

STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Study 1 Life with the Shepherd

Read Psalm 23

The Psalms we are going to consider in these next four studies have to do with experience. In them the writers tell of their personal experiences of the Lord in their lives. God can meet the varying needs of many people, yet even more wonderful than this, is the way in which He becomes real to us individually. This is what the Psalmists found as they wrote of their own experience. **Psalm 23** has sometimes been called the 'Psalm of the Crook' and it forms a trilogy with **Psalm 22**, the 'Psalm of the Cross', and **Psalm 24**, the 'Psalm of the Crown'.

In **Psalm 22** we have the GOOD shepherd of **John 10: 11**, giving His life for His sheep. In **Psalm 23** we have the GREAT shepherd of **Hebrews 13: 20**, tenderly caring for His sheep, and in **Psalm 24** we have the CHIEF shepherd of **1 Peter 5: 4**, appearing as King of glory, to own and reward His sheep.

Psalm 23 is in some ways unique for it has brought blessing and comfort to countless people. This 'Shepherd Psalm' is written by a shepherd about a shepherd. No doubt you learnt these verses way back in the early days of your life. It is a favourite passage of many. Someone has called it the pearl of psalms. In terms of the joy and comfort that it has given to people of all ages, it has great value indeed. There are times when life seems either dissatisfying or insecure. Our lives seemed drained of everything certain or worthwhile. How good then to be able to say out of personal conviction, "**The Lord is my Shepherd.**" The Psalm can be conveniently divided into three parts:

- The SHEPHERD and His sheep. **Verses 1-3a**
- The GUIDE and His followers. **Verses 3b-4**
- The HOST and His guests. **Verses 5-6**

Let us look at each section in turn.

I. THE SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP.

Have you ever met the kind of person whose life is full of 'wants'? No matter how much they have or how much more they get, they never seem satisfied. Perhaps we are all a little guilty of this! The strange thing about it is that so often our 'wants' are much greater than our needs. Possibly too, if our 'wants' were satisfied they would create even greater needs. But here is a man in our Psalm who says "**I shall not want,**" or "**I shall lack nothing.**" Through the shepherd-care of his God, he has come to an end of his wants, for all his desires are met in the Person of the Great Shepherd. How very wonderful! Can you say, "**The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want?**"

Notice there are three things that we, as sheep of the Great Shepherd, can learn from this lovely Psalm. Through His love and care we can find rest, refreshment, and restoration. He provides "**green pastures**" of tender, luscious grass. He leads by "**still waters**". And when there is tiredness and failure, He "**restores my soul**". Studying these first three

verses in the light of my own life, it is good to realise that with the Lord Jesus as "**my Shepherd**", every need arising from every experience I meet, can be satisfied. He is all-sufficient, and as I trust Him I shall be able to say with confidence, "**The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.**"

2. THE GUIDE AND HIS FOLLOWERS.

The theme moves on now to picture one who follows in the tracks of their guide. "**He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.**" The only guide who is worthy of confidence is one who can be trusted to lead in right paths. In the earlier days of life we are, in a way, pioneering our paths. All seems vague and uncertain - there are so many different paths and some could be wrong. The Lord Jesus can become for us, the sort of guide that David wrote about. Right paths are for those who follow Him. Notice it is for His Name's sake that He leads us in this way, that is because it is His nature to do so. God's love and care are wholly in keeping with His character. Even in dark and deadly ways of tragedy and fear we can know His company all the time. What was it the hymn writer said? '**I'd rather walk in the dark with Him, than walk alone in the light.**' And this has been the experience and testimony of many in the past.

I read recently of a young American missionary in China, who, when the Communist forces took over that country, was arrested and placed in solitary confinement with only the barest of necessities to sustain life. After her release over a year later, she returned to the U.S. But when kind friends sought to sympathise with her, they were surprised to hear her say, '**Oh, no! It was wonderful! For I have learned a great secret. We really do not need anything but our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ! He can completely satisfy our hearts!**' In that 'dark valley' she had experienced the presence of the Shepherd in a way she had never known before. "**I will fear no evil; for You are with me.**"

Let's move on now to our third section.

