

TEXT SERMONS – SERIES: PSALM SERMONS

THE SHEPHERD OF THE SHEPHERD PSALM

PSALM 23

Psalm 23 is the favorite of most Christians. It is comforting in times of sorrow, encouraging in times of sickness and assuring as we journey day by day with Jesus, our Shepherd. Its words are words learned in youth, quoted in adulthood and cherished in old age. With this Psalm in their hearts millions have lived and with it on their lips multitudes have died.

The Psalm is a musical journal of one who journeys with Jehovah. He starts out as a youth enjoying green pastures and wide open spaces; in middle age he needs a respite now and then beside still waters; when aged he experiences valley times that infirmity imposes, is relieved by medicinal oils and, reflecting upon all of life, overflows with joyous gratitude as he passes to his eternal home in the house of the Lord.

This Psalm is called “The Shepherd Psalm.” If the Shepherd is left out, the Psalm loses its sweetness and the sheep lose their way. The sheep must then fare for themselves, find their own green pastures, still waters and right paths. They must pass through dangerous valleys alone, face enemies by themselves, endure untreated scrapes and bruises, know nothing of goodness and mercy following and, saddest of all, come to the end of life without hope or home.

It is the Shepherd that makes the Psalm what it is. He is the theme that gives sense to the song, the Leading Actor in the drama, the melody that brings the lyrics to life. He is out in front, up ahead and always present. It is the Shepherd Who is the Chief Attraction. Therefore, it begins: “Jehovah is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Our Savior-Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, has a three-fold designation as Shepherd. He is called:

- “***The Good Shepherd***” in John 10:11;
- “***The Great Shepherd***” in Hebrews 13:20;
- “***The Chief Shepherd***” in I Peter 5:4.

The well-known trilogy of Psalms, Psalm 22, 23 and 24 pictures these three Shepherd titles of the Lord Jesus:

PSALM 22 GOOD SHEPHERD

Cross
Spear
Substitute
Crucifixion
Yesterday
Grace
Past Ministry

PSALM 23 GREAT SHEPHERD

Crook
Staff
Shepherd
Consolation
Today
Guidance
Present Ministry

PSALM 24 CHIEF SHEPHERD

Crown
Scepter
Sovereign
Coronation
Forever
Glory
Future Ministry

The common approach to this Psalm is to exult in the blessings that it exudes for those of us who are sheep. That is not a selfish approach, for all scripture is written for our salvation, admonition and edification. However, there are those who come to this Psalm and focus entirely upon the sheep to the exclusion of the Shepherd. Therefore, let us begin as the Psalm begins with the words, "The LORD." Let us see the Psalm from His perspective for a change. In doing so we see first,

THE SHEPHERD'S LORDSHIP. *"The LORD...."*

In rushing to get to the "green pastures" and the "still waters" we must not rush past the Shepherd Who is The LORD! This Psalm is called The Shepherd Psalm. It is the Shepherd Who is principally in view. Of course, the sheep are seen as well for a shepherd without sheep is an unfinished picture.

Who is "The LORD"? The words, "The LORD" in the Hebrew are "Yahweh-Rohi" – "the Lord my Shepherd." "Yahweh" is translated "Jehovah" in our English Bibles. Jehovah is the eternal, self-existing, all-sufficient covenant making and covenant keeping God of Israel. The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Lord Jesus Christ of the New Testament. Christ is pictured as a Shepherd and true believers are His sheep.

I have heard people quote the first verse saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" and I knew that they lived in a veritable wilderness of want. What they meant was, "The Lord is my Savior, and I am glad He is." There is a vast difference between knowing the Lord Jesus as Savior and knowing Him as Shepherd. It is possible to know Him as Savior and know nothing of Him as Shepherd. It is true that we cannot know Him as our Shepherd unless and until we know Him as our Savior.

The term "Lord" is a title of supreme authority and when ascribed to the Lord Jesus it means a title of sovereign deity. When we submit to His Shepherd-hood we are submitting to His authority, recognizing His deity. Consequently there must be a ready obedience to His Lordship and a daily allegiance to Him as our sovereign Shepherd.

There is one thing that ought to be true of us if the Lord is our Shepherd, and that is, we ought to recognize His rights over us and submit to Him. If we say, "The Lord is my shepherd" – the proof of the truth of that statement should be seen in our daily following Him. At least two-dozen times in the four Gospels Jesus said, "follow me." In Matthew 10:38 He said, "He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me."

Submitting to the Lord as our Shepherd means that He is the Lord of our lives. The sheep are owned by the Master. The Shepherd rules the flock. When we say, "The Lord is my Shepherd" we are acknowledging His Lordship.

