

There is something that sets our hearts at ease, and allows us to rest, in the familiar. Think of that feeling when you walk in the door after time away; for most of us that is a sense of comfort. We've enjoyed time away for a holiday "but its nice to be home."

I expect that for most of us Psalm 23 is a place of familiarity. Many of us can recite it from memory, we've heard it at funerals, we've sung it, we've prayed it, we know it!

As we open it today it's my hope that coming to the familiar will give us great courage, and set us at ease, in an uneasy world. Where many are fearful we'll see again that we have nothing to fear. As we walk through this wonderful, familiar Psalm we'll start with the dominant image **{slide 2}** of God as shepherd, before we shift gears and look at God as Host, and see how they are amplified in Jesus.

Pray

i) *God as Shepherd vv1-4:*

{slide 3} v.1 The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing! It is a glorious testimony, and an unusual one.

Israel looks at God as the shepherd of their nation He has constantly fulfilled his promise to take care of his people and revealed himself to be full of love, compassion, patience, fidelity, and forgiveness.

The image of shepherd is also used of kings and rulers, and not just within the life of Israel, but right across the ANE.

For a king, even a god to be called 'shepherd' wasn't unusual, what is unusual is that David speaks of the shepherd personally. The Lord is *my* shepherd.

On this side of the cross, it's hard to recognise just how radical that is. We are used to a close and personal God, its our default, but it wasn't in Israel, it wasn't in the ANE.

Pagan deities were fickle and distant.

They didn't relate to humanity with generosity, you had to coax good things from them.

It's one of the things that sets Yahweh apart so clearly. This is a God who relates to people for their good. The shepherd is a beautiful metaphor.

The shepherd is the one the sheep look to, the shepherd has a caring responsibility, to endure hardship so that the sheep might thrive. David knew it, he was a shepherd boy himself.

Under the care of this shepherd, nothing was lacking:

There is an emphasis on provision and rest v.2

Last week we considered the destructive power of envy, of wanting what we don't have. It almost cost another psalm winter Asaph his faith. David's trust lies in stark contrast; I lack nothing.

Everything I need is supplied by God: green pastures, plentiful waters.

In his amazing care for these sheep, the shepherd finds them a place of security and plenty.

In a world where sheep are moved from place to place in search of patches of pasture, or pools of water in rocky crags, how good is that image? How wonderful is the provision of God? In him what they need is provided - there is no need to strive, and strain, and struggle. No need to keep wandering restlessly from place to place. They can lie down and rest.

King Hammurabi of Babylon made the boast that he'd done that for his people "I have sought for them peaceful places.... I made the people of all settlements lie in safe pastures."¹

David's God, our God goes further. He provides refreshment for the soul v.3, and guides along right paths.

This isn't about leading to moral purity (although God does that, doesn't he? He's given us the Holy Spirit to guide and convict us when we stray for his way). This is a leading along a safe pathway. It's a demonstration of the competence of the shepherd. He can spot the best path, the path that is sure. God's faithfulness is reaffirmed for his name's sake: to show what he is like, to reinforce our trust in Him and who God claims to be.

He will lead us on right paths, he will absolutely do what he has promised, because that's who he is. His path is solid and secure, that will be true even in the hardest, toughest, most difficult moments.

Because of that we have nothing to fear.
v.4 'I will fear no evil, for you are with me.'

It's a promise he has made time and time again, to be *with* his people:

{slide 4} To Jacob in Gen 28:15 ' I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go'

{slide 5} To Jeremiah in Jer 1:8,19 'do not be afraid of them for I am with you and will rescue you'

{slide 6} To the people of Judah Jer 15:20 - I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you

{slide 7} To the exiles in Babylon Isa 41:10 'So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.'

{slide 8} To the exiles returning from Babylon Hag 1:13 - 'I am with you,' declares the Lord.

It's a promise that gave strength to the early church, as they were harried and hunted, and scattered across the world.

In a time when Christians lived under the threat of prison and death they were encouraged by the promises retold in **{slide 9}** Matthew 28:20 I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

and **{slide 10}** Acts 18:10 'For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.'

¹ Jacobson, R. A., & Tanner, B. (2014). Book One of the Psalter: Psalms 1–41. In E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, & R. L. Hubbard Jr. (Eds.), *The Book of Psalms* (p. 241). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

There is nothing we need to fear, even in the darkest times, even over these past two years as we've lived with COVID-19 with omicron on the doorstep. **{slide 11}**

I hope that's a relief! We're often pretty good at seeing God with us in the good times. We attribute good fortune to God, we feel like he's pleased with us when we do well, or something just slots into place - a house sale, a job offer, a recovery from illness. Here we're reminded that God is no less with us in the dark times, in the hard moments.

We're tempted to feel like God's let go when it's tough and that is spiritually exhausting. We fall into patterns of religion, rather than a living faith. God is not only near us when things are good, he is with us, near us, guiding us when things are hard.

God is a wonderful shepherd, providing all we need, and walking near us when things are good and bad, he is also a host **{slide 12}**, inviting us into the most wonderful future with him.

ii) God as Host vv.5-6:

David looks to a glorious future, an amazing banquet, a never ending feast.

A table is prepared, and those people who are God's people are treated as honoured guests. As they enter, their heads are anointed, they have a special perfumed oil poured on them. The things to enjoy at that banquet are overflowing. God is giving his very best to his children.

