

Psalm 23 v 1 - 3

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Date: 06 January 2019

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[0 : 00] It's a new year, but it's also the same in lots of ways. And of course, particularly, what is so encouraging for us and comforting for us is that the Lord our God, the one in whom we put our faith and trust, is an unchanging God.

Moses wrote a psalm, and it's Psalm 90. In that psalm, we have the verse, before the mountains were born, or you brought forth the whole world from everlasting to everlasting.

You are God. Our God is unchanging, faithful. Whatever he's been to us in the past 12 months, he will be to us in the year ahead. We can trust him.

He is the eternal and everlasting God. And our first hymn picks up on that theme and reminds us of this truth, that our God is the one who helps us in the past, and we trust him for the future.

115 in our hymn books are, Our God, our help, in ages past, our hope for years to come. Let's stand as we sing together. 115. Let's come to this everlasting God in prayer.

[1 : 17] Let's seek his face together. Let us pray. How great you are, O Lord our God. How incredible to think that you are from everlasting to everlasting, unchangeably and faithfully and wonderfully the same.

Not in the same as we might think of as boring and unimpressive and routine. For Lord, there's nothing in that sense about you that is dull or boring or routine.

For you, your mercies are new every morning. And great is your faithfulness. Lord, though you do not change, you are to us fresh and reviving and renewing.

And, O Lord, as we come to the first Sunday of this new year, Lord, we thank you that we come to a timeless God. We come to the one who is always the same.

The same, O Lord, in your great power. For you are still the one who is on your throne. You are still the God who rules and reigns over the universe you've created.

[2 : 23] You're still the God who holds all things together, who is working your purpose and plan. You're not a God who is caught out by changes in us or in our world or society.

We know, O Lord, that you are the God who holds all things together and works all things together for our good. We thank you that you rule and reign over our lives and order things according to your purposes for us, your good and pleasing and blessed purposes for us.

Thank you, O Lord, that you are the God who is unchanging in your love. Oh, how wonderful that is. In a world where, Lord, love is spoken of so flippantly and lightly, where relationships in love are so easily broken and damaged, where love seems to be a roller coaster, we thank you that your love to us is perfect.

Just as you are love, so your love to us is a love which does not change with time or season or with our own failings or with our love. We confess even this morning, Lord, that our love for you has not been as it should be, that our love has been feeble, that our love has been weak at times.

And, Lord, well, we have acted unlovingly towards one another and to you, but we thank you that with you there is forgiveness because you are merciful and gracious.

[3 : 46] We thank you, O Lord, that you're unchanging, unchanging, O Lord, in your salvation, that, O Lord, though our sins are many, Lord, they have been forgiven once and for all and forever.

We thank you for the changeless power of the cross. We thank you that it is not weakened by time, that the blood that was shed for our sins, that atonement that was made is everlasting.

And that, Lord, for every single one of those for whom you died, Lord Jesus, we have the assurance that, Lord, even in the year ahead, when we will fail and we will fall and we will stumble, Lord, you shall, Lord, forgive us because of what Jesus has done.

Help us, we pray. We pray, O Lord, even in this beginning of the year, to give you our thanks, our praise for all that you've done. And again, O Lord, to trust you for all that's to come.

Be with us now in this time, we pray especially, and speak to us through your word. Meet with us by your spirit. Bless us, O Lord, we pray, for we ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ.

[4 : 51] Amen. We're going to read together now from God's word in our Bibles and John chapter 10. John chapter 10, verses 1 through to 21.

And if you have one of the Red Church Bibles, that's page 1076, page 1076. John 10, beginning at verse 1, reading through to verse 21.

Very truly, I tell you, Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger. In fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.

[6 : 13] Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore, Jesus said again, Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved.

They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.

Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd.

[7 : 16] I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Just as the father knows me and I know the father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold.

I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my father loves me is that I lay down my life, only to take it up again.

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my father.

The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, He's demon-possessed, raving mad. Why listen to him? Others said, These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon.

Can a demon open the eyes of the blind? Please, would you turn to Psalm 23.

[8 : 21] Would you turn to Psalm 23 in your Bibles? It's page 555, if you have one of the church-read Bibles.

I'm going to read this psalm together. It's going to be the focus of our attention this morning and this evening as well. And you'll see, I hope, as we go through the very clear link there is between our reading earlier in John and chapter 10.

Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul. He guides me along the path. Sorry, He guides me along the right paths for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

[9 : 30] Surely Your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Let me ask you, the start of our new year, have you renewed your gym membership yet?

Or have you taken it out? Have you signed up to Slimming World? Or bought the latest diet book? Perhaps you've made a new year's resolution to cut down on alcohol, to give up smoking, to do without those takeaway meals three times a week.

Maybe you're planning to get your rusty bicycle out of the shed, and give it a service, or hunt for those trainers in the back of the cupboard, which haven't been seen the light of day for many months.

For many people, New Year is an opportunity to strive for a new you, a better you, to get our bodies into a more healthy shape.

But let me put before you an even more important need than that of your body. I want to urge you this morning, and encourage you this morning, that this year will be a year in which you strive and work for a healthy soul.

[10:54] A healthy soul. Paul, writing to Timothy, tells him, Physical training is of some value, but godliness has a value for all things, holding promise for both the present life, and the life to come.

When he speaks of godliness, he speaks of the health of our soul, for we recognize, and need to recognize, that your soul is far more important than your body, far more valuable than your body. Here's what Jesus said in Matthew 16. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit or lose their soul? What can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Soul is eternal. Our soul does not die with the body. You may strive for a six-pack, you may long for a tighter bum, but they're nothing to be compared with a healthy, living, vibrant soul.

No matter how well you look after your body, no matter how hard you train, no matter how much you diet, it will eventually look like mine, or worse. Ultimately, it will die.

[12:12] Ultimately, this body is not eternal, but your soul, dear friends, is everlasting, undying.

Now, maybe here that this morning, there's some folk who don't believe that they have a soul, they're very much taken up with, the modern trend of thinking of ourselves as being simply a mass of chemicals, and minerals, and water all wrapped up in skin.

That's the evolutionary thought and understanding of the body. We're nothing more than just chemicals and minerals. And when we die, that's what we become again, food for the worms and for the soil.

Let me ask you a few questions, though, which I hope will convince you that you are someone who is more than body and mind, that you have a soul. Remember when you last stood at the top of a cliff, or a hill, or even perhaps even a mountain, and you gazed out over the view that was stretching before you?

Didn't you feel something inwardly? Didn't you feel good? Didn't you feel alive? Didn't you feel even perhaps revived?

[13:26] Well, what part of you felt that as you looked upon that view? Was it your body? Your mind? Was it in fact your soul?

When you've listened to music, particularly very stirring music, aren't there occasions when inwardly you've been moved, inwardly you've been lifted up, inwardly there's been an awakening in one sense?

Artists and musicians talk about these things as food for the soul. Dear friends, you have a soul. It may be in very poor condition.

It may be a soul which has no understanding or experience of the Spirit of God. But you have been created in the image of God. And because God is spirit, you are spirit as well.

A dead spirit in that sense. An unhealthy soul. But you have a soul. Now this soul, dear friends, is of much greater value than even your body or your physical health.

[14:38] And the question that I want us to be concerned with today, this morning and this evening, particularly is, how do we ensure we have a healthy soul, that we are spiritually well?

And for that reason, I draw our attention to Psalm 23. Almost certainly the best known of all the Psalms, possibly the best known portion of the whole Bible.

But I would put to you that the whole of this Psalm is about David's rejoicing in and faith in the God who cares for his soul.

Now many other Psalms, of course, as you know, talk about rescue and deliverance and provision for physical things. But on the whole, most of the Psalms, this one included, speak of the spiritual relationship between the soul of David and the Lord God.

And it is his soul and the preserving and the caring of his soul that he has in mind. And I point your attention particularly to verse 3. He refreshes my soul.

[15:42] And the language he talks about is picture language, isn't it? Spiritual language. David himself was not a sheep, but in a spiritual sense he was.

He wasn't led by the Lord to really lie in green pastures or really stand beside quiet waters. These are spiritual pictures.

This starkest valley, again, is a spiritual picture, not just him being out on a midnight walk. Preparing the table, feeding and eating are all spiritual language.

Now the Lord is the shepherd of his soul. The Lord is my shepherd. David himself, as you know, was once a shepherd. Before he was king, he cared for sheep in the hills around Bethlehem for many years as a young man.

And the care that he took of those sheep is the same care, or even better care, that the Lord God takes of David's soul. The Lord is my shepherd.

