

## God is my Shepherd

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long. (Psalm 23)

### Exiles Yearning for Return

Psalm 23 is perhaps the best-known psalm. It's read at funerals, when people seek comfort. It was written in the sixth century BC when the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon. Nothing remains of the famed city of Babylon (80km south of Baghdad, Iraq) - the clay bricks of this once powerful empire are now sludge. Yet, this beautiful psalm from a seemingly inconsequential kingdom does. It's an enduring testament of a people's yearning to return to their homeland.

### The Good Shepherd - Yahweh and King David

The people of Judah live in a region of warring tribes and contested lands. They have much opportunity to reflect on the different kings that have ruled them since King Saul, and also of the monarchs in neighbouring kingdoms & empires. Their profound realisation is that their God reigns not like the violent neighbouring kings, but like a good shepherd (Ps 23:1-4).

The 12 tribes settling in the promised land experience a good shepherd king in the flesh - King David. David's been a lowly shepherd - the youngest & most insignificant son of his family. Yet, in a crisis time for his people facing war with the Philistines, David courageously faces their mighty warrior Goliath in battle - & prevails. In his own flawed life & repentance for his wrong doings, David continues to worship Yahweh & show servant leadership of his people.

### Hosted in an Eternal Covenant

The people of Judah come to realise that their God does not rule exploitation and threat, but by **relationship**. They're called into an eternal covenant. God will never leave them. God will never stop loving them. They've had a temple & a land - God's house - but these are taken away from them. Yet, in exile they realise their dwelling place with God can be anywhere. They'll never be removed from their relationship with God. Our readings explore the Good Shepherd theme.

### 1. Providing guidance & protection

*The Lord is my shepherd, and I want to follow wherever he leads me, wherever he goes.  
Over the mountains, the waters and byways, valleys and highways he's waiting for me.*

*And while on the journey to where we are going he promised to be there to help us along,  
And over the mountains we'll walk on together, to know all the wonders he's given to me.  
(Together in Song 659: 'The Lord is My Shepherd' - v. 1 & 2)*

- God "leads me in right paths for his name's sake" (Ps 23: 36)
- God invites us into relationship, a journey together
- God comes for us with 'outstretched arms' when we get lost & go astray
- With guidance for shared direction & boundaries, eg: 10 Commandments, 2 Great Commandments (see equivalent in 1Jn 3:23 - "believe in God" = "loving" or loving God, in John's writings) & the Sermon on the Mount
- God guides & protect us as we journey together in faith - though we don't get free immunity from life's suffering & perils, but rather strengthening & resilience in the face struggle.

## **2. You restore my soul with living waters**

*Where streams of living waters flow my ransomed soul he leadeth,  
And where the verdant pastures grow with food celestial feedeth.  
In death's dark vale I fear no ill with thee, dear Lord, beside me;  
Thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.  
(Together in Song 145: 'The King of Love my Shepherd Is' - v. 2 & 4)*

- God lies me, "down in green pastures; leads me beside still water; restores my soul" (Ps 23:2-3)
- God offers us spiritual practices for restoration, growth & thriving
- Regardless of how dark the valleys are we encounter, or what evil/enemies we face (Ps 23:6).

## **3. You know me, love me & stay with me forever**

- "Surely goodness & mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
& I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long/forever." (Ps 23:6)
- In John's Gospel, Jesus whole-heartedly offers his life to his Father ("lays down his life" (Jn 10:11)) in faithfulness & integrity, in the face of those who pursue him - even as his disciples fail to understand his mission & abandon him in fear
- God knows us each uniquely in our human frailty: "I know my own & my own know me" (v.14)
- There are other sheep not belonging to the fold (Jn 10:16) - other Christian communities at the time of John's community & those who'll exist in the future
- God's promise to us is we'll dwell in God - God's house - forever.

Our invitation is to join Christ on the journey of deepening relationship with God, & share with others this offer of guidance, protection & flourishing in love - now & forever.

*And so through all the strength of days thy goodness faileth never:  
Good shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house forever.  
(Together in Song 145: 'The King of Love my Shepherd Is' - v. 6)*

### **Collect Prayer**

Jesus, good shepherd of the sheep, by whom the lost are sought and guided into the fold:  
Feed us & we shall be satisfied, heal us & we shall be whole, & lead us that we may be with you.  
Amen.