

My God- the King

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Well, this evening we are coming to certainly the best-known Psalm, if not the best-known chapter of the whole Bible, Psalm 23.

Maybe you're thinking, at last, I thought we'd never get there. Maybe you're thinking, why bother preaching Psalm 23? What more could there be to say?

But I hope that through our walk through the first book of Psalms, what we're beginning to see is that the Psalms are less like a box of celebrations for us to pick our favourites out of, and a more like a 150-course meal.

Each course is carefully crafted to tantalise us, to satisfy us in some way, but each one is designed to lead us on to the next, to fill us up as a whole.

And now 150 courses would take a long time, wouldn't it, and lots of chewing, but isn't that the point? Isn't that what the very first appetizer prepared us for?

[1 : 10] Blessed is the one who delights in the Torah, the teaching or instruction of the Lord, and who chews it over, who soaks it in, day and night.

It's a gloriously drawn-out meal. We can't digest it all in a sermon or a sermon series, but over a lifetime and indeed beyond.

And no doubt some of the courses are crowd-pleasers. Some others perhaps satisfy more alternative tastes, but the whole book is served all together, designed to deliver that promise of blessing to those who walk with the King.

Through his word. So with that in mind, how then does Psalm 23 in particular feed us? Well, we began thinking last week in Psalm 22 about how God and his King rule together.

We saw that the high point, paradoxically, of that relationship is the suffering of God's King at the hands of God himself and on behalf of his people.

[2 : 27] And coming off the back of that into Psalm 23 is a bit like a storm blowing over. And in the wake of the storm, complete calm and still and quiet.

Because the realization at the heart of this psalm is that if the Lord has kept hold of the King's life, even in the deep darkness of Psalm 22, well, then the Lord will hold his life in any and every season forever.

If Psalm 22 shows us the united reign of the two kings, human and divine, well, Psalm 23 shows us what kind of King God, the divine King, is.

And verse 1 gives it away, doesn't it? He is a shepherd king. His scepter is a crook. So David assures us that the Lord, his shepherd, is absolutely enough in all circumstances of our lives, even to death and beyond.

Even if we can recite this psalm backwards, aren't these words we need to hear again and again and again? Isn't this a lesson we never stop learning?

[3 : 52] That if the Lord is my shepherd, then I lack nothing. We're going to explore this precious truth in three ways this evening.

Firstly, by seeing that the Lord is enough in life. He is enough in life. And this picture of God as a shepherd has taken hold of the hearts of Christians through the ages.

But when you step back and think about it, it's really quite a scandalous image. The Lord is my shepherd, writes David. Well, what is David saying about God here?

Well, back when David was writing, there wasn't anything that the shepherd did not do for his sheep. The shepherd would lead his sheep to good places for them to graze, take them on good paths for them to walk on.

He would protect them from wild animals. He stopped them from wandering off and getting lost in the wilderness. You remember that David himself knew all about being a shepherd.

[5 : 03] The first time we hear about David, what is he doing? Well, he is grazing his father's flock. When he went out to face the giant Goliath, what is it that's on his CV?

He says, when a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it and struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.

But that's what a shepherd did. David knew that being a shepherd in the ancient world was not a simple, cozy life. So imagine describing God like that.

Not sitting back, basking in the light of his glory. Half listening to his people's prayers, drinking in our worship.

No leading and seeking, fighting, feeding, rescuing, returning, restoring, pursuing, protecting.

[6 : 15] He is down in the dirt, so to speak. His kingship is so gritty and earthy. He's so personally committed to the safety and good of his people that he comes and seeks our good himself.

The fact that we think of God so naturally in these terms is evidence of how deeply this image has sunk into our collective psyche.

Because back when David wrote it, no one had heard of such a God. The gods of the ancient world were not like this. Today's gods may dress like this, but they are not shepherds at heart.

There is no God like the shepherd of Israel who leads his people like a flock. The Lord. And David lets us have the application of this truth early on, doesn't he?

