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## ***Psalm 23 and Stephen***

**Psalm 23; Acts 7:44–8:2**

1<sup>st</sup> August, 2021

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Two weeks ago, I preached on the first few verses of Psalm 23 and said that there was more for next time. Psalm 23 is ascribed to King David who had been a shepherd boy and was raised to shepherd God's people. In Psalm 78, verses 70-72 we read of David.

[God] chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance.

Who better then, to write such a psalm comparing God's care for his people to a shepherd caring for the flock?

Last time I told you that I had learnt that the Hebrew word for shepherd can be translated: "the lover of the flock". It comes from a root word meaning best friend. The Lord is my shepherd – he personally cares for each one of his people as the lover of the flock.

We covered last time the provision of pasture and water and those words, "he restores my soul." I saw a newspaper headline yesterday which gave a striking contrast. The British rowing team had fared poorly in their Olympic events; one of the rowers spoke out against the former coach with the words, "He destroys your soul!" What dreadful words! And what a contrast to David's testimony of the Lord's shepherding of his people – "He restores my soul." God is no heartless taskmaster, the Lord is the lover of the flock caring for each of his people.

### *Stephen*

Today we remember and celebrate the life of Stephen the first Christian martyr. By Luke's account he was a remarkable Christian. Our reading has focused on the end of his defence when he was on trial for blasphemy. But the earlier accounts in Chapter 6, tell of his service for the poor and needy, his co-leadership of the early church's feeding programme and his developing into a strong debater for Christianity in the synagogue. We are told that he was full of the Holy Spirit and in that he was "a man full of God's grace and power, [who] did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." <sup>1</sup>

As we hold these two accounts alongside each other, we can see in the life of Stephen an outworking of Ps 23.

### *He leads me in paths of righteousness*

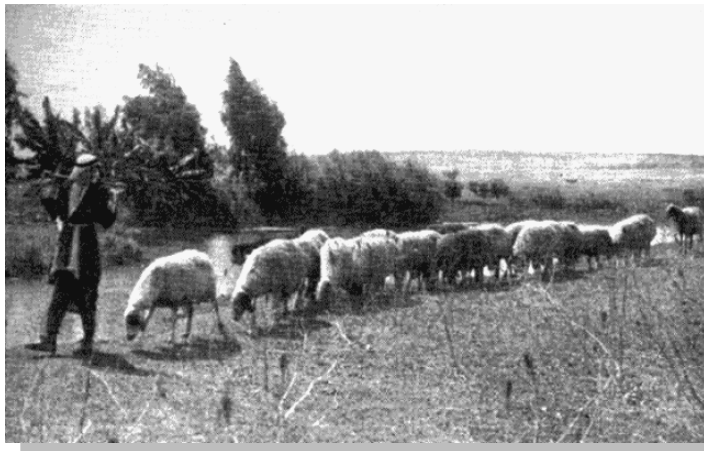
Stephen was led in the power of the Holy Spirit to do the good works which God had prepared in advance for him to do.<sup>2</sup> Or as David would say, he was led in paths of righteousness. The sheep if left to wander will get into trouble. They need to find good food, the land must not be overgrazed for the health of the sheep and of the land. They need to be protected from predators and rescued from natural dangers such as getting their heads caught in a thorn bush as they reach through for grass! So with us, God promises to provide and lead

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 6:8

<sup>2</sup> Cp Ephesians 2:10

us in his right paths. Isaiah wrote, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it.""<sup>3</sup> While Jesus said, "My sheep listen to 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."<sup>4</sup>



God offers us his leading through life. We all struggle to be sure about hearing his voice, but the promise is there. There are times when he communicates as it were loudly and strongly, other times he is very gentle and soft. We can learn to grow in sensitivity and responsiveness.

Verse 3 says he leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Our actions reflect on our God. In Stephen, we find a disciple who was so powerful in his oratory and debating that none could withstand his arguments. His actions were so good and the miraculous signs so significant that his

opponents had to resort to false witnesses to bring him down. He did not dishonour Christ in his word and deeds. Even in his death, his words honoured the Lord and he followed in the example of Jesus - forgiving his persecutors and asking God's mercy on them.

#### *V4: The Valley of the Shadow of Death*

In the Middle East, there are watercourses called *wadi*, which for much of the year are dried up. When the rain comes the run off causes erosion so *wadis* are usually valleys or even deep chasms. To get around the land, the shepherd must lead his flock across or along such valleys. To get water, he may take them down into the *wadi* to a well.

