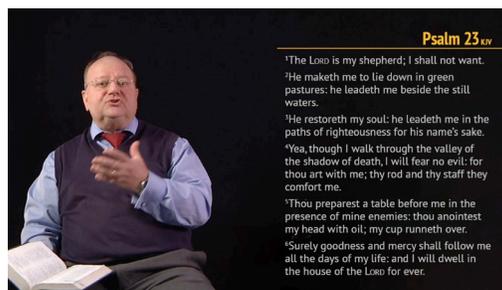


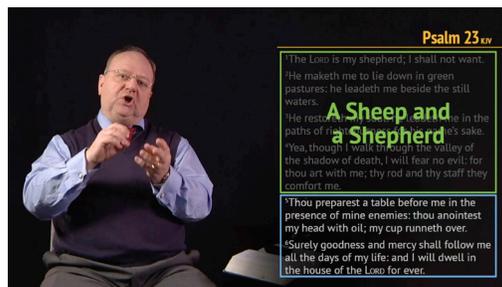
Psalm 23



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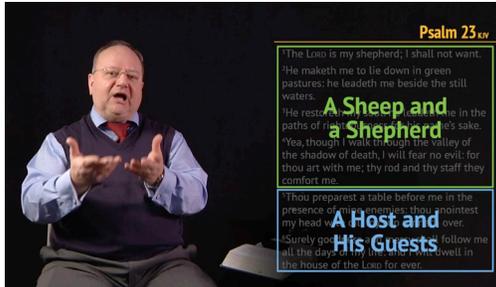


Welcome to the second in our series of teachings on the Psalms. This time we're going to look together at Psalm 23, and in particular at the beautifully evocative verse 4. I read from the King James Version: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Now Psalm 23, of course, is a favorite of many, many Christians and Jews across the world—and rightly so. But nonetheless, if you think about it from a modern perspective, we tend to think of sheep as rather dumb herd animals that just do as they're told and don't have a mind of their own. Yet this psalm, by speaking of God as the Shepherd, pictures us, as God's people, as a bunch of sheep. Not very flattering, really, if you think about it.



Yet what we tend to forget sometimes is that the pastoral image of sheep and their shepherds in the time of the Bible was a beautiful, idyllic image of peace, of abundance, of safety, of nature at its very best, and of a full and fulfilling life. And that is really what this psalm is exploring. But even as the psalm explores the safety and security of the believer in the hand of this wonderful, amazing God—who like a shepherd looks after us, protects us, guides us, supports us, feeds us—yet in all of this what we need to recognize is that some of the imagery, of course, is strange to us. Nonetheless, as we mentioned briefly in our introduction, metaphors help us to live our lives and to develop our faith by bringing a symbol, or a picture, and evoking something in us that helps us to understand something that is not as clear and visible to the human eye.

It is our relationship with God, which here in this psalm, especially the first half of the psalm in verses 1–4, is envisaged as the relationship between a sheep and a shepherd, and then in verses 5–6 moves on to a second metaphor. I hope you have your Bible open and see the text in front of you where suddenly God becomes a host, and we are God's guest in God's own house; and what we see in the psalm is a blending of two different metaphors, which together tell us a more vivid idea of how our relationship

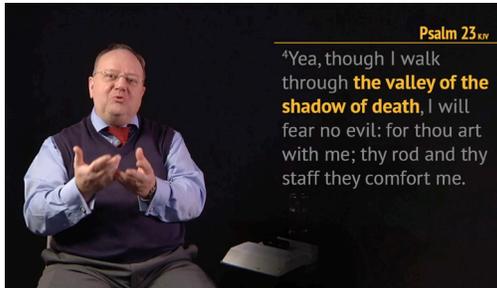


with God works. Now there is so much more in this incredibly rich and beautiful psalm that I would like to share, but in this series we just want to give you a glimpse of the beauty of what is there for us in the Bible's poetry.

For the rest of our session, I'm going to focus on one verse to give us a glimpse and an idea of how many other treasures are hidden in this beautiful psalm, this beautiful poem. It is this phrase I have quite deliberately quoted from the King James Version, a translation that is now hundreds of years old and yet remains beautifully evocative: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." What is this valley of the shadow of death? In fact, if we turn to modern English translations—and the same is true for an increasing number of other modern translations in other languages—the texts nowadays don't speak of a valley of the shadow of death, but they speak of a dark, wet valley. What has happened in the intervening hundreds of years between the King James Version and, let's say, the New Revised Standard Version that I'm using for these sessions?

Well, what happened is modern scholars discovered that the Hebrew words that in the King James Version are translated "shadow of death," that the word [Hebrew 00:05:35] is actually a compound noun that combines the two words for death and shadow but together are functioning like an idiom for deep darkness, very similar to when in English we say something like in the dead of night or like dead silence. The word dead in this compound noun is actually a superlative, and so there is a place where at the level of linguistics alone it seems to be preferable from a modern perspective to say, "Yea, though I walk through a dark valley," which, of course, is a dangerous and scary place. But this is not everything. When the poet was composing this psalm, he was thinking of a dark valley at one level.

The poet was nonetheless also doing something fascinating and, for me at least, beautiful and exciting. What he did was to put himself in the shoes of a wild animal, a sheep who in those days was half wild, and in the situation of a ruminant, a herd animal under threat from predators like bears and wolves and so on. When the psalmist speaks about himself going through this dark valley, he envisages himself as a sheep in that dangerous spot when the sheep are moving from a safe resting ground, where they're hiding away from their predators, to the feeding grounds, perhaps on the other side of a forced passageway—a valley that is in between those two locations, the location where food is



available that helps sustain life, and the place where there is safety and rest and security.

This is very much true for the human life too. We have spheres of life that are safe, and other areas of our life that are challenging and dangerous; yet in spite of, or perhaps because of it, they're also rewarding and fulfilling and life-giving. But in between those spheres of life there is danger; and that is what this image of the valley of the shadow of death tries to evoke. Because now let's imagine ourselves in the Judean desert thousands of years ago, which really represents our own lives where we have to move from safe spaces to the more dangerous yet rewarding and life-giving places that are both challenges and opportunities. And just as those sheep have to walk through a narrow valley where large boulders have tumbled down and are now blocking half of the valley and making the passageway even narrower than it was before, these big boulders are now casting long, deep, dark shadows. And it's in those places where the predators are waiting for the vulnerable sheep. So we in our own lives have to go through situations that are both physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually dangerous and scary places. And what our wonderful poet is doing in this incredible poem of "The Lord is My Shepherd" is helping us see that for us today, the Lord—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is our Shepherd and Guide, our host who will help us through the ups and downs of life into a life that is yes, dangerous, but also fulfilling and hopeful, because if God is for us who can be against us?