

Psalm 23:1-6.

The LORD is My Shepherd

Psalm 23:1-6. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

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

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, 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.

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

⁶Surely 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 the exception of John 3:16, the twenty-third Psalm is likely the best known passage in the entire biblical narrative. Likewise, it is likely the most commonly memorized complete chapter, with very few other chapters receiving this form of attention. The chapter contains no historical accounts of the Jewish experience, no teaching of law or behavior, and makes no attempt at imparting wisdom upon the reader. There is no reference to its setting, either geographically or temporally. The chapter contains no ancient Jewish doctrine or policy, makes no references to Israel, or any group of Israelites, or any Jewish individual. Unlike many of the Psalms, there is a disunity between testimony spoken to the reader (vs. 1-3, 6) and a prayer spoken to the LORD (vs. 4-5). There is no consistent poetic meter or rhyme. Some have noted that the writer refers to three distinct persons of the LORD: Shepherd (vs. 1-4), Guide (vs. 2-3), and Host (vs. 5). Yet with all of its unique characteristics, this Psalm has become the most beloved of all of the Psalter.

We often make use of these components of a biblical passage in the task of determining its author, the date of its original recording, and its cultural/historical context. Consequently, we have little information that aids us in this task. There are likely as many opinions concerning the author and composition date of Psalm 23 as there are scholars who endeavor to determine this information. The actual Hebrew vocabulary¹ tends to imply that the current form of the Psalm was written after the Babylonian exile. However, many hold that this argument alone is not sufficient to deny that the original Psalm could be much older, as much as a millennia if one holds to the tradition that the Psalm was originally composed by

¹ As found in the Masoretic Text.

King David and passed down through the generations in various forms. We might recall that the Psalms were not considered Hebrew canon at the time of their composition. It was not until much later that the strict rules of copying were applied to the then-extant copies of the text.

As we approach this Psalm, we will do so with the context that it was originally composed by King David as a celebration of the confidence and security he has in the LORD. David's reign came at the end of a period of about 800 years following the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, a period when Israel was characterized by continuing and extended periods of apostasy. Though a few would occasionally turn to the LORD in faith, and there were a few occasions when the nation of Israel attempted to do so, there are very few instances of truly faithful Israelites working to maintain the faith through these years. The Levites were tasked to take on this responsibility, for without faith leadership, people would not have an opportunity to know the LORD or what He has done for them. Like the others, the Levites failed in this task, and did not administer this need in the nation. Consequently, by the time that David is anointed King of Israel, there are very few people of faith. David's faith in God was a rarity, and though he, like all people, was imperfect, he did desire that the nation would know the LORD. Consequently, he worked to lead the nation in faith, and produced writings to encourage the people. Few of his writings have produced as much encouragement as the 23rd Psalm.

David's experiences that led to the point of his anointing as King were dramatic as he was engaged in a mortal conflict with the previous King Saul. David showed grace and courage as he navigated the circumstances of that period, some which brought him great stress and danger. David knew the blessing of sustenance and protection that his faith in God engendered, and this Psalm is an expression of his celebration of that blessing.

This Psalm has been often used in circumstances where encouragement is needed, sometimes recited in funerals to bring comfort at such a time of loss. It is a dense summary of David's theology, that speaks to many different components of faith, making its investigation a worthwhile effort.

Psalm 23:1-6. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

The Psalm begins with a simple statement with three important components.

1. **The LORD.** Note that, in many translations, the name of the LORD is expressed in capital letters. If we are to fully understand the context and application of this Psalm, it is imperative that we understand the identity of the LORD. When expressed in capital letters, both in the Old Testament

and New, it is a reference to YAHWEH, that person of God through which He communicates with man. It is YAHWEH who spoke to Adam, Abraham, and Moses, etc. It was YAHWEH who wrestled with Jacob.² It is through the work of YAHWEH that creation came into being. This latter point is described by the Apostle John in his Gospel when he describes YAHWEH as the “Word” who became flesh and dwelt among us.³ YAHWEH is the Messiah, and the Messiah is the Christ, Jesus.