THE SHEPHERD'S RELATIONSHIP. *"The LORD is my shepherd."*

The very first thing that we learn about the Shepherd is His relationship to the sheep. The relationship that exists between shepherds and their flocks is well documented. There is a trust, a bond that is formed that is the basis for the well-being of the sheep.

However, there is no greater relationship than the relationship between the Great Shepherd and His sheep. That the Great Shepherd would want a relationship with us is humbling! He it was Who took the initiative to make it possible for us to become His sheep. The Psalmist did not choose his Shepherd; the Shepherd chose His sheep!

David testified saying, "The LORD is my Shepherd" because the Lord had first said, "David is My sheep! It is a wonderful thought that the Lord chose us to be His sheep! Jesus said to His disciples: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you...." (John 15:16) "We are the sheep of His pasture" (Ps. 100:3) because He initiated the relationship. What a relationship!

In the Bible, the designation of "sheep" is reserved for the regenerate; those who do not know God's salvation are described as wolves or goats. Once we know the salvation of the Lord, we can say with David: "The LORD is my shepherd."

THE SHEPHERD'S LEADERSHIP. v.2 "*He leads*"; v.3 "*He leads*."

The Shepherd goes before the sheep, the sheep do not go before the Shepherd. Cattle, horses, pigs, etc. are driven, but sheep must be led. If one attempts to drive them they scatter. Sheep need guidance, direction, leadership.

They need not know where the green pastures are. All that they have to do is patiently follow where their Shepherd leads. They do not worry about where they will get their next meal. They are content because their Shepherd leads the way.

Transfer this thought to yourself, and see how the Lord is your Leader. Look at the past, and note how he has guided you. How very little you and I have had to do with it after all. We may have struggled; we may have fretted; but, after all, we have had but one decision to make and that has been to decide to follow as He leads and where He leads. I do not know that we have had much more to do with it than the sheep have.

The Lord has led us in the past, He is leading us in the present, and He will lead us in the future. We have nothing to do with the future except to follow in the path of our Shepherd! Let us then, as the Lord's sheep, maintain our position behind our Shepherd and not attempt to usurp the prerogative of our Great Shepherd. He leads, we follow. "Savior, like a Shepherd lead us, much we need Thy tender care."

THE SHEPHERD'S CUSTODIALSHIP.

"I shall not want He makes me to lie down in green pastures He restores my soul anoints my head with oil."

"I shall not want" - The one who has Jehovah as Shepherd lacks nothing. The comparison of the care which God extends over his people to that of a shepherd for his flock is one that would naturally occur to those who were accustomed to pastoral life. The tender care of the sheep by the Shepherd is seen throughout the song.

The Shepherd supplies all that is needed for the sheep's welfare: replenishment in green pastures (note: the pastures are "green" – not brown, dead grass!); refreshment from stilled

pools of water; restoration of soul. Because of His custodial care we can say, "I shall not want." Not that I will have all of my foolish desires fulfilled, but that I shall not be in want for anything necessary and good.

Jesus said, "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matt. 6:25-26)

Sheep are guided, provided for and protected by the Shepherd. Our Lord shows great love and care for us: "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).

Sheep in the custody of the Great Shepherd are well cared for as is seen in Ezekiel chapter 34, which Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, renders as follows:

"God, the Master, says: From now on, I myself am the shepherd. I'm going looking for them. As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I'm going after my sheep. I'll rescue them from all the places they've been scattered to in the storms. I'll bring them back from foreign peoples, gather them from foreign countries, and bring them back to their home country. I'll feed them on the mountains of Israel, along the streams, among their own people. I'll lead them into lush pasture so they can roam the mountain pastures of Israel, graze at leisure, feed in the rich pastures on the mountains of Israel. And I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I myself will make sure they get plenty of rest. I'll go after the lost, I'll collect the strays, I'll doctor the injured, I'll build up the weak ones and oversee the strong ones so they're not exploited." (vs.11-16)

Our Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, does no less for His sheep. He is concerned for our well-being for "my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:19) Why? "He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7) Our response should be: "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care." (Ps. 95:5-7).

The following hymn, "The King of Love My Shepherd Is," was sung at Princess Diana's funeral in Westminster Abbey, September 6, 1997. It captures the custodial care of our Great Shepherd.

"The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never,
I nothing lack if I am His
And He is mine forever.

Where streams of living water flow
My ransomed soul He leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow,
With food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love He sought me,
And on His shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.

