

Iain Macritchie: Psalm 23

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Well, we can turn now to God's word as we find it in the Old Testament in the book of Psalms and we'll read that well-known Psalm together, Psalm 23, the book of Psalms, Psalm 23. It is here God's word. A Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pasture. He leads me besides still water. He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me. You're rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen. And we pray the Lord would bless that portion of his word and to his name be all the praise.

Can continue now our praise by singing from Psalm 100 again and sing Psalms, Psalm 100.

Shout to the Lord with joy. All who to earth belong. Adore the earth with joyful hearts and come to him in song. Know that the Lord is God. He made us as his own. We are the sheep for whom he cares. His people his alone. Enter his gates with praise. His courts with thankfulness. Your praise is gladly sing to him. His name forever bless. For God, the Lord is good. His love is ever sure. His constant truth and faithfulness through every age and future. We can sing the whole Psalm to God's praise. Standing to sing shout to the Lord with joy. All who to earth belong. Adore the earth with joyful hearts and come to him in song. All who to earth belong. Adore the earth with joyful hearts and come to him in song. All who to earth belong. Adore the earth with joyful hearts and come to him in song. We can turn back to the Old Testament to Psalm 23 and sing the whole Psalm.

[3 : 47] We can turn back to the Old Testament to Psalm 23 and sing it as a short Psalm. I think we'll just read through the Psalm together again. Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I can look at verse one again. The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. I'm sure you'll all agree that Psalm 23 is perhaps one of the most famous Psalms in the whole Psalter.

In fact, it's probably one of the most famous books, chapters in the whole Bible. It's a Psalm that we've all been familiar with singing at special occasions in Sunday school and school. It's a Psalm that many of us know very, very well. We know of by heart. It's a Psalm that Spurgeon called the pearl of Psalms. The pearl of Psalms. And tonight, just for a short time, I'd like us to look at the words that we have here in verse one.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want and think about how these words relate to the Psalm as a whole. Now much has been said about these words over the years and I'm sure that you've heard many sermons on these words. It's not my intention to dot every I and to cross every T as regards the Psalm. It's more of a general overview tonight. But I do think it's important for us that we come back to these timeless truths that can be very familiar to us, but yet through the passage of time, we can just sing without really thinking about.

[6 : 35] And so what I'd like us to do is to look at these words and to think about what it is that makes Christ a good shepherd and how as a result, if we are in Christ, we are a satisfied flock.

Now David opens the Stam by starting with the words, the Lord is my shepherd. The Lord, the Lord is my shepherd. Now this word, the Lord, significant because it sets a scene for the rest of the

Psalm. David here at the very outset is quoting the name of Jehovah at the very beginning. The word of the word Lord that is used in the Old Testament. That's the word, the personal name for God himself. It's a word that was given to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus three. And since then, we find it in the Old Testament repeated over 4000 times Lord. And this word basically means I am who I am. I am who I am. And it refers to the timelessness of God. It refers to the fact that God is always the same in his eternal attributes and traits. He doesn't change. He's unchanged and he will be unchangeable forever. And it's from this that everything else in the Psalm flows as it were. I am who I am. It refers to the self sufficiency of God, the fact that God needs nothing. Although he uses people like me and like you to carry out his work here on earth, he doesn't need to. He's all sufficient. He doesn't need us at where a helping hand from us because he is all powerful. Nor is God accountable to anybody else because he answers only to himself. He is the great I am. And it's this great I am that David, the very outset of this Psalm is acknowledging the Lord is my shepherd. He doesn't start the

