

MEDITATIONS

On the 23rd Psalm



A STUDY of the Psalms is most interesting, as well as inspiring. Intense feelings are expressed here, and we can become personally and emotionally involved as we read. However, when we are in this book, we should always keep in mind that we are in the Old Testament. Many concepts and feelings are found here that are not compatible with the New Testament (God's completed and final revelation). The Old Testament promised a land flowing with milk and honey (material, temporal blessings), whereas the New Testament puts the primary emphasis upon the spiritual and the eternal. Characteristic of the Old Testament, in the Psalms vengeance (even personal vengeance) and the law of sin and death are ever before us. Yet the Psalms are highly spiritual and touch our souls. As we study we can profitably make a twofold application of them, first drink-

ing in the words, as they are written,* and then by making a New Testament application of them.

Of all the Scripture making up the Bible there are two references that stand out as perhaps being the most loved and well known. They are the 23rd Psalm and John 3:16. In this article let us spend a little time with the 23rd Psalm. Such informal meditation is good for the soul.

**VERSE 1: "The LORD
is my shepherd; I shall not want."**

Palestine was a land that was a simple pastoral society from which David emerged to become the king of Israel. In growing up David himself had experienced being a young shepherd boy in taking care of his father's sheep. He was personally qualified from a life of experience, both physically and spiritually, to make all of the impressive applications we read in this psalm. He speaks from his point of view.

The Shepherd

David said, "The LORD is my shepherd? " The word "LORD" represents the great, unspeakable name of God. The Jews respected the name so highly that they would not even say it, but used another word in its place. Inasmuch as the early written Hebrew language had no vowel markings, with time the exact pronunciation was lost (not ever being uttered). Our English word "LORD" (capital letters) stands for this name. It is thought that Jehovah, or Yahweh, comes close to the pronunciation. Regardless, it is God's personal name, and it refers to Him as the Eternal, Self-Existent One. It represents Him in covenant relationship to His people.

"My Shepherd"

David said that such a Being is "my shepherd." God is a personal God, and personal pronouns are found 17 times in this psalm expressing our close relationship to such a shepherd. The great God of eternity was the Shepherd of the lowly shepherd boy as well as the Shepherd of the king of

Israel. Isaiah 57:15 reads, “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

Perhaps this story is not new, but it serves as a good illustration. A well-known actor had come to town and to the delight of everyone was giving public recitations of outstanding literary pieces. Among the recitations he gave was the 23rd Psalm. His presentation was flawless. Everyone was highly impressed. However, at the gathering an old saint of God was recognized who had been known to recite the 23rd Psalm at times. Upon the friendly prodding of the people, and the consent of the actor, he was finally coached into giving his recitation, too. As all eyes were fixed upon him, with deep feeling and emotion he began, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside still waters?” On and on he continued, emphasizing each personal pronoun as his own until he had finished the great psalm. As he sat down everyone was visibly moved, including the actor. Without hesitation, and with exclamation, the actor responded, “I know the psalm, but this man knows the shepherd!” Yes, “The LORD is *my* shepherd.” He is personal.

“I Shall Not Want”

Now having asserted that “the LORD is my shepherd,” the psalmist does not hesitate to say, “I shall not want.” The rest of the psalm follows to show what he has in mind. Although so much of the Old Testament has to do with the material, the thoughts are enlarged to include more than that here. There was no want of the presence of God in every circumstance of life, whether good or bad. It is easy to go from here to the New Testament where Jesus says, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:10,11). The

apostle Peter later wrote that God had “given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him [knowing him] that hath called us to glory and virtue” (II Peter 1:3). Then taking the figure a step further (the term Lamb is used), Revelation 7:17 projects us into eternity, “For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”

**VERSE 2: “He maketh me
to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.”**

This certainly is a refreshing scene that now comes before us. The good shepherd, considering the needs of his sheep, has brought them into choice pastures of tender, green grass. Here in contented repose they lie down. From this proximity they are led beside the still waters. A most beautiful picture of tranquillity, quietness, and well-being presents itself to us. It is no wonder that in the next verse the psalmist says, “He restoreth my soul.”

From here it is easy for our thoughts to jump to the New Testament where our Lord said, “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls [you will be rested up, refreshed], For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light [mild, pleasant]” (Matthew 11:28-30). Then, as pointed out, this thought is carried over into eternity when we read that he “shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17).