3. THE HOST AND HIS GUESTS.

The picture here changes altogether from the shepherd and the sheep. The Psalmist seems to be saying, '**I am more than just Jehovah's sheep, I am Jehovah's guest.**' In every culture it is looked upon as a privilege to sit with a man at his table and share his food. This is particularly so in the East, for not only is it a means of satisfying hunger, but a mark of intimate and affectionate love. Thus, it was not possible for our Lord to give a more touching proof of His love for the traitorous Judas, than to dip the morsel of bread and pass it to him. So here, in **Psalm 23** we have a very rich theme for meditation, as we compare the life of a Christian, to a seat at God's table where we can enjoy daily the things He has prepared for us.

Notice those two words, "**You prepare**" in particular, for they tell us of the 'anticipatory care' of God. God is never taken by surprise at the requests of His children. No child of His care can ask for anything, but that He has already foreseen it. 'Isn't that wonderful?!' So whether it is strength to meet a difficult task, courage to witness to others, power to overcome some sin or temptation in our life, or even our ordinary daily bread; God is never taken by surprise by our needs, - His table is already prepared!

Notice too, the very significant addition the Psalmist makes **“in the presence of my enemies”** - many was the time that David was surrounded by hostile opponents - pledged to do him harm; to cut off his supplies; to starve him out! But they could not cut off his supply which came from above! **“My help comes from the Lord,” (Psalm 121: 2)** he could say. And so it is with us. We may be surrounded by those who are hostile to the gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ; whether human or spiritual forces. But our Heavenly Father has prepared a table for us, and if we are daily feasting at that table through prayer and the study of His Word, then no external foe will be able to cut off that wonderful supply.

Then as we think about all His blessings, His love and His care for us, our cup of joy will be running over. The people of the world have no conception of the joys and pleasures of the Christian. To them the Christian life possibly seems dull, restrictive and unnecessarily difficult. Yet with all that our modern world has to offer, there are very few people, apart from Christians, who can truly say, **“my cup runs over”**.

There is so much more we could say about this beautiful Psalm, but let us just close by looking briefly at the last verse. Not only can God’s goodness and mercy be my experience throughout all my life, giving me a sense of well-being and security, but at the end there is that wonderful welcome into the Father’s house. No fear of death for the Christian. Heaven is a reality! **“I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”** Someone has aptly summed up the truth of **Psalm 23** in this way: A Happy Life; A Happy Death; and A Happy Eternity. Truly we can say, **“Happy is that man that makes the Lord his trust.” (Psalm 40: 4)**

Study 2 Life with a Song

Read Psalm 40

It is good to have a song worth singing. There are so many songs being sung in our world today which enjoy varied measures of popularity. Those that top the charts rarely last for long. It is amazing the different things that people sing about - trivial things; sentimental, sloppy things; as well as songs of protest. There are also some people who still ask for the good old songs. But at the heart of our study in **Psalm 40** is a man with a new song - a song of praise to God. Most wonderful of all perhaps for us to notice is that it is a song of experience. It was David’s experience of his Lord that made him sing. Without doubt the best songs, even today, are those sung in praise of the Saviour - these are the songs worth singing!

We can see in this man’s experience, both a process and also progress. In a Christian’s life there must be a process of growth and progress made in those things that are worthy of God. Among other things, we can learn that where there is a happy, praising spirit in life, growth can more easily take place.

Let us first make an outline of the development in David’s experience as seen in **Psalm 40**.

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| 1. WAITING for the Lord. | Verses 1-3 |
| 2. WONDER at God’s works. | Verses 4-5 |
| 3. WORSHIP because of God’s activities. | Verses 3 & 16 |
| 4. WILLING surrender to God’s will. | Verses 6-8 |
| 5. WITNESS to God’s power. | Verses 9-11 |
| 6. WAITING further for God’s deliverance. | Verses 12-17 |

Do you see the progression of thought in this study?

1. WAITING for the Lord. (verses 1-3)

These verses move from tragedy to triumph. Down in the mire and mud, the Psalmist cries to God. Everything associated with the pit of despair dragged him down. But the Lord’s ear is alert to his prayer. His cry is answered; he is set upon a rock, and given a firm foundation, the sufficiency of God. He is given a new song to sing so that others too may hear, reverence and trust. We can see then from these verses that it is never a vain thing to pray. Someone has said, *‘waiting time (on God), is never wasted time.’* In our sin and need, the Lord Jesus can lift us up. This is the way the Christian life begins - the Lord Jesus died that we might be taken out of the miry bog of sin and despair and have a new song of salvation to sing.

