

# Being Strengthened by God

#  Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is probably the best known of all the psalms, a text that most of us will have sung even more times than we’ve read it. It is a passage which most of us will have turned to in times of need, finding a comfort which goes beyond that which can be studied or analysed. As the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann observes, ‘It is almost pretentious to comment on this psalm. The grip it has on biblical spirituality is deep and genuine. It is such a simple statement that it can bear its own witness without comment.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

It's been pointed out that one of the most distinctive things about Psalm 23 is how it consists entirely of statements of trust in God, containing no pleas or requests to him.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, we also need to bear in mind that it was written at a time when shepherding was a far more dangerous task than it is today. Forget everything you’ve seen on ‘One Man and his Dog’! As Brueggemann comments: ‘It is likely that the psalm is not idyllic and romantic as if often interpreted; rather, the psalmist speaks out of a context of deep danger and articulates confidence in YHWH as the one who will keep the flock safe and protected in the face of every danger.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

The opening verses of the psalm speak of David’s confidence in the abundance of the shepherd’s provision. We are invited to think of all the needs that a sheep might have: someone to keep them safe from attacks, someone to guide them from one place to another, someone to ensure they have fresh grass to eat and water to drink. This good shepherd provides it all!

In verses 4-5, David speaks of the experience of walking ‘through the darkest valley.’ This psalm does not deny the reality of dangers we experience or of enemies who may seek to attack us. However, it does remind us of a comfort we can find in God even in such moments, an assurance that we will be comforted and, ultimately, kept safe.

The psalm concludes with arrival at a safe destination in v6, ‘the house of the Lord,’ a line which early Jewish worshippers would likely have read as referring to the Jerusalem temple. In this secure place they are retrospectively aware of how God has always been watching over them, his goodness and love having followed them for the whole of the journey they’ve been on.

**For discussion**

1. As noted above, this psalm was written in a dangerous time when shepherds often had to take great risks to look after their sheep, something David himself had personal experience of. Read together 1 Samuel 17:34-35. How do these statements change your understanding of Psalm 23?
2. In verse 3, David testifies that God ‘refreshes my soul,’ a phrase that in Hebrew suggests the idea of reviving a person or animal with food or drink. How does this speak to you of the ways in which God protects and provides for you?
3. In verse 4, David speaks of two tools which God uses to ‘comfort’ him: a rod, which a shepherd would use to attack animals who threaten sheep, and a staff, which would be used to keep the sheep in order and knock down olives that they could eat. How might this sort of ‘comfort’ help us today in our present context?
4. Psalm 23 finishes with a remarkable affirmation of God’s goodness. The psalmist arrives at a safe destination and testifies to how, even though the journey through the darkest valley has felt dangerous at times, it is goodness and love which have been following after him. Have you ever had this sort of experience, an awareness, after coming through difficulty, of how God was with you the whole time?
1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, 1984, p154 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms: Volume* 1, 2006, p345 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Brueggemann, *New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Psalms*, 2014, p123 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)