

mp3/51/PSALM 23.MP3

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 23. Psalm 23, a Psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[1 : 1 2] We're going to stand and sing together the words of our first hymn, 144. 144, 144. 144. 144. 144. 144. 144. 144. All my days I will sing this song of gladness.

Give my praise to the fountain of delights. For in my helplessness you heard my cry. And waves of mercy poured down on my life.

The experience of the child of God. God's grace. 144. 144. 144. 144. From verse 7. The Gospel of John chapter 10.

Reading from verse 7. These are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. I tell you the truth.

I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers. But the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved.

[2 : 1 3] He 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 who owns 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.

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 sheep pen.

I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice. And there will be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life.

[3 : 1 2] 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 receive from my Father.

At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said he is demon possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him? But others said. These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon.

Can a demon open the eyes of the blind? Then came the feast of dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter. And Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's colonnade.

The Jews gathered round him. Saying. How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ tell us plainly. He answered. Jesus answered. I did tell you.

But you did not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me. But you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice.

[4 : 11] I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life. And they shall never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all.

No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him. But Jesus said to them. I have shown you many great miracles from the Father.

For which of these do you stone me? We are not stoning you for any of these replied the Jews. But for blasphemy. Because you are mere man. Claim to be God's.

Would you turn in your Bible to this extraordinary psalm?

Perhaps the best known passage in the whole of the word of God. Psalm 23. And God willing we'll look at this together. This evening.

[5 : 15] Can I underline. Just that. There are some notes of what I. Will say. And if anybody wants them.

To take them on the way out. They might just help you to remember some. Of the glorious things. In. This psalm. Strange place to come perhaps.

Because. It is a psalm that most of you will know. Extremely. Well. So why are we looking at it together. This evening. Well. Because it deals with.

Two of the most important. And most disputed questions. Of life. What are those questions. Well. That is plain from the very. First verse.

And then they're explained. And answered in the whole psalm. The questions are these. What is religion really. All about. At its best.

[6 : 09] What is religion all about. And the answer is. The Lord is my shepherd. And what difference. Does. This kind of religion make.

To a person's. Life. And. David said. The Lord is my shepherd. Therefore. I shall not be. In want.

Life. Life. So. So we'll look at these. Two questions. Which are vividly. Answered here. From a man's deep. Personal. Experience. So the first question is this.

What is religion. Really all about. At its best. The best kind of religion. You could possibly have. What is at the heart of it. Well there are many answers. Given to that question.

If you asked. Richard Dawkins. The question. And then you asked. The Archbishop of Canterbury. Roland Williams. The question. You would get.

[7 : 05] Fantastically different answers. I suspect they both have. One thing in common. That neither you nor I. Would understand. Either answer. But. Otherwise. Very different. Answers.

I wonder what you would. Answer to this question. What is religion really. All about. I think a cross section. Of people. In our society.

Would come up with three things. Or a combination. Of three things. They would tell you. That religion is about. Believing. The unbelievable. Believing things.

That deep down. You're pretty sure. Are not true. The second answer. To the question. Would be. That religion is about. Rituals. To be performed. Religious actions.

Religious acts. To be. Gone through. And then. And the weirder. Almost the weirder. The better. Or at least. They need to be. Somewhat. Unusual. And then.

