

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Love, Faith and Hope in the Psalms: Psalm 23 - Faith

As you look round your home, have you noticed how often you get a series of three objects: the basic cutlery is made up of a knife, fork and spoon, you may well have a 3-piece suite in the lounge or you may even wear a 3-piece suit. And then there is a nest of three tables. Perhaps there is regularity in this which helps us to remember. So we find this is often true of Bible subjects, sometimes three, sometimes more. God, Himself, is described as three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; we speak of morning, afternoon and evening as making up a day. For three weeks we are taking the subjects of love, faith and hope, as shown in three well known Psalms, of which Psalm 23 is central. This Psalm describes faith.

We recently broadcast a series of programmes on 'The gallery of faith'. This brought to our attention several characters from the 'faith chapter', Hebrews 11. The writer of Psalm 23 has the briefest mention in that chapter, by name only, as a man of faith. David, the king of Israel, chosen by God, was clearly a man of faith and, as we look at this Psalm today, we will see how his faith is demonstrated.

It is certainly worth our while first to remember what faith is. Faith describes the trust gained from hearing and learning of God and is summed up in the words 'Abraham believed God', Romans 4:3. This belief in God brings with it the absolute certainty that all God is, and all that He has said and done, is true.

It is vital to realise that we can only receive the blessing of God when we accept in totality who He is and what He has said and done. James tells us that faith must be without 'wavering'. If we waver we are like a wave, driven by the boisterous wind, which picks up all in its path and tosses it around, James 1:6. Such faith is unstable and does not really exist in these circumstances. The beginning of faith is in the acceptance of John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life'. Acceptance of this brings us into the eternal blessing of salvation. We are saved from punishment for our sin, which our Lord Jesus has dealt with on the cross, and we are now the possessors of eternal life. God has said so! Faith depends wholly on who God is and all that He has said. We rely totally on it.

Let us see today how this fits into the lovely Psalm 23.

Faith is a reality, verse 1 - 'The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want'.

Positively, king David the writer, commences, 'The LORD *is* my shepherd'. This statement is particular, it is present and it is personal. There could be only one *particular* shepherd for David: it was 'the LORD'. Abraham also accepted the shepherd care of the LORD. When he pleaded with God for Lot and his family at Sodom, he said, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' Genesis 18:25.

David also had the assurance that the LORD *is* always *present*, ready to tend to his concerns. In Psalm 3:4 the Psalmist records, 'I cried unto the LORD with my voice, and He heard me out of His holy hill'. He adds, 'Selah', 'think of that!' One cry for help would be answered in the way the LORD intended; what a blessing!

The writer also claimed this shepherd *personally*. It mattered not to him what others thought. His family thought him insignificant. His father spoke to Samuel of 'the youngest, and behold, he keepeth the sheep', 1 Samuel 16:11. But David says, 'The LORD is *my* shepherd'. He had the greatest Shepherd overseeing him and was thankful.

David was a professional shepherd. He knew how a good shepherd handled his sheep. Can you picture a lamb which had been seized by a lion and another by a bear. How scared that lamb would be! David, the shepherd, came and killed both the lion and the bear, releasing the lamb to complete safety. In preparing to fight Goliath, David told the king, 'The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, He will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine', 1 Samuel 17:37. In effect he was telling King Saul, The LORD is *my* shepherd'. Faith was a reality to him. In 1 Peter 5:8, the apostle writes of the activity of the 'devil as a roaring lion, [who] walketh about, seeking whom he may devour'. Is your faith such a reality that you, too, depend on the same Shepherd for your protection?

Next we can see something of the reasons that led David to take this stand.

Faith yields responsibility to the LORD, verse 2 - 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters'.

This verse emphasises the care of the shepherd, giving rest, safety and refreshment. In His care for the sheep, the Shepherd has brought them to an excellent place in which to relax. He makes the sheep to lie down, totally to rest. This can best be done in a 'green pasture'. It reminds us of care and comfort. The Lord told a story in Luke 15 of one lost sheep. Having satisfied himself that the other ninety-nine were cared for, the Shepherd sought out the one lost sheep, far from home and desolate. He brought it back. My Shepherd has done that for me! He has said, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest', Matthew 11:28. The Lord took the responsibility for doing this when He gave 'His life for the sheep', John 10:11. Now He cares for the sheep, giving them rest.

Those sheep, as they lay down, did so in complete safety. David knew the strength of this and spoke of it in Psalm 4:8. 'I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for Thou, LORD, only makest me to dwell in safety'. May we all enjoy the safety of soul that the Saviour offers to all who come unto God by Him.

In His care of the sheep there is always refreshment for them. He provides it. There is nothing better, the Psalmist says, than that 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures', food in plenty, and 'He leadeth me beside the still waters'. There is no better way than to have faith to leave the responsibility in the hands of the Lord. He takes control, gives care and satisfies!

Faith brings restoration, verse 3 - 'He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake'.

When we have been through difficulty and deep concern, it is most satisfying to be in a place of peace and so be restored. Perhaps you can imagine my problem when, as a young soldier, out one winter's night in icy weather in the north of England, I struggled to get back to base. The environs were unknown and the hilly roads were narrow, winding, steep and slippery. The car could hardly be controlled on a downward gradient. Then the lights failed! How would I proceed? All I can say is that the Shepherd kept me. With what thankfulness to the Lord I reached my destination and, as I lay down that night, He certainly restored! All the problems of the night had passed by the morning. David says, 'He restoreth my soul'. This is here and now. He takes control. He deals not only with the body but the spirit also. We are drawn closer to the Shepherd; we find our greater delight with Him. This is what faith does; it brings restoration.

