

# Christ Our Good Shepherd

## *Reflections on Psalm 23 From A New Testament Perspective*

### Part 1:

### *The Lord's Abiding Presence With His People*

**Scripture:** *Psalm 23.*

**Exegetical Big Idea:** Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd who blesses us daily with His abiding *presence*.

### Introduction

Over the next three Sundays we are going to be reflecting on **Psalm 23**. **Psalm 23** is probably the best known and best loved of all the Psalms. This is a Psalm that I'm sure some of us memorized in childhood, can still recite today, and probably still use regularly when we pray. This is certainly true in my own life.

Most Bible scholars agree that David wrote **Psalm 23** although they don't agree on when he wrote it. In his youth David had been a shepherd. When, as an adult, David became the King of Israel, he was known as the Shepherd King of Israel. David wrote this Psalm, however, not from the perspective of being a shepherd, but from the perspective of being a sheep of the Lord, *Yahweh*. David, along with all the OT people of God, saw themselves as being the sheep of *Yahweh's* pasture, as **Psalm 100:3** confirms to us.

Unlike David who lived under the Old Covenant, you and I live today under the New Covenant and we think of *the Lord* as referring not so much to *Yahweh*, but rather to our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ identified Himself as our Good Shepherd in **John 10**. He is also referred to as *the great Shepherd* in both **Heb. 13:20** and **1 Peter 5:4**. For this reason we will be reflecting on **Psalm 23** from a NT and Christ-focused perspective. This means that we will meditate on the Psalm in the light of what God has done for us in Christ that calls us to follow Jesus Christ as our Good Shepherd.

As I have meditated on this Psalm over the years I have been amazed by how the Holy Spirit took David's knowledge and experience of both being a human shepherd and a spiritual sheep of God to make the six verses of **Psalm 23** a very inspired and inspiring metaphor of how the Lord daily blesses His people with His abiding *presence*, His secure *protective care*, and His all-sufficient *pastoral care* (**3P's**). It is my prayer that we will all be encouraged in some way in our walk with the Lord as we meditate on these **3P's** from **Psalm 23** over the next three Sundays.

So, we'll read the Psalm now, and begin our reflections on **Psalm 23** this morning by looking at the first of these **3P's**; The Lord's abiding *presence* with His people. First we'll look at the *reality* of the Lord's abiding presence with us, then we'll look at the Lord's abiding presence with us through His *goodness* and His *mercy*.

## I. The Reality of the Lord's Abiding Presence (Verse 4)

- 1) In **verse 4** David declares that: *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.* Next week we will look more fully at this verse but for now I want us to focus on the words in the middle of the verse, *I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*
- 2) Fear is that sense of panic and anxiety we experience when we anticipate a situation or event ahead of us in the future that threatens danger, pain, or harm. In the OT the Hebrew word for fear is *yarel*. This word means to revere, to respect, and to be in awe of something or someone. This is why one of the more common phrases in the OT is *Fear the Lord*. This phrase was used to call God's people to walk in awe and amazement of God, to revere Him, to worship Him, and to recognize that as the creator of the heavens and the earth God is in control of all things at all times.
- 3) This is also why in the OT, the Lord always told His people, *Fear not* whenever they faced the problems and difficulties of life. This was always God's reminder to His people that they should not be in amazement and awe of the problems and difficulties they faced in their lives. Bible scholars tell us that this expression, *Fear not*, appears 366 times in both the OT and NT – one for each day of the year, it appears!
- 4) Here in **verse 4**, David tells us why, as the people of God, we should not fear or be in awe of the evil we face in the problems and challenges of life. His reason is seen in the words, *For you are with me.* David is saying here that because *Yahweh*, his almighty Shepherd is with him, his fear, that is, his awe and reverence, are rightly of *Yahweh*, not of the problems and challenges he faces. This is exactly what the Lord told the Prophet Isaiah at a time when the nation of Israel was filled with fear because they were facing a very serious military threat from their enemies. In **Isaiah 8:12-13** the Lord said to the Prophet: *Do not fear what they fear. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to fear.*
- 5) In our own Christian lives today, these words here in **Verse 4**, *For you are with me*, remind us of the NT truth and teaching that when we become Christians the HS imparts into us the very life of Christ. In **John 14:20**, just before He went to the cross, Christ promised His disciples that after His work on the cross, He will be in them and they will be in Him, spiritually. This truth about Christ being in us and we being in Christ spiritually was one that Paul emphasizes throughout his epistles. For example, in **Gal. 2:20**, Paul wrote these words: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me.* This amazing truth means that Christians are joined to Christ in an everlasting spiritual bond that assures us of the Lord's eternal abiding presence with us both in this life and beyond. This is why in **Matt. 28:20**, just before His ascension, Christ said to His disciples: *And surely I am with you always, even to the very end of the age.*

- 6) The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, in **Heb. 13:5**, reminds us that God has made this promise to us: *Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.* So, this writer reminds his readers, and us, to say with confidence, *The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.* We will not be afraid because the Lord's abiding presence is with us, which is precisely what David means when he declares in this verse that *I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*
- 7) When all is said and done, as Christians, this reality of the Lord's eternal, spiritual abiding presence with us is what makes all the difference in our lives.