2. WONDER at God’s work. (verses 4-5)

This new song, or rhapsody, is in two ‘movements’. The first (**verse 4**), glorifies the way of faith, in which there is a deliberate choice and action made by **“that man who makes the Lord his trust,”** and who recognises that there is no ground for confidence in proud men or those who make hollow promises. The next (**verse 5**), glorifies the object of his faith, **“the Lord my God,”** whose supernatural marvellous deeds are just a reflection of His inner thoughts toward us. He is indeed beyond compare and His mercies already experienced, are but a fraction of what is still kept in store for us. (Compare **1 Corinthians 2: 9**). One translation of **verse 5** says, **“O Lord my God, many and many a time you have done great miracles for us.”** God is indeed wonderful, and everything He does for us is in keeping with His character. There is a real thrill in being a Christian because of the marvellous power of God in our lives.

3. WORSHIP because of God’s activities. (verses 3 & 16)

Wonder leads to worship, one translation says - **“Let such as who love Your salvation say continually, The Lord be magnified,”** or **“How great God is!”** It is always good to make God the centre of our praise and worship. Like the Samaritan in Luke’s gospel who was healed of his leprosy. we should return to give Him thanks, not once, but over and over again, for this is pleasing to God. Worship is a continuous occupation and is the result of realising how wonderful God Himself is. We do not necessarily need to stop what we are doing to worship God. Our hearts can be worshipping Him even when our hands are occupied with our daily work.

4. WILLING surrender to God’s will. (verses 6-8)

Look at these verses very carefully. They can only apply perfectly to the Lord Jesus and this is why this psalm is a Messianic Psalm, because it looks forward to the coming Messiah. We shall look at other examples of this later on. But here we can learn that true worship is not demonstrated by mere outward observances, but in the willing surrender on the part of the worshipper, to a life of continual obedience to the will of God.

5. WITNESS to God’s power. (verses 9-11)

God wants us to tell others of what He has done for us. This is how Christianity spreads. Notice how effectively David had proclaimed what God had done for him. It was not kept for his own secret delight. The faithfulness, mercy and truth of the Lord was preached before crowds of men. God’s salvation was boldly advertised! Do you witness for the Lord? It is a good thing to do, and it has tremendous possibilities of blessing for other people. Why keep all the good news to yourself?

6. WAITING further for God’s deliverance. (verses 12-17)

The Psalm’s whole expression of praise, its reliance upon God’s promise, and its plea for help, are caught up and crystallized in the words of the last verse. None other but the Lord can help; none other is sought for help. May He then

NOT tarry. Christian living will always have its difficulties and needs. Therefore prayer and waiting upon God must be a daily, even hourly, exercise. This **verse 17** is a wonderful conclusion to the Psalm. Think about it carefully.

Study 3 Life in the Sunshine

Read Psalm 27

This Psalm of David is full of interest. We can feel a sense of elevation in the words expressed. The Psalmist lives in the sunshine of his knowledge of God. The second part of this Psalm in particular would indicate that often shadows fell across his life. He speaks of evil-doers and adversaries. (**verse 2**) There are enemies, **verse 6**, and false witnesses rise up against him. Will he allow these dark agencies to cloud his sky? Not a bit of it! **“The Lord is my LIGHT and my SALVATION; Whom shall I fear?”** (**verse 1**) In thus saying we feel him moving out of the shadows into the sunshine.

Just before we study some of the details of the Psalm, let us pause and consider this. Have you ever walked along a street, deep in thought? Suddenly you begin to feel cold. Over on the other side of the road the sun is shining but you have failed to notice it. The chilliness of the shadows grips you and then you notice the bright sun. It is no good grumbling about being cold, if you walk in the shadows. To get rid of the chilled feeling you must walk in the sunshine. This is very much a parable of life. We can walk in the shadows of our sins and sorrows, our anxieties and cares, our fears and our failures. To find and follow the Lord is to find light and salvation. Compare **John 8: 12**.