To get up to the hill tops for summer grazing, they will ascend through the valleys – it is the easiest ascent. It is the way which offers water, it has some shade in the morning or evening from the summer heat.

Dr Gerald Wilson, writes of such valleys:

I remember hiking down Wadi Qelt from Jerusalem to Jericho ... The narrow, ancient Roman aqueduct, still flowing with water, clung to the canyon wall at a height of several hundred feet. We began our journey following the rugged footpath on the opposite canyon wall, dipping at points to bottom of the wadi and back up to the opposite side. It took only two such trips down into the shadowy depths of the stifling heat at the wadi bottom (and this was early morning!) and scrambling back up the steep limestone wall to regain the path, before we overcame our natural reluctance of heights and continued our journey walking along the outer rim of the aqueduct...<sup>5</sup>



The valley of the shadow of death – what might that be? Some scholars think it is Hebrew idiom for the deepest shadow, not necessarily to do with death itself. It is certainly a trying, testing time. This Psalm has been associated with dying and funerals because of the comfort of these words. We can take it to heart

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 30:21

<sup>4</sup> John 10:27-28

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, G., 2002, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms Vol I*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, p434-5

whether we are going through a testing time or facing the threat of our own death or of a loved one's death. In all such circumstances, David said that we need fear no evil because the Lord with us. Jesus promised us, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."<sup>6</sup> That is a strong promise and a great comfort. We see it played out with Stephen, who was granted a vision of heaven as his persecutors arose in anger against him.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

What an assurance of Jesus' presence with him that he might not be afraid of the evil they intend against him! And we can be no less ready to trust that the Lord is right alongside, right with us, even within us by his Spirit to comfort, guide and assure us of his love for us and his good purposes.

Once again, time is not my friend, so I will leave some verses for part three! But let us pick up two final points from Ps 23 –

Verse 5b: You anoint my head with oil, my cup runs over.

Verse 6b: I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

### *Anointing with Oil*



With sheep, there is a serious, potentially fatal, danger from fly-strike. There are many types of flies that trouble sheep. Some lay eggs in the nostrils and their larvae burrow into the mucosa and cause great pain to the sheep, which can drive them to death. The shepherd's remedy and protection from ancient times has been to anoint the sheep's heads with oil laced with sulphur and other chemicals to deter the flies and protect the sheep.

Anointing with oil is always symbolic of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. The anointing of the Holy Spirit for us is both protective as for the sheep to keep spiritual evil at bay and also the presence of Holy Spirit enlivens, assures and empowers us. We see this so powerfully in Stephen as a quick scan of Acts 6 & 7 shows:

- 6:3: Choose seven men who are known to be **full of the Spirit** ...
- 6:5: They chose Stephen, a man **full of faith and of the Holy Spirit**;
- 6:8: Stephen, a man **full of God's grace and power**, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.
- 6:9: They began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or **the Spirit by whom he spoke**.
- 6:15: All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his **face was like the face of an angel**.
- 7:55 Stephen, **full of the Holy Spirit**, looked up to heaven.

Here was a follower of Christ who was attested six times to be anointed with the Holy Spirit. We need to seek to be full of the Holy Spirit, that we too may do the good works which God has prepared for us to do. Then like Stephen our cup will run over with the anointing of God.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:20



*Verse 6b: I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

There was little separation of the dwellings of sheep and shepherd. Remember the shepherd would sleep across the gate of the sheepfold to protect the sheep at night. When David had taken Bathsheba in adultery, the prophet Nathan was sent to him with a parable of a poor man having his one sheep stolen from him.

**2 Samuel 12:3** ... the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

This roused David to anger on behalf of the poor man – not to ridicule of the idea. Did you hear the intimacy of the care for the lamb in Nathan’s story – how much it was part of the household. Dwelling in the house of the shepherd was common since the animals would also be kept in part of the ground floor of their houses, just as we see in **Kondoa** to this day – where for some people part of the house is a cattle or sheep pen and the other half is for the people – and there is not much difference!

Stephen knew what it was to dwell in the house of the Lord. And I don’t mean the temple. He argued at length that God was not limited to the temple in chapter 7. He knew that we become the dwelling place of God as Christians and that the fullness of this promise is in the next life when God and man will dwell together. In his vision of Jesus, Stephen saw him standing at the right hand of God in glory. From early days, commentators have thought this was Jesus welcoming Stephen into heaven and into the very presence of God.

We can be sure that as Christians we already dwell in the house of the Lord. That started from the time we trusted Christ for salvation. It continues throughout this life and into the heavenly experience of God’s presence when we will know as we are known.

Truly, the Lord is the lover of the flock and our best friend.



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