Psalm by referring to all the things that he is or all the things that he wants from God, but rather he refers to who God is to him in his experience. He is his shepherd. And what a lesson that is to us when we're coming to God. Often in prayer we hear folk coming to God and they launch straight into a list of supplications, a list of all the things that they want him to give them and to do for them. It's all about them. But it's important that we like David, that we always first and foremost acknowledge who God is, that we would acknowledge him as being faithful and merciful and patient and holy and powerful and good. All these attributes that are his that we would acknowledge them and we would acknowledge that if we are in Christ above all else, he is our great shepherd. Now in Israel at this time, a shepherd's work was considered one of the lowest of occupations or tasks. If a family needed a shepherd, it came to the youngest boy in the family to carry out this job that no one else wanted to do. It would have been quite a full-on job, a job that would have been intensive, a job that would have taken up 24 hours of David's time here. This was the task of caring and tending that would have been never ending day and night, winter and summer, fair weather or foul, the shepherd would have had to have been there for the sheep at all times. The shepherd would have laboured to nourish and to protect and to guide his sheep. Now of course the great shepherd that's spoken of here in Psalm 23 is the Lord Jesus

Christ and what a picture we have here of the greatest shepherd of all, the one who chose to nourish and to protect us, we as his flock. Now after addressing the Lord as his shepherd, it's interesting to note what he says next. He makes me lie down in green pasture. He leads me beside still waters and he restores my soul. David is here at the beginning of the Psalm, he's acknowledging who God is, the Lord is my shepherd but he's also acknowledging the fact that the shepherd leads his flock to rest, being made to lie down, being made to lie down and you know this is something that we can maybe skip over but this is a vivid reminder to us that the beginning of our Christian walk, the beginning of our wanderings through the Christian scene of time as it were as his flock, we are made to lie down, we are made to rest in Christ. Now no matter what kind of journey you've had in life so far, I'm sure we've all got many a tale to tell about the journey that we've had in life, some have had bitter experiences, some had sweet experiences, we've all had different experiences, that is the rich tapestry of life but no matter what our experience is, if we are in this flock, if we are the Lords, we all meet together at this one place, we all rest in Him by the green pastures of His love and by the still waters of His grace.

Are you resting in Him? Have you come to that place where He's made you lie down by the still waters? What are you still going through as many of us once were going through the scene of time with that burden on your back, that burden that's making you weary and tired and really needing to lie down and take a rest but yet you just keep on going. Now I am no crofter and I want to make that clear from the outset and there are people here who know far more about sheep than I do but I'm told that it's extremely difficult to get sheep to lie down. Douglas McMillan points out in his book *The Lord My Shepherd* that the only way to get sheep to lie down is to make sure that four conditions are met. The first is that they're free from fear, that there's not a dog barking around them and trying to move them on. They need to be free from fear. Secondly, they need to be free from irritation and what I mean by that is sometimes there can be flies or midges or something irritating the sheep that mean that they just will not lie down. They also need to be free from conflict with other sheep or maybe trying to get the upper hand and they also need to be fed because if they're hungry they will not lie down and you know there's such a picture here for us because it's not easy for us to come and to lie down and rest in Christ. There are so many different things that stop us lying down by

these still waters and green pastures. Sometimes it's because we're driven by our own desires and our own ambitions and that we're often looking in completely the wrong places for that breast that we need. Maybe you're looking for that breast and fulfillment from your job, you're looking for promotion, maybe you're wanting to climb the ranks as it were or maybe you're looking for fulfillment and being entertained by the things of this world. The things you see and the things you hear that is what drives you and that's what you think you're going to find rest in or maybe it's in some kind of addiction, alcohol or gambling,