## **II. The Lord's Abiding Presence Through His Goodness (Verse 6)**

- 1) We see the Lord's abiding presence with His people further affirmed in **verse 6** where David declares that: *Surely your goodness and your mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* David is saying here that the eternal and abiding presence of the Lord with His people assure God's people of the Lord's mercy and goodness at all times.
- 2) This is very re-assuring, of course, but I think it's only fair and honest that we ask ourselves: What about when our loved ones or we ourselves suffer from some horrible sickness? What about when we have to stand by helplessly and watch our children drift away from the faith we have faithfully raised them in? What about when our financial situations get tough and there isn't enough money to meet our financial obligations? What about when friends prove false and turn against us? What about when our prayers seem not to be answered as we watch our world falling apart around us? At those times, can we still honestly declare: *Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life?*
- 3) At these times of unexpected difficulties and challenges, with our finite human understanding, we naturally lapse into anxiety and worry and we are sometimes tempted to doubt if God's presence is really with us. We are even tempted to think that perhaps we can run our own lives better than God.
- 4) In this verse David uses the two words *goodness* and *mercy* to help us to recover the reality of the Lord's abiding presence with us when we go through such tough times.
- 5) The Hebrew word that is translated in this verse as *goodness* is, in the NT, equivalent to the Greek word, *charis*, which is often translated into English as the word, *grace*. In the NT, this word, *grace*, denotes the fact that God gives us blessings that we do not deserve, such as His salvation, eternal life, His Holy Spirit, etc. This is why a more common definition of this word, *grace*, is, God's unmerited favour to us.

- 6) In our tough days, to bring us from despair to a place of faith and continuing trust in God, the Holy Spirit, often in the place of prayer, reminds us of this reality of God's *goodness*, His unmerited favour, to us. This is what helps us to recover the reality of the Lord's abiding presence with us in our tough days.
- 7) And it is this Spirit-inspired remembrance of God's unchanging goodness that assures us, in our dark days, of His abiding presence in our lives.

### III. The Lord's Abiding Presence Through His Mercy (Verse 6)

- 1) The second word that David uses in **verse 6** that helps us to recover the reality of the Lord's abiding presence with us in our tough days is the word *mercy*. This word is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*. *Hesed* was one of the hardest Hebrew words for the English translators of the Bible to render into English because there is no really accurate corresponding word or concept for it in the English language. Some versions of the English Bible translate it as *lovingkindness*, others translate it as *love* and others translate it as *mercy*. This Hebrew word, *hesed*, basically, refers to God's unchanging covenant faithfulness and His commitment to be our God even when we fail to live up to our end of our covenant relationship with Him.
- 2) In the NT, the word *mercy* is a translation of the Greek word, ἔλεος (*eleos*). This word refers to God not giving to us what we deserve, such as eternal damnation and separation from Him because of our sins. God's *grace*, His goodness, as I explained earlier, is God giving to us what we do not deserve such as His salvation and eternal life, and His *mercy*, is God not giving to us what we do deserve such as eternal separation from Him because of our sins.
- 3) This is why often, in the NT, you will see the two words, grace and mercy, joined together in the same sentence. An example of this is **Heb. 4:16** that says: *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*
- 4) This means that whenever we face life's unexpected difficulties and challenges we need to remember that because of His *hesed* God's presence will always be there to pick us up and set us back on His track, even if we got off the track through our own mistakes of self-will, especially if we turn back to Him in repentance and renewed faith and obedience.
- 5) In **John 10:11**, Christ said: *I am the good shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.* This is a reminder to us that by His death on the cross Christ forever proved to us His complete eternal and unchanging commitment to never leave us nor forsake us, His sheep, in spite of our doubts, and our fears, about His goodness and mercy when we go through the tough times of life.

- 6) Indeed, during our tough times, it will help us to remember that in the first half of **John 16:33** the Lord forewarned us that in this world we *shall* have trouble. The Greek word for *trouble* in this verse is *thlipsis*, which means to be in a tight and narrow place. In the second half of that verse, however, Christ then went on to say: *But take heart! I have overcome the world.* This is His firm promise to us that as our Good Shepherd His victory over the troubles of this life will always prevail in our own troubles – because He is in us and we are in Him, you see!
- 7) This is our assurance that His mercy, His *hesed*, will faithfully follow us through all the up and down days of our lives as a continuing evidence of His abiding presence with us.

### Conclusion

So, this is our **first P** from **Psalm 23**; The Lord's abiding *presence* with us through His goodness and His mercy, as portrayed in **verses 4 and 6** of **Psalm 23**.

Illustration: The breaking of our car's accelerator cable on the southern by-pass several months ago: As my wife prayed, the Spirit calmed me by bringing with these words from Psalm 23 to my remembrance: *I will fear no evil, for you are with me.* After she had prayed, I called Paul, and he came and rescued us!

This reality of the Lord's abiding *presence* with us through His *goodness* and His *mercy* is captured very powerfully by Paul in **Rom. 8:38-39** where he declares: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

May these reflections assure us that His abiding presence is indeed with us if we have the assurance deep in our hearts this morning that we are Christians who are safely in the fold of Christ our Good Shepherd. If you do not have this assurance in your heart this morning that you are safely in His fold, but would like to have it, the good news is that in **John 10:7-9** Christ the Good Shepherd said: *I am the gate for the sheep . . . whoever enters through me will be saved.* By these words He meant that you can enter into His fold and be saved through a prayer of faith and repentance in which you ask for the forgiveness of your sins and you surrender and commit your life to Him.

Next Sunday we'll look at our **second P** from **Psalm 23**; the Lord's *protective* care of His people.

Let us pray.

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