

The Shepherd's Psalm

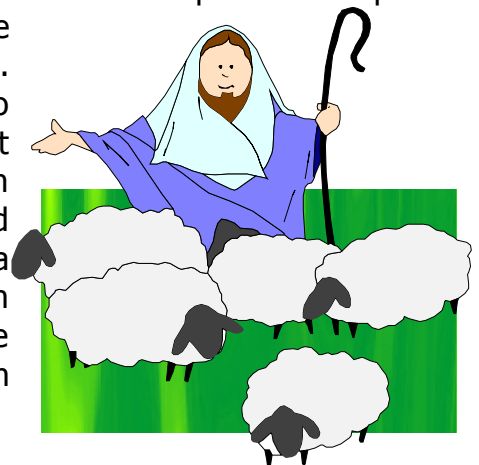
This well known psalm of David, like many of his psalms, has more than one level of meaning. Often his writings had direct application to himself and also were prophetic of the Lord Jesus Christ. This psalm can also have meaning for us today. There are many, many meanings and lessons we can take from this Psalm and different people look at it from different angles. David took things he knew from his sheep minding days and applied them to his own relationship with God. We can find lessons for us both on a natural and spiritual level. There are plenty I've missed that you may be able to think of. I cannot guarantee that any of what I've said is totally correct, but here are a few things for you to think about.

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."

Here is a declaration of acceptance of God as leader and the need to trust in Him to provide for every basic need. David knew how reliant the sheep are on the shepherd for so many aspects of their well-being. The symbol of a shepherd as leader and carer is found several times in the Bible (2 Samuel 5:2, Matthew 2:6). David states similar thoughts about trusting God to care for him in many of his writings (see Psalm 25:3, Psalm 31:14, Psalm 52:8, Psalm 56:4, Psalm 56:11 and Psalm 91:2). God's guidance and authority was important to Jesus too (John 5:30). In Old Testament times God was the Shepherd (Genesis 48:15, Genesis 49:24, Numbers 27:17). This is who David is referring to when he says "The LORD is my shepherd", however in the New Testament we find that Jesus is the "Good Shepherd" (John 10:11) This may seem confusing until we realize that God at different times appointed shepherds under himself (Ezekiel 34:10-11) to care for his people, judges, kings, prophets, rulers and finally Jesus. All things come from God (James 1:17), and this is exactly where Jesus is leading us - back to our Heavenly Father (John 14:6) "...no one comes to the Father except through me". We can choose to let God and Jesus be our shepherds and experience the benefits of their care.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul."

David now give us a picture of rest, refreshment and restoration. The shepherd must provide the sheep with a place of peace to rest, for without peace there is no real rest. Peace comes from God (Philippians 4:7). This is not the peace that we have with God when we come to know him (Romans 5:1) but the peace we find when we let him be our shepherd. All too often we try to find our own path through life and its turmoil, without looking to our shepherd for guidance and protection. "Green pastures" gives the idea of feeding as well as resting. Once the sheep feel at peace in the shepherd's care they can begin to feed well. As sheep, we need to feed from God's word and we can do this best when we are close to him.



Water is an essential of life. Sheep will not drink from a river of swiftly flowing water, so it is important for the shepherd to find "quiet waters" for them to drink at and if he cannot find one he will make one by placing rocks in the river to create a quiet pool for the sheep to drink from. We seem to get swept along in the swift flowing waters of life and we desperately need our shepherd to calm them for us so we can stop to drink of the "water of life" (Revelation 22:1).

For the shepherd to provide the right conditions for the sheep to eat and drink, they must remain close to him. In Luke 15 there is a parable about a sheep that gets lost, having strayed from the flock. The shepherd hunts for the sheep until it is restored to him.

Our shepherd is just like this. When we stray from him, his aim is to restore us to him. His love for us is that strong. Whether we have been caught up in the strong flowing currents of life and drifted right away from him or simply lost our closeness to him in the routine of worship and family life, our shepherd is always there, calling to us to return and come closer to him.

"He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me"

The shepherd guides his sheep, finding safe places for them to go. There would literally be many places of danger, shadows where wild animals or other dangers were hidden. The shepherd guarded and guided using his rod and staff. The "rod" was probably a club-like weapon to be used against any that would harm the sheep, while the "staff" with its curved handle was used to guide or rescue sheep from danger. The sheep could feel safe, knowing the shepherd was caring for them. He does this for his reputation as a good shepherd.

If we let him, our shepherd will guide us through the many hazards that we find in life. There are many pitfalls for those who are trying to please God and we need all the help we can get. Our Shepherd both guides, protects and corrects us. He does not promise to wrap us up in cotton wool, so that we will never encounter any danger or temptation and never make a mistake (our human nature prevents that), but we do have many examples and instructions to learn from (2 Timothy 3:16), and through prayer we can ask for both help and forgiveness. Once again peace plays its part, as fear disappears when we know we are in his care (Romans 8:15) - fear of death and fear of what will happen in this life.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

David continues on the theme of God's blessings. It almost seems at this point that he is reflecting on his own experiences. In 2 Samuel 17 he finds himself out in the desert, hungry and weary with a group of loyal followers, fleeing for his life from his own son. In verses 28 and 29 three men, who aren't even Israelites, bring food and bedding for them all. Maybe you can think of times in your life when things have been difficult and God's provision has shone through.

In Bible times anointing with oil was used for greeting (Luke 7:44-46), healing (Luke 10:34, James 5:15) and dedicating (1 Kings 1:34). Kings and priests were anointed as a part of their

entry to that role. God has called us (Ephesians 1:18) and spiritually anointed us (2 Corinthians 1:21-22) as an initial step toward an eternal priesthood (1 Peter 2:4-5, Revelation 1:6-7).

An overflowing cup gives the picture of an amount that cannot be measured. God's love to us is like this (Romans 5:8,15). But God's love is not just restricted to offering us salvation through his Son, he care is complete, physically as well as spiritually (Philippians 4:19).

"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

David ends this psalm on a very confident note. God is different to us. We put a great effort in for a short time, and then start to get tired and look to other things. God's care is constant for our entire life - and - for those that truly try to please him, in the great kingdom he will set up.