[16:22] I don't know, maybe you're trying to find rest in these things but you just cannot find rest in God. You can't come to that place where you lie down before Him. You know that's a wonderful thing about our good shepherd friends because he can create all the right conditions that are needed so that we can lie down. He can create these conditions that can enable us to sample these green pastures and still waters for ourselves. Now as His flock we are placed in the care of a faithful shepherd and because we're in the care of a faithful shepherd our focus changes. No longer are we being carried along in the streams of the ever-changing fashions and ideologies of this world desperately trying to be someone and maybe get somewhere. If we're in His flock we now have a strange peace, a peace that passes understanding, that passes knowledge, a peace that is saying that's better felt than telltale. It's very difficult to put into words the peace that you find when you close in with Christ but this is a joy that can only come from a total submission to the good shepherd. Now I'm not talking about an outward joy where people are smiling all the time but a joy that is deep within our very being. As our shepherd as well as leading us to rest he also guides our paths. Verse 3 tells us that he leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Now I think it's fair to say that sheep are fairly foolish creatures in many ways they're quite stupid I'm told and perhaps one of the most obvious signs of their stupidity is the fact that they wander off on their own they do not know what's good for them and I'm sure many of you have come across a lone sheep in the middle of the road with no other sheep inside, no where near pasture they've just wandered off and they're in danger of being hit by a car sometimes they're even lying in the middle of the road. A good shepherd can and does lead his or her sheep to a suitable pasture to pasture that will provide nourishment so that this sheep can grow into a healthy member of the flock but there's absolutely no guarantee that they will stay there. Often as

I said they'll wander off they'll stray they'll find themselves in danger. You know I was reminded of this recently as I was walking along the coastline just near my house in Skigurst I was walking with my dad and my brother round about New Year and we were walking along the rocks and we came across a sheep on its own there was this lone ranger there on its own with absolutely no sign of the rest of the flock. Now as soon as we came up to the sheep it started running around in circles and it didn't know where to go on one side was a huge steep climb and on the other side was the sea to get up to the top of the cliff as it were there was just a very very narrow grassy verge.

We tried our best to to guide and to lead this sheep up this grassy verge but it took some time it kept going up a wee bit and then coming back down and this went on and on and on until eventually it went back up. You know it reminded me afterwards that this is such a clear picture of what happens to us when we if we're in the flock of God when we stray from the Good Shepherd perhaps we find ourselves flirting with the things of the world things that we know are sinful things that were perhaps in our lives before we were a Christian and bit by bit we're going back to them and we're perhaps enjoying them and we're being convicted about enjoying them but then after we've done these things two or three times that conviction it it gets less and less and less so that just as scripture tells us our conscience becomes seared like a hot iron seared like a hot iron numb not able to feel anything. Now that is such a challenge to us friends tonight what a fearful situation to be in that we allow ourselves to be in that place where we think that we're strong enough to do these things that we know are sinful and before long that's it's snowballed so that we find ourselves in a state of spiritual amnesia away from the flock. This can often be seen when we stop coming to church we're not as regular in the means of grace as we as we ought to be we stop reading our Bible as we should our taste for these things it fades it's not as strong as it once was when we meet the Lord's people we don't really know what to say to them we we feel uncomfortable these are all signs that we're drifting away from the flock if you can identify that with that if you can identify with what it's like to be that sheep on the rock wandering around aimlessly in danger not quite knowing how to get back. Well friends take comfort in the fact that every good shepherd sets a mark upon his sheep we see sheep in our villages and we see that they have a colour on them a mark

