

A Song for the Lonely

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[0 : 00] Whatever age we are, no matter how young or how old, we always have questions and we always wonder what the future will be like in our life.

And to be honest, we don't really know what the future is going to hold. So we do have lots of questions about our health, about our families, about our relationships, about our jobs, about our income, our home, our church.

Lots and lots of different questions and we just wonder how things will work out, how things will turn out. What about this? What about that? What if this happens? What if that happens?

Because we're well aware that life can be a mixture of good and bad, of joy and sorrow, of success and failure, of triumphs and trials, highs and lows, security and danger, pleasure and pain, mountaintops and deep valleys.

And so how do you cope? It's a question for you. How do you cope with all the uncertainty and all the unpredictability of life? How do you cope with what is going on in the world around us? Where do you look? What do you do?

[1 : 11] Well, Psalm 23 is such a brilliant song for life, for all of life, because it helps us focus not just on our own lives and on our own circumstances or the situations that we find ourselves in, but most importantly, it helps us focus on God.

Because it's a song that doesn't just describe the ups and downs of life, but it describes to us a God who is with his people in all of those ups and downs, in all of those circumstances.

And so David, the author, experienced all of this. So while David could say, verse 1, David also knew what it was like, verse 4, to walk through the darkest valley.

He knew both. And the reality of our own experience is the same. There will be those highs and there will be those lows. And so some of you may have come in the door this afternoon and you feel safe and you feel secure and life is going well and everything is sorted.

And yet some of you may have come in the door this afternoon with a really heavy heart, worried, anxious, disturbed, distressed about what is going on in your life or in the life of your family or in your work situation or whatever.

[2 : 28] So some may be going through a pleasant green pasture with quiet waters. Others may be going through a deep, dark valley. But whatever our circumstances, what we need to do is to store up the truth of this psalm, in a sense, and hold it in the medicine chest of our souls.

Because if we know it and we believe it, it will do us good, whatever comes our way in life. And so the message of this psalm, I would say, can be summed up quite easily.

And it is this, God is committed to his people. God is committed to his people. It rings out in every single phrase from start to finish. God is committed to his people.

And it's there right at the very centre of the psalm, in the central words of verse 4. For you are with me. Right there in the middle. God is committed to his people.

God is with his people. Through thick, through thin, with the highs and with the lows. And so if you are here this afternoon and you wouldn't call yourself one of God's people, then you need to know what God is like.

[3 : 38] You need to know what kind of God this is that we're talking about today. And this psalm shows us not just what he's like, but how he relates to us. How he comes into a relationship with human beings.

So we see how he provides, how he protects, and how his presence is always with us. And so you'll find in the back of the service sheet, three simple points. First, provision. Second, protection.

And third, presence. Provision, protection, and presence. So first of all, let's look at God's provision. Stay in verse 1 to verse 3. Let me just read those verses again.

The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides quiet waters.

He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. So David here uses this image of a shepherd to describe what God is like.

[4 : 40] And it's one of the most intimate descriptions of God in the Bible. Because being a shepherd himself, David knew what it was like to relate to the sheep under his care.

And so he uses this relationship to describe his relationship with God. So just as a shepherd is committed to his sheep, so the Lord is committed to his people.

So David begins, the Lord is my shepherd. And then everything else that's said in this psalm, every phrase, every word, flows out of this relationship that David is describing between God and him.

Just look at the language in the psalm. So David speaks of my and me and I and he and his and you and your.

It's all personal, isn't it? The description of his relationship is very personal. So just like a shepherd would know each of his sheep, so God knows each of his people. God relates to us in a personal way.

[5 : 42] He's not a distant God, but he comes close to us. And so David can say, I lack nothing. And that's God's provision that he is aware of.

And so if we do belong to God, then we have what we need because God is our shepherd. So I wonder if we can repeat David's words. The Lord is my shepherd.

And so can you say that you lack nothing? Are you content with what you have in life? Because the Lord is your shepherd. Because just like a shepherd knows what's best for his sheep, so God knows what's best for us.

And he gives to us what we need, not always what we want, but what we need. And so David is really saying here that God knows far better than we do about what's best for us in life.

And so David says he makes me lie down in green pastures. Verse 2, he leads me beside quiet waters. And I don't know what it's like being a sheep, but I'm sure if you're a sheep, that's what you need, isn't it?

[6 : 48] You need a nice place to lie down, some nice, soft, fluffy grass. You need a nice stream, some water running by so you can be refreshed after a drink.

And it would just be perfect. And so David's describing how God does provide for his people. And so what he's also saying is God, even amidst things in life that don't go well, God will enable us to rest secure.