[16:48] And this Lord, who is the Lord of David's soul, is of course the good shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. We read there in John chapter 10, verse 11, I am the good shepherd.

In fact, he is the only shepherd of our souls. 1 Peter chapter 2, For you were like sheep going astray, but now you've returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.

Jesus is the good shepherd. He cares for our soul. He has a concern for your soul, perhaps more than we do ourselves. So I want us this morning and this evening to afresh think about how the Lord Jesus is the one who provides for our souls.

We see that there. The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I lack nothing. In other words, the Lord is my shepherd. He provides all my wants, all my needs, my spiritual needs.

And therefore I hope by looking at this together, you and I will, each of us, be motivated, determined more, to care for our souls, to give time to our souls and the welfare and the health of them.

[18:07] Because David says, the Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing or I need nothing, it's clear that his soul has got needs. We know our bodies have needs.

Perhaps we've indulged our bodies too much and given too much time to them over Christmas. But our bodies have particular needs. We have to eat. We have to drink. We have to sleep.

We have to exercise. We have to do all these things to take care of our bodies. They are essential for sustaining life, physical, bodily life. If we do not take care of them, if we neglect them, then our health suffers.

And of course, more than that, if we neglect them too much, then our bodies will die. So it is with the soul in that sense. We have essential needs for our soul.

And if we do not look after our soul, then it will be unhealthy, unwell. It may even, if I can put it this way, be deadly.

[19:07] Two things, two very simple things. This is verses one through to three that I want us to look at this morning and then the following verses this evening. First of all, we see that as the good shepherd, the Lord Jesus fed David's soul.

Or David's soul was well fed. He makes me lie down in green pastures. Now a shepherd has to be very careful about where his sheep eat and what they eat.

If a sheep eats something poisonous, then it can become seriously ill or even die. Now even here in the UK, there are plants like foxglove and ragwort and yew tree that sheep cannot eat because otherwise it would kill them.

They're poisonous to them. And a good shepherd keeps them away from that. And here the good shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, the shepherd of David's soul, what does he do? He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads him to those places of lush vegetation, good grazing. Our souls need to be fed. As I said before, even in a secular world in which we live, people speak about food for the soul, music and art and beauty and so on.

[20:27] They may not understand the soul as the Bible teaches the soul, but we need to feed our souls and the best nourishment that we can give to our souls is the Lord Jesus himself.

Here's what he says to the people in John chapter 6. Jesus declared, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.

Clearly again, he's not talking about physical hunger, but spiritual hunger, soul hunger. I am the bread of life, the sustaining food of the soul.

Jesus is what every soul needs to feed upon. Most people feed their souls with things that are either poisonous to them or at the best very unfulfilling.

We look around about us and we see people who are hungering for something to satisfy, hungering for something to give sense, to feed, to sustain, to make life purposeful and meaningful.

[21:35] The trouble is that they're looking in all the wrong places. They're looking, in one sense, into those very physical things rather than those spiritual things. What we need is real food.

In fact, in that same chapter of John chapter 6, Jesus says this, very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in Him.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise them up at the last day for my flesh is real or true food.

We'll come back to that in a moment as to what that means, but clearly Jesus is expressing the importance of feeding on Him. He Himself is the one not only who gives us food, but who is the food?

He is the food for our souls. Are we feeding our souls? I say we'll come back to that in a moment. What does that mean? How do we feed?

[22 : 36] Secondly, we need drink and our soul is provided by the Lord Jesus with good drink. We're well fed and we have good drink there in verse 2 and 3.

He leads me beside quiet waters. there He refreshes my soul. It's in the leading by quiet waters that our souls are refreshed. Our bodies can survive for many weeks without food.

Wouldn't think so, but some of us could survive a lot longer than others looking around, including myself, but only a matter of days without water. Water is far more important than food.

just a matter of a few days without water and we would be seriously unwell. Food much longer. But our souls need to drink.

Our souls need to be refreshed with life-giving water. So again, what does Jesus give us to drink? What is it that we vitally need to refresh our souls to give them living water?

[23 : 43] Well again, Jesus tells us Himself. John chapter 7 verse 37. Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink.

Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this He meant the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive.

We are spiritual beings. We need spiritual life and we need spiritual drink. The Holy Spirit is the one who causes us to have that spiritual refreshing.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul says that as believers we have all been baptized into one Spirit and given one Spirit to drink. We are Christians who drink drink, drink of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit which the Good Shepherd provides for us revives our souls. I don't know whether over the Christmas period you've been away for a few days and your house plants when you got back have been a little bit wilting on the windowsill.

