

PSALM 23:1 (Part 1)

INTRODUCTION

This is the best known and best loved of all the Psalms. It is a Psalm that is used at funerals and it is often sung at the funerals of those that have no faith and have shown little interest in the Christian faith. But this Psalm is not an exclusive funeral hymn for I have also known people who have sung this Psalm at their wedding.

Therefore it is a psalm that has been used with great profit in moments of extreme sadness and in moments of extreme joy. But the problem is that when the Psalm is used frequently then it is likely that it becomes so familiar that it loses its meaning.

Now Psalm 23 is in my view in great danger of becoming only of sentimental value to people in general because we have used it at our loved one's funeral and therefore it reminds us of our loved one rather than its focus being upon the Lord. Yet because it is so familiar and often of sentimental value we must not go to the other extreme and rarely use it or speak of it at all. It is a great Psalm and it contains great teaching and great truths that every one of God's people needs to hear again and again.

In trying to overcome the familiarity problem I was very tempted to only preach one sermon on it but then I thought again and decided that there is so much in this Psalm that I don't want us to miss that we are going to look at it in a little more detail over the coming weeks. But this decision immediately raised some difficulties for me because we all know this Psalm so well that we could be tempted to switch off in our minds.

After all what am I going to say about this Psalm that has not already been said? We probably have heard more sermons and more series of sermons on this Psalm than any other Psalm. Well I will confess I am unlikely to say anything that you have not heard before and what I am going to say you have heard before from better and more capable preachers than me.

So having acknowledged our difficulty we are still going to remind ourselves of these great truths once again and I trust God by his Holy Spirit will make it profitable to us all. We are only as a way of introduction to this Psalm going to focus on the first sentence and think of this great theme from a biblical perspective.

1. A VITAL RELATIONSHIP - THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD (v 1)

Now the shepherd theme is a theme that we find used on many occasions throughout the Bible. God is referred to time and time again as the Shepherd of his people. Let me give you a few examples of this theme. Jacob referred to God as His Shepherd when he is praying for a blessing for the children of Joseph (Genesis 48:15-16).

What Jacob prayed for his children's children was that they should know the God that shepherded him for many years. You will find God pictured as a shepherd throughout the Psalms, Isaiah (40:11) Jeremiah (31:10), and Ezekiel (34:12). Constantly throughout the Minor Prophets we read that God's people are his flock, the people of his pasture and his sheep thus implying that God is the shepherd of his people.

So we can see that this is an important biblical theme and as we consider this opening phrase and think about what it means for the Lord to be our shepherd we need to notice a number of things.

a) Our need to know the Shepherd. – As we look at this Psalm the first thing we see about it, is that David the writer knows God as his own shepherd, the Lord is MY shepherd. Now before we go any deeper or further we need to ask the most basic of questions. Is the Lord your Shepherd? Are you able to say with any great assurance that the Lord is MY shepherd? Have you come to trust him as your shepherd? Have you come to repent of your sin and turned in faith to this shepherd. Is there clear evidence within our lives that shows clearly the Lord is our shepherd?

If not then we will not benefit from this Psalm unless you first and foremost put that matter right by turning to him tonight. This Psalm is a personal Psalm and all the statements that follow are addressed to those who are able to declare that the Lord is MY shepherd. But having sorted that question out in our own life let us continue to look deeper at this opening sentence.

To know the shepherd will mean that you will have One who will lead and guide you throughout life for that was the task of the shepherd in bible times. You will have one to protect you, even when you sleep; you will have one who watches over you every moment of every day of every year. Now if you do know this shepherd personally then do you live as if you do?

Do we consult him with the various decisions of life that we have to make? Do we seek his will rather than our own will? Do we every day humble ourselves before our shepherd seeking his leading throughout the day? Do we come to his word with a desire to obey it and to follow our shepherd whatever path he chooses to lead us down? All of these things are what is meant by the fact that the Lord is MY shepherd.

It is truly a great thing to be able to say and know that it is true that the Lord is MY Shepherd. It is wonderful to be able to go to the funeral of a dear Christian and sing this Psalm and listen to it being read. This opening sentence is full of meaning for those who can say it and mean what they say. I am always saddened when I attend a funeral of someone who is not a Christian and yet they ask or the deceased family asks for this Psalm to be sung or read.

