

THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM

This psalm is the most beloved and the most often used of all the psalms. Perhaps there are more expositions of it in existence than of any other. The saints of God have always delighted in it. Orthodox Jews love it, and the unorthodox, so-called reformed Jews, also make use of it in their synagogues. It has often been pointed out that in the preceding psalm the Messiah, Christ our Lord, is seen as the good shepherd. Thus he announced Himself when on earth. "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth His life for the sheep." Joh 10:11

The suffering of the good shepherd as He gave His life for the sheep is wonderfully foretold in many Old Testament passages.

Jeremiah spoke of Israel being gathered by the Messiah Christ as a shepherd gathers and protects His sheep. "Hear the word of the Lord, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock. Jer 31:10

Ezekiel spoke of the day when the Great Shepherd would seek out His sheep and deliver them from where they have been scattered. "As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day." Eze 34:12

The New Testament also describes Christ as a loving and caring Shepherd. "Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory forever and ever." Heb 13:20-21

The Twenty-third Psalm first revealed Christ as the Great Shepherd of the sheep Whom the God of Peace would provide as Israel's Shepherd—Christ the Messiah. Without the work of Christ there could be no Twenty-third Psalm. Without a Christ who died for our sins there could be no comfort for guilty sinners. The twenty-third Psalm announces the gracious provisions made possible by the risen Christ. He who denies that Christ died as the good Shepherd for our sins has no claim on the comfort of the Christ. Nor has the unsaved a right to say, "the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

Before we quote the text and give a very brief explanation of the famous Shepherd Psalm, we must point out an often neglected truth. While we apply this psalm, and apply it rightly, to ourselves, we must not forget that Christ is not alone our Shepherd, but He will be the Shepherd of a future Israel.

Recall Zechariah's vision of Joshua, representing Israel before the Throne of God. "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a

burning stick snatched from the fire?" Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you." Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by. Zec 3:1-5

The interpretation of David's Twenty-third Psalm to Israel and their covenant promises have been mostly overlooked. Throughout the Old Testament the Messiah is spoken of as the Shepherd of His people, Israel. Jacob was the first who used this expression. He was himself, like David, a shepherd, keeping flocks. In blessing Joseph (that blessed type of Christ) he said, "Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day." Gen 48:15

And when on his dying bed the aged patriarch mentioned the shepherd again in connection with Joseph, he said, "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, Gen 49:22-24

And so we often sing of a Rock in Whom we have been safely tucked away:

Rock of Ages cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;

In Psalm 80 we read again of the Shepherd of Israel. "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock: Thou that dwellest between the Cherubim, shine forth." Psa 80:1

Isaiah also mentions the Lord as Israel's Shepherd who lovingly gathers them in His arms. "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. Isa 40:11

Micah calls Israel "the flock of His inheritance. "Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, which lives by itself in a forest, in fertile pasturelands. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in days long ago. As in the days when you came out of Egypt, I will show them my wonders." Mic 7:14-15

One of the greatest prophecies of the Shepherd of Israel is found in the Book of Ezekiel. A whole chapter is devoted to this theme. In this chapter the false shepherds of Israel are exposed. The condition of the sheep of Israel is described; they are a scattered flock and become the prey of wild beasts. "Therefore tell those who cover the walls with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?" "Therefore this is what the

Sovereign Lord says: In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury. I will tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the LORD. So I will spend my wrath against the wall and against those who covered it with whitewash. I will say to you, "The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it."

Eze 13:11-15

When the Shepherd and the Stone of Israel appeared on earth in the form of a servant, He came for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He sent His messengers to none but the sheep of Israel. He had great compassion for them "because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

In the gospel of John we hear Him speak of these sheep who come forth from the Jewish fold who received Him not; and thus the Shepherd of Israel was rejected by His own nation. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not." Joh 1:11

In the next verse John mentions other sheep who will hear His voice and become one flock (the Church). "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." Joh 1:12

Some future day Christ will again act as the compassionate Shepherd of a believing Israel. He who was rejected, as Joseph was rejected, will come again and gather the outcast of Israel. He will gather them as a shepherd gathers the sheep. At the Second Advent, the believing remnant of Israel will break forth in singing, and the Twenty-third Psalm will most likely have a prominent place.

