

Psalm 23 Matt Taylor 12th July 2026

There's an old preacher's story about a boy. Tragically, he was very young when his parents died and so he went into the care of his grandparents. And his grandfather was a poor shepherd but a devout Christian man. And so he sought to bring up this young boy trusting the Lord Jesus. So he sought to teach him the Bible stories and to teach him verses from Scripture. The boy was uneducated and found learning things difficult. And so the grandfather would get the boy's little hands, sat on his lap, teaching him Psalm 23, verse 1, The Lord is my shepherd. And over days and weeks, the boy learnt the verse, The Lord is my shepherd. Simple, 5 words. Now time came for the boy, as he grew up, to take the sheep out on the hills. And one winter's day, the snowstorms came in. But the boy didn't come home. The night came and the boy still was not home. He didn't come back. The next day, when the snow had ceased to fall, the grandfather went out looking for him. Tragically, the boy died. And when the grandfather found the boy, he found him holding on to his fourth finger. The Lord is my shepherd. When he was in the darkest valley, the boy knew Jesus as his good shepherd. The big question we're thinking about this morning is this.

Do you know Jesus as your shepherd? The one who can give you comfort even in the darkest of valleys. Psalm 23 has become very precious to Christians over the years.

In this excellent book, which I recommended in the e-mail this week by David Gibson, the Lord of Psalm 23. He calls Psalm 23 a holy psalm because the psalm is so dear to so many Christians that preaching on it can be a torturous thing because I fear that I'll ruin the psalm for you this morning. I pray that is not true. But I pray as we meditate on Psalm 23 together, it would become even more dear to us that we will keep walking with the Lord

Jesus as our shepherd. The Psalm can be used by grandparents teaching deep truths to their grandchildren, but also read by grandchildren on the hospital ward to their grandparents. I've known it used, opened up as two sisters battling with anxieties, wrestle with the truth that the Lord is their shepherd. I've known it to be WhatsApp one brother to another in times of deep want. Psalm 23 is a psalm for the journey, a psalm for us all. My prayer this morning is that we know Jesus as our shepherd. Some of us, that may well be for the first time. But others, that we would be strengthened and encouraged to keep listening, keep following Jesus, the good shepherd. And as we walk in this world with all its hired hands, all its thieves and robbers wanting us to drag us away from him, that our hearts, our minds, our ears would be resolute following after Jesus. The one who is our good shepherd. It's that principal metaphor.

Verse one. The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. The image of the sheep and the shepherd. That in the shepherd's care, the sheep lacks nothing. I shall not want, or the translations put it, that perfect contentment that with Jesus we have everything we need. All things for life and godliness are found in Christ. Now as we come to this psalm, I wonder whether there are six ways in which we could read the shepherd-sheep analogy, and it kind of opens up through scripture. Firstly, there's the most obvious way, David and the Lord. So look to that little superscription under the Psalm 23, a psalm of David. King David, who was himself a shepherd, speaks of the Lord as his shepherd. I guess that's the most obvious way. But then also there's the notion that the Lord is the shepherd of his people. So Psalm 80 verse 1, God is described as the shepherd of Israel. And as we study the Psalm, there are lots of ways in which there are many allusions to the way in which God shepherded his people from Egypt and into the promised land. You might want to take a picture of that and follow up those notes later. But wonderfully, the story of God's people are rescued out of Egypt. They're fed and watered by God in the wilderness. They're brought to his mountain where they eat and drink with God and then given the tabernacle to dwell where God will dwell with them. There is this picture of Israel's story. But also, it is The shepherd sheep analogy models for Israel's kings how they are to look after God's people. And in Ezekiel 34, it is this

metaphor as sheep and a shepherd that God uses to critique Israel's kings. That they'd left God's people as sheep without a shepherd. So we can see this paradigmatically of the king and Israel. But also, as we've been seeing in Psalms 15 to 24, there's a typological fulfilment between Jesus and his Father in heaven. That Jesus feels full who David is. And actually, this is a wonderful thing that you can see filled out in the New Testament. We won't be doing all that today, but it's worth dwelling on as well. Most wonderfully, we see Jesus as our good shepherd, who saw people as sheep without a shepherd and fed them with his word. Hebrews 13 calls him the chief shepherd. But also, I think, just as the king to Israel, The sheep shepherd analogy shows what it means to pastor people. It's a model of pastoral care. And I wonder whether a good reading of Psalm 23 would help us as a church family as we think about what pastoral care could look like here at Trinity. I wonder whether there is actually a six-week sermon series in Psalm 23 that we could go through. But what I want to do this morning is just focus in on this one relationship of Jesus and us. John 10, Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. And I pray that we would know him as that this morning. And we're going to trace this psalm through in these five different places.

