



WHEN THE PATH IS UNCERTAIN

I thought we'd look today at one of the most well-known – and misused – psalms in the whole Bible:

Psalm 23

At the heart of this psalm, David speaks of "the valley of the shadow of death" – which is why it's often associated with all things morbid. In reality, this isn't a psalm to die by; it's a psalm to live by! And yes, it acknowledges the 'darknesses' of life - when the path is uncertain; when trouble is near; when we're tempted to give in. But it also points us to the God who can lead us through it:

1) A God Who Guides (vs1-3). David begins the psalm with *Yahveh Rohi* or "The LORD is my shepherd," a picture the NT uses of Jesus. Now, if Jesus is our Shepherd, what does that make us? Yep, sheep. So what does that mean? Well, it's not the most flattering of comparisons. Sheep can be dumb. Sheep are incapable of looking after themselves. Sheep are dirty. Sheep have little or no sense of direction. Sheep are scared of everything. And they stink! And I think, if we're honest, we'll probably admit this is a pretty accurate description of us, too. Well OK, on a spiritual level it's an accurate description of us. And that's why we need a shepherd!

So what does it mean to see God in this way? It means He goes on ahead of us (Middle Eastern shepherds lead their sheep, rather than driving them). And it means He knows what's best for us – as we can see here:

- “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” He knows what will nourish us, what will truly satisfy us.
- “He leads me beside quiet waters.” He knows what will quench our thirst, a thirst for love and significance.
- “He restores my soul.” He knows what it takes to make us all spiritually healthy – and to keep us that way.
- “He guides me in righteous paths.” He knows the best decisions to make, in any and every situation.

God knows what’s best for us. It may not agree with what the *world* says is best – but it is what the Shepherd says is best. So trust, obey, and allow Him to guide you.

2) A God Who Guards (vs4). At some point in our lives, we will find ourselves in a dark valley, whether it’s a physical illness, a personal tragedy, an emotional stress, a financial difficulty, a broken relationship. Good news is: we’re walking *through* that valley. The valleys are not our destination – they’re just a part of the journey! Even death, the darkest experience of them all, doesn’t go on forever. How do we know? Because Jesus defeated it! That’s why death is referred to as nothing more than a shadow. Anyone here been hurt by a shadow? *Exactly!*

But the main point is that we’re not alone. To illustrate it, we get 2 items that would have been associated with a biblical shepherd:

- **The rod.** The rod was used to fend off wolves, lions and bears, and had 2 prongs at the end. Why? Well, if a shepherd saw a snake approaching the flock, he would bring the rod down on top of it, trapping its head between the prongs. Then he would grab the tail, lift the snake in the air, take the rod away, and smash its head on a rock (nice!). God has the power to save us from every kind of *external* danger we might face.
- **The staff.** The staff was used to guide the flock, but also to rescue them from trouble. It was long, with a crook at one end, and the shepherd would use it to pull his sheep out of holes or off of ledges. And again, this is a metaphor for salvation – the holes being a picture of sin and hell as well as the scrapes we can get ourselves into (well, I can). God has the power to save us from every kind of *internal* danger we might face.

Before we move on, there’s one other thing you might have noticed. There’s a switch in vs4 from talking about God in the 3rd person (He) to the 2nd person (You). Why?

I might be wrong, but perhaps it’s saying that it’s in our darkest times that God becomes truly personal to us.

3) A God Who Gives (vs5). Finally, David assures us that God will provide, and gives us 3 examples:

- **He talks about feasting.** “You lay a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” This is a description of a banquet - a celebration. Now I have a problem with this: my life doesn’t always look like a party. What

about yours? Didn't think so. So what is this saying? It's saying that, in general terms, if you follow the Shepherd you will find happiness, contentment, and a sense of hope. I.e. you'll find the kind of life that a lot of people are desperate for. You'll find that table.

- **He talks about healing.** "You anoint my head with oil." Olive oil was used for all sorts of things, including medicinal purposes (just think aromatherapy) so in the Scriptures it's often synonymous with physical healing. On saying that, there are different kinds of healing: physical, yes, but also psychological, relational – and spiritual. And maybe that's why oil is also a picture of the ultimate healing agent, the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is able to fix us, from the inside, out.
- **He talks about blessing.** "My cup overflows." There's a custom in Judaism that harks back to this verse. When a Jewish family prepares for the Friday night *Shabbat* meal, the father takes a glass and fills it to overflowing with wine. It's a way of saying, "God has blessed us in abundance!" But this is about more than just the blessings of the past, or the present: it's a picture of all the blessings we will ever receive from God, from first breath to last, and on into eternity.

God knows our needs, and meets them. But notice we're talking needs, not wants. It's common for us to get those things confused. The Shepherd knows the difference.

From Negatives To Positives

Now, David ends the psalm with vs6: "If God is my Shepherd then I can never get away from His goodness and love!" And we can never lose our place in His flock either, hence David's words at the end: "And I will dwell in the house of the LORD, forever." The point being: if we know the Good Shepherd, nothing can separate us from Him – not sin, not sickness, not even death itself.

But for all this to be ours, the *Shepherd* must be ours. So the challenge for all of us here today is: is Jesus *my* shepherd? Am I following Him? Am I part of His flock? Do I know Him and love Him? The One who guides, who guards, who gives?

Have I handed my life over to Him?