And now we turn to the psalm itself. It is best divided into two sections, each with three verses. Over the first three verses I put the word "assurance"; over the second three verses the word "comfort." The authorized version can hardly be improved upon. For purposes of this overview I do not care to disturb the working of the KJV, which for over four hundred years has brought unspeakable assurance and comfort to millions of God's children.

And now for verses 1-3. These three verses are designed to provide assurance to the believer.

I. Assurance. (Verses 1-3)

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

To be able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd," one must belong to Him and be one of His sheep. By nature we are not. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Isa 53:6

Christ, the Shepherd, came to seek and to save that which was lost. In the parable of the lost sheep He speaks of Himself as the seeking Shepherd. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? Yes, and when He finds it, He puts it on His shoulders, rejoicing. "Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'" Luk 15:3-6

Notice that Jesus does not take His found sheep from His shoulder till home is reached. He carries His sheep upon His shoulder--a symbol of power; He carries them in His bosom--a symbol of His never ending love. It is not the sheep which is lost that seeks the Shepherd, but it is the Shepherd Who seeks the sheep. He comes and seeks us individually, and when we believe on Him as the Shepherd who died in our stead, we become His sheep and He becomes our Shepherd. "For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls." 1Pe 2:25

Ergo, we who know Him and belong to Him, can say, "The Lord is my Shepherd;" we can add in full assurance of faith, "I shall not want." He is the all-mighty, the all-wise, the all-loving, the never-changing Lord. Neither His power, nor His love can ever diminish. In His Shepherd's love He provides for all His sheep; in His Shepherd's care He watches over them. How different our lives would be as His children if our minds were ever centered upon Him as our Shepherd and if we could continually expect all things from Him!

All we need is found in Him. As we say, "He is my Shepherd," we should be delivered from all anxiety and from all care. If we worry and are anxious with such a One who loves and cares, it is because we do not trust Him fully. Faith should say, "I cannot want."

Next we have the phrase, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." Pasture and rest He gives to His sheep. Christ paraphrases the phrase in the Gospel of John. "I am the door; by me if any man enter in he shall be saved, and shall go in and out and find pasture." Joh 10:9

The phrase "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures," describes a peaceful scene. A flock of sheep quietly grazing, and then, after eating lying down to chew the cud. The sheep like other ruminants eat, rest, and then the food comes up to be chewed again. The contented picture of sheep at rest, chewing the cud, shows what a pleasure it must give them. And so God provides a place where we can feed. The place the Lord has provided for His sheep is the local church and the food upon which we are to ruminate is His Word. In the local church the pastor-teacher presents the Word and the Holy Spirit provides for each believer just exactly what is needed. To eat of Him and to drink of Him, this is our pasture. It is in that pasture we are to absorb and assimilate the Word until it becomes an integral part of ourselves. He also leads beside the still waters. There we find as His sheep, complete refreshment. He supplies the pasture; He gives the rest and He leads beside the quiet waters.

And now for the phrase, "He restoreth my soul. Some have changed the word "restore" to "refresh." But this is incorrect, for the Hebrew word *Shuv* means "to turn about, to be converted," or "to change one's mind." The sheep of Christ often wander away from the Shepherd; they stray into by-paths and then having wandered into the desert of the world, where there is no pasture for the sheep of Christ, they lose their sense of fellowship with Him. We constantly need to be reminded of our proclivity to sin--the song writer perhaps said it best:

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;

Some misguided Christians who claim to possess perfect sanctification through some kind of an experience, deny this tendency of the human heart. This delusion is often followed by the disobedience of those unscriptural perfectionists. All spiritually minded believers know, we all have a tendency to wander from His side. But when we have strayed from Him He brings us back by His gracious power, and the result of this restoration is that we are led afresh in the paths of righteousness. He is the righteous, Holy Lord; that is His name, and His sheep, for whom He died, for whom He cares and for whom He never leaves nor forsakes, must follow Him in the same paths of righteousness which the Shepherd walked while on earth. To perform this formidable task God has provided from His love a perfect plan for each member of His forever family.

He to rescue me from danger;
Interposed His precious blood.