So firstly, verse 2, we arrive at the field. Look for me to verse 2. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. Just drinking the imagery there. It's wonderful, isn't it? A picture of rest and safety, of food and water. It's idyllic. What sheep would not want to live here? In the green, green grass, the blue, blue skies, the water's there. It's idyllic. And we are just like sheep, are we not? We hunger and we thirst. We're driven by our appetites. Three meals A day. We have to get food on the table. We earn money to do so. But it's not just physical things that drive us. but spiritual things as well. We are driven by our appetites, longing to find fulfilment, whether that's in areas of success or pleasure, comfort or happiness. And just like our eating habits, we find a little bit of pleasure, but it doesn't satisfy and we're hungry for more, so we go for more. Or we thirst after comfort. We have a little bit of comfort there and then it wanes and we hunger and thirst for more. It's a cycle that goes round and round and round. And yet Jesus, our good shepherd, says, come

to me and you'll never hunger. Come to me and you'll never thirst. Come to me and I'll make you lie down in green pastures. I'll lead you beside quiet waters of rest. See, just as the Lord shepherded his people through the wilderness and fed them on bread from heaven to teach them that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the Lord. So Jesus, yes, he provides for our physical needs, but also he himself provides for our spiritual needs. He is, he said in John's gospel, the bread of life. He is the one who feeds us spiritually that we never go hungry. There is no cycle of hunger and wanting with Jesus. He fully satisfies. And just as in the wilderness, God led his people to those oasis of sweet waters, gave them water from the rock. If we're thirsty, Jesus says, come to me and drink and I will give you a living water. in your heart, welling up to eternal life. And wonderfully, here in Buxton, we have a beautiful picture for us, don't we? It's even written on the well when it's not covered up for the well dressing. That living water, that well, that we never need thirst. If you were to station yourself by the well for your entire life, you need not go anywhere else for water. You'll have that continuous supply of life. And that is what it means. If we come to Jesus, he puts his Spirit in us, that we have that satisfying relationship with God forever. We know God, and that is a satisfying, a thirst-quenching satisfaction. We share in his life that vital relationship will never thirst again. You see, with Jesus, you'll never lack anything. And from the field we move to the path.

In verse 3, he refreshes my soul, he guides me along the right path for his name's sake. It's worth noting at this point that all the verbs are active with the Lord being the one doing them. So notice verse 2, the Lord is the one who makes, the Lord is the one who leads, the Lord is the one who refreshes, he guides. Verse 5, he prepares, he anoints. The Lord is the one doing everything. The shepherd does everything for the sheep. And here he refreshes and he guides. And this refreshment, this guidance, the Lord attaches his name to it. For my name's sake, his reputation's on the line. And that word refreshes my soul. That phrase, we've seen it already in Psalm 19 and verse 7, talking about the law of the Lord, refreshing our soul. And we noted then that this refreshing word means literally to return. That God calls us back from our wanderings. And we've sung of it, haven't we,

already this morning? My heart is prone to wander like a sheep straying. Yet God restores, refreshes our souls. And we see that most perfectly in the Lord Jesus Christ, who leaves the 99 to find the one wandering sheep. Maybe we've come to church this morning and we see ourselves as the black sheep. The one who has wandered away. We don't know why we're here this morning, like John was speaking about earlier this morning. Maybe it is that Jesus is calling you back into his fold this very morning. He refreshes our souls. He guides us along the right path. That phrase, right path, has a moral quality to it. That there are right ways in this world to live, which makes sense. If God has made this world, then there is a right way to live in it. And as sheep, there are lots of questions, aren't there, which is the right path to follow? And as we're following Jesus, we might question whether his path is the right path. It's narrow. It's steep. Jesus, is this the right path? But Jesus, the good shepherd, leads us along right paths. We can trust him that he's leading us. And where is he leading us? Verse 6, to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. This world tells us that there are many paths in which we can follow. It even encourages us to forge our own path through life. But actually there will be no true satisfaction following the path of the world, following our own paths, me being me. There is no true satisfaction found outside of Jesus. We can follow Jesus, we can trust him, the good shepherd. With Jesus as our shepherd, we'll never lack any leading. But the path, well, it suddenly leads to the valley in verse 4.

