

“I’ll Never Forget What’s-his-name”

*He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names. (v. 4)*

Isn’t it amazing that God should not only know how many stars there are but also have a name for every single one of them. The verses surrounding this one are not about stars but about the Lord’s people, who are just as numerous and whom he knows in the same sort of way. In fact, the particulars of every person who has ever lived, including his or her name, are all in the divine database.

So it is intriguing to find here and there in Scripture a number of well-known characters who remain anonymous. What was the rich young ruler called? What was the name of the queen of Sheba?

We’re not told, so we don’t know. But God does. And perhaps that is the point. There are any number of things that for a variety of good reasons—not just curiosity—we should like to know, but that God doesn’t tell us. It’s as if to say, “Provided you know *me*, you can leave to me all the stuff you don’t know.” That is called trust. (One day, of course, we *shall* know. That is called hope.) —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Teach us, Lord, not to let the things we do know be disturbed by the things we don’t know.*

Potiphar's Wife

*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,
says the LORD. (Isaiah 55:8)*

Who's the young man, so handsome and able (though neither his looks nor his ability—nor even his God—have kept him from what seems to be a run of dreadful bad luck, causing him to end up as a slave in a prison)? His name is Joseph.

Who's the older man—obviously important, a person of standing in the royal court, a man of influence and integrity, and Joseph's master and owner? His name is Potiphar.

And who's the woman, who knows how to use everyone else for her own ends—forceful, manipulative, lustful, vengeful? Surely the story records her name too? After all, she dominates the scene in Genesis 39: determined either to seduce or to destroy Joseph, browbeating his fellow-slaves, both betraying and deceiving her own husband Potiphar.

Don't trouble your head over a name for her, says the Lord. It's of no significance in my scheme of things. From my point of view, as I tell the story, all *she* is there for is to forward *my* plans, in order to get my servant Joseph into the place from which he will rise to be Grand Vizier of Egypt, and the savior of nations. —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Lord, enable us to see things your way, and to trust when we can't see.*

Pharaoh

*Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go."
(Exodus 5:2)*

One of the Bible people I learned about when I was little was a man called Pharaoh. He figured in the stories of Abraham and Joseph and Moses, and even Solomon, so he must have lived a very long time (so I thought!). Later it dawned on me that there must be several of him—like the eighteen kings of France who were all called Louis, perhaps? Eventually I realized that “Pharaoh” was not in fact a name, but simply the Egyptian word for “King.”

In one way the Pharaohs were all alike, and we don't need to know the names that distinguish them from one another. All of them stood for a famous, historic, powerful empire, organized without any concern for God. Old Testament Egypt shows us what many New Testament Scriptures mean by the expression “the world.”

It's the world we live in today. “Pharaoh” will admire and use men of God like Joseph when it suits him. But usually he ignores them, or suppresses them, or even persecutes them. We mustn't be surprised when he rides roughshod over our Christian principles. “In the world you face persecution,” said Jesus. “But take courage; I have conquered the world!” —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Lord, teach us how to live in a godless world.*

Samson's Mother

"If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have . . . announced to us such things as these." (v. 23)

“Use your head,” says Samson’s mother to Samson’s father.

They are not yet Samson’s parents. They believe they are not able to have children. But a mysterious stranger has just told them that they are, after all, going to have a son. Is this a messenger from God?

Then before their astonished eyes the “man of God” rises into the air and disappears! “It’s the Lord himself,” squeaks the husband in terror. “We shall be struck dead. No one can survive seeing God face to face.” “Don’t be stupid,” says the wife. “If we die, how are we going to produce the child he’s promised?”

We know his name—it’s Manoah—but not hers. Was it a time when women were regarded as the inferior sex, as they were by many in Israel in Jesus’ day? If so, this story is a sly dig at that unbiblical idea. The terror of the moment scatters Manoah’s wits, while his wife, called simply “the woman,” rises above it with bracing commonsense.

All of us, though, need to keep our wits about us when emotion threatens to blow away clear thinking. What did God give us heads for? —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Thank you for brains to think with as well as hearts to feel with.*

The Queen of Sheba

“She came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!”