[24 : 57] Hopefully they haven't died. What do you do with them first of all? You give them a drink. Perks them up doesn't it? What a change can make in a wilting plant. Well dear friends, our souls need the Spirit, the Holy Spirit when we are wilting and dry.

Many of us know what it is to have a dry soul and spirit how we need him. And it's the Holy Spirit who is given to us by the Lord Jesus himself. John in chapter 20 after his resurrection when he met with the disciples and blessed them the second time he breathed on them we're told and said receive the Holy Spirit he came upon them at Pentecost and at other times as well.

But again just like eating the wrong food is unhealthy so drinking the wrong drink can mess with our bodies and with our minds. So our soul must drink pure water, living water, satisfying water.

Just as people hunger so people thirst. People hunger for purpose and meaning people thirst for excitement and enjoyment. They thirst for something which will stimulate and move them and give them pleasure and cause them to feel as if life is worth living.

But Jesus is the only one who reaches those parts that other drinks can't reach. While he was standing by the well in Samaria he met with a woman who all her life had been thirsting, moving from relationship to relationship so she was on her sixth partner by the time that Jesus met with her and by the well he stands and says to her in John chapter 4 If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

[26 : 54] Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

So we need food for our souls, we need drink for our souls, we need a good diet for our souls and this the Lord Jesus provides for us as the good shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing, nothing for your soul is lacking but is given freely and fully and completely in Jesus.

I'm going to think about that in a moment. How do we eat, how do we drink, how do we diet rightly for our souls? First of all I've got to ask you a very simple question.

If you want to enjoy these benefits, if you want to know your soul being healthy and well and living and vibrant, if you want to know an end to hunger and to thirsting in the soul, the only way is if you have the Lord as your shepherd.

[28 : 01] So the question is beginning of 2019, is the Lord your shepherd? Can you say with David, the Lord is my personal shepherd? Not that I know he's a good shepherd or I've heard he's a good shepherd or he's a good shepherd to others but is he my good shepherd?

Because it's only as David could say the Lord is my shepherd so he could also say I lack nothing. Are you part of his flock? Are you one of his sheep or are you still wandering far from him? Much imagery in the Bible that talks about what it is to be a sheep without a good shepherd. In Isaiah in chapter 53 the prophet confesses concerning all of us, we are all like sheep have gone astray.

Each of us has turned to our own way. No matter who we are, each of us begins as a lost sheep, a wandering sheep, a foolish sheep, a sheep that is far from the shepherd of our souls. In one sense the very essence of sin is to be living out of relationship with God, to be going our own way and doing our own thing, to be living to please ourselves, not being willing to come under the care of the good shepherd.

[29 : 18] Is that you? Are you still a wandering and lost sheep? You say well how can I know that I'm a lost sheep or a found sheep? How can I know if Jesus is my shepherd or not?

Well remember what we read there in John chapter 10. Jesus says I am the good shepherd who knows his sheep. He goes on to say in verse 27, he describes what his sheep are like. My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. Is that true of you? Have you heard the voice of Jesus speaking to you, speaking to your soul, speaking to the very depths, come follow me?

I'm sure you've heard it audibly with your ears. Have you heard it with your heart? And if you've heard it with your heart are you following him? If you come to follow Jesus, not just to acknowledge him or to say I know him, but to follow him.

Does that sound like you? Then if you are such a sheep, even if you're a poor sheep, even if you're a limping sheep, even if you're a one-eyed sheep or a three-legged sheep, if you're following the Lord Jesus, no matter how imperfectly, then these things are true of you.

[30 : 38] The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. If you're not one of his sheep, then let me urge you, at the start of this new year, whatever resolution you're planning on making or have made, whatever determination you have to get your body in shape or to sort other things out in your life, let me urge you more than anything else to get your soul sorted out.

You're an undying soul. Hear the voice of the good shepherd, put your faith and trust in him, don't leave it another year or another month, even another day. come to the shepherd, return to him who meets all your needs, who provides for you and for your soul.

So just as I close briefly, and I'm going to pick this up a bit later on this evening as well, how do I feed my soul? How do I feed on Jesus? He's the bread of life and I've been told by him that I must eat him and drink him, his spirit.