At that banquet God will vindicate his people. The feast, the honouring, the giving good things, all happens in the presence of enemies. Of the ones who have rejected, and harmed and hurt, and scoffed and mocked. The proud and arrogant, the mean and abusive, the cruel and cold who have refused to have hearts shaped and changed by the Lord Jesus will see the satisfaction the meek and lowly, the rescued sheep enjoy.

In this picture, the psalmist draws comfort from knowing God's love and presence will be constant. They are absolute, they are eternal.

What a change from the experience of life, where David has been pursued by enemies, who has lived under dark shadows. His eternal future is God's provision, abundance, and never ending protection.

God's loving care follows David through this life, and into eternity. 'The psalmist does not say that our cup will always be full or that our heads will always be anointed with oil, but we do have the promise that God's beneficence will be our lifelong companion.'²

A promise which is made even bigger, magnified, **{slide 13}** amplified in the Lord Jesus.

iii) Both amplified in Jesus:

² VanGemeren, W. A. (2008). Psalms. In T. Longman III & D. E. Garland (Eds.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms (Revised Edition)* (Vol. 5, p. 256). Zondervan.

a) Jesus amplifies God as 'Host.'

We've looked at God as host; and we don't see an explicit parallel in John 10. Jesus only calls himself a shepherd. I don't want to try and wrestle something into the text which isn't here - but if we are thinking about God as host, I think it's worth considering the kind of work Jesus is doing as the gate to the sheep pen in vv.7-10

He is providing safety, and protection. Robbers and thieves have come to carry the sheep off, but Jesus makes them safe - he is a gate, whoever enters in through it will be saved v.9.

He is also hauling these sheep from different folds together v.16. He is working to unify and bring back together a new people who are faithful to God. There might be Romneys, Perendales, Texels and Drysdales all in the same flock in the Lord Jesus.

He is gathering together, to himself, a new community. It's this motley flock, with mixed abilities, and strengths, with weaknesses and flaws, that he is welcoming to the banquet. David envisaged a wonderful future with God for the people of Israel, that they would enjoy his gracious provision at the heavenly feast : In Jesus this hope is amplified. This shepherd will go even further than David had hoped.

The entry for this future isn't limited to Israel, it is more wonderful and encompassing than David had imagined. In the Lord Jesus any and all who come in by him, are welcomed and seated at the table of God. Any and all who put their trust in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

And it's that foundational truth, that truth which we believe which dispels fear.

God the Father, through the Lord Jesus is gathering people to himself. We know he's committed to it, we know he's doing it - look at our church!

Different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, styles, all gathered around the same Lord. It dispels the fear we face when we think about sharing the Good news, because we know good is bringing people to himself.

It's another truth which dispels fear, fear of rejection and exclusion. That's wonderful, life-giving news at a time where sharp dividing lines are drawn between people because of race, gender, faith, or even vaccination status.

In Jesus God is a host who is still welcoming people into the fold. He is the Good Shepherd **{slide 14}**.

b) Jesus amplifies God as 'Shepherd'

What we've seen David proclaim is absolutely right, and true God was his shepherd and host. He had nothing to fear, because Yahweh was with him.

David, who lived in a world of violence, where disease was fatal, life uncertain, had nothing to fear because God was with him. That trust, which casts out fear is amplified even more for those of us who put our trust in the Lord Jesus.

He's been getting a rough time from the Pharisees. This Jewish sect prided themselves as leaders on shepherding people on what they thought were right paths. They hedge the law, and fence it with rule upon rule, until keeping the rules has become so paramount that their religion is more important than their relationship with God.

They haven't been good shepherds. They have burdened the people of God, oppressing them with this religious form which they value so highly. Jesus likens them to hired hands, who care more for themselves than the sheep they are supposed to care for and protect. When danger comes they flee.

Jesus is completely different. Three times he shows just how different v.11,15,17 "I lay down my life for the sheep."

He doesn't harm or hurt, he doesn't flee when danger comes, he protects the sheep. He actually draws the danger to himself.

In 2010 Australian, **{slide 15}** Corporal Daniel Keighran was on active duty in Afghanistan.

At 9.13am, his patrol walked along an aqueduct at the eastern edge of Derapet. Taliban insurgents opened fire with small arms and machine guns from several positions, including another aqueduct less than 100 metres away.

"With little regard for his own safety he deliberately and repeatedly drew intense enemy fire away from other members of his patrol," "Despite the enemy bullets biting into the dirt at his feet, he returned fire, providing critical information about the insurgents' positions."

He was awarded the Victoria Cross for "The most conspicuous acts of gallantry and extreme devotion to duty in action in circumstances of great peril."

Friends, that is what the Good Shepherd is like. **{slide 16}** With nails biting into his hands he drew enemy fire. By pouring out his blood on our behalf he provided the protection that saves. He said the price for sin, securing eternal rest, for all who enter in by him.

In the darkest valley, with death taking him in its icy grip, his trust in the promise of his heavenly father was absolute. He knows his father v.15. He gives his life for the sake of the sheep, trusting that the love his Father has for him will be sufficient, even in the face of death. He lays down his life for the sheep, he isn't just a good shepherd, he is the Greatest Shepherd. Where else can we put our trust? **{slide 17}**

This wonderful familiar Psalm is such a gift to us in a time of great uncertainty in our world, where fear is palpable because at its heart in its original context, and amplified in the Lord Jesus, we can see that there is nothing for the the believer to fear.

God is with us, in the moments of joy, and the moments of terror. If our faith is in him, we have nothing to fear, because we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, absolutely secure, under the care of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Pray