

The Shepherd Psalm

Psalm 23.

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There are wonderful statements in Psalm 23, but all flow from the first great statement — the most wonderful of all — "The Lord is my Shepherd."

There are temporal needs at every turn, but "The Lord is my Shepherd"; therefore, "I shall not want" (1).

There are spiritual needs, but "The Lord is my Shepherd"; He will lead me into green pastures, and beside the still waters (2).

There may be failure, but "The Lord is my Shepherd"; He will restore my soul (3).

There may be the valley of the shadow of death to face, but "The Lord is my Shepherd"; I will fear no evil (4),

There may be enemies to meet, but "The Lord is my Shepherd"; a table will be prepared for me in the presence of mine enemies (5).

There is eternity before me, but "The Lord is my Shepherd," and, at last, He will bring me to dwell in the house of the Lord for ever (6).

It is one thing to say "The Lord is *the* Shepherd," and quite another to say "The Lord is my Shepherd." The first is a matter of knowledge; the last is a question of experience. "The Lord is my Shepherd" is the language of one who has proved the Lord in the varied circumstances of his pathway, and gladly submits to His leading.

First of all we do well to consider the Blesser. The safety, comfort, and blessing of the flock entirely depend upon the care, wisdom and devotedness of the Shepherd. Who is my Shepherd? The LORD — Jehovah. And Jehovah of the Old Testament is Jesus of the New Testament. He is the Man of the twenty-second Psalm, but also the Man of the twenty-fourth Psalm. In the twenty-second, He is the forsaken Man, in the twenty-fourth, He is the accepted Man. In the twenty-second, "His strength is dried up like a potsherd." In the twenty-fourth, He is "strong and mighty." In the twenty-second, He is "a worm and no man." In the twenty-fourth, He is "the Lord of hosts" and "the King of glory." This is the One who is "my Shepherd." One who has "descended first into the lower parts of the earth." "Who has ascended far above all heavens, that He might fill all things." He has filled every position in which a man can be found, from the utmost distance into which sin can put a man, to the highest glory which God has purposed for a man. He has trodden every step between these vast extremes, and well He knows the rough places and the solitary way. With such a Shepherd we need fear no evil, nor wonder at any blessing He bestows.

"I shall not want."

With such a Shepherd, the Psalmist argues that he cannot want. And yet, if we look at this world with its many wants, and failing supplies, it is no small thing to say, "I shall not want." But with a great Shepherd we can say great things. It has been said, "We shall not want, not because we are sheep, but because He is our Shepherd. This conclusion flows, not from what we are to Him, but from what He is to us."

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters."

Not only does He provide for our temporal needs, but He satisfies us with spiritual blessings. He would set me free from earthly cares to fill my soul with heavenly joys. He not only brings His sheep to green pastures — pastures of tender grass — but there He makes them lie down. No hungry sheep will lie down in green pastures: the hungry sheep will feed in the pastures of tender grass, but the satisfied sheep will lie down and rest. So our Shepherd not only provides us with spiritual nourishment, but He can fill our souls with satisfaction and rest. He that cometh unto Me, shall never hunger."

Moreover, not only does our Shepherd provide nourishment and rest, He also ministers refreshment to our souls. "He leadeth me beside the still waters." Not the running streams that dry up, but the deep, still waters of the well. In Genesis 21, we read of a poor woman wandering in the wilderness of Beersheba, the water in her bottle spent, weeping beside her dying child; suddenly she heard the angel's voice, for we read, "God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water." In that dreary wilderness, face to face with death, God led that poor, outcast sheep beside the deep waters of quietness.

Like Israel of old, who forsook "the fountain of living waters and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that could hold no water," we, too, often seek satisfaction in earthly things, only to find that all earthly springs run dry. If only we could trust the Lord not only to save our souls, but to satisfy our hearts, He would lead us into the green pastures that never wither, and beside the still waters that never run dry.

"He restoreth my soul."

Alas! we often turn aside. And after a season of deepest spiritual blessing we are in the greatest danger. We enjoy the green pastures and the still waters and then we wander. In Matthew 26 we find the world in an uproar: chief priests, scribes and elders, plotting to kill Jesus. But in the upper-room all is quietness and peace. The Lord has been leading His weak and weary sheep into green pastures and beside still waters, as He spoke to them of the Father's home and His coming to receive them to Himself, and they close that time of sweet fellowship by singing a hymn. But immediately the Lord warns His sheep that, on that same night, all would be offended because of Him, and every one would be scattered. Singing a hymn in His company one hour, and offended and scattered the next. So we read they all "forsook Him and fled." But if they wander, He restores. Peter breaks down and denies the Lord, but he cannot restore himself. The Lord's prayer for Peter, the Lord's look upon Peter, the Lord's private interview with Peter, brought about his restoration. Says restored Naomi, "I went out," but she has to add, "The Lord hath brought me home again."

