

Week 8 – Psalm 23

A Psalm of Trust

Psalm 23:1-4 – Under the Shepherd's Care

- Psalm 23 begins with a basic metaphor, “The LORD is my shepherd.”
 - o Shepherds were a normal part of ancient life.
 - o King David was a shepherd boy early in his life lending much credence to the heading “A Psalm of David’s”
 - o God was frequently described as a shepherd (see Genesis 49:24; Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10).
 - o Earthly kings and leaders were often described as shepherds of the people both in extrabiblical (Hammurabi, Ashurbanipal, and Cyrus) and biblical sources (see Ezekiel 34; Micah 5:4).
- The psalm stands out for the way it personalizes God’s role as shepherd.
 - o God isn’t just Israel’s shepherd in some general sense. “The Lord is *my* shepherd” in a personal way. God’s cares for each individual sheep.
 - o The psalmist also makes clear that is Israel’s God, Yahweh, of whom he speaks.
- The psalm highlights the sufficiency and gracious nature of God’s care.
 - o Because of God’s care, the psalmist lacks nothing (see Deuteronomy 2:7).
 - o God makes the psalmist “lie down in green pastures” and leads him “beside quiet waters.” The picture is one of provision and care. God makes sure his people have food, water, and rest.
 - o God’s care refreshes or restores the psalmist’s soul. This may mean the renewing of one’s spirit or rescuing one who is lost (see Matthew 18:10-14).
- God guides the psalmist “along the right paths.”
 - o God’s aim is not simply physical care, but spiritual, as well.
 - o God wants the psalmist to be righteous for both the psalmist’s well-being and his own glory (v 3).
- Because God is such a good shepherd, the psalmist can walk any road without fear, even if that road takes him through the darkest valley (v 4).
 - o The phrase is literally “the valley of the shadow of death.”
 - o The psalmist has no fear because God is with him (see also Psalm 139:7-8).
 - o God’s ability to fight off predators with his rod (or club) and staff brings great comfort to the psalmist (v 4).

Psalm 23:5-6 – A Place in the Royal House

- The metaphor shifts a bit in verses 5 and 6 from shepherd to royal host, although some commentators see the meal as that of a literal shepherd leading his sheep up onto a grassy mesa for a meal.
- Even though there are those who wish the psalmist harm (enemies), God shows his favor by preparing a generous meal for him.

A Song for Every Season: A Study on the Psalms

- Several psalms lament the presence of enemies who doubt God's care for the psalmist (see Psalm 41:5-9; 69:19-21; Psalm 86:17).
 - Here, God's ample provision proves the slander of the psalmist's enemies wrong.
- God also shows his favor by anointing his head with oil.
 - Oil was used in anointing the kings of Israel to their royal position.
 - Oil was also used on a person's head and face as a sign of joy on festive occasions (see Psalm 104:15).
- God's present kindness assures the psalmist of God's future provision.
 - He is confident that God's goodness (tov) and love (hesed) will follow him all the days of his life.
 - The word for "follow" is most often used to describe enemies pursuing someone in order to do them harm. Here God's goodness and steadfast love hunt the psalmist down in order to do him good.
- The Psalmist is confident that he will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever."
 - The house of the Lord, ie. the Temple, was where God's presence dwelled and where the people worshiped the Lord.
 - The psalm reminds us that at the heart of eternal life is the worship of the Lord.
 - Worship may be the means by which God makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside quiet waters.
 - The church has heard in these words an assurance of eternal life.

Jesus and Psalm 23

- The gospels often pick up God as shepherd (see Matthew 18:10-14 and Luke 15:3-7).
- Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd in John 10.
- Hebrews 13:20 and 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4 view Jesus as the shepherd of the church.
- Christ's promise to prepare us a place (see John 14:1-4) elaborates upon the idea of dwelling in the house of the Lord forever).

Other Psalms of Trust/Confidence

- Psalm 11 – The Psalmist expresses confidence in God's sovereign rule.
- Psalm 16 – The Psalmist rejoices that God is his portion and that God makes his lot secure.
- Psalm 52 – The Psalmist declares his trust in God's unfailing love.
- Psalm 91 – The Psalmist expresses confidence in the Lord's protection and care.
- Psalm 125 – The Psalmist announces that those who trust in the Lord will never be shaken.

Sources

- Davidson, Robert, *The Vitality of Worship* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
- Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2006).
- May, James L., *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1994).