

**No Fear**  
(Psalm 23:4)

I daresay many of you memorised this Psalm from childhood and could still repeat the old Scottish metrical version commonly sung to the tune ‘Crimond’:

*The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want, he makes me down to lie,  
In pastures green; he leadeth me, the quiet waters by.*

It has blessed God’s people in every generation ... today we focus on verse 4:

*Yea, though I walk through death’s dark vale, yet will I fear none ill:  
For thou art with me; and thy rod, and staff me comfort still.*

We can profit from this familiar text by addressing three questions:

- (1) What comes **before** Psalm 23?
- (2) What comes **after** Psalm 23?
- (3) What comes **within** Psalm 23?

**(1) What comes before Psalm 23?**

There is gospel significance in Psalm 22 coming before Psalm 23. Psalm 22 (known as the ‘Psalm of the cross’) has no green pastures, or quiet waters, or cups overflowing with good things. You’d never entitle it ‘no fear’! On the contrary ... it depicts dreadful scenes. Its first words point straight to Calvary ... “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?*” We know the answer: by **not** saving the shepherd God **was** saving the sheep. Psalm 22 has more images of Calvary:

*“All who see me mock me: they hurl insults, shaking their heads: He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him”* (v 7-8) ... “*They pierced my hands and my feet*” (v 16) ... “*They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing*” (v 19). So there is gospel logic in Psalm 22 preceding Psalm 23. First the sword had to fall on the shepherd before his flock could say “*I shall not lack, I will fear no evil*”. So the God-forsaken man in Psalm 22 is Yahweh the good shepherd abundantly blessing his sheep in Psalm 23.

**(2) What comes after Psalm 23?**

Another version of Psalm 23 ... the ultimate version ... the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s gospel. There Jesus (the greater David) reveals that he is that good shepherd, he is the one who knows his sheep and blesses them with all the realities mentioned poetically in Psalm 23. Jesus is the explanation to everything the Psalm says: “*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd ... My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10:14-31). Notice ... the hope and comfort of Christ’s sheep.

- He laid down his life for them (paid their penalty for sins, cleared their debts)
- He gives them eternal life (they conquer death in him)
- No one can rob them or defraud them of this
- Heaven is theirs ... no *ifs* or *buts* ... they **will** dwell in the house of the Lord forever

**(3) What comes within Psalm 23?**

Here I'm thinking about the poetic images in our main text today, verse 4: the shadow of death, the rod and staff, and the ever-present shepherd.

**(a) The shadow of death.**

Our final encounter in this world is not “the valley of death” but “the valley of the *shadow* of death”. There cannot be a shadow without light behind it. The good shepherd is that light (the light of the world ... shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it). Death throws its vain shadow across our path but a *shadow* cannot harm us. The shadow of a dog cannot bite, the shadow of a sword cannot kill, and the shadow of death cannot end us. The eternal curse of death has been removed by the shepherd so a mere shadow remains for his sheep. This interpretation is confirmed by Matthew as he explains Isaiah's reference to that same term ... “*the shadow of death*”.

After 40 days and nights defeating Satan in the wilderness temptations, Jesus went to live in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. Why? “*To fulfil what was said by the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned’*” (Matt 4:14-16). Isaiah immediately explained this light ... “*for to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders*” (Is 9:6). Matthew (700 years later) says: “That Son is here, Jesus of Nazareth!” Because of Jesus there is light at the end of the tunnel. He has just defeated the most vicious enemy of his sheep, Satan. Darkness (including death) is overwhelmed by light. The sheep have no evil to fear. No fear!

When a bee has left its sting in anyone it has no more ability to hurt. The essence of the gospel is that death left its sting in Christ our good shepherd, so it has no more ability to hurt his sheep. So we interrogate it with Paul ... “*O death, where is your sting?*” and we affirm with David “*I will fear no evil*”.

**(b) The presence of the shepherd:** “*I will fear no evil, for you are with me*”.

To die in company with another is no comfort if in fact it means the end for both of you. To die with ten million is no more comfort than dying alone, if it is the end of the ten million. But to die in company with Christ removes all fear. He is the only one who has ever passed through death and returned from it alive and triumphant. He conquered death and took all its dire consequences away. John Owen's brilliant essay describes it well ... “The death of death in the death of Christ”.

The familiar translation of Psalm 23 captures the Biblical teaching well ... “*though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*”. We do not merely enter the valley of the shadow of death, or walk “in” it ... we walk “through” it! That implies we also walk out! It is only a temporary state, exactly as the Lord our shepherd says: “*If anyone believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live*”.

**(c) The shepherd's equipment** ... “*your rod and your staff, they comfort me*”. These were strong pieces of hardwood. The rod hung off the belt and was used to beat off wild beasts, while the staff was carried in hand ... usually curved at one end to reach under the body of a sheep and lift it from the danger of a ravine or snare or slippery ground. Goliath mocked David for these two ‘sticks’ ... “*Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?*” (1 Sam 17:43). He soon discovered that some shepherds (including David) were also equipped with a slingshot. (Makes me wonder if the original tune to Psalm 23 is not ‘Crimond’ but ‘We will, we will, rock you’).

By saying “*your rod and your staff, they comfort me*” the Psalmist expresses complete confidence in the ability of the shepherd. He is safe. He has nothing to fear. What are the

gospel realities? What is our shepherd equipped with? Answer ... his death and resurrection. The substitutionary atonement of Jesus nullifies the savage attack of Satan, and his resurrection lifts us up onto higher safer ground. Romans 5 is a brilliant summary ...

*“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him by the death of his son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”* (Rom 5:9-10). The resurrection of the shepherd ensures that the sheep will also live forever.

One final matter ... **is this for you?** How can you know if it is legitimate to apply Psalm 23 to yourself? The answer is found in Jesus’ comments about two marks identifying his sheep, a mark on the ear (*“My sheep hear my voice”*) and a mark on the feet (*“And they follow me”*). It is pointless calling something a “sheep” when we know it is not. It is pointless calling ourselves “Christians” without the brand marks to prove it ... having no ear to listen to Christ’s teaching (the Bible) and no feet inclined to follow it.

What if someone is in that position now? What if it is you? Does anyone still live in disregard of the good shepherd? Then the comforts and blessings of Psalm 23 do not apply! The reality is - *“The Lord’s not my shepherd, I shall be in want.”* But I have good news. There is still time to put it right! These are days of grace! Christ is still willing to receive, forgive, and bless!

- No matter how far and long a lost sheep has strayed
- No matter how stubbornly they have resisted

Christ ~~invites~~ (commands) everyone *“Come unto me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matt 11:28). So I urge every man, woman, and child - come to Christ! That is the only true hope you can have. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life ... Seek and you shall find! Ask and you shall receive! Knock and it shall be opened to you!”* Make sure the Lord is your shepherd in life and he most certainly will be in death. **No fear!**