

## "The Lord Is My Shepherd"

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...". Does this sound familiar? Of course, it's the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, one of the most familiar parts of the Bible. Let's do this: I'll read it – and if you remember parts of it, follow along with me:

"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. 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 my 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 for ever."

Can't you feel the reassuring and calming effect of this ancient psalm? This psalm is commonly attributed to King David of Israel. It comes out of a rural, pastoral setting, a much earlier time in history (somewhere around 1,000 B.C.). And yet, there is something enduring about this psalm that allows it to speak to every time and place.

Someone has pointed out that the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm represents a "positive, hopeful, faith approach to life". In this psalm the writer asks for nothing, but simply affirms his faith in God without reservation. Don't we admire people who seem to have this "faith approach" to life? A quiet, steady trust in God? So let's examine this psalm more thoroughly.

**"The Lord is my shepherd..."** (Psalm 23:1). Ever met a shepherd? Know any shepherds? Nancy and I saw shepherds when we visited the Holy Lands. Seeing these shepherds was like going back in time. They looked like they probably did in Biblical times. Other than, they knew how to gravitate to the tour bus, hoping to get some money.

When we think of shepherds we might think of Sunday School Christmas pageants, kids or guys donned in bathrobes – often nervous or reluctant to play the part. But a real shepherd was a *rugged hero* in Bible times: devoted to the flock, exposed to all kinds of dangers – individuals even willing to risk their lives to protect the sheep.

I can imagine David, who had been a shepherd, in a quiet moment of reflection, thinking of all he does for his sheep, and how he cares for them. And he realizes *that's the way God is towards him!* So he begins: "The Lord is *my* shepherd."

What's the message of this psalm? What does it mean if the Lord is *our* shepherd? ***It means God provides for us.*** "The Lord is my shepherd, *I shall not want...*" (Psalm 23:1). Some translations have it, "I lack nothing." God provides our needs. God will provide for us if we only trust Him. When I was a young man I went through something that just devastated me. I felt crushed, like I just couldn't go on. I got into bed, and took my Bible from the night stand, and did something I don't necessarily recommend! I turned at random to somewhere in the Bible, hoping to find a word from God for that situation. (I remember the old story of the man who was very depressed and despondent. So he got out his Bible, closed his eyes, and turned at

random to a page. And his eyes fell on the words, "Judas went and hanged himself." Well, that didn't exactly help, so he tried again, and found these words: "Go thou and do likewise!"). Anyway, I flipped my Bible open at random, and I read the words, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Well, God got me through that difficult time. God provided, and life became good again.

This isn't saying God will give us everything our little heart desires! But God will provide the things we *need* if we trust Him as our shepherd.

Other imagery in the psalm conveys how God *provides* for His children. "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters ("waters of stillness" "waters of rest"); he restores my soul" (Psalm 23:2-3a). Sheep begin grazing about 4 o'clock in the morning. By later morning (10 a.m. or so) the sun might be hot, the sheep are warm, and they're thirsty and tired. The shepherd knows sheep shouldn't drink when they're hot, nor when their stomach is filled with undigested grass. So he *makes them* lie down in a cool, soft spot. There they chew on a cud, which is nature's way of letting digestion take place. Then later, he leads them to a quiet, still pool of water where they can drink. In this way the sheep's strength can be renewed and restored. Isn't that a beautiful picture of how God can renew and restore our life and soul!

Life has a way of draining us, wearing us down, doesn't it? Where do you need rest...or a renewing of your soul and spirit? The Lord wants to provide for us – to refresh and restore our souls. Does the Lord *make us* lie down in green pastures to rest? I think most of the time we have to *choose* to disengage from the hustle and bustle of the day, *decide* to slow down and seek Him. But maybe sometimes God *allows things to happen to us* to slow us down, and help us look upward, so He can restore spiritual health to us.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29).

*The Lord can give us rest, restore our souls, and provide every one of our needs!*

***Then too, this matchless psalm reminds us that God leads us in right paths.*** "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Psalm 23:3). It can also read, "He leads me in right paths."

Sheep do not see very well – maybe 10-15 yards ahead. They are also rather stupid! They can walk along a path with their head down, nibbling away, and literally walk right over a cliff. A few years ago, near the Iraq border, a large flock of sheep were grazing. The lead sheep took off and jumped off a cliff. He was followed by the rest. The first 400 sheep died in the fall (about 90 feet drop). The remaining 1100 survived due to the soft downy cushion of the bodies of the first 400. (By the way, where were the shepherds? They all decided to go to breakfast together at the same time).