He will be watching over us, foster maybe turbulence around us to take care of us. And David then goes on and says he refreshes or he restores my soul.

Verse 3, now from what we know of David's life in the Bible, he often needed to be refreshed or restored or revived. Because his sin, his failure, all the times he messed up in life are written large across the pages of the Bible.

And so he often needed to be restored, to repent, to turn away from his sin. And God gave him this forgiveness and he gave him this refreshment because God was committed to David.

[8 : 08] David was his. And so if we are in this relationship with God, then God is committed to us. And so we'll be well aware of the need to have our souls restored.

We know we're not perfect, far from it. We know we fail and yet we need God's forgiveness. We need our souls to be refreshed and restored. And so God never turns away from people who turn back to him in repentance.

He never turns sinners away no matter what we've done. But he longs to restore us and he longs to forgive us. And that's why the message the church has about Jesus is such good news.

But that's not all because God also provides new direction. David says, verse 3, he guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. So God restores us when we've strayed.

Takes us back so that he can lead us in his way. He can lead us on his path. And so being guided along the right paths by God will mean that we avoid sin and we obey God.

[9 : 14] That's why David says, he guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. That's to say that God leads his people in his way because of God's reputation and God's honour.

People will think worse of God if they see someone like you or me who professes to believe in God, living in a way that goes against the character and nature of God.

And so whatever God does, he does it not just for us, but he does it for his name's sake, for his glory and honour. So God provides all that we need.

He gives contentment. He gives peace. He gives refreshment, guidance, direction, because he's committed to his people. So that's the first thing we see, verse 1, 2, 3, his provision.

The second thing is his protection, verse 4 and 5. We see how God's commitment to his people leads to the protection of his people.

[10:13] But just notice there's a change in tone in the psalm here in verse 4. So we read, 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. So just picture verse 1 to 3, sunny, peace, tranquility, green pastures, quiet waters.

And then it jars because the clouds come over, the sun disappears, and then verse 4, there's darkness. And so what's this darkest valley that David speaks of?

Well, we might normally associate this with death, because of course the darkest valley that any human being can go through is the valley of death. But the language David uses here is much broader than just death.

Sometimes it's translated the valley of the shadow of death, or the valley of deep darkness.

Because David's not just talking about death, but about every single dark experience in life.

[11:18] Everything that we go through, up to, as well as, including death. And we all go through these dark valleys. And so the psalm is saying, God's people are never immune to difficulty or to danger.

And so the point is, that whether we're going through a dark valley right now, or whether it's the final dark valley of death, David is saying, God's people have got nothing to fear.

And so how is it that what David says in the Bible, what God is saying to us, how is he promising that we don't need to fear in life? Because I'm sure all of us here have at some point had fear in our lives, worried about what is going to happen.

Well, David says, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. God was with him. And that's the only way that you and I can make it through the dark valleys.

It's not because we are strong on our own. It's not as if we need to try harder or be braver. But we can go through them because God is with us. So David knew that God would never leave him.

[12:34] God would accompany him and God would protect him. And so he knew he was safe. Safe in this life, this life we're living. But also safe in death.

Because David was aware that God would be with him in death too. So these words really only apply to people who believe in God. Because only a believer can know this kind of protection.

Because without God, we go through the valley of death alone. And that's why the funerals of people who don't believe in God are so bleak and so hopeless.

And I've been at so many of them. There's no hope. There's no joy. There's no pain. There's no pain. There's no pain. Only grief and pain. Because death seems to be the end.

And the psalm is saying, if you don't know God or believe in him, then death is not the end.

Because we go on for all eternity. But after death, there's no chance you'll be in God's presence at all.

[13:42] But only those who know the Lord as their shepherd have nothing to fear, even in the face of death. And so David goes on to say, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

In verse 4. What was the significance of the rod and staff? Well, the shepherd would use these to defend and to control his sheep. So the rod was for defence, like a club.

Maybe like a baseball bat. Maybe with bits sticking out of it. And this would be used. It would hang on the shepherd's belt. And he would bark danger, other animals, away from his sheep in order to protect his flock.

And so the staff was for control. A big long stick with a hook. So one end, the pointy end, could discipline the sheep and guide it in the right direction. And the hook end could pull the sheep out of danger and catch it by the neck.

And so that's how this shepherd that David's describing would protect his sheep. And so it's not as if the sheep would never be in any danger.

[14:48] There's an awareness here that there is often danger and difficulty in life. And so it's not as if we can avoid all of that for all of our lives, even if we believe in God.

