

## Psalm 23

"The Lord Is My Shepherd"

Hamilton Smith.

He knows His sheep;

He counts them and He calleth them by name.

He goes before;

They follow as He leads, through flood or flame.

The Twenty-third Psalm unfolds before us the blessings of one who takes his journey, through this world, with the Lord Jesus as his Shepherd.

The Psalm is closely connected with the preceding Psalm, as well as the one that follows. All three Psalms are of outstanding beauty and value, seeing that in each one Christ is the great theme. Psalm 22 presents the Lord Jesus as the Holy Victim offering Himself without spot to God, on the cross, in order to meet the holiness of God and secure His sheep. Psalm 23 presents the Lord Jesus as the Shepherd leading His sheep through a wilderness world. Psalm 24 presents the Lord Jesus as the King — the LORD of hosts — bringing His people into the kingdom glory.

The Psalm opens with the great statement, "The LORD is my Shepherd." Every believer can say, "The Lord is my Saviour"; but have we all definitely submitted to His leading, so that we can each say, "The LORD is my Shepherd"? He has told us that He is "the Shepherd"; but have we each told Him, Thou art "my Shepherd"? Have we not only accepted Him as our Saviour who has died for us to save us from our sins, but also submitted to Him as our Shepherd to lead us home through all our difficulties?

Let us think for a moment of a flock of sheep without a shepherd. They are needy, foolish, weak and timid creatures. If left to themselves to take their way through a wilderness scene, what would happen? Being hungry creatures they would soon starve; being foolish, they would wander and lose their way; being weak, they would grow weary and fall by the way; and being timid, they would flee before the wolf and be scattered.

In contrast, let us ask, What will happen if the sheep take their journey under the guidance of the shepherd? Now, if the sheep are hungry, the shepherd is there to guide them into green pastures; are they foolish, he is there to keep their wandering feet; are they weak, the shepherd is present to gently lead his sheep and carry the lambs; are they timid, he is in front to lead them through the rough valleys, and defend them from every foe.

Plainly, in a flock without the shepherd everything depends upon the sheep, and this must lead to disaster. It is equally plain, that if the shepherd goes before, and the sheep follow, it will mean a safe journey for the sheep with manifold blessing by the way.

This, indeed, is the picture that truly represents the journey of the Christian flock through this world; for does not the Lord, Himself, say that He is "the Shepherd of the sheep," that "He calleth His own sheep by name," that "He goeth before them, and the sheep follow; for they know His voice" (John 10: 2-4).

The Twenty-third Psalm sets before us this blessedness of the Shepherd going before, and the sheep following. We, alas! in our self-confidence, may at times get in front of the Shepherd; or,

growing careless, we may lag far behind. But granted the two conditions — that the Shepherd leads the way, and we follow — we can count upon the support of the Shepherd in every difficulty that we have to meet.

The Psalmist touches upon seven different circumstances that we may be called to face:

1. Our daily needs.
2. Our spiritual needs.
3. Our failure and dullness of soul.
4. The shadow of death.
5. The presence of enemies.
6. The daily round.
7. The prospect of eternity.

All these things may, in varied ways and at different times, cross our paths, and, if left to face them in our own strength, will surely overwhelm us with dread and disaster. Nevertheless, with the Lord as our Shepherd, to lead the way, we can with confidence face the journey that leads to glory, in spite of the difficulties that may lie in the path.

As every blessing in the Psalm flows from the first great statement, "The LORD is my Shepherd," we may very well preface each verse with these words, "The LORD is my Shepherd."

First (v. 1), there are the daily needs of the body. How are they to be met? The Psalmist does not say, "I hold a good office, I shall not want"; or, "I have kind friends who will care for me, I shall not want"; or "I have ample means, I shall not want"; or "I have youth, and health, and abilities, I shall not want."

In all these ways, and many others, the LORD may meet our wants, but of none of these means does the Psalmist speak. He looks beyond all second causes, and providential ways, and he sees the LORD; and with the LORD going before, and he himself following, he can say, "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

Secondly (v. 2), in the wilderness path there are not only temporal wants, but spiritual needs. For the Christian the world around is an empty wilderness. There is nothing in all its passing vanities to feed the soul. Its pastures are dry and barren; its waters, only waters of strife. If "the LORD is my Shepherd," He will lead me into His green pastures and beside the still waters.

How quickly the pleasures of this world pall, even upon its votaries. The spiritual food provided by the Shepherd is ever fresh, for He leads into the "green pastures." Moreover, the Shepherd not only feeds, but satisfies, for He makes His sheep to "lie down in green pastures." No hungry sheep would lie down in the midst of plenty. It would first feed, and when full lie down. Furthermore, the Shepherd leads beside the still waters. The waters of the stream that makes most noise, and show, are ever where the rocks are most abundant and the waters shallow. The still waters are quiet but deep. The Shepherd can calm our souls, and quench our spiritual thirst with the deep things of God far removed from the noisy and shallow strifes that occupy men, and too often distract the Christian.

