

Fear Not – Yahweh is Your Shepherd

Reflections on Psalm 23

By Barry Wilkins

A psalm of David.¹ The LORD² is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

Thus begins the most well-known and popular psalm, in the first book of psalms (1-41) which are almost all 'of David' and use God's name, Yahweh. Exactly half of the 150 psalms in the Bible are attributed to King David. Here he compares himself with a sheep. 'Why a sheep?', we might ask. Right at the start here we have a vivid picture, typical of Hebrew thought then and now. Sheep are not exactly the brightest of animals. A valuable source of wool and milk then, they live in a perpetual state of anxiety, always nervous; they rarely lie down.



They had reason in David's day. Lions and wolves roamed then, now extinct in the Near East, and they even feared birds who would peck at lambs' eyes. They needed the protection of a shepherd³ who knew them individually by name, and who would lie across the sheepfold door at night to protect them. 'Shepherd' is also an allusion to kingship in the Old Testament (OT). A king was seen as the shepherd of his people, for example [Ezekiel 34:1-16](#), v.15, 'I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD.' Here David the king pictures himself as a sheep under God's kingship and shepherding care and protection.

Anxiety is the commonest reported psychological illness today and, without exception, we are all anxious from time to time, such is the pace of modern life and its pressures on us. Even advertising is designed to cause anxiety – 'you must have this latest device' – and we become anxious because we 'lack' it (fear of missing out!). 'Fear not' is the commonest command in the Bible. David the king did not exactly 'lack' much. He could have what he pleased, even seducing another man's wife, and causing her husband's death. After all, he was the anointed king. But a state of anxiety plagued him, too. Thus, he perceived his need for protection and guidance. Yahweh, the LORD God of Israel, was his shepherd, and so he 'lacked nothing'. This last phrase in the Hebrew is a continuous state in the present and into the future.⁴ 'I want nothing' or 'I shall not want' are equally good translations, but both are true. The 'nothing' cannot refer to his worldly needs, rather he is expressing his dependence on his God, his Saviour.

He [Yahweh]⁵ makes me [causes me to] lie down in green [grassy] pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters [Hebrew, waters of rest]. The picture language is sustained. The verb '... makes me ...' does not imply coercion; rather, David is confident that God causes him to rest without fear under His protection.

¹ This short sentence is incorporated into the psalm in the Hebrew, and in many other psalms, so they should be read!

² When LORD is spelt with small capitals in our bibles, it is a translation of God's OT name, Yahweh, which means, our Saviour God.

³ It is notable that shepherd in Hebrew has a root of only two letters (three is usual) indicating how basic to Hebrew life is a shepherd. Likewise grace, name, sea, waters which we encounter later.

⁴ This is called the 'uncompleted act' form of the verb and is used a lot in this psalm. It's not just a 'now' experience, nor just a 'shall', but now and for ever.

⁵ Text in square brackets represents exact or alternative rendering of the original Hebrew or Greek.

The word translated 'quiet' or 'still' is essentially Noah's name,⁶ and implies rest, comfort, relief and even salvation (see [Genesis 5:29](#), '... and called his name Noah, saying, "Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us relief ..."'). And even the word 'lead' implies 'to waters of rest'.⁷ That's what shepherds do. And that's what David's and our Shepherd does for us, if we trust in Him. This word translated 'rest' implies far more than just 'take a short break'; a much deeper and lasting rest is meant, for example [Deuteronomy 12:9](#) '... you have not as yet come to the rest ...' [Ruth 1:8-9](#) 'The LORD grant that you may find rest ...', [1 Kings 8:56](#) 'Blessed be the LORD who has given rest to his people ...' [Psalm 116:5-7](#) 'The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The LORD protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.' Notice the words gracious, righteous, saved and soul in this last reference. We shall encounter them later.

The Hebrew 'waters' (always plural) is closely linked with 'seas' (See [Genesis 1:10](#), '...and the gathered waters he called seas.').⁸ In the OT these words frequently connote chaos ([Genesis 1:2](#), '...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.'), destruction and death (for example [Ezekiel 27:34](#), 'Now you are shattered by the sea in the depths of the waters ...'). God, not Man, is sovereign over the raging of the seas (for example [Psalm 93:3,4](#), '... the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves. Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea; the LORD on high is mighty.'; [Job 9:8](#), 'He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.'). 'Waters' evokes fear, but not here, in Psalm 23, in God's presence, where David finds rest and comfort.