And so can you see the implication of what David is saying here? He's saying that his security in life doesn't depend on his circumstances. It's got nothing to do with his environment, whether it's green pastures or quiet waters or dark valleys.

Because, well, we don't even know which it will be tomorrow, next week, next year. But David's saying here that the ultimate security comes from the Lord who is his shepherd. Because the Lord is more than able to look after David and to protect him.

Because he's with him. And that's why our security can't ever come from anything in this life.

Although we do put our security in many things in this life.

We put our security in our job, in our status, in our education, in our income, in our home, in our family. And yet we're aware all of that can go so quickly.

[16:00] So David is saying our security ultimately comes from God. Because without all these other things, he will still be with us. And so David goes on and describes what this will be like for him.

What it looks like for him in verse 5. He prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. David's speaking here about triumphing in the presence of his enemies.

So this could be a description of a victory celebration. So there's a meal down at a well set table where the captured enemies are watching on as David is anointed with oil and David's cup is overflowing.

So it could be after victory has been won. But this could also be describing a celebration meal. Not after victory is won, but in the darkest valley.

God's protection is not when we get out of the dark valley. But God's protection is while we're in the middle of the dark valley.

[17:04] Whilst our enemies are all still around us. And that might sound strange. Because you might have this idea of God that when he protects us, he takes us out of trouble.

And so we're totally safe. And there's no danger. There can be no enemies. No pressure around about us. But the psalm is saying, that's not how God works.

So our lives will never be totally risk free or comfortable or easy. Never. And so we might think that God's protection means he's got to take us as far away as possible from danger or from enemies.

But that's not how he works. But why? Well, it's because the Lord wants us to know that we will be safe and we will be secure even in the midst of our troubles.

Even whilst our enemies are around about us, God will protect us. He'll be with us. Not by taking them away, but by assuring us of his presence in the difficulty.

[18:11] Because if you think about it, we'll never learn how God protects us or how secure we are in God if life is just so easy and comfortable.

But so often, we need to be away from the comfort so that we're not relying on our own strength, but we're relying on his. We're trusting in him rather than trusting in ourselves.

So the Lord is our shepherd. He can keep us safe and he protects us. And he wants us to know it. That's why there are often dark valleys, because that's when we look to him more than we do when things are nice and pleasant.

Green pastures and still waters. So God doesn't just want us to survive in the presence of our enemies. He wants us to thrive because he's right there with us.

And so don't these verses give us this total picture of protection? Complete safety. Even in darkness and in danger, because God is committed to his people.

[19:17] He's with his people. Okay, that's the second point. First, God's provision. Second, God's protection. And then third, God's presence. And this is in verse 6 at the end of the psalm.

God's so committed to his people. He's not just with us now, but he's with us forever. So verse 6 says, So David had experienced God with him in the green pastures.

He'd experienced God with him in the dark valleys. And so he can be confident that God will be with him every single day of his life. From here on until he dies.

How could you be so sure of this? Well, it's interesting because the word here for love, verse 6, is a covenant word. It's speaking of steadfast love.

Where God is committed to his people in a strong covenant relationship. Just like two people would commit to each other in marriage. Making promises that they will be with the other no matter what.

[20 : 30] And so that's what's being said here. There's an intensity about God's loving commitment to his people. It's so intense that it's not that we pursue God.

Which is what we might think. That we're a Christian because we're the ones who have pursued God and are pursuing God. But it is that God pursues us with his goodness and with his steadfast covenant love.

So his pursuit of us, of you and of me, is far greater and stronger and intense than our pursuit of him. And so that assures us, doesn't it, that God is never ever going to let us go.

And because of that, David can't just be speaking in this final verse about this life like before he dies. David is also confident that he will dwell in the presence of God forever.

I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. So God's presence with his people is not just in the here and now of this life. But God's presence with his people, God's commitment to his people is in the there and then of eternity.

[21 : 43] So God will never ever ever leave his people. And David had that certainty that God was committed to his people forever. I used to be a landlord.

And I wasn't a very good landlord. And so it seems to me that the aim of your landlord is to try and make as much money as possible. And do as little as possible in the property that you own for the people who are living in it.

And landlords can have that tendency, can't they, to think that, well, if they look after my house well and there's enough things done, I mean, it's not wrecked or damaged, then, well, they might just get to live in it a bit longer.

We might just increase the tenancy agreement. Well, the psalm is saying here that God's not like some kind of landlord who agrees covenant, to agree some kind of short-term tenancy, that if we behave well enough, and if we are good enough, then, well, maybe he might let us into heaven to be with him forever.

That's not how God is described here. No, God is like the owner of the universe, the best landlord you could possibly get, who invites us in to stay with him and to live with him rent-free forever.