Thirdly (v. 3), as we pass through this wilderness world we may fail in following the Shepherd; and, apart from actual failure, we may grow weary in the way and dull in our affections. Even so, if "the LORD is my Shepherd" "He restoreth," or "reviveth," my soul. Let us, however, remember it is

"He," Himself, that "restoreth." It almost seems, at times, as if we think that when we have grown weary of our wanderings, we can restore ourselves by our efforts and in our own time. It is not so. We can wander; He alone can restore. Naomi, restored from her wandering in the land of Moab, can say, "I went out," but, she adds, "the LORD hath brought me home again." She says, as it were, "I did the going out, but the LORD did the bringing back." Blessed be His Name, He can, and He does, restore. Were it not so, the people of God on earth would be little more than a great company of backsliders.

Moreover, He does not only restore, but having restored, He leads us into "the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." Alas! how often we may even in sincerity and zeal turn aside into paths of self-will, that are inconsistent with His Name, only to prove how little, in practice, we allow the LORD to lead us as our Shepherd. The path of righteousness, in which He leads, is a "narrow way" in which there is no room for the self-confidence of the flesh, and can only be trodden as we have the LORD as our Shepherd before us. Even so an Apostle found, when with real sincerity and zeal, and yet with great self-confidence, he said, "Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death."

Fourthly (v. 4), we have to face "the valley of the shadow of death." Even if we are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, and have not personally to pass through death, yet, again and again, we have to face that dark valley as, one by one, our loved ones are taken from us. Then, in a wider sense, what is our passage through this world but a journey through the valley of the shadow of death? For, over all there sounds the toll of the passing bell.

Nevertheless, if the LORD is our Shepherd, we can say with the Psalmist, "I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me." The Lord can say, "If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death" (John 8: 51). The Lord does not say, he will not pass through it, but he shall not see it. Those who stand round the death-bed of a dying saint may indeed see death, but the one that is actually stepping down into the dark valley sees JESUS. Even so, if we have to pass that way it is only passing "through." And the journey through is very short; for is it not written, "Absent from the body . . . present with the Lord." And in that passage through the valley, not only is the Lord with us, but He is present with His rod and His staff — the rod to drive off every foe, the staff to support us in all our weakness.

Fifthly (v. 5), in this wilderness world we are surrounded by enemies that would rob us of the enjoyment of our blessings, and hinder our spiritual progress. But the LORD is our Shepherd who prepares a feast for us in the very presence of our enemies. And not only so, He prepares His people for the feast, for He anoints the head with oil, and not only fills the cup, but makes it run over. He does a great deal more for us than ever we did for Him in the days of His flesh; for, though one of the Pharisees desired Him that He would eat with him, and in wonderful grace the Lord sat down to meat in the Pharisee's house, yet, He has to say, "My head with oil thou didst not anoint."

Sixthly (v. 6), there is the daily path that we have to tread "all the days" of our lives. Each day of our life brings its ceaseless round of duties, difficulties, and circumstances, small and great. But if we follow the Shepherd we shall find that "goodness and mercy" will follow us. Were we nearer the Lord, following hard after the Shepherd, should we not with clearer vision trace His hand in the little things of the daily life, and discover therein His goodness and mercy?

Seventhly, and lastly, looking beyond the days of our life into the great eternity that stretches beyond we see that if the LORD is our Shepherd, it is, not only to lead us through the wilderness, but, at last to bring us home to "dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." For the Christian it is the Father's house; there to dwell beyond all bodily wants, with every spiritual longing met, where no failure can intrude, no hearts grow cold, no shadow of death can come, no enemy approach, but where, indeed, the cup will run over. "The days of my life" will end "in the house of the LORD for ever." In that great

home gathering not one of His sheep will be missing. "Those that Thou gayest Me I have kept, and none of them is lost" (John 17: 12). Long years ago the saintly Rutherford wrote, "What think ye of His love? What of these feet that went up and down the world to seek His Father's lost sheep, pierced with nails? The eyes that were oft lift up to heaven unto God in prayer, wearied with tears? His head pierced with thorns? The face that is fairer than the sun, all maimed, and the hair pulled out of His cheeks? He took shame and gave you glory. He took the curse, and gave you the blessing, He took death, and gave you life . . . As the Chief Shepherd, He shall make an account of all His lambs, and tell His Father, these be all My sheep. I went through woods and waters, and briers, and thorns, to gather them in, and My feet were pricked and My hands and My side pierced, ere I could get a grip of them; but now here they are."

Remembering all that He has done for us in the past, when, as the Good Shepherd, He gave His life for the sheep; knowing all that He will yet do for us when He comes as the Chief Shepherd, we may look up into His face during our present wilderness journey and say,

"THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD."

We follow in His footsteps;

What if our feet be torn?

Where He has marked the pathway

All hail the briar and thorn.