Aren't you glad we humans aren't blind and stupid like sheep! Right! Think of some of the dumb stuff we do, the poor decisions we make, the paths in life we choose that lead us to unhappy places and miserable outcomes! There was a young man on a talk show who had run up a \$60,000 credit card debt, although he only made \$20,000 a year. He admitted, "It was just easy. I didn't think about the consequences. I would see something I wanted and charge it. I knew I was getting in over my head but I got so much pleasure from being able to buy what I like I forgot all about where I was heading." Sounds kind of *sheep-ish*, doesn't it!

Most of the time if we lose our way and wind up on the wrong path of life, it's not because of some one-time blatant, obvious, terrible sin. Rather, we nibble away at little moral compromises, little daily choices, that nudge us in the wrong direction, until one day we wake up and realize we are far down the wrong road.

We have a shepherd God who wants to lead us in right paths, paths of righteousness. We can begin the day with a prayer, "Lead me, O Lord today, in the right paths." We can intersperse the day as we make decisions with a prayer, "Help me to make a choice right now that will lead me in paths of righteousness."

God *provides* for us...God leads us in *right paths*...***Psalm 23 also speaks of God's protection.*** "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" (Psalm 23:4). Valley of the shadow of death could be "valley of deep darkness" "deep gloom".

Sheep are defenseless animals. A lion can defend itself. A rattlesnake can defend itself. The porcupine and skunk can defend themselves. But not sheep. Shepherds would carry a *rod* – a heavy club, perhaps 2 or 3 feet long, to ward off robbers or beasts of prey. The shepherd also carried a *staff* – a thin pole about 8 feet long, turned into a crook at the end. It could be used for discipline, to lay over a sheep's back when the sheep would begin to wander. This staff could also be used when a sheep lost its footing, perhaps hanging on the edge of a cliff, or if it was stuck in thick underbrush. The shepherd could put the crook over the chest of the sheep and lift it to safety. "Rod" and "staff" were symbols of the shepherd's *protection* of the sheep.

Other imagery speaks of God's protection: "Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over" (Psalm 23:5). There was an odd custom in the ancient East. Even if a person was being hunted down by enemies, that person would be safe inside a tent – or even touching the tent - of another person, one's host. The picture in this verse is that of enemies standing around a tent, while the person is safe inside, eating and drinking to their heart's delight! All while the host is anointing the person's head with oil (a custom back then) and brings refreshment in a cup that is overflowing!

*God's divine protection in our life!* Like sheep, sometimes we're pretty vulnerable and defenseless, aren't we? We walk through valleys of deep gloom and deep darkness. It's that illness that comes on us, and lays us low. We're scammed, or hacked, or cheated, or robbed. The accident that changes our circumstances, maybe changes our life forever. That burden or

responsibility laid on us that just seems to overwhelming. Some of these valleys may have been laid on us at birth: the valley of poverty, or abuse, or some disability. Other times we are born into green pastures, but we dig our own valleys through addictions, or ignorance, or hate, or stubborn self-will. We need a shepherd who will walk with us through these valleys, who will use His club to beat off those things in life that would destroy us, and use His staff to lift us up and keep us going.

This doesn't mean we will never have to face suffering, or go through difficult trials. This is just life. Life has its inescapable deep and dark valleys. But we don't have to walk through the valley alone! And we don't have to face these things in our own strength! *And nothing eternally can harm us, or separate us from God, if we trust Him and hold on to Him.*

The Apostle Paul summed it up well: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Psalms 23 ends with further testimony of God's ability to care for us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalm 23:6). Literally this says: Dwell in the house of the Lord "for length of days" or "as long as I live."

King David trusted that God's provision and protection wouldn't be a hit or miss kind of thing. It wouldn't last a little while then leave. It would last as long as he lives. 1,000 years later, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, would stretch that out even further. Jesus promised those who believe in Him and follow Him, "I am the good shepherd ...my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them *eternal life*, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:11, 27-28). *It doesn't get much better than that!*

What a marvelous psalm! *No wonder it has endured! A psalm that represents a positive, faith approach to life!*

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