

# QUANTOCK MINISTRIES

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*A Bible teaching and preaching ministry  
for the Christian community*

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## PSALM 23

This psalm is one of the best-known and most-loved passages of the Bible. Its lasting appeal lies in the intimate and all-embracing testimony to David's relationship with God. It is not all about victorious living, and if we study the psalm in any depth, we find it uncovers David's very human concerns, frailties and needs. In this way it is a challenge that speaks to each of us today as well.

v1. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.

The amazing thing about this statement is that David, as a great and strong personality, a mighty leader of men, should feel the need of a shepherd. Such self-confident personalities do not usually look to be led by anyone. They would feel affronted to be told what to do and where to go by anyone else. But David, strong as he was, realised he needed divine leadership, and that is a mark of true greatness. We can also consider from David's life story that the means God used to bring him to the place of seeing his need of a shepherd was the rejection he suffered in childhood. As the youngest of eight brothers we know he was greatly ignored in his early years: not invited to the big family meeting with Samuel (1 Samuel 16 v 11); the reception he received from three of his brothers (1 Samuel 17 v 28 – 29); his testimony in Psalm 27 v 10. The life-long feelings of rejection, inferiority, and probably depression (Psalm 139 v 23), brought about by his childhood experiences and expressed in so many of his psalms, was God's way of preparing him for his great dependence on God throughout his life, and his deep empathy with human feelings. God uses the tragedies in our lives for His glory and the blessing of many. David also declares that not only does he need shepherding, but God is the perfect shepherd, not leaving any need unmet. This is completely fulfilled in Jesus, the ultimate Good Shepherd (John 10 v 11), a wonderful confirmation that Jesus is indeed God.

v2. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.

The shepherd leads us to a place of rest ("You have bedded me down in lush meadows", The Message). As we walk with the Lord, even in times of busyness and adversity, He wants us to know His peace and to be in a state of inner rest, or shalom (John 14 v 27, Philippians 4 v 7). The biblical idea of rest is not inactivity. The goal of our Christian lives should be to know we are exactly where the Lord wants us to be, and to be at peace about it. This would include our relationships, our home, our Christian fellowship and ministry, our work life, etc. We refer to this in hymns such as "When peace like a river...", and "When we walk with the Lord...". As the Good Shepherd leads us, He gives us His living water, the Holy Spirit, in a measure and to an extent that each of us as sheep finds comfortable and comforting (John 7 v 37 – 39, 14 v 16 – 17, AV).

v3. He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

In our humanity, deep inside, our soul can be buffeted by much fear and anxiety: the state of the world; the tide of evil all around; concerns about loved ones and circumstances; etc. As with David, we need His restoration at that very deep level – the wave of deep calm and faith that washes over us and removes the anguish and confusion. Part of that process of restoration concerns the moral and spiritual decisions that can be so difficult in our daily lives. Not only do we need that inward warning prompting that we are nearing our own particular danger zone ("Lead us not into temptation" Matthew 6 v 13), but we need the antidote of being shown the path of righteousness instead. Then the witness of our life will honour His name.

v4. 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.

This is not necessarily referring to the occasion of our physical death itself, but times of real difficulty, despair, depression and danger; the shadow of death-like circumstances that David knew all about. In the journey of life, just like a train journey (the 32-mile long Channel Tunnel linking England and France is a good example), we have to go through the tunnels whether we like it or not; dark times are a fact of life. But, just as the train driver is there at the front of the train as we pass through the tunnel, God is always with us whatever happens (Hebrews 13 v 5). Thus, we can be assured that God has a purpose in everything that comes our way (Romans 8 v 28). We must believe it, and especially that there is light at the end of the tunnel. I'm not sure the rod means the "rod of correction", for although that is sometimes necessary, it does not always appear to be very comforting! However, in Leviticus 27 v 32 we see that passing under the shepherd's rod indicates our holiness in God's sight, and that we are chosen for His service. David certainly knew he had been chosen by God and was therefore under His rod, and that was a root security in his life. The shepherd's staff is the means he uses to rescue wayward sheep when they have fallen, and a very great help it can be, too. The greatest staff He has in rescuing us is, of course, the cross (Galatians 2 v 20).

v5. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

God's grace and love doesn't disappear when we are facing the enemy and engaged in spiritual warfare. The provision God makes for us at such times is sufficient, satisfying and tangible. The anointing we receive, as with the priests in the Old Testament, is a sign that marks us out as His people in a very clear way; all true believers are priests. It is like the marks of ownership often found painted indelibly on a sheep's back today. The blessings that are then given to us fill us up to overflowing, so that those around can benefit, too. Who knows the amount of sanctifying grace that can flow out from us to others around us (1 Corinthians 7 v 14)?

v6. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

We, as the Lord's people, might question at times whether in fact we are receiving His goodness and love. But, as with David, that might well be because we are not looking at Him as our shepherd and seeing the goodness and love that actually are closely following us constantly, and they are not far away. So often we tend to interpret circumstances according to our own feelings and perceptions, losing our spiritual sensitivity along the way. David certainly did so when he saw Bathsheba. Finally, the psalm gives us a wonderful messianic conclusion. As the Lord makes clear in John 14 v 1 – 4, He is at this moment preparing eternity as our destiny, like the wonderful bridegroom He is. The house He is preparing for His bride, all truly born-again believers, as the Jewish bridegroom did of old at his parents' home, is where we shall dwell for ever in His presence and beyond all possibility of sin, danger and despair. This was David's ultimate hope, too.