- [7 : 58] The third answer. To the question. What is religion. All about. Would be. That religion. Is all about. Observing a great list. Of do's and don'ts. And actually. More don'ts.
- Than. Do's. And I think. That's most people. Some combination. Of those things. Are most people's. Idea. Of. Religion. But.
- David's. Answer. To the question. Of what religion. All about. Is something. Entirely different. And truly. Astonishing. He says.
- That religion. At its best. The only religion. Worth having. Is about. A relationship. With the one. True. And. Living God. That's where the psalm starts.
- He says. The Lord. Is my. Shepherd. The Lord. The one who's shown himself. Many times. And in many ways.
- [8 : 53] To. Israel. The one who called Abraham. The great journey. To the land. Of Canaan.
- The one who met with Moses. On Mount. Sinai. The Lord. The God. Whose name means. That he is unchanging. Self-existent.
- Needing nothing. The one who spoke the universe. Into being. The one who gives us life. And the only reason. There is anything here. Is because he upholds it all.
- By the word of his power. This Lord. Says David. The great God. Not a God of men's imagining. But the one. True and living God. He. Is my.
- Shepherd. And. For. An Israelite. That was a wonderfully. Vivid. Picture. Of. Relationship.
- [9 : 47] The old testament. Shepherd. He lived. With. His. Sheep. And he did for them. All that the psalm here. Describes.
- So. He led the sheep. He led them to the places. Of. Pasture. He doctored them. He says. He restores. My soul.
- Every ailment. These sheep. Faced. He. Treated. And he protected them. That's the imagery of verse 4. Your rod.
- And. Your staff. He protected them from. The wolf. And the lion. And the bear. With this great cudgel. But he also protected them from that.
- Tendency to scatter. Using. His staff. To draw them. Back. And it's a relationship. Of. Intimacy.
- [10 : 43] Of living. Together. I have a. One of my best friends. Is a shepherd. A man I've known for. Forty years. Often holiday.
- On his. Well I suppose these days. It's a small holding. That he has. I was there very recently. He has 60 sheep. Every night. He goes out to count his sheep.
- And make sure they're all there. And it was an extraordinary experience. To see. His relationship. With these sheep. And he knows them all individually.
- And he knows and recognises their history. They all look like sheep to me. But to him. They were all different characters. And he knows what problems they've had. And he knows their temperament.
- He knows everything there is to know. About them. And it's an extraordinary. Relationship. And they trust him. The tendency when I got in the field.
- [11 : 39] Was for them to scatter. But actually while he was there. They would still come close. And it was a wonderful thing. To see.

And this picture. Of the sheep. And the shepherd. Is a picture of a relationship. You'll notice all the pronouns here. The Lord is my shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guards me in paths of righteousness. Even though I walk through the valley of shadow of death. I will fear no evil. For you are with me.

Your rod and staff. They comfort me. Now. It's a relationship of grace. Isn't it? It's not a relationship of equals. The sheep are not. As it were.

The same as the shepherd. The shepherd is the leader. He's the one who's in charge. He's the one who's in control. The sheep simply. Have to depend.

[12 : 37] And follow. Him. It is the shepherd. Who commits himself to care. And look after. His sheep. He is the. Sovereign one.

He makes me lie down. He leads me. He restores me. He guides me. He protects me. He supplies my need. So he is the leader.

The Lord. The great and mighty God. And the sheep. They are dependent. Absolutely upon him. With a heart. Willingness to follow. And obey him.

This is the heart. Of real. True. Religion. The only kind of religion. That is worth having. The Lord is my shepherd.

That's the best word in this psalm. Where all this becomes intensely personal. This man is not talking about some theory as to what might be possible.

[13 : 34] He's talking about his own deep personal experience. God is his. The Lord is his shepherd. Now it's an interesting picture isn't it?

Because on the one hand this is a collective thing. Although he's talking about himself. You don't get a flock of one sheep. Even my friend who these days really farms almost in his spare time.

But he doesn't have one sheep. He has 60. And there is something. You know that God's people need to be in Christ's flock. And yet there is something deeply personal.

This is all. The Lord is my shepherd. David is talking about himself as an individual. He has a relationship with the true and living God.

And that my friends is what real religion. The very heart of the best religion. The only religion that's worth having. Is about. It's about relationship.

[14 : 41] It's not just about certain beliefs. It's about an experience of the one true and living God. On a day to day basis. That is gloriously different.

From so many ideas and common caricatures. Of religion. Indeed it's so different from much. Religion that one sees in this world and in our land.

True religion is about friendship. Which is intimate and tender relationship. With the God who made all. All that we see in the God who made us.

My friends that is what is possible for you. Surely that is intriguing. It is also astonishing.

There's nobody here this night who could not enter into a relationship with this God. Because actually this God has not just reached down to David.

[15 : 42] But he has provided a way by which any man or woman or child. Can come into a relationship with him. To know him in intimacy. Because we have a problem.

In terms of how can we be in relationship with God. When he is burningly pure. And we are anything but. And that problem.

Which is a mountain to God. Whether you see it or not. Has been wonderfully resolved. By an extraordinary act of God himself. Coming into this world.

Taking human nature to himself. Living. Growing up as a child. Into manhood. Living our life. And then dying our death. Offering himself.

