

The Lord is my Shepherd

Psalm 23; John 10.1-10

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Psalm 23 is, I think, the most favourite psalm for many people. It is used in all denominations, at weddings, at funerals, and many of us know it almost by heart.

I guess this is because this Psalm of King David expresses very vividly how our Lord God cares for us. And the Psalm expresses our desire to experience this care.



God is like a Shepherd; He cares for you;
He will never let you go.

This faithful love of God for us unfolds in three steps in this song of King David.

1. The Lord cares for us

First, David speaks about God as his Shepherd.

Nowadays we think of shepherds as something romantic, sweet. But in the Ancient Near East, the image of the shepherd was used for kings and for the gods.

It spoke of the task of the kings to care for all their people, and of their power to decide the fate of their people.

David himself was a shepherd before he became a king, so for him the imagery was clear. The shepherd fights for his sheep, to give them security and to satisfy them with anything they need.

And as such a shepherd, the Lord God guards us and cares for us... He fights for you.

Will you have a job next year? How will your studies go? How will it be to move to another country? Will my children be okay? What about old parents far away? What about this dangerous extremism of ISIS, will it affect us here in The Netherlands?

God is your shepherd and he will take care of you. It is good to see this work of God in very physical terms. He gives you food to eat, every day. He makes you live safely. He takes care of your kids, even when they grow up and you have to let go of them.

What about your health and the health of those we love? He cares for you.

God cares for who you are. For your whole life. As Christians we believe that all of life is important for God, your work, your safety, your relationships, what you eat and drink. That you enjoy the potluck after church.

2. The days can be dark

But here is one of the riddles of the Christian life.

Sometimes the grass is not so green. We do face multiple problems, problems that are real.

Where was the good shepherd when Armenians were butchered in Turkey, 100 years ago? When he was really needed? Where was he when you lost a child. When your partner passed away too early.

We do not have clear answers, or maybe none at all, to this riddle of life. If God is almighty and good, why does he not intervene in our problems?

We do not know. But we do know that He sent his Son to be part of this misery. And to be with us, even in the darkest days. Even in your darkest moments.

Some Christians think that we must always be happy, good, positive, satisfied. That is a great dream, but it is simply not the reality of our Christian life.

The promise of God to feed us and to quench our thirst, actually presupposes that sometimes we are hungry and thirsty. Our life goes through ups and downs and sometimes the downs seem to have the upper hand.

The promise of God, our Shepherd, is that ultimately he will bring us home to the eternally green pastures. But he does not promise an easy journey.

Why do you think St Paul emphatically says that we must always rejoice in the Lord? Because we do not always rejoice in Him.

Why do we read again and again in the bible that we must love each other? Because we do not do this by nature.

Why does the Bible so often tells us to not fear? Because we are often in fearful circumstances and we have a tendency to forget about God's promises.

It is normal for Christians to be at low points. We are normal human beings, and we must always be reminded that God is our Shepherd who helps us. We are needy people.



You may feel stressed or depressed, or lonely; you notice the lack of love and compassion in your heart for others, or you experience the unfaithfulness of others to you.

David even speaks of experiencing the valley of the shadow of death. There are awful times in life. And maybe you are going through such a time.

It is interesting in this Psalm... When David speaks of the work of the good Shepherd, the feeding, the quenching, the caring, he is describing God. He speaks of what God does for us.

But when David describes the darkest moments in his life, when death seems to cast a shadow over him, then he begins to address God directly in the Psalm. He switches from speaking of God, to addressing God directly. In my most difficult moments, 'You are with me. You comfort me. You prepare a table before me. You anoint me.'

In times of need, God becomes our companion.

It is good to talk about the mercies of God, but when darkness comes, the only thing left is to talk with God.

What is the valley of the shadow of death? We can think, again, in very physical terms. David was afraid his enemies would have the upper hand and kill him.

I was in Egypt last week, where the church is facing so much hatred, sometimes to the extend of murder and bombs. And we, we also face the valley in times of sickness, of ourselves, of family, of friends.