Let us consider four points which come from living in the sunshine:

1. FEAR is overcome. **Verses 1-3**
2. FINDING the Lord's House. **Verses 4 & 8**
3. FAVOUR of the Lord enjoyed. **Verses 5,6,10**
4. FOLLOWING a safe path. **Verses 11-12**

1. FEAR is overcome.

How confident the words of David sound: **“Whom shall I fear?”** The Christian who lives in the light has no reason to fear. Notice in **verses 1-3** how the threats and fears of life are abundantly met and overcome by the Lord. Thus the Psalmist can be calm in the face of his enemies and confident in the time of disturbance. When fears cast their shadows on our lives - move out of the shadows, and open your life up to the sunshine of the power and love of the Lord Jesus. How often He told His disciples not to be afraid!

2. FINDING the Lord's House.

Notice **verses 4 & 8**. David had a single longing in his mind. It was to seek the abiding security and joy of God's presence. It was not just the house he wanted but the Person associated with it. Places are often empty of meaning without people. David longed for his Lord and the light of His presence. So he sought it through the appointed means of Temple sacrifices (compare **verse 6b**). When the Lord is our Light, we find beauty in His presence too. While you are thinking about this, look at **Matthew 18: 20**. It is possible for us to enjoy the presence of the Lord Jesus today, in the company of other Christians.

3. The FAVOUR of the Lord enjoyed.

David expresses in this Psalm his confidence in the blessing of his God. He lived in the light - the sunshine of His favour. What did this mean? **Verse 5** shows that in a time of trouble David knew he was secure. God was sheltering him from

above and giving him a rock beneath. **Verse 6** tells of being lifted up above his enemies. Even when forsaken by his closest relations, his Lord would never let him down. (**verse 10**) Just let the confident sense of victory grip you as you read this. Do you know this joy of completely trusting the Lord Jesus every day? If you move out of the shadows into the sunshine of God's presence you, too, will be able to sing an anthem of praise like this.

4. FOLLOWING in a safe path.

Because of his enemies, David wanted to know a safe pathway. Look at **verses 11-12**. As you follow the Lord Jesus, you will find that life is not always easy! Temptations will come your way; doubts may trouble your mind; Satan is out to make life difficult. The Lord Jesus can lead you out of the shadows of uncertainty and doubt, into the sunshine of a **“smooth path”**. It is good to study this Psalm carefully and notice how the light shines clearly through in David's relationship with his Lord. He says **“MY light and MY salvation”**. You can have the same experience and joy in the sunshine of the knowledge of the Lord Jesus as your own Saviour and Guide.

In closing, let us notice David's threefold prescription for true intercessory prayer. First it rests upon the invitation of God. (**verses 7-9a**) Then it casts the whole burden of care upon God alone, permitting no human help (**verses 9b-10**), and thirdly while seeking the specific request of deliverance, it seeks first and foremost to know and do God's will. The conclusion of this wonderful Psalm emphasises human frailty, but stresses the absolute certainty of the Lord's sufficiency, and the patience of faith which waits with confidence in God.

Study 4 Life of Security

Read Psalm 46

This Psalm is the one on which Martin Luther based his famous hymn, *‘A Mighty Fortress is our God,’* It is the first of a group of three poems (**Psalms 46 - 48**), which have a common theme. God is extolled and adored because He has brought His people through a great crisis, which had threatened to become a national calamity. So, in **Psalm 46**, God greatly helps; in **Psalm 47**, He is greatly to be exalted and in **Psalm 48**, He is greatly to be praised.

You will possibly have noticed as you read **Psalm 46**, that it differs from the other Psalms we have studied so far, in that the writer expresses himself in very positive language. There are no traces of doubt or fear here. Everything is expressed in terms of certainty and confidence. **“GOD IS”** - there is no argument, no debate, no questioning; just a clear statement of fact. How good to know God in our lives as the basis of our confidence! Even a young Christian can learn to know God in this way,

Just two points to note before we study the Psalm further.

i) Notice that the heading of the Psalm says, **“To (or for) the Chief Musician.”** Fifty-five Psalms carry this heading and it means that these were written as part of a collection of songs for the use of the leader of the Temple praise. This title only appears in the Psalms of David.

ii) The word **“Selah”** occurs three times in our Psalm and a total of seventy-one times in the Book of Psalms. Quite simply, it means ‘pause’, or as someone has put it, ‘think of that!’ It occurs at a point where the Psalmist has made some great or profound statement and calls upon the readers (or

singers) to pay special attention to it. The Psalm can thus be divided into three parts.

