

# Psalm 23

## Walking through the Valley of a Dark Pandemic

### Introduction:

I am sure that many of you are familiar with John Bunyan's famous Christian allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The story of Christian's journey from the City of Destruction, representing the world, to the Celestial City, representing heaven, has captured the hearts and minds of Christians for centuries. Just recently, it was made into a movie, which incidentally may be worth watching during this strange time in which we are spending most of our time indoors.

As I read Psalm 23, a short six sentence poem written about 3500 years ago, by a shepherd boy by the name of David, it is amazing how much of the imagery of Christian's life journey is represented in the lines of this well-known poem.

As we read this song, we need to imagine a simple young man, sitting in the fields surrounded by sheep, who are quietly grazing. David is equipped with very simple equipment, a bag to carry his food, a rod to fight off wolves, a staff with a crook to retrieve sheep who wandered off, and a sling-short with some stones.

Indeed, Shepherds were a bit like pilgrim travellers who moved from one place to another, travelling lightly, as they journeyed with their sheep from place to place.

Shepherds didn't have much, but they had a big heart. The shepherd often cared for the same flock of sheep – around 30-40 sheep - for many years. The shepherd knew all of his sheep by name and his sheep knew him, by the sound of his voice. Because the shepherd lived with his sheep it was a 24 hour-a-day job.

Were you and I to meet a shepherd in David's time, we would likely see a sleepless, weather-beaten man who looked old far beyond his years. He would be humble and gentle man. And yet after many battles with wild animals, he would also seem very rugged and tough. Shepherds were no

sissy's. But the thing we would notice most about the shepherd would be his obvious love for his sheep. Constantly watching, always attentive, the sheep were always on the mind of the shepherd.

## Point 1: God is a shepherd

And David, the shepherd, described his God, as his shepherd.

### ***The LORD is my shepherd***

Now, if we pause for a moment and think about what David is saying – it is a most outstanding

He is saying that the God who created the universe, the One who knows the beginning and the end ... is like a shepherd.

He is speaking of a very intimate relationship.

When David writes that **“he shall not want”** it is because he believes and trusts that his Shepherd God will be source for everything in his life.

And this allows David to rest in quiet confidence knowing that his God will always be with him

**“He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside quiet waters.”**

I'm sure every one of us has had times when we've needed to find stillness so we've sought out a trickling stream, a water fountain or the gentle lap of lake waters – I think that's what David has in mind.

## Point 2: The Good Shepherd PROVIDES

David continues in celebration of his intimate relationship with his Shepherd God, because he knows his God is good, he knows He provides for all his needs.

**“He restores my soul;  
He guides me in the paths of righteousness,  
for the sake of His name.”**

When we live our life after the pattern that God has shown us in the bible, it becomes like a straight and solid path for us to walk.

In Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress Christian must walk the pathway toward the Celestial City. He was advised by the Interpreter, who represents the Holy Spirit, to always choose the straight and narrow path, never deviating from left to right. Even though Christian needed to climb the Hills of Difficulty, and battle with various foes, he knew his Shepherd God, the King, would sustain him.

I read an interesting meme this morning – it said “No movies, No concerts, no sporting events, no restaurants, no social gatherings, limited workload – now that I've cleared your schedule, can we talk? God.

We read our Shepherd God “makes us lie down”. Could it be that this time of mandatory self-isolating – could be God leading us beside the quiet waters for more intentional reflection and meditation on our spiritual growth?

Will we use this time in which we can ‘lie down in green pastures’ and spend time ‘beside quiet waters’ – for deeper communion with God?

### Point 3: The Good Shepherd PROTECTS

Then David recalls how his Shepherd God has protected him time and time again. As a shepherd David would have had to fight with lions, foxes, wild dogs – all in an effort to protect his beloved sheep. David is saying that his good Shepherd God does the same for him.

And David holds onto his confidence even when he walks through times of great distress and darkness.

He sings,

**“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.”**

The picture created by David's words is like a scene John Bunyan wrote in his allegory when Christian must pass through the valley of the Shadow of Death.

We read,

*Christian came to the Dark Valley. Mistrust and Timorous warned him that it was a place of great distress, in which the cries and groans of people never ceased. Christian saw the road that the way of the King led straight through it.*

*Christian found that it was indeed a dark and formidable valley. Black rocks seemed to meet overhead, and a mist hovered so thickly that Christian could scarcely see his hand when he stretched it out. Flashes of light broke through the darkness but Christian was not sure whether they were flames of fire or lightening, and the air was thick, making it hard to breathe.*

*Christian found his time walking through the Valley by far the worst. Although he tried to think of the King and his goodness, he could not help be frightened. At one time, Christian heard voiced whisper in his ear bad and troubling words.*

*At about the middle of the night Christian began to hear the voice of another pilgrim who was repeating aloud some of the beautiful words that were written in the King's book. It was too dark for him to see who the pilgrim was, but he hoped it was Faithful. Even though he could not see Faithful, he knew he was there, and he felt less frightened than when he had thought he was alone.*

**“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.”**

Be reassured that there are pilgrims all around you repeating aloud the words from the King's Book, the Bible – so you too can be confident that your Shepherd God is with you.

**Point 3: The Good Shepherd PREPARES**

Then David moves to make a very strange statement, a phrase which has puzzled people for years. He wrote,

**“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”**

It is in fact this phrase which has been on my heart and mind over the past days.

Let's break the imagery apart a little.

David says that his Shepherd God has prepared a table or a feast for him. A table laden with good things and enriching food. And that table is laid

... in the presence of his enemies ...

Although his enemies, his foes, are all around him, David is enjoying the rich feast which is Shepherd God has laid out for him.

Consider this ...

Our generous God has prepared a table of spiritual food, food which nourishes our soul, feeds our spirit, and strengthens our faith – and this table is laid out, while all around us the world is worried and fearful about an enemy virus.

Like David, we are invited to delight and enjoy the generous provision of God's spiritual food – in the presence of a viral enemy which encamps outside.

As we partake of God's spiritual food, our Shepherd anoints our head with his blessings, so that our heart overflows with the knowledge that our God is our source for all our needs.

How is God using this time to prepare you? What is on the table that God has lavishly laid out for you? What spiritual food is God serving you? Is there an area in your life, that God needs to heal? Some spiritual vegetables which are going to nourish growth and empowerment?

Point 4: The Good Shepherd PRESERVES our earthly and heavenly life

David celebrates that his Shepherd God preserves his life. So, he says,

**“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life,”**

What a beautiful confidence to know that wherever you are – whether at home or at the shops – when the shelves are surprisingly bare - God’s goodness and mercy follow you.

Finally, our shepherd David looks into the future and has confidence. Because, his God provides, prepares, protects and preserves his life, he knows with surety that he will enjoy everlasting life with his God.

That’s why he finishes by saying,

**“and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”**

What a hope we have as Christians who are in relationship with our Good Shepherd. We have confidence that our Shepherd God has preserved our lives and will continue to preserve her life throughout eternity.