And our hearts and minds also know the valleys with dark shadows. The truly bad moments when we feel down and out. When problems hang like a dark shadow over us. When we have no words left. When we are drained of all energy. When we feel no hope. No joy.

In times like these, simply talking about God is not so helpful. Nor does our theological knowledge provide much comfort. The only thing left is to speak to God himself.

When we are in deep trouble, then the Shepherd is really in the midst of his sheep. 'You are with me.' Even if we do not know what to pray. He is with us.

He is with you. That is a deeper reality than your ability to feel that.

His presence is more true than your ability to pray. If you cannot even pray, when all is dark, He is still there with you in the darkness. In the valley of the shadow of death.

So even when it is pitch dark, the Great Shepherd is there, beside you.

And he is armed. He has his rod and his staff with him, to defend you and to lead you to safety.

If we have no words left, even no prayers, the Shepherd does not change. His love for us lasts forever. He cares for his sheep even when the sheep have temporarily lost sight of the shepherd.

God has made a covenant with his people, with you, and He will not let you fall out of his hands. You may stumble, you may fall, but he will pick you up again.

3. He is with us always

The shepherd-imagery is great for showing us how much God cares for us - but the Psalm proceeds and then begins to use images - images of friendship; of togetherness. Language of intimacy.

“You prepare a table before me...” Eating and drinking at the table with the Lord signifies great intimacy. Being the guest of God at his table means to live with him.

With God, people do not go in and out. The door to his Kingdom is not a revolving door where we go in and out all the time because we forget to pray or because we are less than perfect.

David rejoices that he “will be in the house of the Lord forever.” That is where David lives, even though he committed grave sins.

Sure, David had his own palace. But he knew the faithfulness of God, so David could exclaim with joy that where God is, there he, David, also has his permanent resting place. And where David is, there is God, always.

In the whole psalm David speaks in the first person singular. It is about I, and me. But we must not read the psalm in an individualistic manner.

The psalm was made for singing in the house of God; it is in the community of the believers where David experienced this care and presence of God.

God works through means, and the means he most often uses, are other Christians, and his church. In the community of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, God cares for us.

Jesus went through the valley of the shadows of death for us - and therefore He can bring us to the green pastures to feed us and to quench our thirst.

He also prepares a table before us - even in presence of our enemies.

If we suffer from enemies, loneliness, depression, or bad health, or even the enemy of doubting that God cares for you, then look at Jesus and what he did. He showed



with his life and death and resurrection that He is almighty, that he loves and cares. God is almighty, and loves, and cares.

Our Lord Jesus gave his life for the sheep, and he sets a table before us today, his table teaches us,

The Shepherd gave his life for you; He cares for you; He is close to you; He dines with you - what a symbol of great friendship

And at the dinner table he says to you, I am your host, you are my friend

Conclusion

In Egypt, a country so plagued with persecution of the church, they had a beautiful icon, of St Menas and Jesus. This icon is in Paris, in the Louvre now. It dates from around 800AD.

Menas came from a rich family and served in the Roman army, but then God called him to be a monk.

And persecution came. He refused to give up his faith, so he died a martyr.

Look how the church painted St Menas with Jesus. Jesus stands with his arm around the shoulder of his friend.

If you are in deep darkness, Jesus your Shepherd is there with his arm around your shoulder. As your friend.

And if people around you are in need, you can be the caring arms of Jesus, of God. By putting your arm around someone else's shoulder. That is how the Good Shepherd often takes care of us. By using each other.

We all need this; we are all needy. We come to his table with empty hands. That's okay.

And at his table of friendship He fills our hands and He whispers in your ear: I am your shepherd, do not be afraid, I take care of you... And he also whispers: just as you experience my care, so also care for others in my name.

Let us be silent for some moments, enjoy the music, and in your hearts, share your needs, your personal needs with your Shepherd, your friend. He is as close to you as the rhythm of your heart.

+ Amen