He refreshes [restores] my soul.

The word for 'restore' is very frequent in the OT; the same word is used for 'return' and 'repent', for example [Ruth 1:8-9](#) and [Psalm 116:7](#) which we saw last week. David was, no doubt, mindful of his need to repent and return to God when he strayed from the right path in his life. And we also need to trust in God's loving kindness to us when we turn to him from our waywardness, as sheep trust and answer to their shepherd.

The Hebrews did not have a concept of soul, unlike Western culture which has inherited the Greek notion of soul as a component of the person, distinct from body and mind. The Hebrew word here, albeit often translated as 'soul', occurs hundreds of times in the bible and denotes a complete person under God ([Genesis 2:7](#), '... the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being' [NIV, Hebrew living person, ESV living creature, KJV and some modern versions living soul] and [Psalm 116:7](#), 'Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.'). Restoration, therefore, applies to the whole being, 'all that I am before God'. It is a restoration of the psalmist's whole relationship with his God. God's rest is again a continuous reality, rather than a one-off single event.

He guides me along the right paths [paths of righteousness] for his name's sake [on account of His Name].

The picture language of the psalm continues here. The shepherd leads his sheep along paths that are walkable (the sheep shall not stumble) and right (they lead to fresh pasture, water and rest). The Hebrew word righteous here means right or correct. King David, who knows his situation before God, and his relationship with God, desires to be walking morally right paths.

For His Name's sake; there is a similar phrase in Daniel's prayer in [Daniel 9:19](#), 'For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.' For God's sake does not mean for God's benefit, and certainly should not be used as an expletive. Rather it means 'because it is in accordance with

⁶ In Hebrew there is a close connection between the words for God's grace and God's rest.

⁷ In the Hebrew 'rest' and 'waters' are both plural.

⁸ There is a close connection between the Hebrew words for water and sea.

His Name', 'it is because that is what He does'. God's OT name Yahweh means the God who saves and delivers. God is dependable; He is true to His character.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley⁹ [NIV; ESV and Hebrew, *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.*** We notice here that David has changed the pronoun from 'he' to 'you', and the relationship with God is now personal (he is 'with me'). The darker the valley, the closer God is in David's experience, and so with us. Predators lurk in the deepest valley, but the sheep needs not fear because the shepherd is close by, protecting and leading. It is worth noting that the path through a dark valley is still a 'right path', the shepherd guiding and protecting as always. The rod is probably an offensive weapon against lions and bears; the staff defensive and guiding. Comfort is not just a soothing experience. The word is very common and is directly related to the Hebrew word for 'rest' in v.2 (*still waters, waters of rest*). It is a whole-person experience, vividly represented by the sheep-shepherd analogy.

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 ...*; ¹⁰ [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.¹¹ 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'.¹² As in earlier verses *shall follow* is

⁹ The Hebrew word is a composite of *shadow* and *death*. It is used in other psalms (e.g. [Psalm 44:19](#), '... you ... covered us with the *shadow of death* (ESV)' and in Job where it means more like deep darkness, Job, e.g. [Job 12:22](#) 'He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings *utter darkness* into the light.', and the major prophets, e.g. [Isaiah 9:2](#), '... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of *deep darkness* a light has dawned.' NIV always avoids *shadow of death*.

¹⁰ Interpreted typologically.

¹¹ Exceptions include Ruth's kindness ([Ruth 3:10](#)) and Hezekiah's ([2 Chronicles 32:32](#), KJV).

¹² Also [John 10:10](#), *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly* (ESV).

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.¹³ A Christian understanding would interpret *forever* as *eternal*.

The verb *dwell* is related to *sabbath rest*,¹⁴ 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 ...*);^{15,16} when earth's paths, valleys and threats are over, there comes the real return home.¹⁷ 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.

