

Fear Not – Goodness and Mercy Shall Follow You

Reflections on Psalm 23: Part 3 (vv.5-6)

By Barry Wilkins

The sheep/shepherd metaphor appears frequently in the Bible. For example, [Psalm 78:52](#), *Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock*; [Psalm 95:7](#), *... for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture*; [Isaiah 40:11](#), *He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms*; [1 Peter 2:25](#), *For 'you were like sheep going astray,' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and overseer of your souls*. But now, in the last two verses of our psalm, the pastoral imagery gives way to a 'welcoming host, honoured guest' metaphor where the imagery is of a banquet. See also [Song of Songs 2:4](#), *He brought me to the banqueting house ...*; ¹ [Luke 14:7-24](#), the parable of the banquet; [Luke 13:23-30](#), the discourse on 'who will be saved'; [Revelation 19:7-9](#), the marriage feast of the lamb.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. David considers not just the hostile circumstances of v.4 (the valley), but all vexatious circumstances and people. God's care extends to all corners of his life and every emergency. The *table* (*prepared* means loaded with choice food) implies every good thing for his sustenance (see also [Psalm 34:10](#), *... but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing*). Yahweh is depicted now as the host, giving hospitality and asylum.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Oil signifies welcome and friendship (see [Psalm 104:15](#), *oil that makes their faces shine*, and [Luke 7:46](#), *You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet ...*), the cup God's bountiful supply for all generations (see [Ephesians 1:7-9](#), *... in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us*).

Surely your goodness and love shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. The thought of pursuit by adversaries is replaced by the guiding hand of God, behind him as well as before. The double *goodness and love* is a Hebrew method of emphasis, complementing the *surely*. *Love* here is rendered *mercy* in some translations, but the Hebrew word, extremely common in the OT, is usually rendered 'loving kindness' or 'steadfast love' or 'covenant love', conveying the superabundance of God's shepherding care and lavish generosity, especially in regard to the redemption of his people. It occurs over 200 times, half of these in the psalms and nearly always ascribed to God.² This compares with [Ephesians 3:20](#), *Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask ...* (ESV) where the Greek expresses 'super-extra-abundant'.³ As in earlier verses *shall follow* is a continuous reality in the present and into the future, and is emphasised by *surely*. *All the days of my life* is actually *to length of days*, a Hebrew idiom. (See also [Psalm 21:4](#), *[The king] asked you for life, and you gave it to him – length of days forever and ever*). David is certain that God's shepherding care is not just for the moment. Hebrews would understand 'live forever' as beginning in the 'now', not at death.⁴ A Christian understanding would interpret *forever* as *eternal*.

¹ Interpreted typologically.

² Exceptions include Ruth's kindness ([Ruth 3:10](#)) and Hezekiah ([2 Chronicles 32:32](#), KJV).

³ Also [John 10:10](#), *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly* (ESV).

⁴ The Hebrews of the OT probably did not have a concept of 'eternity' as understood by Christians. Certainly, 'life forever' begins now, but it is the quality rather than the quantity that Hebrews would understand, an 'other-worldly' relationship.

The verb *dwell* is related to *sabbath rest*,⁵ so God's presence is David's 'home base', his real home, his house forever (see also [Psalm 116:7](#), *Return to your rest, my soul ...*);^{6,7} when earth's paths, valleys and threats are over, there comes the real return home.⁸ The whole picture here – the well-set table, the welcoming oil, the brimming cup, and the certain future imply, like the sheep/shepherd motif, an enduring relationship with God (see [Psalm 27:4](#), *One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life ...*). But this future is even better than a feast. In the Hebrew mindset, to eat at another's table signified more than just friendship, there being a lasting bond, and often seals a covenant as at Sinai ([Exodus 24](#)) which anticipates the last supper, '*this cup is the new covenant of my blood*' ([Luke 22:20](#)). There is no ending of God's commitment to His people according to His covenant promises.

⁵ It is also related to 'return' which concurs with the idea of home as the place where 'when you go there they have to take you in' (from *Death of a hired man* by the 20th century American poet Robert Frost).

⁶ House is not the temple – this has not yet been built – see [2 Samuel 7](#), well worth reading.

⁷ Interestingly dwell is in the perfect tense, i.e. a completed act; perhaps, 'it is for ever that I have come to dwell in ...'.

⁸ From Alec Motyer in *New Bible Commentary*, IVP (1994 edition).