I'm no musician, but I think I'm using the right phrase here, that the minor key comes in at this point. Colin's giving me a nod, there we go. It kind of changes, doesn't it? The sound of the psalm. For even though I walk through the darkest valley, it is no longer an ideal setting. No longer do we have green, green grass and blue, blue skies. No, the clouds have come in, the mountains have, the edges have risen up, and it's a dark and dangerous place. Now this valley, taken in the context of Psalms 15 to 24, is the complete opposite place to God's dwelling place. So Psalm 24, verse 3, Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The mountain is the holy place. God's dwelling place, God's home, God's presence. To be on the mountaintop is to be with God. But to be down in the

valley, well, is to be far from God, to be cut off from him. It's A Psalm 22 type experience. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Dark, distant. And see the footnote, as old translations had it. This is the valley of the shadow of death. The ominous, dark, Dangerous death-like shadow cast by our rebellion against God and the judgment it deserves. And we feel that, don't we, in this life? Whether it's through sickness, bereavement or ageing. Disappointment, guilt or shame. Dark death's shadow casts its shadow over us. We know this in our circumstances. But here's the glorious truth. That God doesn't stay on the mountain. Jesus doesn't stay in heaven. No. I will fear no evil, verse 4, for you are with me. The one who was ahead is now beside. The great comfort is that the shepherd is with the sheep in the valley. Presence, but also Protection. I've not been in many dangerous situations, but when I was 18, 19, I once went on elephant back safari in Zimbabwe. It was quite an astonishing experience. And what was great is that if you're on an elephant, then all the other animals are nice and happy. And so we got to see some wonderful animals. But there was one thing that the guides had on the elephant. So I zoomed in a little bit. It was this massive iron stick with a spike. And I said, what is that for? And the guide said, it's actually for our safety. Because if the elephant goes a bit rogue, then one foul swipe and the elephant is no more. And we're safe. And actually, the guide having that pokey stick, well, more than a stick, an iron spike to kill the elephant brought safety and comfort to me, knowing that safety in the danger. And I guess it's a similar thing that if you're in a war zone and your guide has an AK-47 over their shoulder, that their presence, that they can deal with evil brings you comfort. And we see that at the end of verse 4, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. That Jesus is the one who can really protect us. And I love the way that Dowell Ralph Davis puts it in his commentary. He puts it like this. Let us realise that Jesus Christ, our shepherd, is no emaciated weakling. Our shepherd is a warrior, as shepherds had to be. No one can ***** his sheep out of his hand. The muscles of Jesus' arm are flexed to defend his flock. He doesn't carry a club for nothing. He is obviously enough for whatever the valley throws at us. Jesus is strong enough for you in the valley. Whatever you're facing today, Jesus is enough. The valley moves on to the party.