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| 1. STORMS and the REFUGE. | Verses 1-3 |
| 2. STREAMS and REFRESHMENT. | Verses 4-7 |
| 3. STILLNESS and REST. | Verses 8-11 |

1. STORMS and the REFUGE, verses 1-3.

Look at the disturbed pictures in these verses. The earth changing; mountains moving; waters troubled; mountains shaken - a description of chaos! If you translate these pictures into the experiences of life, you can see an underlying meaning to the Psalmist's words. Often the calm of life's sea is ruffled and disturbed. Perhaps sometimes you feel you want to run away and hide. Everything that you depend upon seems to be unstable, or fails. Life is noisy, restless, cruel, shattered! GOD IS - "**a very present help in trouble.**" When we are at our wits' end we can come to Him. To those who know Jesus Christ as Saviour, the storms of life need not end in our defeat. Three times the Psalmist says, "**God is our refuge,**" and the same thought is voiced again in **Psalm 62: 5-8; 91: 2, and 142: 4 & 5.**

2. STREAMS and REFRESHMENT, verses 4-7.

After a "**Selah**" when we pause to think, a different picture arises. "**There is a river:**" The City of God is gladdened and refreshed by waters that stream through it. Rivers are often mentioned in the Bible as a picture of life and refreshment. Compare **Revelation 22: 1-5**, where the river is an important feature in the picture portrayed of Heaven. There is that need in our lives which calls for satisfaction. To be a Christian in a dissatisfying world means that we have within our lives the counterpart of these streams - God's presence through His Holy Spirit. There is a sense of quiet and calm in the midst of war and disturbance. Have you ever sat on the banks of a river, perhaps in the evening, and enjoyed the peace and calm that is there? You seem to be in a different world! So we can live '**above the restless world that wars below,**' as we daily come to know our God - the source of refreshment and peace. (Compare also **John 4: 13, 14 and John 7: 37-39**).

3. STILLNESS and REST, verses 8-11.

"**Be still, and know that I am God.**" (verse 10) This is a wonderful exhortation. To be able to be calm and quiet in the midst of a noisy, restless world is great. Notice how the writer seems to stand back and take stock of what God is doing. He sees Him as victorious, eliminating war and bringing peace. Then he says, "**Be still**". When God reigns, in a future day, there will be universal peace and rest. But as we close our study, let us realise that we can find rest in our hearts and minds now, as we allow God to take control. This perhaps links us with the invitation in **Matthew 11: 28**, where the Lord Jesus said, "**Come to Me . . . and I will give you rest.**" It is definitely true that Christians can find deep peace through the consciousness of the presence of the Lord Jesus in their everyday life.

Questions

Study 1

LIFE WITH THE SHEPHERD

1. Say briefly in your own words, what you understand the Psalmist to be saying in **verse 1**.
2. One hymn-writer has written, '*I'd rather walk in the dark with Him (the Lord), than walk alone with the light.*' How do you understand these words in the context of this Psalm?
3. In what way are **verses 4 & 5** a progression from **verses 1-3**, both in thought and experience?
4. Why are the words, "**You prepare**" in **verse 5**, so significant?
5. What part of this Psalm have you most enjoyed from this study, and why?

Study 2

LIFE WITH A SONG

1. What was the basis for David's song?
2. What can **verse 5** and **1 Corinthians 2: 9** tell us about the nature of God?
3. What do **verses 3 & 16** tell us about true worship?
4. What can we learn about Christian witnessing from **verses 9 & 10**?
5. Why is prayer and waiting upon God a vital part of the Christian's daily life?

Study 3

LIFE IN THE SUNSHINE

1. Why has the Christian no reason to fear?
2. What was David's greatest desire in life?
3. Why is it good for us to meet with other Christians when we can?
4. As Christians, why would we do well to pray the prayer that David did in **verse 11**?
5. What three steps does David give for true intercessory prayer?

Study 4

LIFE OF SECURITY

1. In what way does **Psalm 46** differ from the other Psalms we have studied so far?
2. What recurring picture of God do we have in this Psalm?
3. What is the significance of "**rivers of water**",
a) in the Psalms we have studied, i.e. **Psalms 1 and 46**, and
b) in the **New Testament**. (especially **John's gospel**)?
4. How can we know refreshment, peace and rest in our busy, noisy world?
5. What have you learnt about God from your studies of these four Psalms?