You know the unbeliever has no right to sing to this Psalm or to have it sung at their funeral for this Psalm is only for those who can really say the Lord is MY shepherd.

b) Who is the Shepherd of this Psalm? – That might seem a strange question because the answer is easy for the text says the Lord is my shepherd. But what does the text mean when it speaks of the 'Lord' as being the shepherd? The word translated 'Lord' in our bibles is the word "Jehovah" and that word was the word that was used for the personal name of God. There are as you know other words in Hebrew used for God, for example the word 'Elohim' is a word used when talking about God's being. But Jehovah is emphasising the commitment of God to his people.

He has made a covenant commitment to his people to be their God and he promised never to leave them or forsake them. It was God who made this covenant commitment he was not persuaded by us or anyone else but his love for his people was such that he committed himself to us in spite of our failures, weaknesses and many sins.

As part of his covenant commitment to us he has promised to rescue us and save us from our sins and give us eternal life. He does this in mercy and grace.

Now if we go to the New Testament we will see that the Lord who is the shepherd is Jesus God's Son. He is the one who has come to his people and is described as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Now when Jesus uses this imagery in John's gospel he was talking to Jews who were steeped in the Old Testament and knew from Psalm 23 that the Lord was their shepherd. What Jesus is doing here is identifying himself with the shepherd of the Old Testament. When Jesus made that statement about being the Good Shepherd every true Jew knew that it could only mean one thing that Jesus is God. It is no wonder they charge Jesus with blasphemy (John 10:33).

So when we say that the Lord is my Shepherd we are in fact declaring that Jesus is our shepherd. But some of us might be asking how is it possible for Jesus to become our shepherd? God is holy and we are sinful, God is God we are mere human beings. The rest of the verse in John 10:11 tells us. He gave his life for the sheep. You see Jesus came to earth willingly and identified with us as human being by taking on human flesh.

He lived a perfect life and through his life and death he presented himself as a sacrifice for those who are his sheep. Jesus death shows us something of God's covenant commitment to his people. He has given his all for us and he asks us to who are his sheep to give of our all for him. If we are able to say that the Lord is MY shepherd then he is totally and absolutely committed to us as his sheep and if we doubt that then look at the cross and see how committed he is to us. Committed enough to die on our behalf and committed enough to save us from our sin and from hell.

What is it that makes a shepherd good or bad? It is surely his relationship with his sheep. We can see from John 10 a number of things about the relationship between Jesus as the Good Shepherd and his people who are the sheep.

2. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP.

a) The sheep belong to him – This is why he calls them my sheep (John 10:14). These sheep belong to Christ because he died for them (John 10: 11). He has purchased them by shedding his blood therefore all who have come in repentance and faith to trust Christ for salvation are Christ's sheep they belong to him. If we are Christians this evening then we do not belong to the world or anyone else but we are the sole possession of Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd.

He has paid the price for us and therefore he is our master. Now of course the enemy of our souls the devil is not happy about this relationship. He wants us to belong to him and so he entices us constantly back into the world. He tells us look what we are missing and he seeks to dress up the pleasures that this world offers. There are times when sadly we believe his lie and are enticed but we have no right to taste of this world again for Christ is our good shepherd we belong to him alone. Now this means that he has the right to instruct us how to live. He has the right to demand obedience from him and the right to dictate to us.

Of course his actions towards us are always full of grace and he treats us with great mercy but we must understand that being a Christian means that we belong to Jesus Christ and therefore any failure to obey him and to live according to his ways and instruction is sinful and must be rooted out of our lives.

b) He knows everyone of his sheep. (John 10:14) – The mark of a Good Shepherd is that he knows his own sheep he knows them as individuals. He knows their strange ways and he knows their particular needs. After a shepherd has spent years with his sheep he even knows how each one of his sheep will react to him in any given situation.

Well just as an earthly shepherd knows his sheep how much more does our Good Shepherd the Lord Jesus know his sheep; he knows each one of us intimately. The first thing that he knows is whether we really are one of his sheep or not. He knows whether we are deceiving others or ourselves and whether his Holy Spirit indwells us or not. But he knows a lot more about us than just the mere spiritual condition of our heart. He knows our thoughts and motives etc.

The person sitting next to you tonight even if it is your husband or wife does not know all that is going on in your head or what's in your heart. Perhaps if we were being honest we wouldn't want

them to know either. But Christ knows and at first this can be a frightening thought particularly when we think of our sinful thoughts and motives and intentions of our hearts?