(Matthew 12:42)

Here is someone who is by no means just “the woman.” In contrast to the many kings of Egypt, we know of only one queen of Sheba, but though like them she is not given a name, she is a dazzling figure in the Old Testament story as she arrives in Jerusalem for a state visit. Her own entourage is hugely impressive. The fact that the splendors of Solomon’s court take her breath away (v. 5) shows that they are even more impressive.

Jesus told his contemporaries, as they stood before him long afterward, that they were in the presence of something greater than Solomon. Think how many unbelievers today are close to Jesus and his message! No need for them to travel “from the ends of the earth,” as this queen did, to meet the great King. He’s as close as the nearest church.

We shall meet the Queen of Sheba ourselves on Judgment Day, Jesus tells us. She will condemn everyone who had such easy access to the Lord and yet refused him. May it not be by our negligence that they failed to appreciate the wealth, the wisdom, and the wonderful Person that were within their reach. —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *King of Kings, use us to draw others to yourself.*

The Lady of Shunem

Death no longer has dominion. (Romans 6:9)

God's gifts to his people "contain both the sad and the glad," says Ralph Davis about this woman's story. What she had: nowhere near as much as the queen of Sheba, of course, but by Shunem standards her wealth was considerable. What she lacked: a child. What she received: a son! How good God is! What she lost: the very son God had given her. How strange are his ways!

But in her distress, who was there to turn to except that same perplexing God who, as Job had said in similar circumstances (Job 1:21), both gives and takes away? So she went to find Elisha, God's representative, through whom the gift had come to her, convinced against all appearances that somehow everything must be "all right."

Just over the hill from Shunem, 800 years later, in the village of Nain, another woman also would have her dead son restored to life. Jesus would confirm what the Old Testament had already promised, that the power of God can overcome even death. Without the prior heartache these women could never have had such assurance.

Even their experiences were only foretastes of what is yet to come, a resurrection to eternal life. But it was clear already to them that everything is going to be "all right."

—Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord, that the sad is always another step on the way to the glad.*

“A Woman of No Importance”

The girl from the land of Israel. (v. 4)

In 1893 Oscar Wilde wrote a play called “A Woman of No Importance.” That title certainly fits the girl in today’s reading. A mere female, a mere slave, perhaps just a mere child. Unlike the well-to-do lady of Shunem, still more unlike the queen of Sheba, this time we scarcely need ask why no one bothered to record her name. This chapter is “really” about Elisha the great Israelite prophet and Naaman the great Aramean general, isn’t it?

We also realize that traumatic events must lie behind this girl’s situation. As soon as we try to appreciate Naaman’s wife’s maid as a person in her own right, we are struck by the pathos of her story—snatched away by war from family and home and freedom, to slavery in a foreign country.

With a background so sad, and a person so insignificant, what glorious and meaningful role does this incident play in the perfect plans of God?

The answer is that Naaman’s healing is another preview of New Testament truth. The gospel reaches all nations. The captive maid was an indispensable link in the chain that brought this outsider, this pagan man, to recognize her God as the only God in all the earth (v. 15). —Michael Wilcock

We Three Kings

Wise men from the East . . . come to pay him homage. (vv. 1-2)

Like Naaman in the last of our Old Testament readings, the Wise Men were outsiders, drawn to God's land and God's people by the news of something worth finding there. Even more were they like the queen of Sheba, coming "from the ends of the earth" to find it, or rather him, God's own chosen King. And as in her case, the Bible (which does not say that they were three or that they were kings) also does not say what their names were.

But they are there in Scripture as representatives of a vast multitude, with neither roots in Israel nor claims on Israel's God, who are nonetheless drawn into Israel's blessings. They have not even been the objects of anyone's deliberate evangelistic efforts. Why have they come?

Though the Wise Men seem such colorful, exotic characters, it was simply in the course of their regular work that something had caught their attention and moved them to seek it out.

It's more than the church deserves to have such people turn up uninvited, asking about Jesus. At least we should be prepared to be caught up in God's own evangelistic plans, even if we have not been involved in making them.

—Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord, that your gospel is constantly at work in ways beyond our imagining.*

The Woman at the Well

She said to the people, "Come and see." (vv. 28-29)

Several of our nameless but memorable Bible characters in these readings are outsiders who with a variety of motives “come and see” something of the unique God of Israel. Here is someone who went a step further. Having met this representative of Israel’s God (she could not have found a better one, could she?) and listened to words so intriguing, so searching, the woman went off to persuade her friends and neighbors in their turn to “come and see.” She who had come and seen then went and told. She left her water jar there with Jesus: she would soon be back, bringing others. An instant missionary!

At the time it must have seemed to her pure chance that she should have met Jesus by the well that day. Not to him, though. When John says “He had to go through Samaria” (v. 4), there was more to that than mere geography. He was going to Galilee, sure, and it would have been a detour to take any other route. But he also had an appointment in Samaria on the way. This was the point at which the Old Testament invitation to “come and see” would blend into the New Testament command to “go and tell.” And God had planned it all. —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Lord, direct our “chance encounters” to the blessing of others.*

What Man Can and Can't Do

They were all amazed . . . "We have never seen anything like this!" (v. 12)

But surely they had? It was by no means the first miracle of healing that Jesus had done in Capernaum. Agreed, it was probably the first (and only) time that a roof was broken through to get a sufferer to him; but though that may have been rather surprising, you could scarcely say it was amazing.

No; the thing they had not seen before was Jesus dealing with sin as well as suffering. The response of the hard-hearted was, "He *says* the man's forgiven, but how do we know, and how does *he* know, and what right has he to say so?" A more positive response would be, "Since he has the power to heal, he must also have the power to forgive."

Though everybody had seen the man walk away, nobody had actually seen his sins disappear, had they? What they *had* seen was one who could do nothing, a mere man, completely restored by one who seemingly could do anything, one claiming to be the Son of Man, True Man, the Man with divine power and authority. That was what amazed everyone—Jesus' claim to be able to do what only God can do. The question is, how do people respond to that claim?

—Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *In our human weakness, Lord, we open ourselves today to your divine power.*

Under Authority

"I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes." (v. 8)

To focus on the way he gave orders and had them obeyed might make this centurion sound like a dictator. But that was not how he came across. On the contrary, he is portrayed as a thoroughly nice man. We may not know his name, but everyone in Capernaum would have. A Roman officer, true; to the locals, though, this man was much more than just a representative of a hated foreign army of occupation. He was a respected and generous member of the community, very sympathetic to the Jewish religion and way of life.

What Jesus saw in him was something yet more praiseworthy. To the centurion the whole command-structure of the military was second nature. Experience told him that when he gave orders, things happened, because the whole authority of Rome stood behind him. But faith told him that Jesus too must have behind him just such an authority, indeed, an even greater one.

What many Jews found hard to grasp was obvious to this gentile. Since Jesus was repeatedly doing miracles of healing, he clearly had behind him the full weight of the "Supreme Command." That was why he could even forgive sins in the name of God. —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, all authority is yours: we bow before you.*

First Terrifying, Then Testifying

Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" (v. 9)

Just as everybody in Capernaum knew the centurion, so everybody in Gerasa, facing Capernaum on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, knew the demon-possessed man. For the opposite reason, of course: the soldier inspired admiration, the maniac inspired terror.

The gospel writers have not named either of these two men for us. But of all our gallery of anonymous people, today's character is the one who most nearly wasn't—anonymous, that is. Jesus actually asked his name, and perhaps, in a lucid interval, he was beginning to answer, "My name is —," when the demons in his mind took over, shouting "Legion! There are crowds of us!"

As Christian converts from other religions have often adopted Christian names in place of their old pagan names, we in Britain find nowadays an increasing number of our young people converting to Islam and abandoning English "Christian names" for Muslim ones. For better or worse, what people call themselves sometimes speaks volumes about what they truly are.

"Legion," once he was healed, presumably reverted to whatever his parents had named him—an Aramaic version of John Doe. But now he was "the John Doe with a Christian Testimony," and everybody was going to know it.

—Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Lord, may it be not what we have done, but what you have done in us, that others notice.*

Further Out Still

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (v. 24)

Again no names, simply the fact that this Canaanite woman and her daughter were not Israelites. “Lost sheep,” no doubt, but (said Jesus) not the kind that he came to save!

This was not a brush-off but a test, spoken with tongue in cheek. And the woman took it that way. *When so great a power came in contact with so great a need, she reasoned, it must be for some good purpose.*

Jesus came to his own people first, so that through them the same salvation might then reach every other people—to all who were outsiders, like these two Canaanites. He who had offered life to a Samaritan woman and brought healing to a Roman centurion’s house, who cured a tormented man in a community that was so un-Jewish as (shock! horror!) to *keep pigs*, had for the first and only time in his adult life “gone abroad.” As in due course his gospel would.

If salvation was the ultimate object, this woman’s faith told her, might she not enjoy a foretaste of it now? The “dogs” would be fed after the meal anyway, she argued; surely they would not be grudging scraps that might fall from the table during it?

“Done!” said Jesus delightedly; and it was.

—Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Thank you for every lost soul in whom you have awakened faith.*

The Man Born Blind

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (v. 2)

Few of the people in our present series of readings are dealt with at such length as the man who was born blind. Nearly two chapters, 89 verses, center on him. Yet he is never named. Perhaps it's because he represents Everyman—the Everyman to whom Christ comes as “the light of the world.” The disciples' question is universal too. “Why this man's affliction?” opens up the whole problem of evil.

Do you notice that whereas they asked the *cause* of the man's blindness, Jesus redirected their thinking with an answer about the *purpose* of it?

Your suffering may be your own fault, or your parents', or your enemy's, or your neighbor's, or your ancestors', or, in the last analysis, the effect of what Milton called “Man's First Disobedience” in the garden of Eden. But questions about the “why of *cause*” can be academic and not very helpful. Think rather of the “why of *purpose*.” Jesus said the man had been born blind so that in due course “God's works might be revealed in him.”

That purpose would still include things hard to bear; he was later thrown out of the fellowship of the synagogue. But that was more than compensated by his having found his sight, and his Savior. —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Open our eyes, Lord, to your grand purposes for your people.*

The Rich Young Ruler

“What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (v. 16)

We call him the “rich young ruler.” “Ruler” comes from Luke, “young” from Matthew; for “rich” Mark joins them—all three gospels underline the man’s wealth. They also focus searchingly on the challenge his wealth presented to him.

This young man had many goods, in more senses than one. He had a good record, good principles, good intentions—to say nothing of the good things money can buy. He also had the uneasy feeling that the best thing of all, the assurance of eternal life, was yet eluding him. So “what good deed . . . do I still lack?” Should I endow a charity, or build a synagogue?

Read again Jesus’ response in verse 17. The question is not *what* is good, but *who* is good. You ask me what is missing, Jesus says, but I tell you *who* is missing. Once you detach your heart and mind from all these *things*, and get to know the *Person* who is the source and pattern of all good, then everything else will fall into place, and you will be “complete” (v. 21 NASB).

And in one of the many touches which go to make up the biblical picture of his deity, Jesus adds: “That means following and getting to know *me*.” —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *May our hearts surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found.*

Shall We Meet Him Again?

“Not far from the kingdom.” (v. 34)

With more than half the people we have met in these readings I find this phrase lurking at the back of my mind. They were “not far from the kingdom.” So many made aware of God’s kingdom, in a variety of ways—colliding with it unexpectedly, or drawn to it from great distances. Some belonging to it in name but not in fact, others, in fact though not in name. Where exactly in relation to the kingdom does this scribe stand?

He is posing a test question. It comes at the end of a series of attempts to entrap Jesus and destroy his credibility. Yet this questioner cannot hide his admiration for Jesus’ answer, and he finds that in the process he himself has been tested and his answer too is approved.

But still . . . “Not far from the kingdom.” Did he actually get there? Shall we meet him when one day the kingdom comes in its fullness? The queen of Sheba will be there, and the lady of Shunem, and the centurion of Capernaum. The rich young ruler? I hope so. This scribe? We just don’t know, do we? Still, “the Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19), and we can leave every such query in his gracious hands. —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Hear our prayers, Lord, for those we know who are not far out, yet not quite in.*

The Ethiopian Eunuch

The eunuch . . . went on his way rejoicing. (v. 39)

What does “deep South” mean to you? Mississippi, perhaps? When I retired and moved from the north of England to its south coast, a mere 300 miles, to judge by the mystified reaction of some people you might have thought I was emigrating to Patagonia.

Our final “anonym” (yes, it’s in the dictionary!) is the Ethiopian eunuch. He had set out to “go . . . south” from Jerusalem when he was waylaid by Philip and introduced to Jesus by him. He reminds me of earlier characters in this series. The monarch he serves is as anonymous as he is (as some translations rightly say, she is “the Candace”—not a name but a title). She is like Solomon’s famous visitor in another way too: not only nameless, but also queen of a far-off southern land.

But there is a thought-provoking difference. The queen of Sheba “*came* from the ends of the earth,” says Jesus, “to listen to the wisdom of Solomon.” The Candace’s minister “*went* on his way rejoicing.” God’s invitation to the world to *come* and meet him among his people was his classic Old Testament policy. The New Testament is more concerned with his command to his people to *go* and take his message to the world. —Michael Wilcock

Prayer: *Whether by their coming to us, or by our going to them, Lord, let your gospel be clearly heard.*

The Security of the Sheep

The LORD is my shepherd. (Psalm 23:1a NKJV)

Lowell was a quiet, private, gentle-giant of a man; all the quieter for the knowledge he'd likely die in the next months. As it turned out, he later died in the very chair in which he was seated during my visit that afternoon.

After sympathizing with Lowell, I asked him what Scripture he'd like me to read. His sister wanted some assurance that he was ready to meet God. My heart dropped as I heard him request Psalm 23, a passage anyone could have chosen.

Yet as I began to read, Lowell joined in, repeating prayerfully the psalm by heart. It had been his life-long companion. His faith, it turned out, was as real as it was simple. We used the psalm at his funeral because he had used it in his life.

In Psalm 23, David, “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Samuel 23:1), sketches the Lord’s love for his people. Drawing on his own experience of shepherding, he begins to detail how the shepherd cares for his sheep. The portrayal is not unique to David, nor is his confession that the Lord is *his* shepherd. Three thousand years later we too may have the Lord as our shepherd. Let’s cease trusting in ourselves and confess our need of him. —Tim Trumper

Prayer: *Lord, take from me my sin and make me one of your sheep, through Jesus’ blood. Amen.*

The Faith of the Sheep

I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1b NKJV)

Real want comes in many shapes and sizes. Material want for many of us has thankfully become a thing of the past. Yesterday's luxuries have become today's necessities, such that the subsistence existence of many in poorer parts of the world is alien to us. Materially speaking, our walk by faith has turned into a trot by sight!

Whether writing as a king or as a king in the making, David knew want first-hand—financially as a poor shepherd boy, emotionally and spiritually when fighting wild animals, physically when taking on Goliath. His claim he'd lack for nothing had been forged by experience and was penned in hope. Doubtless he also remembered Moses' assurance to Israel that in the Promised Land God's people would not want.

If the Lord is our shepherd we too may have this confidence. He will not only supply our every last need, but provide the desires of our hearts—short of spoiling us. Given this, we can sing with David of the Lord's providence. Insurance policies, investment accounts, family, friends, and church have their place, but the Lord wants us to lean our full weight ultimately on him. His grace is sufficient, even if it's made perfect in our weakness! —Tim Trumper

Prayer: *Lord, help me to see my needs and to trust in you to meet them, in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

The Calming of the Sheep

He makes me to lie down in green pastures. (Psalm 23:2a NKJV)

There are sheep aplenty in my native Wales, but try getting close to one! Up they get and off they trot, bleating as they go. It's fear. No amount of coaxing seems to persuade them otherwise. But then, I'm not their shepherd.

The relationship between the shepherd and his sheep is what's crucial. He knows them and they recognize his voice. His very presence challenges their many fears: tension within the flock, the "bully boy" sheep, irritating flies and insects, not to mention plain old hunger. In the company of the shepherd, sheep can do what they find so difficult: they can relax and lie down, and do so in the luscious pastures to which he's led them.

How like sheep we are! We claim to be "FINE" even though inside we may be "*Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional!*" There are the big reasons for fear, sure. But how many of our fears have to do with the flies and insects of life? Let's commit our every fear to our shepherd, whether big or small. He delights to calm our frantic natures and to feed us on his promises. —Tim Trumper

Prayer: Lord, we acknowledge that we are fearful and discontented by nature. Be our peace and contentment we pray, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Peace of the Sheep

He leads me beside the still waters. (Psalm 23:2b NKJV)

The plentiful lakes and rivers in my adopted home of Michigan make desperation for water difficult to imagine. The first readers of Psalm 23 could anticipate just two seasons of rain per year: the early and later rains. The rest of the year was dry. How the sheep appreciated the shepherd leading them beside waters of rest! Not only did the waters quench their thirst, they also helped the sheep to digest the grass on which they fed.

Water is one picture Scripture gives us of the Holy Spirit. Like water, the Spirit supplies the sheep with vitality and helps them to digest the grass of God's Word. God's Word without the Spirit is a dry orthodoxy that fills the head but leaves the heart untouched. God's Spirit without the Word is an empty mysticism that excites the soul but fails to nourish it. In short, God's Spirit and Word, although distinct, are both necessary for the health of his sheep.

The waters the Lord leads us beside are still or quiet. Slow-running waters are the only ones sheep will drink from. David reminds us that while troubles can be blessed to us, we need seasons of peace as well. —Tim Trumper

Prayer: Lord, grant me days of peace for refreshment and nourishment by your Spirit and Word, through Jesus I pray. Amen.

The Restoration of the Sheep

He restores my soul. (Psalm 23:3a NKJV)

Sheep find trouble easily. Some roll over and can't get up. Birds of prey swoop down and pluck out their eyes or burrow into their sides and claw out their vital organs. Others stretch for one too many tufts of grass and down the precipice they go. Still others stray off the path and lose sight of the shepherd.

Christians, like sheep, get into all sorts of difficulties. David is not so much thinking of the trials that come our way but of the impact of the sinful decisions we make. By them we become prey for the evil one and wander out of God's established way. In the process we endanger our souls and rob our lives of the joy of being in the center of the Lord's will.

We can no more restore ourselves than can an upside down sheep. It takes the Lord to rescue us. Our restoration begins when we confess our disobedience. Elsewhere David illustrates the sort of genuine confession that pleases the Lord: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep: Seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments" (Psalm 119:176). Let this be our confession too. Let's not delay, for the longer we wait, the harder becomes our confession.

—Tim Trumper

Prayer: *Lord, awaken me to the first signs of wandering, and restore my soul I pray. Amen.*

The Leading of the Sheep

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

(Psalm 23:3b NKJV)

The paths in which the Lord leads us are paths of uprightness. This simple truth helps us discern whether we're on the right path. We ask ourselves not whether our path is uphill or downhill, or whether we are passing through sunshine or cloud, pleasant scenery or back streets, but whether the path we are on is leading us to do what pleases the Lord. If so, we not only know the path is the right one, we also know it is the Good Shepherd who is leading us. Sheep, it is worth remembering, only walk in a straight line when they are being led.

Following our Lord is not only our privilege, it is also our responsibility. The Lord expects us to follow him. It's for our good that we do so. When David thinks of the Lord's leading, he's not imagining sheep meandering far behind. Sheep who keep pace with the shepherd are safest, for the closer we stick on his heels, the more protection we gain from the dangers around us. —Tim Trumper

Prayer: *"O let me see thy footmarks, and in them plant mine own
My hope to follow duly is in thy strength alone.*

O guide me, call me, draw me, uphold me to the end;

And then in heaven receive me, my Savior and my Friend." (John Bode)

The Courage of the Sheep

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil. (Psalm 23:4a NKJV)*

Sex used to be a taboo subject, but now death has taken its place. David speaks plainly of it. “The valley of the shadow of death” can be taken in a metaphorical sense to speak of life’s trials. Certainly David had many of these: his fights with wild animals, the threats of Saul, his many battles, and most trying of all, the betrayal of his son Absalom. However bright David’s life, the dark valley was never far away.

But the darkest valley for each of us is death itself. Let’s be realists. We all will die. We all must pass through the eerie valley. For some its shadow is darker than for others. Our temperament, the extent of our physical sufferings, and the onslaught of Satan (our accuser) can all influence the degree of darkness we will experience.

No matter how dark the valley, God’s sheep have hope: we will pass *through* the valley and into the light. Indeed, there can be no shadows without light near by. The sunlit uplands are ahead! No wonder David exclaims that even in the shadow of death he will not fear. —Tim Trumper

Prayer: *Father, I thank you for the assurance that those possessing eternal life never perish. Help me to live in this confidence, and to die in it too.
Amen.*

The Strength of the Sheep

For you are with me. (Psalm 23:4b NKJV)

Americans are very upbeat—born optimists, in fact. As a Briton I find this optimism very refreshing, but let's not mistake it for faith. Whereas optimism is humanistic ("I'm strong; I can do it!"), faith is theistic ("I am weak, but *God* can do it!").

David may well have been an optimist. You've got to be to fight a giant! Yet as we listen to the outflow of his heart, we discern that his reliance was not on his own bravery but on the presence of the Lord. "I will fear no evil; *for you are with me.*"

David not only knew his Lord, he knew his Lord was with him. Sheep are comforted when the shepherd is near, for the shepherd knows us personally. How reassuring is the remembrance and felt experience of the presence of the shepherd! It sucks up our fears. Oh, they remain a possibility, but they need not fill our minds or shape our actions. So let's exercise faith. Through it the Lord frees us from enslavement to fear. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear," wrote Paul to timid Timothy, "but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7). —Tim Trumper

Prayer: *Father, grant me in Christ the assurance of your love, and the fearlessness that marks out those who have it. Amen.*

The Comfort of the Sheep

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4c NKJV)

Comfort is not the first word we think of when reading of rods and staffs! Yet David knew these simple, multipurpose implements describe well the Lord's care.

Shepherds used their rods and staffs to protect their sheep. Armed with them they could scare off predators and bludgeon them if they got near the sheep. Did not Jesus, centuries later, hint as much? No one would snatch his sheep from his hand (John 10:28).

Shepherds also used their rods and staffs to correct the sheep. The hand of the Lord that protects us is the same hand that chastens us. Discipline is also a form of protection. It guards us from ourselves.

Then again, shepherds used the crook of the staff to rescue sheep in distress. With it they could pull a wayward sheep out of a bog or off a ledge. They could even use their crooks to lift the sheep's coat to check the skin for wounds or sores.

It's interesting that David sang as much of the Lord's correction and discipline as of his protection. He knew he needed both the unpleasant and the pleasant care of the Lord in his life. The Good Shepherd gives both. —Tim Trumper

Prayer: Lord, comfort me with your rod and staff, for your glory's sake and the joy of my soul. Amen.

The Support of the Sheep

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

(Psalm 23:5a NKJV)

Sheep have plenty of enemies. There are the flies and insects beneath, the parasites that burrow within, wolves prowling around, and vultures and buzzards circling above! In the days prior to insecticides shepherds would protect their sheep by making them eat from tables. Some commentators understand the tables to be high plateaus of green grass. Others refer to the eastern practice of having sheep eat from low-lying tables that kept their feed free of parasites.

Our enemies also come in various shapes and sizes and attack us from different directions. They work as agents of the prince of the power of the air (cf. Ephesians 2:2). If they cannot destroy us, they seek the consolation prize: the disturbance of our peace and joy. The Lord, however, provides for his sheep. He nourishes us right under the noses of our enemies. Of course, our enemies won't acknowledge this. In fact, they may try to hurt us all the more. Nonetheless, the Lord will continue to neutralize their plots and silence their prattle.

Dear sheep of the Lord's flock, take heart! —Tim Trumper

Prayer: Lord, grant me patience to wait on you when beset by ungodly enemies. Prepare a table for me in their presence, and spare me to serve you, I pray. Amen.

The Protection of the Sheep

You anoint my head with oil. (Psalm 23:5b NKJV)

Oil predated sheep sprays. Shepherds used it to anoint the heads and horns of their sheep—the parts least protected by the woolly fleece. The process was both protective and medicinal, David’s mention of this practice follows on naturally from his reference to his enemies. On the one hand the oil gave off a repellant odor; on the other its stickiness served to catch the flies and the insects pestering the sheep.

Anointing with oil is another biblical picture of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. John, for instance, says Christians have “been anointed by the Holy One” (1 John 2:20). Anointed by the Spirit, the Lord’s flock possesses confidence that God intends in his love to protect and to heal. If we know this now when we have just the firstfruits of the Spirit, how complete will this protection and healing be at the end of the age once we receive a full measure of the Spirit’s influence?

Fear not, O little flock, the foe
who madly seeks your overthrow;
dread not his rage and pow’r;
What though your courage sometimes faints,
his seeming triumph o’er God’s saints,
Lasts but a little hour.

(Michael Altenburg [1584-1640])

—Tim Trumper

Prayer: Lord, grant me more and more to know the fullness of your Spirit and the courage you afford, so that I may live boldly for your glory. Amen.

The Satisfaction of the Sheep

My cup runs over. (Psalm 23:5c NKJV)

Do you remember learning abbreviations as a child? I particularly recall learning about “etc.” It had a certain appeal—a sort of shorthand for “You know the rest.” In a sense David is adding here his *etc.* He does so not because of laziness, but because the Lord’s blessings are so many and so rich that he cannot retell them all.

At first sight, David’s language seems odd. Since when do sheep drink from cups? Call to mind, however, Nathan’s parable in exposing David’s adultery with Bathsheba. In it the prophet spoke of the poor man (Uriah the Hittite) who took his one little ewe lamb (Bathsheba) into his house and nourished her from his cup. The illustration was based on the custom of shepherds during times of winter or sickness, when lambs needed closer attention. It was the ancient equivalent of bottle-feeding.

Once again David is underlining the generosity of the Lord’s love and providence. Our great Shepherd takes us to himself tenderly and personally, granting us times of joy in his nearer presence. There he nourishes us one-on-one as if we’re the only sheep in his flock. Hence David’s wonder: “my cup runs over.” —Tim Trumper

Prayer: *Good Shepherd, I praise you for those times in your nearer presence. Thank you for sharing your cup of blessing with me and filling it so that it runs over. Amen.*

The Confidence of the Sheep

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

(Psalm 23:6a NKJV)

“**D**ogs are man’s best friend,” so the saying goes. I’ve been blessed by a number of them: Lucy, Gelert, Coco, Beau, Kellem, and, currently, Worcester (eight months old today!). These dogs have all been great friends to me, but better yet are the psalmist’s “Goodness” and “Mercy.” They’re the Lord’s two sheep dogs bringing up the rear of his flock.

Goodness is the Lord’s love outpoured in blessings: spiritual, practical, economic, and aesthetic. Goodness hints at the sensation of love. Mercy refers to the Lord’s steadfast covenant love and speaks of his commitment to his sheep. Our humanness ensures we need the Lord’s goodness; our sinfulness, his mercy. Goodness provides, and mercy pardons.

While we keep our eyes on the Shepherd and follow tight on his heels, it’s comforting to know that goodness and mercy are always behind. In their own ways they keep us from straying and ensure we stick to the Shepherd’s path that leads us all the way home. Unlike Worcester, they will be with me all the days of my life—intensively: everyday, extensively: lifelong. Why is it then that we persist in fearing and fretting? —Tim Trumper

Prayer: Lord, I praise you for yourself and for making yourself known through your goodness and mercy shown us in Christ. Amen.

The Home of the Sheep

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

(Psalm 23:6b NKJV)

Recently I became a first-time homeowner. No more dead money (rent); no more living out of boxes! Yet this home too is temporary. The Lord's house is my permanent residence.

Like sheep we can experience here and now seasons in the Lord's nearer presence. Unlike sheep, however, we don't end our days in the slaughterhouse or rotting in the open field. The Lord we follow leads us all the way back to his home. There we reside forever.

Rejoice, dear sheep of the Lord. Life in the flock has just begun. We've tasted the shepherd's love. It's been heaven begun below. The nourishment we've received is just the appetizer of glory. Whether there will be Bibles in heaven we can't be sure, but the Word of God will certainly be there. Never again will we face the elements, the enemies that harass, or the fears that intimidate. We shall forevermore be treated by our Shepherd as his sons and daughters. When our faith gives way to sight, the trust that lies at the heart of faith will be complete. —Tim Trumper

Prayer: *O love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul on thee, I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be. (George Matheson, 1842-1906)*