This identification of Jesus as LORD is fundamental to the Christian faith. To reject the deity of Christ is to reject one of the basic tenets of Christianity, leaving one without true faith in Him as one’s LORD. Salvation comes from submission in faith and trust to God, and Jesus is the person of God through which God communicates with man: LORD, YAHWEH.

It is not until we have placed our faith and trust in God does the 23rd Psalm have any real power in our lives. David had done so, and like all who trust in God, he receives the blessing of that relationship. In the remainder of the Psalm, David describes much of the nature of that blessing.

2. ... **is my Shepherd**... Salvation comes from one’s submission to the LORD. The nature of that relationship is similar to that of sheep to a shepherd. Sheep are entirely dependent upon the shepherd to meet virtually every need in their life. Without the shepherd, the sheep will die. Consequently, to testify that the LORD is “my Shepherd,” one takes upon him/herself the role of the sheep. This choice of humility, though contrary to human nature, is necessary to experience the relationship with the LORD that He desires. We are to be dependent upon Him in the same manner that the sheep are dependent upon the shepherd, fully accepting the LORD in this role.

Note the very personal nature of the statement “my Shepherd.” One does not come to salvation through any means other than a personal relationship with God. One is not saved because they are members of a church. One is not saved because their parents or family are saved. The relationship that God has offered us is intensely personal, and it is only through that personal relationship that the LORD blesses us.

3. ... **I shall not want** ... Again, it is the nature of the shepherd to meet all of the needs of his sheep. The LORD promises to meet the needs of the

² Genesis 32:22-32; Hosea 12:4.

³ John 1:1-14.

faithful. David finds confidence and security in this simple truth. As we go through what can be a very dynamic life experience, we can always know that the LORD will provide for our basic needs. It is not the intention of the Holy Spirit that the faithful would be consumed by worry or anxiety concerning the future. Looking at his past, David can face the future with confidence as he can easily recall how the LORD preserved him and provided for him. David no longer faces the future with worry and for this he celebrates, as should we.

Psalm 23:2a. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures

Another of the promises of the LORD is His guidance of those who have faith in Him. One of the important responsibilities of the shepherd is to lead his sheep to grass. In the dry and arid region of the ancient middle-east, this was no trivial task. Sheep would quickly consume the sparse grasses, necessitating continual movement to new sources of food. The implication of David's testimony is that the LORD leads him, not only like a shepherd to fresh grass, but to a place where grass is plentiful, and the setting is so peaceful that he is able to lay down and safely rest.

Psalm 23:2b. he leadeth me beside the still waters.

In a poetic rhyme, David testifies to another necessary task of the shepherd: leading them to fresh water. Again, David refers to the blessing of both plentiful water and a setting of peace.

The LORD serves as a guide when we are submitted to Him, a guide who leads us to "green pastures" and "still waters," leading us to a place of peace, and a place where our needs are met. Despite all of the conflicts and distractions of this world, the LORD gives us the resource to be lifted above them, to find sustenance and peace.

Psalm 23:3a He restoreth my soul:

David not only celebrates the physical blessings of faith, but also the spiritual. David knows what it is like to feel like there is no hope, as though the entire world seeks to destroy him. There were times he felt absolutely alone with everything that he loved and aspired to was taken away. Yet, when he sought the LORD, he was restored.

The primary work of the Shepherd is the restoration of the soul. Every person ever born was born in to sin with a soul that was bound for separation from an Infinite and Righteous Creator. From conception to grave no man has the

capacity to live a righteous life, no man is worthy of an audience with the One who created him. Yet, the Shepherd's most fundamental purpose is to reconcile man to Himself,⁴ to restore the soul that He created to Himself through another simple promise: to bring to Himself any and all who will turn from this wicked and perverse world and come to Him in sincere faith and trust.

However, the debt of sin is real, and must be paid, lest the gift of grace would become without true worth. To pay that debt YAHWEH took upon Himself the form of a man,⁵ proclaimed the good news of the Gospel, and humbled Himself before evil men to be tortured and crucified, shedding His blood as a sacrifice. The cost of the restoration of our soul was the torture and crucifixion of YAHWEH, the LORD. It is by this shedding of blood that forgiveness for sin is found. Consequently, all will find themselves before God in the final judgment, but only those who are covered by the shed blood of Jesus Christ will find themselves immersed in God's forgiveness, and recipients of His promise of a restored soul, restored to spend Eternity with Him.

