

**“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in the 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 kindness shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” (Psalm 23)**

Dear Friends,

I want to stick with the passage I began to reflect upon last week in my letter, Psalm 23. It strikes me that it provides us with a similar template to the Lord’s Prayer for reflecting upon God’s presence with us, provision for us and protection of us. When I use those three ‘P’ words I do not do so in the sense that God ensures that we are immune from all the difficulties of everyday life, in our frail, mortal bodies and broken world. I use them in the sense that God holds us in an everlasting embrace and accompanies us through all the trials and tribulations that we face in such a way that it really is possible to journey through life knowing contentment in every situation and being free from all fear! Those are quite some statements I have just made and though I do not always experience life like that, nevertheless, I believe it is possible to experience life like that when we come to realise who it is that is our Shepherd.

My focus last week was upon the nature and character of *“The Lord.”* We can experience a life without lack and fear because our God is entirely good and kind and will sustain us with the bountiful provision of grace and mercy if we can find ways of opening our lives up to God at every moment. After all God is the One who creates and sustains all things.

This week, I want to focus on what it means for the Lord to be *‘my Shepherd.’* Shepherding is one of the most common images used in Scripture to describe God’s relationship with God’s people. Throughout the Old Testament God is seen as the Shepherd of the people of Israel and David is held up as the standard bearer of those God called to be the physical shepherds of God’s people. So in Psalm 78 we find these words: *“He took David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skilful hands he led them.”* (Ps. 78: 70 – 72)

Jesus, of course, added new dimensions to the shepherding imagery when he spoke of being the Good Shepherd, of knowing his sheep, of his sheep knowing his voice and of laying down his life for his sheep. In John 10: 3 & 4 we read, *“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all of his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.”*

When we put all of this together, we come to see a clearer picture of what it means for God to be our Shepherd. Not only does God rescue, defend, guide and discipline us when necessary – for that is the purpose of the tools of a shepherd, the rod and staff, which bring us great comfort; not only does the Shepherd find good pasture and safe drinking places for our nurture

and growth; but primarily, the Shepherd knows the sheep by name. We belong to him. Remember Jesus talks of the difference between the shepherd and the hired hand. Today, we perhaps understand the role of a shepherd as the hired hand, the one who looks after the sheep on behalf of their owner. But that is not what Jesus pictures. The Shepherd *is* the owner of the sheep, the One to whom they belong. He knows them and they know and recognise his voice and because they do, the Shepherd becomes their leader, the One whom they will follow wherever he leads because they know he will lead them along right paths and to good places.

So our Shepherd: calls, leads, guides, nurtures, feeds, protects, rescues, disciplines and encourages because he knows and loves us, so much so, that he is prepared to die for us that we might live for him.

If *'the Lord is my shepherd'* then I am in his care. I am not the one in charge. I have taken my life – my kingdom – my sphere of influence – and surrendered it to God. I am then living life with God rather than on my own. I am allowing God to be God and me to be me. I am giving God the space to do what God wants to do in and through me. I am letting go of the need to be in control and giving control to the One who can best handle it on my behalf. I am turning every aspect of life over to God's good guidance daily. Can you see how that might then enable me to live a life of contentment without fear? Because of whom God is and how God cares for me, I am released from the burden of managing my own life and can live in the freedom of God's presence, provision, and protection.

If Psalm 23 is to the Old Testament what the Lord's Prayer is to the New, then perhaps Paul is for the New Testament what David is for the Old – the standard bearer of those God called to be the physical shepherds of God's people on earth. So, I want to close by reminding you of St Paul's words in Philippians 4: *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through Him who gives me strength."* (Phil. 4: 11 – 13)

For us modern day Methodists, these thoughts are perhaps best captured by the words of our Covenant Prayer. You might want to use it as your prayer this day: *"I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none; when I am troubled and when I am at peace. Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded; when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things, and when I have nothing. I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and when you choose. Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. May it be so for ever. Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen."*

I wonder, as God is your Shepherd, who is God calling you to be a shepherd to?

Every Blessing

Rev Tim Perkins