If the Lord, our God, is our shepherd, what does that mean for our lives? Well, verse one, the Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.

[7 : 27] I lack nothing. Because he is enough. Now, what does David mean by nothing? It's a nice thought.

It trips off the tongue. It's a nice thing to say. But what does the Lord's enoughness cover? Well, read on with me in verse two. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Notice that drumbeat.

He, he, he. Remind me who does these things? Well, he does. He does them all. My shepherd does them. He protects.

And his protection is enough. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. How hard is it to sit down or to go to sleep when there are a thousand things on our minds?

[8 : 31] A quiet night is impossible. We describe ourselves, don't we, as restless. Well, here is a picture of perfect rest. The shepherd makes me lie down.

David's saying I can rest under his watchful protection. He can take time out, knowing that he is not going to take his eye off you.

Or stop watching, drop his guard. He can rest because he never rests. He is watching over his people night and day.

See, this isn't the peaceful psalm for the cool, calm and collected. It's a psalm for the needy, the worried, the restless.

God promises he is sufficient for our rest because he is constant in his protection. And his provision is enough for us. Green pastures and quiet waters.

[9 : 38] There's no hunger or thirsting with him. They say that we start getting thirsty when we lose just 1% of our bodily hydration. I don't know if that's true.

Perhaps if Dave Boyd is there this evening, he can fill you in on that later on. Even a small degree of need can send us to the tap to guzzle down a pint of water, can't it?

The point is the Lord doesn't let that happen to us. Water is the basic stuff of life. We can't live without it. So the Lord leads us to everything we need so that we never run out or fall short.

And we all know, don't we, what it's like to be stuck in a tight corner. But often when we are in that position, when we find ourselves in desperate need, well, it's not long before we discover to our relief that the Lord has himself gone ahead and stored up a solution further down the line.

He is not passive or piecemeal in his provision. He provides for us perfectly. So he protects, he provides. Next we see he restores.

[10 : 54] He refreshes my soul. Not only an outward help, but an inward renewal. Remember the words of Jesus, Come to me, he said, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Rest for our souls, because he is the great and good and gentle shepherd.

He is enough for us down to our very depths, our spiritual aches and pains, our doubts and our disappointments, our depression, our despair.

He is enough for us when our souls are bruised and sore. Or he heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds, says the psalmist.

And he is enough, too, for our right living. He guides me along right paths or paths of righteousness for his name's sake. He is enough for all of our steps every day.

[12:11] The good shepherd has walked the path before us. He guides us in the narrow way, leading us not into temptation, delivering us from evil.

You know, this evening, perhaps of all the ways that the Lord is enough for us, this one is the hardest for you to believe. Some days it feels as if he has left our right living to us.

So we struggle to stay pure. And we fight hard to remember his words and we grind on in holiness. But this verse, this line reminds us he has never left our holiness up to us. It's not as if he leaves us to do it ourselves. If he did, we would be doomed.

Instead, he guides us along the right paths. Notice, for his name's sake, there's the guarantee that he will not give you up.

[13:10] There cannot come a time when the Lord says, well, at that one sin, that was too far. And he stops walking with us. Because he is leading us to live rightly.

It isn't in the end to do with us ourselves. He leads us in right paths for his own sake. He has staked his own name, his reputation on our sanctification.

Therefore, he will never give us up to our sin if we are in him. The Lord, our shepherd, then protects, provides, restores, guides, and he does so perfectly.

Perhaps one of these aspects of his care sticks out to you, especially this evening, or resonates with where life is at for you right now.

If that's true, take hold of that truth. Drink it in. Bask in it. But what David wants us to take away as a whole is that the Lord is not enough for us just in one or two ways.

[14:19] He is enough for us in every way. That is who the Lord is, he says. Sometimes it's easier for us to believe that God, our shepherd, can take care of the very big things, sin and death and eternity.

And it is harder to believe that he can take care of the everyday things. Health and money and sleep and family and friends, work, rest, recreation.