**VERSE 3: “He restoreth
my soul: he leadeth me in the paths
of righteousness for his name’s sake.”**

As life has been restored and invigorated, he leads his sheep on “in the paths of righteousness for his name’s

sake.” Blessings received, whether material or spiritual, should not be for naught. God leads us in deliberate paths for an expressed purpose or intention, “for his name’s sake.” The bottom line to all human experience is whether it will bring glory to the name of God or not. By deliberately leading us in “paths of righteousness,” the LORD purposely seeks to encourage and accomplish this.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name” (Matthew 6:9). God’s name is hallowed and His glory is accomplished when His attributes are reflected in us. But there is a problem. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Even in the Old Testament the prophet Isaiah said, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way?” (Isaiah 53:6). However, the rest of this prophetic verse in Isaiah arouses hope, “And the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” That is where the good shepherd of the New Testament enters the picture. Jesus said, “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10; Luke 15:1-7). John had much to say about Jesus being the good shepherd (John 10:11-18). The good shepherd would give his life for the sheep. With grace and forgiven sins, we again have a chance to glorify His name. Through him we are led into the paths of righteousness “for his name’s sake” as he goes before us.

**VERSE 4: “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.”**

When the psalmist speaks here of “the valley of the shadow of death,” he is not talking about the experience of death itself, but the danger and possibility of death. During the visit to Bible lands one time, the dark shadows cast across the Kidron Valley by the towering walls of Jerusalem suggested such a shadow to this writer. Take that situation and put it in the wilderness. The danger of wild

beasts lurking in the shadows as the sheep passed through was very real.

David as a young shepherd boy had dealt with such problems and had come to the rescue of his sheep. Thus looking to the LORD as the great shepherd, he says, "I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." With his rod and his staff David had guided his sheep safely through the valley and warded off the attack of wild beasts. The very appearance of the rod and staff brought a feeling of security and comfort to the sheep. These thoughts from the human perspective are going through David's mind as he finds comfort and security in God (and how God will handle the situation). And looking to Jesus in the New Testament as the good shepherd, many reassuring things come to mind (John 10:10-13). He even gave his life, and has been raised from the dead, in coming to our rescue (Hebrews 13:20,21).

Some would see "the valley of the shadow of death" as death itself, and then they would bring forth beautiful lessons and applications from this angle. They would say that Jesus has gone through "the valley of the shadow of death," becoming the "firstfruits" of those who slept. Consequently, he has taken away the fear and sting of death as he accompanies us in this experience. While these things are true, that is not exactly what the psalmist had in mind when he wrote these words.

**VERSE 5: "Thou preparest
a table before me in the presence
of mine enemies: thou anointest my head
with oil; my cup runneth over."**

Here it seems that David jumps from the vivid shepherd and sheep imagery to just plain language when he states, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." More than once during the lifetime of David this had happened. Two occasions come to mind. This happened when he was fleeing from Saul before he became king and later when he was fleeing from his own

son, Absalom. Even in adverse circumstances it seems that God had openly provided.

The verse as it continues could be mingled imagery. "Thou anointest my head with oil" could apply to sheep or human beings. Tender care of a torn sheep would at times prompt anointing with oil. But anointing the head with oil was one of the gestures of honor and hospitality offered by oriental people to their guests (Luke 7:46). Not only had David been fed, other acts of honor and hospitality had been bestowed upon him.

"My cup runneth over" further suggests the abundance and overflowing of blessings coming to him (even in the presence of his enemies).

**VERSE 6: "Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me all the days of my life: and
I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."**

Even in the face of adversaries, and them pursuing him, David thinks in terms of goodness and mercy following him. With God's presence he could only conclude, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

Now his thoughts go beyond this life, "And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." The Old Testament that says so little about life hereafter at times has a few beams of light to shine through. It is mostly in anticipation of the fullness that would come in Christ who has "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (II Timothy 1:10). And the words about dwelling "in the house of the LORD forever" fit into this mold. The writer of Hebrews tells us that "Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Hebrews 9:24). So, to dwell in the house of the LORD for ever would mean to be in heaven.

How wonderful to have such a shepherd to care for us in this life and then, finally, to be with Him forever!

Amen! The LORD is *my* Shepherd!



—By *James E. Gibbons*



Psalms 23

—A Psalm of David—

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
- 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- 4 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.
- 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
- 6 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. KJV



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