

Sermon

The Names of God in Psalm 23

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What Psalm 23 again! Yes – this is a text which just keeps on giving. In the first sermon of this series, we saw that God is shepherd and companion to his people. He provides food, water and rest. He restores our soul.

In the second sermon, we found examples from the life of St Stephen – who was full of the Holy Spirit, walking in the righteousness and power imparted by the Holy Spirit. He suffered passing through a valley of the shadow of death but assured of eternal life with the Lord.



Last week, we considered the comfort of the rod and staff which we clarified as a throwing club and shepherd's crook. Paul Huffam send me this photo of a knobkerrie which he inherited from a Victorian forebear – it is a fine example from South Africa. You can see how it relates to the ball throwing sticks people use to throw a ball for their dog to retrieve. The extension of the arm and a hardwood heavy bole at the end – a significant weapon in skilled hands.

We thought about feasting in the presence of enemies in terms of shepherds preparing grazing grounds for the flock ensuring they are safe from poisonous plants and predators. Then there was the Middle Eastern hospitality code where the host has an absolute duty to protect his guest.

And finally, we found that God's goodness and covenantal love are pursuing us through life – he is continually imparting love and goodness to us.

So all that is a rich picture of God's care for us as his people. When Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd" in John 10, they would know he was referring to this Psalm and also to the use of the word shepherd for the rulers of Israel in the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 34 God said to the rulers of Israel that they had failed the people. In contrast he said:

I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.¹

That statement of Jesus is one of his I AM statements. Since God is eternal, he has always been the Good Shepherd. So Psalm 23 obviously uses a name of God in saying, the Lord is my shepherd.

¹ Ezekiel 34:15-16

As I was preparing last week's sermon I found an article by Shari Abbott ² which pointed out that there are eleven names or titles of God hidden, or better, illustrated in Psalm 23.

Now, some of these names were coined after Psalm 23 was written, but that is not an issue. The formal names or titles mostly came out of crises. They often built a memorial so as not to forget an aspect of God's character which had been brought to focus and named through the event. Psalm 23 doesn't use those other titles but illustrates them as attributes of God's eternal, unchanging character: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever"³.

Let's lay some foundations first. The Hebrew word for God is *El*. This is simply the generic word meaning god. You hear it in peoples' names: e.g., Elizabeth which in Hebrew is *Elisheba* – God her oath; *Elisha*: God his salvation. Then this word, *El*, is used as part of compound names for God like Almighty God (*El Shaddai*) and the Most High God (*El Elyon*).

However, the most important name of God is the one he declared himself. We heard it in the reading from Genesis. Moses had gone to look at a bush which appeared to be on fire but was not burnt up. God spoke to him out of the burning bush and commissioned him to lead his people to freedom out of slavery in Egypt. Moses was, not unreasonably, afraid and asked, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"⁴ Who am I, exile from Egypt, working as a common shepherd, against the might of Egypt?

God replied, "I will be with you." Folks, if God is with us – it is enough! Paul wrote in Romans, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"⁵ That is what David was writing in Psalm 23, "¹The Lord is my shepherd, my companion, my best friend. ... ⁴I will fear no evil, for you are with me." I will be with you – do you know God is with you? Jesus promised it, "I am with you, every single day, to the very end of the age."⁶

Moses' then said that the Hebrew leaders would ask for the name of the God who had appeared to him. What should he say? In other words, what is your name? Who am I that I should go? Who is sending me? And the answer was:

Exodus 3:14-15 "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob--has sent me to you.' This is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.

So here God names himself as "I AM". He is the eternal source of existence. He is simply is 'the existing one'! It is this name of God which Jesus is referring to with his I AM statements: I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world, I am the door of the sheep; I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Resurrection and The Life; I am the way, the truth, and the life; I am the Vine.⁷ The way he phrased the "I am" very emphatically in Greek, makes them obvious references to the name of God and so claims of divinity.

In Hebrew, this name is just four letters. It is called the Tetragrammaton which is Greek meaning "four letters." In ancient Hebrew, they only wrote consonants; without vowels. These consonants correspond to our letters: "Y-H-W-H".

Now, the Third Commandment says, ""You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."⁸ The Rabbis later interpreted this to mean they must not say the name of God in case they unintentionally misused or blasphemed it. So the practice developed on saying *Adonai* (which means Lord) instead of the Tetragrammaton. That has gone down Jewish practice and

² <https://reasonsforhopejesus.com/names-jehovah-hidden-psalm-23/>

³ Hebrews 13:8

⁴ Exodus 3:11

⁵ Romans 8:31

⁶ Matthew 28:20 New Testament for Everyone NTE

⁷ John 6:35, 8:12; 10:7,9,11,14; 11:25; 14:5; 15:1,5

⁸ Exodus 20:7

hence into Christian practice. In our Bibles whenever you see “Lord” written in capitals this indicates that it is the name of God (the Tetragrammaton) rather than the ordinary word ‘Lord’.

In time, Jewish scholars added vowel marks to the text to help with pronunciation. When they came to the Tetragrammaton, they used the vowels from Adonai because that is what the reader would say. Later Christian readers read it as written with the consonants YHWH and the vowels of Adonai and produced *Yehovah* or *Jehovah*. Scholars are certain this is not the original word, but more probably, “Yahweh.” So, when you hear *Jehovah* you know that is another attempt to represent this name of God.

Just as *El* was used in compound names, so was *Yahweh*. Amazingly eleven of them are illustrated in the Psalm 23. Let’s review the Psalm and see where they apply.

V1 The LORD is my shepherd:

Here God is named *Jehovah-Raah* — The Lord, my Shepherd! This is an actual title of God in Psalm 23. In the following verses, we are finding instances of his character rather than the names themselves.