identifying them to their owner this sheep might drift away but we can tell the owner where the sheep is because of the mark that is on them on that sheep and you know it's the same for us when we're in Christ he knows us because he has set his mark of grace upon us John 10 27 says that he knows he I know them and they follow me he knows his children he knows them because he has placed that mark on us and and if tonight you think you have strayed if you think yes I am not where I should be with the Lord I've wandered off here and I've wandered off there please take comfort that he knows you and he will lead your path he will lead you back to paths of righteousness but there is a but you have to be willing you have to be willing to take his hand so that you can go along that path with him you can't expect to be carried all the times we do have a responsibility we have a responsibility to allow him to be as a lamp to her feet and a light to her path and as our shepherd Christ also keeps us safe he protects us we read in verse 4 even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death you are with me your rod and your staff they comfort me now David has previously used very positive language as he as he talked about all the blessings that follow being led to these these pastures but now here in verse 4 the tone of the Sam changes it changes as as David stops talking about blessing as such and starts talking about the valley of the shadow of death and of and of evil now this is a verse that's often used to comfort those who are dying and rightly so but it's also a verse that I think we can all apply to ourselves a verse that we can apply to the fact that every day we can find ourselves in in the valleys of life's difficulties the valleys of our afflictions maybe tonight you are going through a trial that is is so great that you're struggling with it's true to say that when we start out on the Christian road we're usually pretty full of the joys of the Lord we think that we're going to be like that forever that we're going to glide through life and that we're not even going to sin again but David knew that this wasn't the case he knew that the the trials of the flick the just and number many be he knew the trials and the temptations that can so subtly yet so damagingly come into our experience friends the Christian walk is not always a mountaintop experience you know what that's a good thing if we were to be riding the crest of a wave all of our life we'd soon take for granted the blessings of God how often do you see something growing at the very very top of a mountain how often do you see green trees and plants growing at the top of a mountain it's it's only really in the valleys that you see the lush green growth and you know the same can be said about the Christian it's when we are in the valleys it's then that we grow it's then that we we learn so much more about ourselves and consequently we learn so much more about our savior it's then that we're completely dependent upon him but you know the valleys have has its own very particular problem I'm sure we can all relate to this because when we're in the valley we can be crippled with fear because this is a fear that can can paralyze us and almost render us absolutely useless do you know that fear that I'm talking about the fear that that turns something very small into to the greatest of mountains something that becomes so unsurmountable in our minds and you know practically speaking physically speaking I believe that this fear can so often come from us being tired is it not true that when we're tired everything else seems so great to us quite often all we need is a good night's sleep in my course we have to read quite a lot of books relating to the practical side of the ministry and something I've noticed time and time again is the fact that sleep is being referred to the fact that so many problems could have been maybe handled differently or better if the pastor of the minister had just had a good night's sleep now you might think that sounds like the most simple thing in the world but it's a principle that I think that applies to every one of us it's so true to say that when the body is low the mind is low also and in the Christians experience when the body is low we can get spiritually low too we can start having questions about assurance and questions of our faith and so it's important that we that we always make sure we get that physical rest but along with ensuring that we get rest for our bodies it's it's vital I think that that's what David's saying here that we get rest for our soul it's referring back again to the second verse now notice in the somehow up until now David has referred to the Lord as he he makes me lie down and green pastures he leads me beside quiet waters he guides me but now in verse four when he's speaking of the valley of the shadow of death the psalmist is referring to the Lord as you I will fear no evil for you are with me your rod and your staff they comfort me comfort that is to us because it's as if in the in the depths of the valley David is never so conscious of the presence of God it's not we well we saw it in the versions before that that he was speaking about the shepherd but now he's speaking to the shepherd it can be true of us we can say so many plausible things about God we can say the right things to the right people we can sound like we're in the right place but you know what really matters it's what we say to God you know this comes when

not only within the mountain on the mountain tops but when we're in the valleys that we come to him that we come to him with all out their problems with our fears and with our worries there are many different valleys we can find ourselves in some maybe completely out with our control some maybe of our own doing we find in

