

“The Lord Is My Shepherd”

David has left no sweeter psalm than the 23rd. The beautiful psalm abounds with assurance of God’s guidance and protection. There is mention of danger of enemies, both past and present, but it is muted by David’s trust in the perpetual presence and ceaseless care of God. The psalm begins with an affirmation of faith for time and ends with an expression of hope for eternity. Its message is couched in figures in which the psalmist sees himself first as a journeying sheep in the hands of a gentle shepherd (vss. 1-4) and then as a permanent guest in the house of a gracious host (vss. 5-6).

This wonderful psalm has comforted the poor, given courage to the disappointed, and consoled the sick. It holds a high place in our hearts because it presents God in an endearing character, it gives us a beautiful picture of the blessedness of God’s people, and it describes the needs of our lives. One scholar wrote, “Its work is not done because it will continue to speak to my children and grandchildren, through all the generations of time until time is ended and it is taken back up into heaven, there to be sung in praise to God for eternity.”

Faith In The Shepherd’s Care

The words, “The Lord is my shepherd,” declare the simplicity of David’s faith in God as the One who laid the foundations of the earth, yet is ever mindful of His lowly creatures (Psalm 138:6). As he sorrowed over whatever troubled him at the time of writing, he claimed the trust he learned as a shepherd of his father’s sheep on the hills near Bethlehem.

The shepherd with his flock was no poetical figure, but a familiar object in ancient times. The shepherd rules, guides, feeds, and protects his sheep; and they follow, obey, love, and trust in their shepherd. David knew how tender a shepherd could be with his flock and he knew how the sheep needed a faithful shepherd. David knew that the divine Shepherd who had delivered him from the paw of the lion and the bear would deliver him (1 Samuel 17:37). The most telling word in the sentence is “my.” David said that He cared for me, watches over me, and preserves me. This implies an abiding fellowship with God in which he meditated on His words, walked in His law, and communed with Him in prayer.

David rose to be king of Israel, but he never rose above a constant awareness of his dependence on God. This is proven when he said, “I shall not want.” No faithful child of God ever reaches the place of the ones at Laodicea

(Revelation 3:17). We, like David, must always remember our reliance on God (James 1:17).

However, we cannot have freedom from want without conditions. While God sends rain alike on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45), only the just may claim the promise of God's care (Philippians 4:19; Hebrews 4:16). None today can say in truth, "The Lord is my shepherd," unless he follows the Good Shepherd (John 10:4, 14).

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." The picture here does not portray the needs of life so much as the righteous rest that God gives the burdened pilgrim (Romans 5:1). The green pastures are God's commandments which are always fresh, rich, and never exhausted. As the tender grass is a natural nutrient for sheep, so the word of God is a natural nutrient for the sin-sick soul (Psalm 119:16, 18).

There is work to do and there are dark valleys to cross, but God provides peaceful meadows for His faithful sheep (Psalm 138:7). When problems pressed upon David and his spirit was ready to sink, the Lord revived his strength.

God so wisely balances our labors and rests, and our sorrows and joys, that we are moved to ask, "How can a holy God deal so graciously with me?" God leads His people, not to the standing waters which are corrupt and filthy, not to the troubled sea, not to the rolling flood waters, but to the silent and still waters. Still waters run deep and so it is with the peacefulness that is in a Christian's life.

Vs. 3 says, "He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." The writer for the moment drops the metaphor to declare his spiritual renewal. To restore the soul is to bring it back from the brink of destruction. God refreshes us when we are weary, He comforts us when we are troubled, and He restores us when we stray. David's life, like all servants of God, no doubt had many restorations.

But He does not restore our souls that we may continue in sin. He restores us that we may walk with Him in the paths of righteousness, which He shows us in His word (Jeremiah 10:23). "For his name's sake" means that God restores us and leads us that His name may be exalted (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Faith In Time Of Trouble

Vs. 4 says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." To "walk" indicates the steady ad-

vance of a soul which knows its road, knows its end, resolves to follow the path, and is calm. The "valley of the shadow of death" calls to mind a ravine overhung with cliffs and foliage that casts dark shadows over the dangers that lurk along the path. Such a place will arouse dread in the sheep, but the shepherd knows every pitfall and the way of every beast that could endanger him.

Under His direction and care, the sheep have no cause for fear. Those who have God as their companion need fear no danger to their soul for His way is plain and His presence assured (Hebrews 13:5). Only when we forsake Him to walk in our own way is there reason to be afraid (Proverbs 14:12).

David wrote, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" because he knew His shepherd is with him and the symbols of his office, the club for the foes and the crook for the pits, calm his trembling heart. Notice that we do not walk in the valley, but through the valley (cp. 1 Corinthians 15:51-53). As He safely guides us through our present life, so He will safely guide us when we make our final departure from it (Luke 16:22).

There is no cause of fear for the righteous in death (Psalm 116:15). The faithful Christian looks upon Satan and death as conquered enemies (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). However, it must be strongly noted that we cannot expect God to be with us in death if we refuse to be with Him in life.

Faith In God's Goodness And Mercy

David pictures God as a benevolent and protective host when he writes, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." Ancient laws of hospitality required the host to provide food, companionship, and security for his guests. God fully supplies his every need and fills his heart with surpassing joy. David believes in the perfect security of God even though his enemies are near.

The table implies the psalmist's personal communion with God. Anointing the head with oil was a mark of special honor and shows divine favor. God exalts all who find refuge in His house. The overflowing cup represents the fullness of God's blessings. The feast in the sight of enemies indicates the safety of God's children in the midst of a hostile world (James 4:7-10).

The goodness and mercy of God are always present with His servant. Goodness supplies our needs and mercy blots out our sins. David seems to have looked back over his difficult and troubled life to remember that God's goodness and mercy had accompanied every step of his way. Based on his friend-

ship with God and the promises of His word, David looked to the future with confidence that these marvelous virtues of God would be with him to the end. No day is too long, too dark or too stormy for the goodness and mercy of God to shine through to those who love Him.

When David says, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," the reference is to Israel (Hebrews 3:5-6). To dwell in God's house means to live with Him among His people. David saw himself as always in fellowship with God. He was in God's house and he expected to be there always (Psalm 27:4). The church is God's house today and if we are righteous, it will one day be delivered up to dwell forever with the Lord in His heavenly home (Revelation 21:1-4).

Psalm 23 describes the Christian's constant communion with God that calms his fears. All whose shepherd is the Lord can have the same assurance as David. The psalm teaches us to trust God for every need of body and soul. It teaches us to depend on God for guidance, to lean on Him in trouble, and to hope in Him for eternity. A thoughtful study of the psalmist's lofty song can help us understand what it means to genuinely say, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

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