Psalm 23:3b. he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Submission to the LORD also involves submission to His person: LORD of All. The Hebrew term rendered "paths of righteousness" is literally "straight paths." The idea behind such a path is one that guides us away from that which would serve to delay us, distract us, injure us, or cause us self-inflicted harm. The writer John Bunyan, in his famous "Pilgrim's Progress" describes the impact upon Christian as he wanders off the straight path and suffers the consequences of his choices. Likewise, left to our own wisdom, we will also make self-centered and world-centered choices that will serve to bring to us no little consequence. However, when we submit to YAHWEH as our own LORD, we are by our choice submitting to be obedient to Him as we learn of His purpose for us through the study of His Word and through our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit who leads us away from disobedience.

For His Name's sake. It may be instructive to note that the Shepherd is leading us so that our nature and character would become more like His. The term rendered "name" is a reference to the nature and character of one so named. As Christians mature in the faith, they are to become more and more like Him, more and more like Christ in their own nature and character. They become representatives of the LORD in this lost world, and they are known as such by their godly behavior and their unconditional love for others.⁶

⁴ Colossians 1:20.

⁵ Philippians 2:7; Hebrews 2:14.

⁶ John 13:35.

The LORD will always lead the faithful on straight paths: paths that are characterized by obedient and right living, paths that serve to enable the believer to bear spiritual fruit that serves to promote the Kingdom of God in this world, serving to minister to others, and serving to spread the gospel in this sin-darkened world.

Psalm 23:4a. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:

Certainly, David knows what it is like to “walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” The Hebrew term is literally, “deep darkness” with not as much an emphasis on death as it is on its apparition. The Holy Spirit is not the author of darkness, and darkness may be experienced in many ways. Darkness can be simply the state of separation from God that is experienced by all before they come to the LORD in faith. Darkness is simply the absence of light, and to experience this life without the light of the Holy Spirit is, indeed, a dark and cold place. Darkness can be experienced by one’s immersion in a circumstance that separates them from the light that manifests itself as spiritual, emotional, or clinical depression.

Our life unfolds in chapters, and many of us have experienced chapters in our lives where we felt like we were walking in darkness, and some become so immersed in that darkness that they think about, attempt, or succeed in taking their own lives, a victory for the evil one who is the author of that darkness. However, the evil one has no power when confronted by the Holy Spirit. Just as light has all of the power over darkness, the Holy Spirit has all power over the darkness of evil. Though we may find ourselves in circumstances where we perceive darkness all around us, the LORD will always work to bring light to our darkness, chasing away the shadows that would seem to surround and encroach upon us.

Knowing the power that the LORD has over all evil, a person of faith has absolutely no need to be in fear of the power of evil. All a person needs to do is call upon the LORD, resist the evil one, and he will flee.⁷ There are no few movies that portray the power of evil to destroy people, and many portray satanic power in a means that is meant to frighten the audience. However, these portrayals of satan are quite incorrect. Satan has no power when confronted by the Holy Spirit, and has no power to destroy any person who has placed their faith and trust in God. By God’s very nature, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a faithful believer, satan can no longer destroy that person.

⁷ James 4:7.

Certainly, any individual can choose destructive behaviors, but with sin forgiven,⁸ their salvation is still secure. Satan cannot take it away.

Consequently, Christians can walk boldly confident in their faith, able to stand against satan and his work.⁹

Psalm 23:4b. thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

It is by the LORD's power that we are protected from the power of evil, not by any of our own. David refers to two different tools that are used by a Shepherd.

1. **The rod.** This is a stick that is used as a weapon, both offensive and defensive, but primarily the latter since it is only used in close conflict. This would be a hard, stout, spear-like stick that is driven, or "poked" at an opponent rather than swung like a bat or a baton. A shepherd can effectively kill a predator by thrusting his rod-spear into its torso. The primary purpose of the rod is to afford protection of the flock against predators, both two-legged and four-legged.
2. **The staff.** This tool may be visualized as a "shepherd's crook," a very long, straight stick with a hooked end. This staff would be too thin and light to be of much use as a weapon. Instead, this staff is the primary tool that the shepherd uses as he tends the sheep. When he is not using it as a walking stick or any other application where a stick is of value, he can reach out with it and guide the flock with it, tapping the sides of the sheep to turn them right or left. The hook at the end can be used to recover a sheep that has fallen into a small hole or crevice.