- Henry W. Baker

THE SHEPHERD'S GUARDIANSHIP. *"Your rod and staff comfort me you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...."*

The Psalm presents a beautiful picture of the providence of the Lord, that is, His oversight, management and benevolent watch-care. He guards us in dangerous places: *"the valley,"* and He guards us from dangerous people: *"my enemies."*

Notice that the verse does not read, "though I walk *in* the valley" as though that is where we spend all of our lives! But it reads, "though I walk *through* the valley." The Psalm does not read, "though I get lost in the valley!" We pass *through* the valley. Why, or how? Because the Shepherd is with us to guarantee our safe passage.

Isaiah chapter 43 presents several similar dangerous scenarios that cause fear in some, but the Lord assures us that He will see us through: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass *through* the waters, I will be with you; And *through* the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk *through* the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior." (vs.2-3)

Here, again, we read "*through* the waters"; "*through* the rivers"; "*through* the fire." Couple these statements with "*through* the valley" and we must be convinced that the Lord our Shepherd intends to see us *through!* An unknown psalmist testified, "We went through fire and through water, Yet You brought us out into a place of abundance." (Psalm 66:12) The hymn, Savior Like A Shepherd Lead Us, contains these words: "We are Thine, do Thou befriend us, be the Guardian of our way." Our Shepherd is our God, our Guide and our Guard.

THE SHEPHERD'S COMPANIONSHIP. *"You are with me" – "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before You anoint my head with oil"*

There is an important transition that takes place in verses four and following. Prior to the valley experience the Shepherd is addressed in the third person as follows: "He makes me to lie down"; "He leads me beside still waters"; "He restores my soul"; "He leads me in paths of righteousness." During the walk through the valley the language changes from referring to the Shepherd as "He" and begins to address the Shepherd personally, using the first person: "You" – "You are with me"; "Your rod and Your staff"; "You prepare a table"; "You anoint my head."

It was the valley experience that drew him closer to the Shepherd and now he is no longer talking about his Shepherd using "He", but he is speaking directly to the Shepherd saying, "You." Valley shadows have a way of focusing our faith and crowding us closer to Christ, our

Great Shepherd. Walking through life in company with our Great Shepherd is life's greatest adventure!

THE SHEPHERD'S FELLOWSHIP. *"I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

To dwell in the *"house of the Lord"* is to have access to the Lord of the house! Unbroken communion with our Savior-Shepherd *"forever"* is guaranteed. "True, deep, and real fellowship with God, that is the climax of all the blessings enjoyed when a man is under the protecting care of this true Shepherd." (Leupold)

We began with the Shepherd walking in green pastures, beside stilled waters, in righteous paths, through dark valleys, in the presence of enemies, enjoying communion with the Shepherd all the way along this life-long journey. And now we have arrived, at last, at our destination: the Father's House. Will He now leave us having brought His sheep to the eternal fold? No! Wonderful, blessed and sweet fellowship will go on and on throughout eternity! We have been with Him here on earth and we shall be with Him in eternity in endless fellowship. What could be better than that?

Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:2-3) He, our Shepherd is with us here, preparing us for that place, and He is there preparing that place for us. Only God could be in both places at once! He said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb. 13:5) Our fellowship will be unbroken. What a wonderful Shepherd!

CONCLUSION

At an evening gathering, an actor and a man known for his skills of elocution, was asked to recite something for the group. He agreed and chose to quote the 23rd Psalm. With gripping expression, perfect diction, captivating intonation and all the accomplishments of his profession, he eloquently and dramatically presented the Psalm. When he has finished the guests applauded vigorously and at length. He had demonstrated his art masterfully.

Later that same evening an elderly Christian Pastor present was asked to conclude the gathering with a few words. He was known to be a godly man whose love for the Lord was reflected consistently in his life throughout the community. Oddly, when he arose to address the gathering he too chose to recite the 23rd Psalm.

When he finished there was hardly a dry eye in the room. Those present had been touched in a strange way. There was no applauding, only a holy silence pervaded the room. God had spoken to the gathered company through His Word spoken by His servant. After a few moments of silence, the elocutionist broke the silence with this comment: "Friends, I know the 23rd Psalm. The Pastor knows the Shepherd."

It is one thing to know the Psalm, it is quite another thing to know the Shepherd. It is my desire and prayer that the familiar words of this Psalm take on new meaning for all the Shepherd's sheep and that all of us become better acquainted with the "Shepherd and Overseer of your (our) souls." (1 Peter 2:25)

To those who cannot truly say, “The LORD is my shepherd,” I encourage you to repent , receive Him as your Savior and submit to Him as your Shepherd. Then, you too, can experience His Lordship, have the Shepherd-sheep relationship, benefit from His leadership, custodianship, guardianship and fellowship.

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