[23 : 06] Not because we're good, but really, actually, because we're bad. And we can't do it ourselves. We can't live in his home because we're good enough.

And then he welcomes us in, and he accepts us, and he takes us, and he wants us to enjoy him forever. And that's how the psalm ends, that God wants his people, you and me, to enjoy him, to live with him forever.

That's why he will provide for us in this life. That's why he will protect us in this life. And that's why there's a promise that his presence will be with us forever. And that's what David is expressing in this song.

He's expressing God's commitment to him. And so that's a question for us all, isn't it? How can we be sure that God is just as committed to you and me as he is to David?

Well, David's understanding of the Lord as a shepherd points to a much fuller understanding because Jesus himself applied this image of the Lord as shepherd to himself.

[24 : 12] Jesus said in John chapter 10, I am the good shepherd. And so we know how committed God is to his people because Jesus didn't just say, I am the good shepherd.

He then went on to say, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And so Jesus Christ is the only shepherd who knows what it's like to be a sheep.

Because Jesus is not only the sacrificial shepherd who gives up himself to look after his people, but he's also the sacrificed sheep who gave his life to save his people.

And so Jesus not only sang this psalm, as a boy he would have learned this psalm by heart. He didn't just sing it in the temple. He lived out this psalm.

Jesus walked through everything that this psalm describes. So in Psalm 23, the Lord is God the Father who's in heaven, who shepherded his son Jesus through the valley of the shadow of death.

[25 : 14] So Jesus faced every evil possible, and Jesus was cast into the deepest, darkest valley of all, the valley of death.

And yet Jesus trusted his Father because he was prepared to die for us. And so the prophet Isaiah speaks of Jesus dying, dying for our sins like this.

He says in Isaiah 53, We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And so the Lord's goodness and the Lord's love followed Jesus and carried him through and raised him from death. And so Jesus was victorious over his enemies, so that death, the greatest enemy there is, has been shattered.

Death's power has been broken by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so through Jesus, through his death, God forgives our sin, and he brings us into a relationship with himself.

[26 : 21] And then through Jesus' resurrection, death has been conquered, so that we can share in his eternal life. So Jesus' death and his resurrection is the guarantee that God will be committed to us now and forever.

Jesus said this again in John chapter 10, My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of my father's hand. So this psalm, as we conclude, highlights the fact of there are two fundamentally different ways to live your life.

One way is to know the Lord as your shepherd, to be connected to the God who wants to be involved in your life.

And the other way is to be on your own, to live your life your way without the God that Sam describes. I think this is described really well in a piece of writing that David Powleson, who was a Christian counsellor, he's dead now, but he wrote what he called Anti-Sam 23.

[27 : 44] In other words, the opposite of this psalm. And this is what he said in Anti-Sam. I'm on my own. No one looks out for me or protects me. I experience a continual sense of need.

Nothing's quite right. I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed. It's a jungle. I feel overwhelmed. It's a desert. I'm thirsty.

My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself. I stumble down some dark paths. Still, I insist, I want to do what I want to do, when I want, and how I want.

But life's confusing. Why don't things ever really work out? I'm haunted by emptiness and futility, shadows of death. I fear the big hurt and final loss.

Death is waiting for me at the end of every road. But I'd rather not think about that. I spend my life protecting myself. Bad things can happen. I find no lasting comfort.

[28 : 41] I'm alone, facing everything that could hurt me. Are my friends really friends? Other people use me for their own ends. I can't really trust anyone. No one has my back.

No one is really for me, except me. And I'm so much all about me. Sometimes it's sickening. I belong to no one except myself. My cup is never quite full enough.

I'm left empty. Disappointment follows me all the days of my life. Will I just be obliterated into nothingness? Will I be alone, forever, homeless, free-falling into void?

Sartre said, hell is other people. I have to add, hell is also myself. It's a living death. And then, I die. Can you see two different ways of looking at life.

And so, how are you and how am I going to live my life? Are we going to do it our way? My way? As Frank Sinatra used to sing, or are we going to live it God's way?

[29 : 43] The way of Psalm 23. Because if God is not your shepherd, then none of the promises of this great Psalm can be for you.

But, if you know God, the Father, as your shepherd, who loves you so much that he didn't spare his only son, but gave him up to die, then you've got no reason to doubt his wholehearted and permanent commitment to you.

And that's why everything that happens in our lives must be viewed in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because a shepherd will provide for us, our shepherd will protect us, and our shepherd's presence will always be with us.

And so he understands what you go through. He knows. And he'll be with us every single step of the way, even through death itself.

Because nothing is able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.