David notes that he is comforted by both the rod and staff that are in the "hands" of the LORD. He finds protection in the rod, and guidance and provision in the staff. The enemy of the faithful sheep of this world is satan and his minions, and David denotes the protection that the LORD provides in the metaphor of the rod. Furthermore, the staff is a metaphor for both the guidance that the Holy Spirit provides, and the LORD's active work to help us out of times of trouble.

Psalm 23:5a. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

With this statement, David shifts the metaphor from Shepherd-sheep to Host-guest. The word rendered "table" is a reference to a sacred dinner, such as the

⁸ Romans 8:1.

⁹ Ephesians 6:10, ff.

celebration of the Passover. It represents a feast. David, though immersed in a wicked and perverse world, is treated by the LORD to a feast of His blessings. One might visualize a man entering a room, battered and bruised from battle, still covered in the dirt and sweat of the work, being led to a seat at the feast. There is no intention of the Host to “clean up” His guest. The Host gladly and lovingly accepts the guest without hesitation and has prepared a feast for him.

Likewise, the faithful come to the LORD, battered and bruised from the conflict with this world, and we enter His presence with the dirt and sweat of our daily lives. Yet, the LORD receives us as we are,¹⁰ and sets before us a feast of blessing.

The Hebrew word that is rendered “table” also carries with it the idea of being surrounded by the protective walls of the Temple. The table that is prepared, though surrounded by enemies, is safely inside the walls of the LORD’s tabernacle, the place where He abides.

Psalm 23:5b. thou anointest my head with oil;

Though the idea of anointing is usually associated with the setting apart of an individual for service, this application carries no such meaning. If we continue the context of this verse, we find a faithful man who has been battered and bruised in his conflict with this wicked world. The anointing with oil in this circumstance serves as a healing salve, a means to bring healing to one who has been hurt. David knows hurt. He knows what it is to be physically and emotionally beaten. Likewise, all of us know the pain of injury, both physical and emotional. When we choose to follow the LORD in obedience we have already signed up for spiritual warfare with this wicked world. If we remain obedient to the LORD without any mixture of compromise, we will find ourselves rejected by many of the forces of this world, and many of these will treat us with contempt, and may even seek to cause us injury. However, Jesus also knows pain and suffering, and His purpose is to bring restoration and healing to our broken spirit. David has experienced that restoration, and for that he celebrates.

Psalm 23:5c. my cup runneth over.

This statement needs little explanation. David, having been restored by the LORD, can celebrate the LORD’s gifting of blessing. The idea of a cup running over is simply that the LORD provides more blessing than David’s cup can hold. Likewise, when we place our faith and trust in the LORD receive from Him more blessing than we can even perceive. Only when we allow ourselves to be

¹⁰ Romans 5:8.

distracted by the darkness of this world do we look away and fail to see an overflowing cup. Every breath and every heartbeat that we experience is a blessing from the LORD, yet we often fail to either notice it, or thank the LORD for it. When we truly consider the blessings that the LORD gives to His faithful, we will come to realize, like David, that we cannot even come close to describing them all.

Psalm 23:1-6. 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.

Finally, David celebrates the eternal security that God's promises afford to those who place their faith and trust in Him. The blessings that David has outlined in this short Psalm are not temporary: they become a permanent part of the life of one who loves the LORD. The goodness that he receives from the LORD will never end. The mercy that he is given by the LORD will never end. Finally, the relationship that he has with the LORD will never end.

These are the promises that the LORD has made to every believer, and by recognizing these, and appropriating that knowledge into our hearts, we can be profoundly encouraged as we seek to navigate the tempestuous waters of this evil world. If there is any chapter of the biblical narrative that should become very familiar to a faithful Christian, it is this one. The encouraging statements of this short passage are all true and can serve to guide and strengthen us when face times of difficulty, knowing that the LORD is always with us, always blessing us, always protecting and providing for us, and will never leave us.

That is a truth worth memorizing.

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