But for David, the logic carries all the way through. It's because he's my shepherd in death that I know he's my shepherd in life.

Because he's my shepherd in the end. He must be my shepherd every day between this day and that day. So friends, do you trust him?

Not only to take care of the big picture, but also the details. Do you come and throw upon his broad shoulders every aspect of your life, the full weight, all the way down to the small print?

[15:34] Because he is enough, says David. He is enough for every one of us every day, for every one of our needs. And now David takes us all the way to the end.

To the extreme need, the extreme depth, to show that's still true even then. The Lord is enough in life. And secondly then, he is enough through death.

Look with me again at verse 4. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil. For you are with me.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Though the scenery has changed, the mountains have risen up and cut off the sun and cast a shadow over the shepherd and his sheep.

But notice we're still here on right paths. This isn't David wandering off track, getting lost or straying from the shepherd. No, the shepherd is leading him through the darkest of valleys on the right paths.

[16:45] In the dark valley, says David, I still don't need to fear because you are with me. The all the security and protection and safety that the shepherd provided in the green pastures, he is still providing in the valley.

The path is still the right path because the shepherd is still walking it. The comfort and the rest of this psalm do not depend on the circumstances within which David finds himself.

It all depends entirely on who the shepherd is. The Lord is still walking it. If he is with me, says David, then even death doesn't hold any fear in me.

In the end, this is the difference between trusting the gifts and trusting the giver. Because when the scenery changes and the sunshine and green grass and still waters are gone.

When we feel threatened and desperate and weak. And sin gets the better of us.

[17 : 56] When God's good gifts seem to have worn out and broken down. Well, do we still trust him?

Are we still clinging to the giver of the gifts when those gifts run out? The darkest valley literally here is the valley of the shadow of death.

And there's a sense in which that is what death is. God's removing of his gifts that sustain our lives. His constant protection and provision that keep us breathing and living are lifted.

And we die. When he lifts those gifts away, then, can we still trust him? I wonder, do we fear him doing that?

Or what David is saying is that even when the shadow of death hangs over us, we don't need to be afraid. Because the God who has been our shepherd throughout our lives is with us even through death.

[19 : 06] Even when he puts his gifts away, the shepherd has not left us. Even when the path reaches its end, where all other guides turn back, he himself leads us on, on the narrow way.

Death casts a long shadow. And perhaps it is something that you fear tonight. But if we are with the Lord, it doesn't need to be.

He is with us to shepherd us through it. Notice that in that valley, David finds comfort in the rod and the staff of the shepherd. These were the tools of the shepherd's trade.

A rod for beating away fierce animals. And a staff or a crook for pulling the sheep back onto the right track. Both instruments that were used for getting the sheep to where they needed to be.

The rod stopped the sheep being taken off by predators. Wolves or lions or bears as David had experienced in his own shepherding.

[20 : 15] I find it hard not to think of those predators that we saw last week in Psalm 22. Strong bulls, lions, dogs. How does the king know that the Lord can keep them safe from being preyed upon?

Well, because Psalm 22 shows that the Lord had indeed kept him safe from those predators. Bring it up to date for us as Christians.

We know he can keep us safe from the great fierce enemies because they could not overcome his king, Jesus. God beat away, so to speak, sin and death and the devil from his son when he raised him from the dead.

So when we walk with Jesus through the darkness and into death, we know that he will do the same for us. Nothing can threaten us when we walk with our good shepherd.

And he doesn't only keep us safe from threats without, but from fears within. David takes heart in the staff or the crook that pulls us back onto the right path.

[21 : 28] In other words, God saves us from ourselves. Sometimes we are our own worst enemy. Maybe the thing you fear most about death is actually that you might not make it that far with Jesus.

That there may be something that causes you not to stick with him to the end. And then he won't be with me when the time comes.

But his staff tells us he will not let that happen to his sheep. I know this is a struggle for some of us, but there is no comfort at all in the thought that we get to choose for ourselves whether or not we stick with Christ to the end.