Jesus is the Shepherd

The shepherd in the Bible is a common metaphor for leaders and kings. King David was well aware of this. He was a shepherd himself as a youth ([1 Samuel 17](#), the Goliath incident) and knew his obligations as king. When David questions why he should not build a house for God's Name to dwell, God replies, [2 Samuel 7:7](#), *Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'*

Throughout the OT, God (Yahweh by the OT Hebrew name) is described as the shepherd of Israel. For example, in Jacob's dying speech he attributes the epithet to God in his discourse about Joseph; [Genesis 49:24](#), *Joseph ... by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (from there is the Shepherd the Stone of Israel)*. Likewise, in [Psalm 28:7-9](#), another psalm of David, he writes *The LORD is my strength and shield ... Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them for ever*. And in [Psalm 80:1](#), *Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who are enthroned upon the cherubim,*¹⁸ *shine forth*.

The prophets are ruthless in their writing of the failure of Israel's human shepherds; for example, [Ezekiel 34:5-15](#), *So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd ... as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD ... because my shepherds¹⁹ did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock ... As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered ... I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD*. We notice here an allusion to our [Psalm 23](#), v.2, *He makes me lie down in green pastures*.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ House is not the temple – this has not yet been built – see [2 Samuel 7](#), well worth reading.

¹⁶ Interestingly *dwell* is in the verb form denoting a completed act; perhaps, 'it is for ever that I have come to dwell in ...'.

¹⁷ From Alec Motyer in *New Bible Commentary*, IVP (1994 edition).

¹⁸ This refers to the mercy seat upon the ark of the covenant.

¹⁹ 'Shepherds' in [Ezekiel](#) refers to all the leaders of the people of Israel, including the priesthood.

The prophet Micah predicts the coming of the Messiah (Christ) with these words, [Micah 5:2-4](#), *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel ... And he shall stand and **shepherd** his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.* This is quoted in [Matthew 2:6](#) when Herod inquires where the Messiah is to be born after the visit of the magi.

Jesus's claim to be the Good Shepherd (and the door to the sheepfold) is one of the great "I am" statements in John's gospel, [John 10:1-16](#), *Truly, truly, ... The one who enters by the gate is the **shepherd** of the sheep ... I am the good **shepherd**. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ... I am the good **shepherd**; I know my sheep and my sheep know me ... I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one **shepherd**.* It is noteworthy that the gentile nations are included here ('They too ...'). There is a contrast between the bad shepherding of the Pharisees (as with the leaders in Ezekiel 34 above); the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is all-important. The shepherd knows the sheep by name, and they know his voice. He leads them out to pasture; he makes us lie down in safety.

Here we see how Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Psalm 23. Who are His sheep? Surely His sheep are all those who know Him as saviour, who are 'in Christ' and whom He knows by name and who share in the kingdom. He is the 'chief shepherd' ([1 Peter 5:1-4](#), ... *when the Chief **Shepherd** appears, you will receive the crown of glory ...*).

Jesus is the Lamb

Jesus fulfils Psalm 23 in another way; He is at the same time the lamb of God, sacrificed for our sake, fulfilling the Passover. See [Exodus 12:5](#), *Your [Passover] **lamb** shall be without blemish ...*, and [Isaiah 53:7](#), *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a **lamb** to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth* (quoted in Acts 8:32 in the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian court official). John the Baptist recognised this truth, [John 1:29](#), *The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, the **Lamb** of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'*

Truly it was Jesus who walked through the valley of death's shadow, and indeed we can fittingly hear the words of Psalm 23 as coming appropriately from the lips of Jesus as he faced the cross. Every line of the psalm could be Jesus' words.²⁰ In the end He is exalted as not just the shepherd, not just God's lamb, but as king; [Revelation 5:12](#), *'Worthy is the **Lamb**, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!'* [Revelation 7:17](#), *For the **Lamb** at the centre of the throne will be their **shepherd**; "he will lead them to springs of living water."* This final statement is yet another allusion to our Psalm 23:2, *He leads me beside waters of rest*, remembering that waters in the Hebrew way of thinking is a figure for chaos and death, but now is transformed into a metaphor for life.

Thus, in our Psalm 23, we have a magnificent statement of God's care for us, His sheep. It embraces comfort, provision, safety, repentance, guidance, protection, steadfast love, eternity, rest in God's kingdom; it even prefigures the cruelty of the passion of the Lamb of God, that we might have life forever.

²⁰ For example, 'he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake' fits with Paul's doctrine of the cross in Romans, namely that it is there that God displays his righteousness in the ultimate way, and the Father thus 'leads' Christ to the cross.