The son of God to his father. In our place. And for our sin. So it's this extraordinary thing that he talks about. Is possible for all of us here tonight.

[16 : 42] And indeed. For everyone who's made peace with God through Christ. It's absolutely paramount that we remember. That that is our relationship.

It's not just what David speaks about. It's the relationship of every real Christian. And we need to remember what we have. It's so easy to lose sight of it.

It's so easy that our religion does become. Something of. Almost of ritual. In terms of what we do. Day by day. Sunday by Sunday.

That that becomes the dominant feature. Or. Or. Observing. These things we do. And these things we don't do. And it can so easily.

Drift. And decay. To that. That the heart. Of. True religion. Is not about. Even about obedience. It's about relationship.

[17 : 39] With the one true. And living God. Through. Jesus Christ. Christ. We need to put our focus. Here. To learn.

Of the Lord. And to seek. That relationship with him. And to make it real. By prayer. And. Trust. So what is true religion all about?

Well according to David here. It's about a relationship. With the one true and living God. But what difference. The other question is. What difference does this. Religion. Religion make. To a.

Person's. Life. I don't think. Too many people would disagree. And certainly the Bible makes it plain.

That much religion makes people bigoted. Boring. Narrow. Hard. Critical. Self-righteous. And a whole load of other negative. Things. But what about this religion?

[18 : 35] Man-centered religion makes people like that. But what about. A religion that comes face to face. And even into a relationship. With the one true mighty holy God.

What difference does that make to a person's life? Well it certainly doesn't make it all easy. The story of the Christian life is not. And they all lived happily ever after.

Certainly not in terms of this life. It's not a picnic. To be in relationship with God. As some would have you believe. But it does make a profound difference.

And what word would you use? What word do you think summarizes everything that David says here about the consequences of his relationship with God?

See the word I would use is this. Confidence. This man exudes confidence. Not self-confidence. But confidence based upon God.

[19 : 33] And the fact that he knows in relationship with God. Look at the first verse. You can add the word therefore if you like. Because the two halves of it. The second half flows from the first.

The Lord is my shepherd. He says. That is the profound fact for which he is profoundly grateful. But it has consequences. And the consequence summarizes this.

I shall not be in want. I shall never lack for anything that I truly need. Because I am in relationship with him.

Because he does all that a shepherd does for the sheep and more for me. And that confidence shows in verse 4.

Or you kind of think well this is. Is this the arrogance of youth? You know. Young people can sometimes talk about dying. But then dying is a long way hence. For most of them.

[20 : 29] And David says. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil. And do we think he is just being. Oh look at me. Look at what a strong character I am.

Well you need to remember as a young man. This young man faced death. He talks about wrestling with the lion and the bear. I don't know about you.

But I would be running as fast as it was possible to run. Or shinning up the nearest tree. But no he didn't do that. So he has some understanding of what he is talking about.

But it is not based on self confidence. Or even experience. Of having sort of cheated death. On a couple of occasions. No he says this. 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. So confidence.

[21 : 22] And it is there again in verse 6. Surely he says. Goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

And why is that? Why is he so confident? Is it because he has lived an exemplary life? No it is all about this. The Lord is my shepherd. And therefore these things flow from that.

So David's confidence here. So how does that affect his life? Where is it seen? Well according to this psalm it is seen in three areas of his life.

He says first of all. I know my God will constantly work for my good. My God will constantly work for my good. Listen. He says.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

[22 : 20] It's all about what he does. Indeed the Christian life is all about what God does for his children. And when we don't see.

If you're a Christian you don't see your life in those terms. Then you've lost perspective. And you'll notice it's all in the present tense. Sometimes I've asked people to tell me about their story.

About their testimony. And sometimes people can leave it as if certain things happened to them quite a long time ago. Changed their life. But that's the end of the story my friend. That's the beginning of the story.

And the true Christian story is this. It's of God constantly at work. And it's a beautiful picture here of exquisite care.

Look at verse 3 for example. He restores my soul. Am I the only person here who thinks that in many ways. That is the most wonderful consequence of this relationship.

[23 : 23] And the one place I need confidence above all else. Because I'm constantly going astray. I'm constantly screwing up. And it's always top of God's agenda.

