

Study 3 Psalm 23 I am a Sheep!

Intro Question: what do you think are the key things you are looking for in a leader? Can you give examples?

Read Psalm 23v1-6 and briefly mention the different things which David describes God doing in the whole psalm.

Read v1-4

God is described as a shepherd.

Read Psalm 78v70-72.

These verses are using 'shepherd' as a metaphor. What for? **Kingship**

This use of 'shepherd' as a metaphor for a 'king' is found throughout the Old Testament. In what ways is a shepherd like a king? **Authority. Responsibility. It isn't a democracy!**

How does the 'shepherd' metaphor clarify the right expectations of a King? **They are to care for the sheep, not to abuse their authority**

How important is the word 'my' in v1? What confidence does it give to David? **Like in Psalm 63 this confirms that it is a personal relationship. Furthermore it is a relationship with the LORD – the God of heaven and earth. This personal commitment that God has made to him guarantees him that God will care for him.**

What different pictures are painted in v1-3 of God's care for his sheep? Can you put them into your own words? **Different ways of describing God's provision and tender care – he knows what we need and gives it to us.**

What extra reasons can we have for confidence that our shepherd will care for us? See e.g. John 10v11,14. **He laid down his life for us.**

Some Christians get paralysed by worry when it comes to God's guidance – they are very concerned that they may have missed his guidance and ended up on the wrong path.

- How does v3 give a different perspective on guidance? **Guidance is a promise and not a problem.**
- What are the 'paths' that God promises to guide us in? What do you think this means? **It is striking that the New Testament tends to speak about God's will and guidance in terms of making us like Jesus – being changed in our hearts so that we love him and hunger for righteousness (e.g. Romans 12v2; Phil 1v9-11; Col 1v9-11; 1 Thess 4v1-3). We probably tend to think of guidance in terms of how to get the answer to the 'big life questions' – it would be interesting to think about why that is...**

The other cultures around Israel would have practiced divination to try to get access to hidden knowledge of the future and of the will of the gods. They would have practiced sorcery and magic to try to manipulate the gods into doing what they wanted.

- How is David's description of his relationship with God different from that? **He seems very much at peace, confident and comfortable with God guiding him. He is happy to let God be the shepherd.**
- Why can we be confident that God will guide us? What does David mean by the phrase 'for his name's sake?' **God has so committed himself to us as his sheep, that he cannot let us go – he will bring us through on the paths that he has chosen. His own glory and reputation depend upon it.**
- If a Christian you know seems to be very anxious about wanting God's guidance in their life over a particular issue, or perhaps is even starting to use ways to try to get access to this knowledge through e.g. horoscopes, spiritism etc what might you want to show them from these verses?

The only qualification that we need for these verses to be true for us is found in v1. 'The LORD is my shepherd.' Or to invert it – for us to be able to say 'I am his sheep.'

- To what extent do you think of yourself as Jesus' sheep? What are the reasons why people might be reluctant to accept that identity?
- What have you found helps you to keep seeing yourself as Jesus' sheep? What place do you think that singing in church has to help us see ourselves as sheep?!

We might read v1-3 and assume that David is describing here a perfect, peaceful and prosperous life. How does v4 clarify his experience? **David is speaking about the valley of the shadow of death!**

The Hebrew word translated 'shadow of death' can either mean literally 'the presence of death' or more often means 'a deep overwhelming, thick darkness' like you would find at the bottom of a very deep valley: so you can't see the way ahead, where your feet are treading and whether a looming shape is a rock or a wolf. What do you think David has in mind when he uses this word? **Times where we can't see where we are going, where we can't tell what is a threat to us because everything seems frightening.**

What is it that transforms his experience of the 'valley of the shadow of death'? **Knowledge that the Lord is with him.**

David finds comfort in the rod and staff of the Lord. What would a shepherd use a rod and staff for? (e.g. pulling a sheep back onto the path, chivvying it along, beating off an attacking animal, counting the sheep.).

What different experiences might David have in mind when he talks about God's rod and staff comforting him? **Not necessarily specific moments in his story though if you can think of some then do mention them, but this is more a case of thinking about what general experiences we might have. This would include discipline, or reasonably firm treatment to keep reminding us to put our trust in God.**

If you are already in a tough situation which feels pretty scary then the experience of being hit or pushed by a rod may not at first feel like a real comfort. What will help us when we are in that situation to draw the same comfort that David draws? **There are many things to say, but do draw out the fact that 'I am a sheep!'**

Read v5-6

David describes a new scene, moving away from the shepherd-valley idea and more towards the King-palace idea.

What different words would you use to describe the way that David is being treated? Which part of this description of God's banquet has the biggest impact on you? **NB he is an honoured guest, served by God! You might ask which of the king's servants are given the job of preparing the table.**

David describes God's goodness and love as though they are people, never letting him out of their sight, through his life.

What difference does it make having a companion who will stick with you through anything?

And what about knowing that God's love and goodness are your trusty companions? What difference would that knowledge have on a day to day basis?

How confident are you that God's goodness and love are following you in each and every situation of your life?

Which situation or relationship would be most transformed if you were conscious of God's love and goodness as your companions walking alongside you and helping you?

What has this Psalm helped add to our big question 'who am I?'