His still small voice is always there urging us to return to the fold, not simply when we are conscious of straying but even when we are not aware of having wandered away. The dust of evil settles easily, and without giving alarm, in a world in which Satan is "the prince of the power of the air"; in Satan's world the mirror of conscience often becomes quickly dimmed. Thus our constant need of recourse to Him Who, girded and ready, desires to use the water and towel on our behalf, and whose word is, "Except I wash thee, thou has no part with Me." When our Lord did this, it was not because the disciples knew of the need but because He knew it! The words with which we come to Him are not, "Lord, I have searched and tried myself--and I have seen," but rather: "Search me, O Lord, and try me; and see if there be any wicked way in me."

The phrase, "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake" strikes at the heart of the reason for our being. Like our beloved Christ we too must understand the role of the subordinate "Nevertheless Father, not my will but thine be done." To fully understand we are the clay and He is the potter, is to understand our role in the appeal phase of the angelic conflict. In time we are witnesses for the prosecution. Our daily adherence to the overtures of our righteous God make for Satan's downfall. The Father's leading in the paths of righteousness is not for our sakes but for His.

Verses 4-6 have been provided for our comfort.

II. Comfort (Verses 4-6)

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.

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

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

While the valley of the shadow of death includes, as it is generally stated, a crossing of the golden bridge from time to eternity, it also has a wider application. The shadow of death includes much of that we experience in time. Life is certainly no picnic. As they say, "Old age ain't for sissies." In this world you shall have tribulation. "For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps." 1Pe 2:21

In the midst of these earthly scenes of uncertainty and change, the believer can say in utmost confidence, "I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Come what may I belong to Him Who is my Shepherd and He will take care of His sheep!

Let trials and afflictions come, let sorrows be multiplied, I will fear no evil, for under His loving care evil cannot reach me, and if evil comes in the form of testing, it too must be good.

Metaphysical cults like to make much of this sentence, "I will fear no evil." Fear is the common and the most subtle expression of distrust. Is He to be distrusted? Fear is unworthy of a true believer, for it dishonors Him. "I will trust and not be afraid," this should be our daily aim. And if we should have to enter the valley of the shadow of death--there is no need to fear when the silver cord is about to break. The Shepherd of the sheep passed through death; He conquered death and the grave and triumphantly the child of God can say, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?" With Him alongside, the dying believer does not see the opening of the jaws of death, but the opening of the gates of glory. Many times pastors have consoled those who were facing serious illness, or a serious operation, by urging them to remember, "I will fear no evil for Thou art with me." His rod and His staff are our comfort. The Shepherd carries a rod and a staff of authority. Moses' rod stretched across the sea, parted the waves and made a way through the sea. His rod is still outstretched in behalf of His people. The staff which our Shepherd has for His sheep today is His Word; on this we can lean and trust."

Then the scene changes. The Shepherd has a table spread for His sheep in the presence of his enemies. Here we can think of the Lord's table with the bread and wine, as symbols of His love. As we worship at that table we remember Him, the good Shepherd who died for the sheep. We show forth the Lord's death. And while we remember Him there are onlookers. The Lord Himself is there and angels behold the worship. But our enemies too are looking. The table spread, telling forth His conquering love, is

the table of victory. Here triumphantly the heart can sing: "If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God who justifies. Rom 8:31-33

At this table then we can look forward to the final victory when the Good Shepherd of the sheep will appear with crowns in hand. The head is anointed with oil, the symbol of election. Just as David was elected by Samuel to become Israel's king, so are we elected to be royalty. And with our election comes all of the overflowing abundance, overflowing joy and blessings which follow royalty.

Then eternity comes before us, the blessed thought with which this psalm closes and with which the next begins. Goodness and mercy will surely follow all the days of our lives. Yea in Him, under Him and with Him all must be goodness and mercy. And then the phrase, "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

This thought was the greatest for a Jewish believer, for it expresses the thought of being in His presence in His dwelling place. The house of the Lord for us is "the Father's House" with its many mansions. He, Who promised I will come again, will come to take us home to be forever with Him. There we shall neither hunger, nor thirst any more. For the Lamb of God Who is on the throne will feed us and wipe away all tears from our eyes.

Perhaps David by penning this psalm provided impetus to Paul's New Testament declaration, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rom 8:38

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. What shall I not want? I shall not want pasture, rest, drink, quietness, restoration, guidance, companionship, comfort, victory, the Holy Spirit and overflowing joy--I shall not want anything in time and I shall not want anything in eternity.