And it speaks of such patience. And commitment. When I wander. He restores. He keeps doing it. Such patience.

It's so easy as a father. When the children were younger. You kind of. You mean to treat them with patience.

But so. So quickly. Some of us. Particularly men I think. Lose patience. You get cross. You get angry. God is not like that.

And it is wonderful. And then we read here. The second half of verse 3. He guides me in paths of righteousness. That means.

[24 : 28] It's always the right path. And he's always got our good. In mind. Mind. He's committed to changing us. And making something. Of us.

He's more concerned about our holiness. Than our happiness. Which is sometimes a bit disconcerting. And difficult to cope with. But that's his reputation. Is at stake here.

He guides me in paths of righteousness. For his name's sake. Do you see it? God constantly at work. For my good. And when you remember who this God is.

That he should have such personal concern for. And commitment to. Inconsequential human beings. It's an extraordinary thing.

And that's the first area of David's confidence. If you like. Constantly work. God constantly working for his good. The second area is. And he has two pictures under this.

[25 : 28] God will more than look after me. In my most difficult times. It's two images. You see. I've given you a proposition. But this is all picture language.

And that's much better. The first difficult time. Is the valley of the shadow of death. And it doesn't matter if it's your death. Or the near death of somebody that you love.

And it's an extraordinary thing. He's confident that God will more than look after him. Even in those black times.

And notice what he's looking for. And expect him from God. God's company. The ultimate walk. Which none of us have experienced.

And therefore none of us really knows what this is like. But no. You know. How much of our life is made bearable. Because there are others to walk the road with us.

[26 : 29] But when it comes to the serious business of dying. Which I'm persuaded is a much more difficult thing than many people imagine. The serious business of dying. It's a lonely way.

Unless you're a Christian. And then God walks that way with you. The only one who can. Right into death itself. He is there.

And protection from the evil one. Protection also from ourselves. The rod and the star. God is there.

When the whole of our life seems to be falling apart. These are wonderfully reassuring things for those of us who've learnt that we cannot trust ourselves.

But there's another equally striking picture which illustrates that however difficult life gets. God will be there. And God will help us. And more than help us.

[27 : 33] There is a picture of the most difficult kind of loneliness in verse 5. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. It might be the office where you're ridiculed for your faith.

It might be school. Sixth form college. It might even be home. The place where it's so difficult to live because you're isolated. And others scorn your faith.

They've thought about it. And unlike you they're intelligent enough as it were to throw away this Christianity nonsense. That's how they speak to you.

And it's hard to live in these kind of environments. And yet David's experience is this. And his confidence. His experience indeed is you prepare a table before me in my presence of my enemies.

It's a picture of a banquet. And there's nothing that the enemies can do about it. You anoint my head with oil.

[28 : 36] You show that personal care and love. My cup overflows. The image of, you know, the host who's pouring yet more wine into the cup.

It's a glorious picture of God more than looking after us in our most difficult times. Extraordinary picture for such a moment.

It's a picture of not only having one's needs met but of lavish love. And it's wonderfully reassuring. God will more than look after me in my most difficult times.

And the third and final picture is this. Area of confidence. Not only confidence, God constantly at work for your good.

Not only that when the things get really, really tough. More than able to look after you. And to show you his love for you.

[29 : 38] But supremely this. God will give me a great future. God will give me a great future. There's an argument for translating verse 6. Only goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.

That doesn't mean that everything will be simple and straightforward and easy. Far from it. He's already talked about verses 4 and 5 about the most difficult circumstances.

So that's not what it means. But what it does mean is that you'll be pursued through life. Every godly person.

Every believer. Everyone who trusts in the great Saviour. Pursued by goodness. Including in the hard times.

And God's undeserved love. God's tender mercy. All the time. I find that a great encouragement.

[30 : 40] But it was a great encouragement to me not only in my 60s, but when I was 16. These are wonderfully encouraging things.

Especially when it all looks uncertain. So often for young people it's very hard, isn't it? In our society today just to find work. Or to stand for righteousness.

When there's a whole gale of falsehood, unbelief, and false behaviour. And ungodly thinking.

It's very hard indeed. But God pursuing us in goodness and love every single day of our lives.