[32 : 31] John Bunyan's a pilgrim progress Christian the main character in that book the man who was taking that journey finding himself in the valley of humiliation and I think that's a valley that's so many of the Lord's people find themselves in the valley of humiliation this was the valley that he had to fight his enemy in a poly in a polly and represents the devil in this book I think that's that's one that we can truly identify with because Ephesians 6 12 tells us that we don't wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers against the authorities against the cosmic powers over this present darkness against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places wonder how often you find yourselves in the valley because of that power of evil that you're so aware of is desperately trying to take you away from knowing that peace that's to be found in the Lord those attacks that come from Satan who can come even as an angel of light that means he can come to us with things that may seem to be good and proper when in fact it's from the pit of hell friends it is a battle to be fought and you know the beauty of being in this fold the fold of the good shepherd is that that we're not going it alone that we don't need to be crippled with fear verse 4 tells us even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me and your rod and your staff they comfort me you are with me we read elsewhere that he is a friend that sticks closer than even a brother I touched him this this morning that so often our friends can and do let us down we all have made promises that we haven't kept we've all not met our friends perhaps at their precise point of need but not with Christ Isaiah 43 1 to 2 says fear not for I have redeemed you I've called you by your name you are mine when you pass through the waters I will be with you and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you I don't know what you're going through tonight perhaps there's something that you feel that is just going to be the end of you spiritually friends take comfort in these words he is the good shepherd he will lead you back to that path of righteousness he will not let the rivers overwhelm you as we read here or or the fires of your providence burn you you may see ah but I can't see God I don't know where God is in all of this in this valley that I find myself in but is it not true to say that sheep do not need to see their shepherd in order for them to be safe they are safe because of their shepherds provision for them and you know our shepherd is with us in the valleys on the mountains whether we realize it or not and even as we we gather from

that verse even in death itself he is with us leading us across the shores to that new Jerusalem her shepherd also provides for us in verse 5 we read you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies you anoint my head with oil and my cup overflows what a table he has prepared for us friends but a banquet of good things is ours this night in Christ here we have oil and wine oil and wine where we're highly valued when the Sam was penned in the in the dry and barren lands of the Far East in Palestine where the sun shines so so fiercely the skin of the people would become dry and cracked and often they would have a really a really dry and tickly throat and so when people were journeying and they would stop off at somebody's home those people knew that people were coming to stay with them they would always make sure that they had wine and oil for the people oil to to soothe their skin after their long journey and wine to to clear their throat friends if you would just allow Christ to to lead you to to that banqueting table to that table with oil and wine you would know what it is to experience the soothing balm of Gilead that can he leave in the most broken of lives Isaiah 1 6 tells us that from the soul of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it talking about us but wounds and bruises and putrefying soars he's made a provision for us friends tonight in the gospel as I said he's given us that oil to to heal those putrefying soars those broken lives he's given us a cup that is overflowing with his goodness and his mercy friends won't you drink from it here we have food that is all sufficient for us food that if if we chew on if we meditate upon it will it will leave us notice that sheat wandering on on its own but rather as a as a lamb with a spring in our steps so that so that all can see that we have been feeding from the richest fear and and drinking from that cup of God's grace you know I love that version in the home amazing grace when when the author says through many dangers toils and snares I have already come to his grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home it's this grace that we can find in this cup that is overflowing that will lead us home we have a shepherd that prepares for us a heavenly home surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of

the Lord forever the 23rd Sam portrays life as a pilgrimage and in the final verse that we've just read the the Samist rightly shows what the whole purpose of of the sojourn of the flock is the whole purpose of the pilgrimage of the flock of the good shepherd and that is that that we will one day come to our long home that we will come to that heavenly home that celestial city here we are just passing through the scene of time we do wander to the left and to the right we let him down but you know our lives are but a flash in the pan and you know we ought to be a satisfied flock tonight because we know that the good shepherd has gone to prepare a place for us he has gone to prepare a place in that house of many mansions what I thought that if we are in his flock that one day we will dwell in the house of the good shepherd if I were to ask you and with this I close if I were to ask you what the most precious word in the the line the Lord is my shepherd is wonder what you would say the Lord is my shepherd but for me it has to be the word my the Lord is my shepherd it doesn't say the Lord is our shepherd or the Lord is your shepherd he is my shepherd it's as if he is a shepherd for nobody else he he cares for me he watches over me he leads my paths he's my personal savior is he yours friends please do not rest don't be content till you can say from the very core of your being until you lie down by these still waters and these green pastures with the words of grace on your lips the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want amen we pray the Lord will bless these one or two thoughts