When we think of our indifference to spiritual things or our disobedience or the coldness of our hearts or our simple lack of love towards others. It's a frightening thought that the Lord Jesus our Good Shepherd knows all this about us. But this intimate knowledge of his sheep is also a wonderful truth. Just think that the shepherd knows all that is wrong in his sheep's life, for if he didn't then he couldn't put it right.

We don't need to pretend that certain sins are not present when they actually are. The shepherd knows all about them and in fact he has died for those sins in order that we might be forgiven. Therefore we can be honest with God we don't need to put on a show for him for he knows what we are really like. In our honesty with God we can also seek his grace and plead for his Holy Spirit to expose our inward sins of the heart and rely upon him to change us into the likeness of Christ.

It is amazing that even though the Lord knows us intimately he still loves us and is committed to us and continues to deal with us in a most gracious way.

As our shepherd he knows all about our circumstances in life. No one else may really know them, you may feel trapped by them, helpless in a situation that you are in now and you might even feel that you stagger from one trial to another.

Well we can be assured that our good shepherd knows every situation and circumstance he understands what we are going through and he is there with you in those situations and in that circumstance he is giving you grace enabling you to stand firm in the midst of your trial. His eye is constantly on us he never misses a thing and as a consequence he deals with us exactly how we need to be dealt with. He does it for our ultimate benefit and for his glory. It might be we do not always like the way the Lord deals with us he might not pamper us as we would like and our perceived needs may not be our real needs but as our Shepherd he knows us better than we know ourselves therefore we can trust him to deal with us exactly as we need for his glory and our good.

c) His sheep recognise and listen to their shepherd's voice. (John 10:27) – The word for listening here is a word that means 'hearing' and 'understanding.' You see there are people who hear the Shepherds voice through the preaching of the word they hear the call to repent and believe and to follow the Shepherd.

But they do not understand what they hear, O they understand the words and the truth that they are listening too but they do not understand with spiritual understanding. They have not understood what they have heard because they cannot understand it fully until the Holy Spirit comes upon them and opens their eyes and ears to the truth so that they will repent and open their hearts to Christ.

When that happens then they become one of his true sheep. As a consequence they will constantly hear the shepherd's voice through personal bible study, through the preaching of God's word and through Christian books and many other means as well.

It is possible to have heard sermons for years and read your bible for months but until you become a Christian you don't know the Shepherds voice and all our spiritual activities are just that, activities. But once we become true believers then it becomes all so different. The word of God becomes alive; we hear our Shepherds voice speaking to us in our heart consistently through his various means of grace.

Perhaps all this strange to you? Perhaps you struggling with what I am saying? I am not talking about some unusual experience here; I am simply describing the normal Christian experience of those who seek to walk daily in fellowship with their God. If this is not normal for you then ask yourself some questions. Am I a born again Christian? Am I seeking daily to deal with sin within my life?

Am I concerned to know God better? Am I determined to obey God's word no matter what the consequences? If the answer to any of those questions is No then you must seek God and the help of His Holy Spirit to help you deal with those issues that you are struggling with. Remember God's sheep listen to God's voice that is the normal Christian experience.

d) The Sheep follow their Shepherd (John 10:27) – Jesus says that his sheep follow him. If you have ever seen a shepherd at work with his sheep you will know that the sheep watch the shepherd's every move especially at feeding time and they follow him. That to me is a good illustration of what a Christian is. A Christian is someone who follows Jesus Christ.

It means that our whole lives are brought under his direction and control. What about us are we following Jesus or are we following someone or something else? To follow Jesus will mean that there is no area of your life that is untouchable to him. To follow him means that he will reveal to us his way and he will help us to walk in his path.

We must of course obey him and follow him with all our hearts and if we do we will be lead by our Good Shepherd to our final heavenly home. However, if you are not following the Shepherd then who are you following and where are you heading. Ultimately those who do not follow the Shepherd are heading for an eternity without the Shepherd. So as we conclude and as I have only really prepared the ground for looking in detail at this Psalm let us all remember that the Good Shepherd gave his life for us.

Therefore if you are a real Christian you will know him as your shepherd and you will hear, know and understand his voice and as a result you will follow Him. Are we all doing that? I trust by God's grace we are.

Amen