But, you see there is an end, isn't there? There is an end to life. But it's not the end to the love of God. He goes on, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[31 : 49] God takes it as his people. Because he means it to be a permanent relationship. So, the picture of verse 5 of the table prepared is not the kind of, you know, somebody invites you for hospitality.

On one wonderful occasion. But that's, you know, the kind of the end of things. No, no. Not with God it's not. It's, every time he visits us here is just, as it were, a glimpse of the continual wonder of the world to come.

The Christian is going home. That's a mark of God's covenant commitment. The hope of being with him. It's all relational, is this.

I will dwell in the house of the Lord. It's his house. It's not just a great new world. But it's a world where he is dominant.

It's the world where I can be with him. That's the imagery here. What difference does it make? To have this heart religion.

[33 : 00] This relationship with God. Well, it's confidence. Ah, but is that confidence justified or is it all make-believe? It's an important question.

But there are two great reasons for affirming that it isn't. Something like whistling in the dark. That confidence is based on the Lord. His greatness. He can do everything good.

And his faithfulness. He is utterly faithful. And you notice what we're speaking about here. It's not a man's ideas about religion. It's about a man's experience.

It's David's experience of God that gives him confidence. All this is about his present experience. He now makes me lie down in green pastures.

He now leads me beside quiet water. Every day I find he's restoring my soul. He's always guiding me. He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

[33 : 59] You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. That's his present experience. And that's why he's confident. So, to most people, religion is make-believe.

It's about silly rituals and nitpicking, illogical, life-restricting list of do's and don'ts. And let's be quite candid about it. Much religion is exactly those things.

But there is another kind, David says. And he knows it at first hand. It's a relationship with God that blossoms into a wonderful, anxiety-draining confidence in the Lord.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want. That is what David says. Let me ask you a question. Have you got that relationship?

It's a real thing. David's talking about his experience, not his ideas. And you can have that relationship with him. It's not here to tantalise you and to show you what other people have, but it's totally outside your reach.

[35 : 10] It would be if it weren't for the grace of God. But God reaches down with his hand and he draws all who say, come to me and I will give you rest. The Lord Jesus Christ is the way.

And it is in Christ that men and women have this extraordinary relationship. Indeed, Jesus himself said, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And it's an extraordinary picture because if the shepherd died, the sheep are vulnerable. But in this case, because the shepherd died, because he dealt with the problem of our sin, we are not vulnerable, but brought into a relationship with the living God.

You can have that relationship. You could have it this evening if you sought it in Jesus Christ. But if you have that relationship, many of you have that relationship, are you drawing from it the confidence in God and his covenant love that David draws from it in this song?

Here is a man who knows that life is not all easy. He's experienced things and he knows that around the corner will be other difficulties. But he has a confidence, not in himself.

[36 : 40] He's not saying, I've now got all the resources I can cope. He's saying, no, I have the Lord. I have God with me. And he will not let me go.

I wonder if most of us know this psalm exceedingly well. But do we know the experience of it? Do we have the confidence that this man had?

How do you get it? Well, how do you get confidence in anybody? It's by knowing them better. You know, if somebody is worthy of your trust, the more you know them, the more you know about them, the more time you spend with them, confidence just grows and grows.

And it's not any different with the living God. We learn about him. We learn of his reputation. We learn of all he's done in the scripture. And then we walk with him.

And every time you, as it were, depend upon him. And as it were, he comes up trumps. That increases this sense of confidence in God.

[37 : 48] Surely it is to our shame that many of us have long been able to say, the Lord is my shepherd. But still are struggling to say, I shall not, you know, experimentally, and day by day, from the heart, to say, I shall not be in want.

But the problem is with us. Because to know him is to know that he is worthy of our trust. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. I wonder if you sit down, if we could just read aloud together that song. That's the way to close up. So, let's see.

Let's just say, Amen. We read together Psalm 23. Psalm 23. Let me give you time to find it. Sorry, I should have said that before you closed your Bible.

I'll read the bit at the top. Psalm 23, a Psalm of David. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not be in want.

[38 : 58] He makes me lie down in green houses. He leads me to my five waters. He refers to my soul. He guides me in the hearts of my righteousness.

For his name is safe. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me.

Your God and his Lord are with me. They come from me. You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil.

My cup of love for us. Surely, goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will be glad in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen. Amen.