

Psalm 23 – God shepherds us (11th May 2014)

Bittersweet challenge – best loved passage in whole bible. On one hand, people know it; but what to say about such a familiar passage?

Google Psalm – first one that comes up is Ps 23 – total of 11.1 million results. Still most popular, but also historic importance: sung by Jews every Sabbath, with the 3rd meal on Sat afternoon.

For me, linked with funerals – passage is either read or sung (to Crimond) about half of funerals I've taken. Which is ironic, given that this is a psalm about this life only. 'Forever' (v6) literally means 'for long days', which given that Jewish people did not have a clear view of resurrection at time of David, should be read as 'for as long as I live.' This is not a song about eternity, so why do we say it at funerals?

Exercise: shut your eyes and think about this psalm. What sort of image comes to mind? (DO) Lush and green, peaceful. Think about topography of Israel. Lot of it was arid, with rocky paths and ravines.

Which makes point – not so much familiarity breeds contempt – in fact great love. But does breed a bit of misunderstanding or misapplication. Lots of surprises in this psalm – central challenge is one of cultural translation. A lot of our misunderstandings of this psalm start with the central idea: the Lord is my shepherd – what is a shepherd?

Biblical shepherd – PUT ON TEA TOWEL. But that's problem, isn't it? Most of us don't know any shepherds, and those of us that do, know 21st century British farmers. Image of sheep in enclosed fields; perhaps a warm but distant relationship. Not sure if that's actually true, but point is, what does David mean when he says the Lord is *His* shepherd? What did shepherds *do* 3,000 yrs ago?

PAWSON TRANSLATION – combines literal meaning of words with cultural context, what a Palestinian shepherd of c.1,000BC actually did – **READ**.

Very different – how respond – like it as much or less? Challenges:

- We tend to read it as a psalm of rest but actually a psalm of journey. Or to put it another way:
- We tend to read it passively, when actually it's dynamic
- We tend to see role of shepherd as warm but quite distant, but actually very hands-on and intense

Sheep didn't live in enclosed fields on farms. They roamed open countryside, often over an area of several miles. Instead of large flocks a shepherd would usually only have a small number of sheep which he looked after personally. There were no fences or sheepdogs, the shepherd himself defended the sheep, if necessary with his rod or cudgel – which could also be used on a sheep's backside to get them to move. When they travelled the farmer didn't walk behind them while the sheep were driven by dogs, the shepherd led them from the front and they followed him. When the sheep wandered they weren't brought back by dogs or kept safe by fences, they were grabbed round the neck by the shepherd's staff and yanked back into line.

Very different relationship isn't it? Why Pawson's translation is so helpful – gives us a different dimension to this Psalm. If started by saying: 'The Lord is my farmer, my sheepdog and my fence' that starts to get us nearer – but clunky. So Pawson concentrates on another dimension: personal aspect. Close relationship: 'So I'll never lack anything I need.'

Further surprises:

v2 – He makes me lie down – have you ever noticed the element of coercion? Clearer in Pawson's translation: He forces me to rest where there is abundant nourishment. Again it goes back to role of shepherd. They travelled for miles looking for good pasture in a semi-arid country. When they found it, they had to stop; if necessary, by force to make sure the sheep stayed close together. But reason was care of sheep: they needed to eat.

Have you ever experienced God forcing us to take a break? Not nice, none of us like it: but David is sure that it's for our benefit.

v3 – He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Not ours! A holy life is first and foremost for God's glory and honour, not ours. Or to quote Pawson: it's for his good reputation. A shepherd whose sheep went astray quickly got a reputation for not being a good shepherd. So the good shepherd keeps his sheep on good paths partly for his own sake, as well as for his sheep's.

v4 much loved: God's presence a real comfort. But interesting that it's the rod and staff that comfort us. Rod easier: beats off enemies, that is comforting (though wallop on backside to get us moving perhaps less so). But staff: again, how much do we like being yanked back into line?

I hope you're getting a picture by now that relating to God as a sheep does to a shepherd is not about passively chewing the cud in fields, but it's active, dynamic, intense. The shepherd is with you all the time, defending you, leading you, and occasionally yanking you into line or getting you moving again. I think many of us love this psalm because it seems quite passive, we imagine God as a kindly farmer leaning on the gate of his field looking fondly at his flock. But as sheep he kind of leaves us alone on a day-to-day basis.

But the shepherd of Psalm 23 doesn't leave us alone. He cares too much for that. And I think maybe if we had a better grasp of the imagery we might not feel as comfortable with it. God actually wants to journey with us, he wants to be intimately involved with every part of our lives. He decides when we stop somewhere and he also decides when to move us on. Not trying to spoil it for you, I just want us to make sure what we really mean by the word shepherd.

(As an aside, the shepherd is also the dominant biblical image for my job: the word pastor is derived directly from the word for shepherd – so developing our understanding of what Ps23 really means also helps us to interpret what I'm meant to be doing. Again, you might contrast the typical understanding of a pastor as someone who gazes kindly on his flock with the biblical shepherd who spends a lot of his time driving the flock on, for their own benefit, safety and flourishing. But that's another sermon!)

But if this all sounds a bit disturbing, now imagine us out on an open hillside at night, with wolves, wild dogs, bears and maybe even lions prowling around. What sort of shepherd do we want? This is where v6 starts to make sense. Again, another bit of translational naughtiness, as the word follow actually means more like 'pursue'. It's dynamic, maybe even aggressive. And most flocks would of course be pursued by predators. But what pursues us in this psalm, under the care of this shepherd? **Goodness and love** – or as Pawson translates more literally: generosity and loyalty.

I love the idea of being pursued by goodness and love: again it's a dynamic idea, isn't it? This is psalm about being on the move, on the move with God, on the move with a shepherd who is with us every step of the way.

Before I close, just want to pick up on v5 – more difficult. One of difficult areas of psalms is way psalmists ask God to treat our enemies. Sometimes the language is vengeful, and we'll deal with that in a later week. Here it is more like gloating. Feels more like way I might eat a chocolate bar in front of a good friend on a diet – although not a friend, an enemy. Although no ill will expressed directly, it's not very appealing. CS Lewis, the great 20th century theologian and writer didn't like it at all: *'The poet's enjoyment of his present prosperity would not be complete unless those horrid Joneses (who used to look down their noses at him) were watching it all and hating it. ... the pettiness and vulgarity of it, especially in such surroundings, are hard to endure.'* Is that fair?

Couple of comments: (1) David had real enemies, the sort that wanted to kill him. Not many of us have had that, but if have, we would probably have more sympathy. Back to idea we focused on last week of honesty before God – no masks; (2) Psalms (and OT) clear that a lot of people live as enemies of God and confident that He will judge them. Temper that with grace and forgiveness of NT – but that doesn't change the idea that God will judge the wicked; (3) not so much about enemies as about us – we can have confidence in protection of shepherd.

That's key, isn't it? The heart of this psalm is a relationship: between sheep and shepherd, between us and the Lord. God desires a close, dynamic, even intense relationship with us. To enjoy this relationship means that we'll lack nothing we really need. He protects us, keep us on the straight and narrow, sometimes forcefully if he has to, and keeps moving us on towards new pastures – because the truth is that if we stay where we are we'll run out of food and starve.

True spiritual nourishment requires us to journey. Where are you on the journey at the moment? Where is God taking you? And are you willing to move with him? Will you let him take you there, and then move you on when the time is right? Will you trust him to protect you, and perhaps even more importantly allow him to yank you back into line when you're wandering away or out of order? Do you believe that with him you'll lack nothing you need?

'The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not be in want.' Amen.