Then with this clear appreciation of the Lord, we are sure of His choice of the pathway ahead. Where does He lead? He leads in the right paths. He guarantees this because it is consistent with His own Name. David's son, King Solomon, believed this too. He shows how this takes place, in Proverbs 3:5-6, 'Trust in the LORD with all thine heart (this is faith); and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths'. So He leads. Faith brings restoration and leads on! Oh, that we all may trust Him the more!

Faith grants reassurance, verse 4 - 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me'.

It is true that there are times when every Christian, like everyone else, will pass through the valley of the shadow of death. David was no exception. We read in 1 Samuel of the several occasions when he passed that way. Saul often tried to kill David. In the palace Saul threw his spear at his young servant. In the countryside, he led his army to search for David to kill him. But Saul never succeeded. Rather, there were times when David saved Saul's life, much to Saul's deep regret. The Lord never suggests that these valleys will be avoided with His presence. This verse grants us the assurance that, even in these difficulties, our faith is rewarded by His presence with us, particularly at these times. Let us briefly note the path of faith through the valley.

It is with **composure**. We walk. Some would run but the Shepherd's care for the sheep means that He does not run. We walk – with composure because, in every difficulty, the Lord is our Shepherd.

We go with **confidence**. The valley and the shadows may be troubling, the path may be dark, but we know we will go *through* the valley. We do not remain there. These difficulties will end and we realise that every shadow is made up of darkness and light, and there is a bright hope ahead.

We go with **courage**. There may be much evil around but there is no need to fear. We are assured that our Shepherd knows our every circumstance and every loss we may experience is gain with Christ.

We go with a **Companion**. Here is the core of the reassurance. 'Thou art with me'. We need never face things alone, but we have our incomparable Shepherd with us, for He is our Lord.

We go with **comfort**. At all times, the Shepherd may encourage by use of his rod, a slight adjustment to the sheep's pathway. His staff may indicate an alternative way through the valley, but He is there! What comfort we truly have in His presence with us.

We have the wonderful incident recorded for us in Acts 12 of Peter's release from prison, not for the first time. Peter was literally in the valley of the shadow of death. Death stared him in the face. Herod was determined to kill him the next day. But Herod had not reckoned with God! Half asleep, Peter was led through every obstacle until he was outside of the prison and was fully awake. Then he commented 'Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent His angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod', Acts 12:11. Peter later wrote to those who were going through many trials and points out that 'the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, thought it be tried with fire, (similar to the valley of the shadow of death) might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ', 1 Peter 1:7.

Valley experiences will certainly come but, through faith, we can enjoy reassurance, as David did, as he claimed 'the LORD is my Shepherd'. He is always with us!

Faith confirms abundant refreshment, verse 5 - 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over'.

David assures us that he was not only kept from the valley of the shadow of death but that ample provision is made for all who can claim the care of the Shepherd. Even David's enemies saw this provision! The table, the oil and the cup were part of the divine provision which those enemies could not prevent.

First we have the table. It is prepared with the richness of all the provision the Lord has for His people. In referring to the care of His Father, the Lord Jesus told His disciples that one insignificant sparrow 'shall not fall on the ground without your Father' and adds, ye are of more value than many sparrows' Matthew 10:29 and 31. The Lord provides where faith exists! We can also appreciate this spiritually. The Lord Jesus also said, 'I AM the bread of life', John 6:35. All refreshment is received from the Lord Jesus and through His Word.

Oil is also available. After the rigours of a day the soothing application of oil to the head was a blessing. We find oil in Scripture indicative, spiritually, of the Holy Spirit. Every believer now enjoys the blessing of the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God Himself, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, is centred in our life. The Lord told His disciples, concerning the Holy Spirit: 'He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you', John 14:17. Nothing is more valuable to the man or woman of faith than to have the Holy Spirit available throughout life.

We then have the cup. This was so important to a thirsty Middle Eastern person. We today value it too. This cup was running over, not just a sufficient supply but an over-sufficient abundance to ensure full satisfaction. The Lord does not treat men and women of faith with restrictions. He is our Shepherd and His care is boundless. The faithful psalmist rejoices in this abundance.

Faith prepares for future rejoicing, verse 6. - 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever'.

Every day, faith determines that we will experience the active goodness and mercy of God. Paul tells us that it was 'the goodness of God that led thee to repentance', Romans 2:4. Paul prayed for the Thessalonians that for them God would 'fulfil all the good pleasure of His goodness, and the work of faith with power', 2 Thessalonians 1:11. The work of the Holy Spirit develops that goodness within us, Galatians 5:22.

As David claimed the mercy of God, he also commented in Psalm 103:8 and 10: 'The LORD is merciful...He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities'. Paul also explains that 'God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us', Ephesians 2:4, has exchanged all that made us 'children of wrath' for all the eternal blessings we now enjoy. Peter adds: we 'now have obtained mercy', 1 Peter 2:10. But for the mercy of God we would have been for ever lost.

Like two sheep dogs, these blessings of goodness and mercy follow us daily as the Good Shepherd ever keeps us near Himself.

Finally, this Psalm ends with the tremendous assurance that faith brings; 'I *will dwell* in the house of the LORD for ever'. It is a fact. It is sure. This Shepherd will never fail! The experience is not that of a long lifetime which declines with the years, but for eternity. Let the words of eternity in Revelation 5:11-12 ring out: 'the number of them was ten

thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands; saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing'. The presence of the Shepherd will fill our mind and thoughts with eternal rejoicing and praise. What a finale to a life of faith in this world! The well-known hymn 'Amazing Grace' ends with the verse:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.*

Well may we thank God for the abiding faith He has placed in our hearts. Hallelujah!

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