I shall not want:	<i>Jehovah-Jireh</i> —the Lord, my Provider.
V2 He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside still waters:	<i>Jehovah-Shalom</i> —the Lord, my Peace.
V3 He restores my soul:	<i>Jehovah-Raphe (Rah-far’)</i> —The Lord, my Healer.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake:	<i>Jehovah-Tsidkeneau</i> —the Lord of Righteousness.
V4 I will fear no evil: for you are with me:	<i>Jehovah-Shama</i> —The Lord is present.
Your rod and your staff comfort me:	<i>Jehovah-Ezer</i> —The Lord, my Help.
V5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies:	<i>Jehovah-Nissi</i> —The Lord, my Victory Banner.
You anoint my head with oil:	<i>Jehovah-InKaddesh</i> — <i>The Lord, my Holiness, my Sanctification.</i>
My cup runs over:	<i>Jehovah-Manah</i> —The Lord my Portion and my cup.
Vs 6 I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever:	<i>Jehovah-Cheleq</i> —The Lord my Inheritance.

Wow! Isn’t that encouraging! Can you hold onto one or more of those aspects of God’s character? I wonder which has most relevance to you at the moment? Here we are in lockdown – some may be afraid of the pandemic, some of financial outcomes. Some are tense, lonely, tired or worried. Some are relieved to have a break from the normal round. Which of these resonates with you?

- My Shepherd,
- My Provider,
- My Peace,
- My Healer,
- My Righteousness,
- God with you,
- My Help,
- My Victory Banner,
- My Holiness,
- My Portion,
- My Inheritance.

We have already considered God as our shepherd. Today, I will explore the next two a little more because they may be pertinent to our common situation: Provider and Peace.

I shall not lack.

David said, “I shall not lack.” God is *Yahweh-Yireh*—Provider. This name comes from Genesis 22. Abraham’s obedience was tested when he was asked to offer his only son to God. Abraham prepared to obey believing that God would either provide a substitute⁹ (he said to Isaac, “God himself will provide the

⁹ Genesis 22:8

lamb for the burnt offering, my son") or if necessary raise his son back to life (as the Epistle to the Hebrews asserts of him¹⁰). And then God stopped him and provided a substitute which was a wild ram caught in a thicket. In response, Abraham called that place, "Yahweh will provide."

Let me tell you a recent testimony of God's provision. Helen's brother has a form of blood cancer for which he is pursuing medical treatment beyond the readiness of our hospital system's funding. He needed a bone marrow stem cell transplant from his sister which could be performed in Singapore. They left here at the beginning of August not knowing whether they could get MIQ places to get back into the country! His wife is managing the applications back here in NZ. None of them is yet a Christian.

Normal bookings are full beyond November and emergency medicine places are difficult to get both in securing a slot from the website and then meeting the strict criteria imposed. It is only possible to apply two weeks before the desired date.

The sister was tested, prepped and had donated the bone marrow stem cells. Then she was ready to come home. You need the MIQ approval for a particular date and air tickets to correspond. She had her ticket but no approval. Then we went into lockdown. What made it harder still was that she didn't have a medical condition, she had travelled to be a donor, so she didn't fit the expected conditions. Naturally we prayed for help with other Christians in the family. The date of the flight got closer and closer. After 9 days of communicating with the Government department, six letters from the Consultant in Singapore and numerous phone calls and emails on the day of the flight: the MIQ voucher was granted - just five hours before the flight took off and only one hour before the deadline to postpone the ticket if necessary.

Helen's sister-in-law who had been working so hard to get the MIQ booking emailed the news writing, "I think we should all get down on our knees and thank God." We followed her advice! We praise God for his mercy and his provision. He is rarely early but he is never late.

In the Psalm, David wrote of God's provision for him – he would not be in want – he would not lack. Do you know God as the provider? All we have ultimately comes from him. Our food, our income whether it is earned or a pension – it is God who is the provider. And he is a good provider.

Did you notice when we held the Passover meal that the Jewish blessing over the food takes the form: "Blessed art thou, O Lord God of the Universe, who brings forth food from the earth...?" We do well to remember that God is the supplier and we can trust him.

Vs 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside still waters.

The still waters are literally the waters of a resting place. God is Yahweh-Shalom—my Peace. It was Gideon as a timid, young man who coined this title. We find the story in Judges 6. The Israelites were oppressed by the neighbouring Midianites who raided at harvest time and stole their crops. So Gideon was secretly threshing grain in a winepress. The Angel of the Lord came to him and commissioned him to free his people. When Gideon realised he had seen God he was terrified but God said to him:

But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die." So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace. ¹¹

The New Testament repeatedly refers to the God of Peace. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all specifically linked to peace: God of Peace¹², the Prince of Peace¹³ and the Spirit of Peace¹⁴.

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:19 "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death."

¹¹ Judges 6:23-24

¹² Hebrews 13:20

¹³ Isaiah 9:6

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:3

The terrorist attack on Friday was shocking news – we don't expect such wanton violence in NZ. If you are made anxious by that, can you hand your fear over to God. The Apostle Peter wrote, "Cast all your anxiety on him, for he cares for you."¹⁵

Can you find rest in Yahweh-Shalom, your peace. Jesus has made peace between us and God. He is our peace. Can you let your soul rest in that peace, knowing that he provides for you?

As you consider that, it might be helpful to remember that faith is an issue of the will not of emotions. When we try to work from our emotions as a foundation, we are unstable because our emotions shift and sway with passing changes, events, digestion, tiredness, the six o'clock news. We need to base our belief on the facts of what God has revealed to us and make the decision (that's the will) to trust him.

May you know the provision and peace of our God, Yahweh, your Good Shepherd. Amen.

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¹⁵ 1 Peter 5:7