After the valley, the party, after threat, triumph. Now, a lot of people would say here that the metaphor changes, that you go from shepherd and sheep to guest and host. Is that what's happening here? Maybe. But what's striking is that David doesn't say, the Lord is my shepherd, the Lord is my host. Now it kind of seamlessly moves in. I wonder whether actually what we're getting here is this is how God shepherds his people. Just as he brought them out of the wilderness, cared for them in the wilderness, and took them to his mountain where they ate with the Lord in his presence. So he so shepherds us that if you can imagine it like this, he lays a banqueting table for his sheep. sat there eating. He lays a table before his sheep. And look at the context, verse 5, in the presence of my enemies. It's A post-battle feast that's happening. Gibson writes in his book, when enemies are against you, Jesus is for you. Jesus lays a table before you in the presence of your enemies. Sin, Satan, death itself are watching on as we're having a victory feast with Jesus. And look how lavish it is in nature. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Now I don't know about you, but having oil put on your head doesn't seem to be a nice thing. It seems a bit weird. and very disconnected. But imagine you've just had a hot and sweaty journey and your air conditioning's broken down in your car, you arrive at someone's home and you're just really hot and bothered. And they open the door and they give you one of those beautiful kind of amenity sets with all the different kind of fragrances and lotions and things. And they say, there's a fresh towel in the bathroom, go and take a shower. How do you feel at that moment? You're made to feel really welcome, are you not? And I guess that is the sense of what to put oil on someone's head it means when they're brought in to a feast and a party. The lavishness is shown again at the end of verse 5. My cup overflows. There is no stinginess in generosity. This is the welcome of Jesus. the reality is we are sheep. We're not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under Jesus' table. Yet he welcomes us to his victory feast. On that final day, there will be a lavish welcome of all his sheep to his banqueting table. And wonderfully, we have a foretaste of that. in the Lord's Supper. We celebrate the Lord's Supper here twice a month, once in the evening, once in the morning. And each time Jesus welcomes us to his table, we're unworthy to come. But he says, come, eat and drink. We

get to feed on Jesus now in anticipation of that final day. Don't stay away. Jesus says, come. And finally, as we hit verse 6, we get home.

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. We finally arrive home to the dwelling of the Lord, his house. The shepherd welcomes his sheep home. This verse always reminds me of dear Vicky Lutton. Vicky was over 100 when I met her. I knew her for only a short three years. And as a young curate, I went to visit her. And she cheekily said to me, Matt, did you know that God has two sheepdogs? I was like, where does that say that in the Bible? Where are the sheepdogs? I was like, yes, Vicky. She said, Psalm 23, verse 6. Surely your goodness and love, or she said, mercy, King James Version, your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And what a picture that is. God is the shepherd with his sheepdogs chasing us to the new creation. Love and goodness, his steadfast love, never stopping, unchanging love, hounding us into heaven, his goodness following us. A wonderful image. In this wonderful work, do get this, it's really excellent. Gibson says, actually, it's bigger than sheepdogs, because goodness and love are very qualities of God himself. God is the one who is good, who is love. And it's as though the Lord himself is pursuing us. The shepherd is chasing us into the fold. And that completes the cycle, does it not? That our shepherd leads us, our shepherd is beside us, and our shepherd is chasing us all the way home. But not into a pen or a fold, but into the house of the Lord, the good place, Zion. the heavenly city, where things are only good all the time, where there'll be true satisfaction, true joy eternally, where we will see the Lord in his face forever. I don't know if you ever have pangs of homesickness. We've lived in Buxton for nearly a year, but occasionally we long for the southern climates of Kent, notably in the winter. But we can also feel these homesicknesses, can't we, longing for the new creation to come? Maybe we wouldn't call it that. If we're not following Jesus, we might just have these big questions like, is this all that there is to life? There must be more than this. Or we just feel that the hopelessness of our broken world just goes from brokenness to brokenness to brokenness. That sense of homesickness, longing for more. Maybe we feel it even more intensely as a believer, as we feel the shadow of death in

this age. Know for sure, Psalm 23 and verse 6. Surely I would dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That is our certain destiny. And the Lord as our shepherd will lead us there. He will walk with us through the valley and he will chase us home. Brothers and sisters, do you know Jesus as your shepherd?

And can I encourage you to take your hands? Take your hands and remember with me the Lord is my shepherd. I didn't really hear that. Okay, let's do it together. The Lord is my shepherd. Now this dear truth can be learned by the youngest of child and can be precious and sweet to them, but also can be dear to us all the way through from 4 to 104. As we keep trusting Jesus, our shepherd, to provide and protect for us, until he brings us home into his Father's house, where there are many rooms. Let me lead us in a prayer.

The Lord is my shepherd. Father, thank you so much for giving us your son, the Lord Jesus, as the good shepherd, who loves us enough to lay down his life for us. who feeds us with his very self, who leads us with his voice. Give us ears to hear him, to walk on his path of righteousness. Thank you that he is the one who hosts a meal before us, with Sin and Satan watching on, speaking of his death for us and his victory over them. Thank you that it is his goodness and his love that chases us. Until we dwell in your house forevermore, keep us confident of that future that is set before us, we pray. We ask this for your glory's sake. Amen.