We live in a world that loves choice. But David is saying, thank God, I don't get to choose. Thank God for his crook that finds me and pulls me back to the shepherd when I get too far from him.

He could heartily sing, let thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.

[22 : 46] We would be on our own, wouldn't we? If it were not for his love, binding us to himself, bringing us back, holding us to the very, very end.

Our good shepherds, rod and staff are the promise that he will. We have seen the Lord is enough in life and through death.

And finally, we see he is enough for our king. Enough for our king. Because verse five takes a surprising turn, doesn't it? Will you read with me again?

Again, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And so now it's not only the scenery that's changed. The whole image, the picture has changed, hasn't it? No longer the shepherd and the sheep.

[23 : 48] It's as if that picture has melted away to reveal the true identity of the speaker and his God. What's being described here is a victory banquet.

The Lord has spread a feast for David in the sight of his enemies. They can only watch hopelessly and helplessly as God's king cooks in and they go hungry.

How do we know it's a feast fit for a king? It's because the Lord has anointed his head with oil.

That's the literal translation of the word Messiah, God's anointed one.

So again, we find in the Psalms a scene dominated by God and his king. So then is this ultimately a one man show? Are we wrong?

Do we have any right to sing or delight or take heart in Psalm 23? Or is this comfort only for the king?

[24 : 52] Well, no, we heard earlier, didn't we, about how another king, the true king, Jesus Christ, spoke of himself as the good shepherd.

And if Psalm 23 is what God, the good shepherd, the shepherd king is like, then Jesus is the incarnation in every sense of that word, of the character of this shepherd king.

And what does he say the work of the shepherd is? Well, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He, the Lord Jesus, is what makes it possible for us to sing this psalm.

Without Christ, without our shepherd king, how could this confidence and this comfort be ours? He died. That we would never truly die.

And not only did he die, he laid down his life willingly, only to take it up again. No one takes my life from me, he says, I lay down my life and I will take it up again.

[26 : 01] This I have received from my father. See, the father was always enough for his son. God was always enough for his king.

And so now he is risen from the dead and feasts in the presence of his enemies, drinking to the end of sin and death. And he, our shepherd king, guides us through life and death and home, his father's house.

This is how we know that his goodness and love will never stop chasing and pursuing us. Because Christ, our good shepherd, has gone before us through life, through death, into new and unending eternal life.

And so his goodness and love will follow us all the way until we are home with him. Douglas Macmillan, who pastored this church many years ago, compared this goodness and love to a pair of faithful sheepdogs, bringing up the rear, keeping the flock close to the shepherd.

I don't know if that's what David had in mind, but it certainly illustrates David's point. That the Lord keeps us tightly bound to him every step of the way he has gone before us.

[27 : 23] And he doesn't let us fall too far behind. It is his goodness and love that will see us through the doors of the father's house into eternity.

And so as we close this well-known psalm, I want us to finish with a wonderful answer to a great question given a long time ago that helps us really to reflect on and take in the message of this psalm.

It's from the Heidelberg Catechism question one. Listen and reflect. And if you can take these words as your own as I read.

Question, what is your only comfort in life and in death? Answer, that I am not my own, but belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ.

He has paid fully for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven.

[28 : 42] In fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. Let's pray together to our good shepherd. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, we worship and thank you. You indeed came to seek us and save us from our wandering.

That you laid down your life for your sheep. That indeed you have fully paid for all our sins with your precious blood. Lord, and that since you have done so, we know for certain that you will not stop until we are home with you.

Leading, guiding, restoring, protecting, providing. Lord, we confess that you are enough for all of our needs. To help us, we pray to rely upon you.

[29 : 57] To trust you every step of the way. Lord, if some of us need to trust you for the first time, Lord, give us a heart to do so, we pray. Lead us by your Holy Spirit, and to the one who saves us.

We ask in your great and holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen.