

## Psalm 23 / II Samuel 17 Light at the end of the tunnel

### Introduction

The expression ‘Light at the end of the tunnel’ undoubtedly portrays the feelings of David when this Psalm was written. Although we can never be 100% certain that we have reconstructed the background context to any author or artist’s composition, in a later generation, it is to my mind probable that II Samuel 17 sets the backdrop to the writing of this Psalm. Now the message of the Psalm is so familiar to us all that we can grasp so much of its teaching without finding out what may or may not have prompted David to pen these words. Yet I believe that it can be helpful to contextualise the experiences of God’s people down the ages as we seek encouragement from their witness for our own in this generation. David had experienced severe trials on many occasions in his life, as well as great joys and successes. I believe that the context in which this and a number of the other Psalms were set was the rebellion of Absalom. After the initial traumatic hours and the frantic decision-making, David and his supporters quickly abandon Jerusalem and set off in the direction of the River Jordan. However, they are on foot and some of the party are aged or very young so progress is slow. In addition, they had no guarantee of ever returning home in safety so some of their limited possessions must have been taken with them. I believe that David and his friends had reached a place of safety where they felt secure from any pursuing force from Absalom. The conflict was very far from over and the outcome uncertain, yet God was with them and they had an inner peace despite the storm raging around them. Psalm 91:1-12, although written much later than the time of David, captures something of the feelings experienced at that time. *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. <sup>2</sup> I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. <sup>3</sup> Surely He will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. <sup>4</sup> He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge; His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. <sup>5</sup> You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, <sup>6</sup> nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. <sup>7</sup> A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. <sup>8</sup> You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. <sup>9</sup> If you make the Most High your dwelling— even the Lord, who is my refuge— <sup>10</sup> then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. <sup>11</sup> For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; <sup>12</sup> they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.* We too can face our times of darkness and despair with all manner of difficulties strewn across our paths. In such arenas the Lord upholds and sustains us, assuring us that there is light at the end of the tunnel. He will bring us through the valley experiences of life, sometimes to the pleasant green pastures, on other occasions to yet more challenging situations, but ultimately to our eternal home with Him forever. We can rest assured that the Lord who upheld and sustained David will also stand alongside His people in our day.

### 1. The Setting of the Psalm

Absalom, the son David idolised and never disciplined, had finally launched a coup d’etat to take the throne of his father David. It had been carefully prepared over several years (II Samuel 15:1-9) and finally he invited the people he considered essential to have on board to a gathering in Hebron where he launched his attack on the government of his father. It appeared on the surface to have every likelihood of success, as the biblical account in II Samuel 15:10-14 makes clear: *Then Absalom sent secret messengers throughout the tribes of Israel to say, As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpets, then say, 'Absalom is king in Hebron.'* <sup>11</sup> *Two hundred men from Jerusalem had accompanied Absalom. They had been invited as guests and went*

quite innocently, knowing nothing about the matter.<sup>12</sup> While Absalom was offering sacrifices, he also sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, to come from Giloh, his home town. And so the conspiracy gained strength, and Absalom's following kept on increasing.<sup>13</sup> A messenger came and told David, *The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom.*<sup>14</sup> Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, *Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin upon us and put the city to the sword.* This was a masterstroke from David to evacuate the city. He may have been failing in physical strength, but had never been outthought on the battlefield. He was a master tactician who kept a clear head whatever the pressures upon him. David then ensured that all the people with him were totally committed to his cause by checking on the loyalty of the Philistine mercenaries, led by a man called Ittai from Gath. He set up a secret service to spy on the opposition using the priests. This was brilliant as he drew Absalom into Jerusalem, the very place where his network was in place. This would allow him to keep one step ahead of his errant son. The final piece of his jigsaw was to send his closest personal adviser Hushai back to Jerusalem. This individual was one of two men whose advice David had taken in running the country. The other was Ahithophel, grandfather of Bathsheba, whose bitter memories of her marriage to Uriah destroyed by David (II Samuel 11), had waited for an opportunity to exact revenge for that crime. Incidentally the fall of Tripoli in Libya (August 2011) to the rebel forces came about for similar reasons. Colonel Ghadafi had arranged the murder of the brother of the man who commanded the defences of Tripoli many years ago. However, the family had been in no place to get justice, but waited patiently for the day when this crime would receive its punishment. This man had contacted the rebel forces to indicate that when the day came that they were ready to advance on the capital city he would arrange that they would have no opposition at the main sites for defensive positions in Tripoli. The lesson here is very clear. A person may appear to get away with wrongdoing for years, but justice will eventually be done; sometimes it may have to wait till eternity, more often than not it comes in this life. David, in many ways a man of God, but he had some serious flaws that led to significant consequences. Our calling to honour the Lord and obey His commands is not to stop us having fun; rather it is to keep us from the long term harmful consequences of going our own way and reaping a very bitter harvest that may result from sinful choices.

Under severe pressure on the way David meets a number of people with particular agendas. An administrative official named Ziba, who spots an opportunity to swindle his master the invalid Mephiboshesh out of his inheritance (II Samuel 16:1-4); a relative of Saul named Shimei, who was a more intelligent and powerful man than the impression given in the passage of a buffoon. However he was also an opportunist who prophesied at the top of his voice to make a name for himself about who God would bless and who He would punish (II Samuel 16:5-14). How did David handle that distressing incident? II Samuel 16:12 said this: *It may be that the Lord will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today.* In other words although David could have responded in kind and sent Abishai to dispatch this man to his eternal reward, instead he chose to stay silent and leave God to bring about the vindication. David made many mistakes, but with the exception of his family members (how ironic is that!) his people management skills were excellent. Yet what is more important was his total confidence in God with respect to the bigger picture. This is why he could sleep so well at night. Do we need to learn from David to do what we can and then genuinely leave things with Him when we lay our heads on the pillow at night?

The battle for the attention of Absalom between the two most skilful advisers in the Kingdom, Hushai and Ahithophel was one that would determine, in large measure, the success or failure of this revolt. Although David and his close circle of leaders had the major details of both proposed plans of action in their minds it would be a day or two before they knew for certain the course chosen. A few days had passed and the destination of David's forces, Mahanaim, was reached without being overtaken along the way. This location was

outside the boundary of Israel, in the territory of client states. Would they remain loyal or would they transfer their allegiance to Absalom? The first of these men was Shobi, ruler of Rabbah, head of the Ammonites (now called Jordanians); his jurisdiction covered most of modern-day Jordan with the same capital city. His brother Hanun had played a dirty trick on David some years earlier and as a consequence lost the throne. Would this second son stay loyal to David or would he be as treacherous as his brother? The second ruler was Machir of Lo Debar. This was a small city state around Mahanaim. He was been a supporter of Saul, but had been impressed with David's care of Mephibosheth. The third was Barzillai, a wealthy landowner who owned much of the region of Gilead. He was a genuinely old friend of David over many years. Would he stay loyal in the closing years of his life when a civil war might be looming? It is often rightly said that we find out who our friends are when life is at its toughest. Sometimes unexpected people rise to the occasion in ways we never thought possible. Yet others we had banked on assisting us let us down. Proverbs 18:24 records these words: *A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.* David knew that God would stand by him even if everyone else deserted him. If we know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour we are never alone as He is with us by His Holy Spirit to equip and empower us to live for Him. Have you put your faith and trust in Him? What a scene awaited these weary travellers at Mahanaim: *When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, and Makir son of Ammiel from Lo Debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim* <sup>28</sup> *brought bedding and bowls and articles of pottery. They also brought wheat and barley, flour and roasted grain, beans and lentils,* <sup>29</sup> *honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from cows' milk for David and his people to eat. For they said, The people have become hungry and tired and thirsty in the desert.* It was hardly a five star hotel with the best of facilities, but it was the better than anything they could have dreamed of receiving. These men showed total loyalty to David. In addition to the provisions, the men under their command would also be available to fight with David. In the hills and woods through which Absalom's army would need to march in due course a smaller committed force was waiting for them. In effect Absalom's fate was sealed. The army he would gather would be much larger and with heavier equipment. But in the densely wooded location where David and his men were waiting his numbers and equipment were of no advantage at all. Had Absalom accepted Ahithopel's advice and sent a small detachment of troops after David at once then there was a high chance of success; by delaying as Hushai counselled, David was able to regroup and quickly take charge of the situation. At the end of the fourth day of this crisis David had time to stop and think about how his life had been spared so far. It was a time for rest and reflection, like a sheep resting besides quiet waters in a green pasture. It was a picture of contentment. His confidence was in the Shepherd of Israel and David was convinced that this would not be misplaced. Fresh in his memory was that walk when totally exhausted up the Jabbok gorge with the high cliffs on either side, that valley of the shadow of death when he and his men were coming to the end of their physical strength, not knowing whether a fit and health enemy might pounce upon them. David had known God's discipline (His *rod*) in his life, due to sinful actions such as his treatment of Uriah and Bathsheba; yet he was equally conscious of God's *staff*, that brought relief when he cast himself totally on God. Here in a place of safety, awaiting his enemies a banquet was provided which so refreshed all of this group of men. God's undeserved goodness and mercy was clearly revealed in this situation; no wonder David wanted to praise the Lord and rejoice greatly at His love and care. Do you? Or do you need to take time to stop in the midst of the good or bad times you are going through to reflect on His blessings and encouragements over the years? What is more God's provision was guaranteed not only for this life, but also beyond the grave.

## **2. The Picture of God revealed in this Psalm**

This Psalm reflects on the character of God in the light of David's experience. Here seven of the Old Testament titles for God are seen in His care of His people, including David and you and me. (a) **Jehovah-raah the Lord...my shepherd** (Psalm 23:1); Apparently there is no *is* in the original Hebrew. David is making a bold assertion about the character of God in relation to him. Yet the *is* is not out of place, because this is not merely a vintage testimony of decades ago, but a declaration of current reality. Even in this time of maximum stress and everything falling apart, he said, I want everyone to know that: *The Lord is my Shepherd*. Can you say these words in relation to your life experiences? Only those who have a personal relationship with Jesus can make such a claim. (b) **Jehovah-jireh the Lord will provide** (Psalm 23:1b) *I will lack nothing* This name for God comes from Genesis 22 in the time of Abraham. In context, *Do not lay a hand on the boy, he said. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.*<sup>13</sup> *Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.*<sup>14</sup> *So Abraham called that place **The Lord Will Provide**. And to this day it is said, On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.*<sup>15</sup> *The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time*<sup>16</sup> *and said, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,*<sup>17</sup> *I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore* (Genesis 22:13-17). The one and only son willingly carried the wood for the sacrifice up Mount Moriah, but God did not ask Abraham to sacrifice his son. However, God did not ask His servant to do something He was unwilling to do Himself. His one and only son (John 3:16) gave His life in our place on the cross. God provided all we need for salvation. Have you received it? David here has the assurance of God's provision for all his needs –not all his wants, or ours! (Psalm 23:1b) *I will lack nothing*. I hope we can share his confidence in God's provision for our needs. (c) **Jehovah-shalom the Lord our peace** *He leads me besides the still waters* (Psalm 23:2), a beautiful picture of tranquillity in the countryside. All of us love the opportunity to get away from it all. For some a walk in the hills or a trek across the moors; for others still walking barefooted in the sea on a warm summer's day, listening to the waves as they roll in across the shore. Whatever your place you chose it is precious and relaxing, not least because it contrasts greatly with the hustle and bustle of regular daily life. However, the quiet place can be somewhere in our own homes alone with God and away from it all. It is not necessarily the avoidance of life's issues; rather it is sensing the presence of God with us that enables us to appreciate His peace. Gideon concerned about the overwhelming odds of talking the Midianites is crying out to the Lord about the needs of his people when he is visited by the angel of the Lord. Once the identity of the visitor becomes apparent this young man wishes to provide hospitality. What follows gives some insight into this aspect of the character of God.<sup>20</sup> *The angel of God said to him, Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth. And Gideon did so.*<sup>21</sup> *With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the Lord touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the Lord disappeared.*<sup>22</sup> *When Gideon realised that it was the angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, Ah, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!*<sup>23</sup> *But the Lord said to him, Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.*<sup>24</sup> *So Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it **The Lord is Peace**. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites* (Judges 6:20-24). David's sensing of the peace of God was not on his summer holidays. By contrast it was in the midst of a national crisis and on the edge of a potentially brutal civil war that could rip his country apart. Today we too may be facing real difficulties, but in the midst of our trials have a real sense of God's presence upholding and strengthening us. Praise the Lord for this revelation of His name. How much we need it in the midst of some of the pressures we can experience and may even be going through them at this moment in time. Paul, prayed for this blessing for the church in Philippi in Philippians 4:7: *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard*

your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (d) **Jehovah-rapha the Lord that heals** *He restores my soul* (Psalm 23:3) (Exodus 15:26) *He said, If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His eyes, if you pay attention to His commands and keep all His decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you.* The context of that story was set at a place called Marah, in the Desert of Shur, where the water was undrinkable because it tasted so bitter. The Israelites complained bitterly about God's provision to Moses. The Lord used His servant to heal the waters so that they were drinkable. Exodus 15:26 provided the spiritual lesson obtained from this incident. David here declares *He restores my soul* (Psalm 23:3). He received inner transformation through God's Holy Spirit at work in his life. Do you need to cry out to God for inner healing today? God can renew our spirits and restore our spiritual vitality. There are times when our walk with the Lord is not what it should be and we feel dry and arid in our souls. At such times as we read God's word and seek His presence in prayer we cry out for restoration from our great God and Saviour. He blessed David in this way and can do so with believers in each and every generation. (e) **Jehovah –tsidkenu the Lord our righteousness** *He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake* (Psalm 23:3). This title of God was revealed in a later era through the prophet Jeremiah. He spoke to his nation about God as the shepherd of His people. His people would follow their shepherd and be established in righteousness. Jeremiah's prophecy was messianic in nature, that is it was pointing forward to Jesus and His second coming to reign in glory. Jeremiah 23:5-6 states: *The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.* <sup>6</sup> *In His days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which He will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.* God promises to direct our paths. David comes forward and affirms that He has done that for him and invites us to trust the Lord in a similar way. The outcome for David here was uncertain, but the principle holds even when we cannot see what lies ahead of us. What counts most to us is who goes with us guiding our footsteps. (f) **Jehovah-shammah the Lord ever-present** *I will fear no evil for You are with me* (Psalm 23:4); We can survive all kinds of storms if Jesus is in the boat! A person outside the faith can have no such assurances. For the Christian Hebrews 13:5-6 are such helpful words: *God has said, Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.* <sup>6</sup>*So we say with confidence, The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?* For the Jewish believer in the Old Testament era Ezekiel 48:35 provides part of a vision of Jerusalem in the future messianic kingdom: *And the name of the city from that time on will be: THE LORD IS THERE.* Oh that this may be said of every gathering of His people today? There are times on earth when we feel alone –remember this assurance David had which is also for us -The Lord is always present with us. (g) **Jehovah-nissi the Lord our banner** *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies* (Psalm 23:5). God's sustaining and strengthening grace is supremely what we need. Our faith has to be grounded in the real world by our great God. This insight into God's character was revealed in Exodus 17:14-16: *Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.*<sup>15</sup> *Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my Banner.* <sup>16</sup> *He said, For hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord. The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.* Vindication of His faithful people; Whether in this life or the next he will provide the light we need at the end of the tunnel, for His precious name's sake, Amen.