"He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

We wander into paths of sin, but when He restores He leads us into paths of righteousness for His name's sake. He will lead us so to walk as to glorify His name. His name expresses what He is, it stands for all that is holy even in the sight of His enemies, for they have to own they find no fault in Him. In leading His sheep He makes good that name. He leads in paths of righteousness that accord with His name.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."

The paths of righteousness may lead into the valley of the shadow of death. It was so with the martyrs. They suffered death rather than sin. They resisted unto blood, striving against sin. Why did the Psalmist fear no evil? He gives us four reasons to dispel our fears in the presence of death.

First, he was only going "through" the valley. We do not fear when we go into a tunnel, because we know we do not go in never more to come out. We are going "through" and on the other side is the bright sunshine. The valley indeed is dark, for over it is the shadow of death, but on the other side is the everlasting day — the morning without clouds.

Second, we must not forget it is but the "shadow" of death. When the good Shepherd took His lonely way down into the dark valley of death it was to bear the "substance" of death in all its terror, as the wages of sin. If the believer is called to go through the valley it is only the "shadow" we have to meet. The penalty of death has been paid, the sting of death is gone.

Still, sheep are poor, timid things and easily frightened, even of shadows. Well, there is a third thing to silence our fears. When the good Shepherd took the way of the valley there was no man with Him.

"Alone He bare the cross,
Alone its grief sustained."

But if we pass the way of the valley we have company, and such company — the One who has already been through death's dark flood journeys with us. Well may we say, "I will fear no evil; for THOU ART WITH ME."

But there is yet a fourth reason why we need fear no evil, for the Psalmist says, "Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." The rod is for defence, and the staff is for support. Does the enemy make a last attack upon the believer as he enters the valley of death? Then let not the believer fear for the Lord is there with His *rod* to defend His sheep, and drive off the enemy. Is the sheep fearful by reason of his weakness in the presence of death? Let him not be discouraged, for the Lord is there with *His staff* to support.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

Some of the sheep may never have to take the way of the valley, but even so, they will have enemies to face, and in the presence of the enemy the Lord can uphold His people. In spite of the enemies, yea, in the very presence of the enemies, the Lord prepares a table for His people. We have a Shepherd who can provide for, and sustain, His sheep in spite of all that man can do, so that we may boldly say, "The Lord is my Helper, and I will not fear what man can do unto me" (Heb. 13: 5, 6). But there is more, not only can He sustain me in the presence of mine enemies, but He can make me rejoice, for He anoints my head with oil — "the oil of gladness" (Ps. 45: 7). And when the heart is filled with gladness it overflows in praise, like a cup filled to overflowing.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."

With such a Shepherd what other conclusion can we reach? The Lord goes before, the sheep follow after, and goodness and mercy bring up the rear. How blessed that goodness and mercy should follow behind, just, indeed, where they are wanted; for there are weak sheep, and sick sheep, and lame sheep, and the weak and sickly sheep lag behind, and follow afar off, but goodness and mercy will pick them up. How do we deal with the weak and sickly sheep? Alas! too often like the shepherds of Israel, of whom the prophet had to say, "With force and with cruelty have ye ruled them" (Ezek. 34: 4); but with goodness and mercy the Lord deals with them. If we cannot count upon the tender mercies of one another, this at least we know, the goodness and mercy *of the Lord* will follow us all the days of our

life.

And when the days of this passing life have run their course, what of the far future that stretches into eternity? The Psalmist closes with an answer of ringing certainty, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." This is the glorious end of a great beginning. For what can be greater, in this world, than to go through it with the Lord Himself for our Shepherd. And if "the Lord is my Shepherd" it must follow that not only He will lead me through this wilderness world, but He will bring me at last into the glory where He Himself is gone.

"For the path where our Saviour has gone,
Has led up to His Father and God,
To the place where He's now on the throne,
And His strength shall be ours on the road.
Till then, 'tis the path Thou hast trod,
Our delight and our comfort shall be;
We're content with Thy staff and Thy rod,
Till with Thee all Thy glory we see."

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