How can I do that? How can I maintain a well-balanced diet through this year? That my soul may be healthy and strong and well. Well, I think it's very, very simple.

[32 : 00] I'm not going to tell you anything you don't already know because it is simple. The Christian life is simple and straightforward. The trouble is it's so simple that actually we think it's got to be much harder than this.

But just as you feed your bodies daily, we need to feed our souls daily. We eat and drink daily, unless particularly we may be fasting and praying, but on the whole we know that our bodies need food and water and we give it to them on a regular basis every day.

So it must be the same with our Lord Jesus Christ. We eat and drink of him by faith. Remember that verse in verse chapter 6 of John 35, whoever comes to me will never go hungry, whoever believes. Believes means not just in the existence of Jesus but exercises faith. Eating is active, feeding the soul is an activity. And I would put it to you, dear friends, that just as the Lord is my shepherd, so the Lord Jesus is our shepherd who feeds our souls as we are in his presence.

as we spend time with him. He feeds and waters our souls with spiritual nourishment and refreshment whenever we are with him.

[33 : 20] Now, of course, we are with the Lord Jesus wherever we go. God is omnipresent. He's everywhere. But I mean more than that. I mean that when we are in fellowship with him, in relationship with him, praying, talking, enjoying his company.

I'm sure we've had it in a very ordinary way with friendships, haven't we? To a lesser degree. When we've been with somebody and we've enjoyed their company, especially perhaps another Christian and we've talked about the things of Christ together.

Where we've been enriched, haven't we? We've found our souls built up and strengthened our spirit renewed. Well, think of that. If that's what happens when we're with other human beings, think what it would be like when we are with Christ, the God, the Son of God.

We are fed and watered as we seek him and enjoy his company. As we spend time with him in prayer, listening to his voice, reading his word. As we spend time with his people in fellowship together, like this on a Sunday or in a prayer meeting.

When we spend time with the Lord, our souls are fed as we think and consider what he's done for us. What it means to be forgiven. What it means to be born again.

[34 : 32] What it means to be a child of God. As we grasp and comprehend the wonders of the things of God's word. These things all feed and refresh and nourish our souls. As we delight in his promises, claim them for ourselves.

You see, I told you it's simple. But isn't it one of the hardest things? To make time, to give ourselves real quality time with Jesus each day.

We set aside time very clearly, don't we, in the day. Well, breakfast will be this time and lunch will be this time and evening meal will be this time. We make clear, definitive times.

We need to do that too for our soul's sake. Or do we just sort of snack? If I can put it that way. One of the worst things, isn't it, on a diet?

It's snacking, not eating proper meals. And so we'll snack, we'll send up a prayer when things are difficult. We'll snack and we'll catch a verse of the Bible when it's on the calendar.

[35 : 37] You can't feed your soul by snacking, you can't feed your body by just eating crisps. You've got to feed it with good stuff. And that means spending quality time with the Lord.

And dear friends, when we do that, when we commit ourselves, now again, we all have a busy schedule, some of us. It's more difficult to allocate time. We have all sorts of pressures pushing in, I know.

But for your soul's sake, make time. Set aside quality time, maybe at the very beginning of the day. It may be, don't leave it right to the end of the day. Let me assure you that when you go to bed and you sit and decide you're going to pray and read your Bible there, that's sure to be a way of going to sleep.

Because you're tired and your mind's tired and your body's tired. If it's not in the morning, make it during your lunch hour even. Make it during, before you have your meal in the evening or early evening, whatever.

Give that time to the feeding and the nourishment of your soul. Lock yourself away with Jesus. Feed on him. Be refreshed.

[36 : 42] Be renewed. And then, dear friends, I'm sure that you will find, as we have in the past, when these things have taken place, we'll taste and see that the Lord is good, won't we? As Psalm 34, verse 8 says.

I'm going to continue, as I said, this evening. I pray for you, dear friends, as your under-shepherd, my prayer is for your souls, that they might be healthy and strong.

When that is the case and all the other things fall into place, we don't need to question and say, well, Lord, what do you want me to do? What do you want me to serve? What is it I should be doing with my career or my job or my finances?

When we are in time with Christ, when we are feeding and being nourished, we lack nothing. He leads, as we see. He guides. He provides. He shows us. He makes clear his will and his way. It's back to basics again. Feeding, drinking, enjoying the good things of Jesus, our good shepherd.

[37 : 49] Here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

Amen.