

THE SHEPHERD PSALM

Psalm 23

Intro: This Psalm was written by a shepherd about a Shepherd. David's brother Eliab scorned David because he was a shepherd. When Jesse their father sent David to see how his brothers were getting along, and to take food to them, David heard how Goliath was tormenting the army of Israel, and so he offered to face Goliath. It was then that Eliab said to David, "Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the desert?" (1 Sam. 17:28).

And later, after David had become the king of Israel, and wanted to build a house for the Lord, the Lord sent Nathan to David to remind him, "I took thee from the shepcote [sheepfold], from following the sheep, to be ruler over my people Israel" (2 Sam. 7:8). So the Lord must have felt that being a shepherd was a good place for training David to be a king.

The fact that a shepherd was a lowly place in the eyes of the Egyptians was a fact that Joseph had to face when he brought his father and his brothers and their families to live with him in Egypt because he told them that "every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians" (Gen. 46:34).

In the light of these facts, it should impress us that when the Lord Jesus was born, angels appeared to "shepherds abiding in the field" who were "keeping watch over their flocks by night" (Luke 2:8).

And it had to be a part of the Lord's humiliation for Him to teach while He was here on earth that He was "the good Shepherd." It fits in with what Isaiah was led by the Spirit to predict concerning the Messiah that "He was despised and rejected of men" (Isa. 53:3a).

The writers of the NT were led to speak of our Lord as "that great Shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20), and as "the Shepherd and Bishop" of the souls of His people" (1 Pet. 2:25) and as "the chief Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:4). It was as a Shepherd that the Lord came the first time because He laid down His life for the sheep (cf. John 10:15). And to show the great care that the Lord has for His sheep, He said that "I ... know my sheep, and am known of mine" (John 10:14). He "callesh his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out" (John 10:3). And our Lord emphasized that He was the "one Shepherd." There is none other like Him.

David knew many of these truths, but we need to take all of the teaching

of the NT and place it beside Psalm 23 in order to appreciate the truth that David expressed in that Psalm.

Some expositors of Psalm 23 say that this Psalm has no title. If I could differ with many of them whom I recognize to be my superiors in the Lord, I would like to suggest that the first verse of the Psalm is its title, and that everything else in the Psalm follows from what we have there. Let us look at that verse first of all.

I. THE PSALM'S TITLE (Psa. 23:1).

This verse tells us much about the Lord, but it also tells us a lot about David. It is a soul-refreshing exercise just to go through the Psalms of David noting the many ways in which he spoke of the Lord. However, none was more important than when he used this lowly title for the Lord. The NT passages indicate that we can apply the twenty-third Psalm in a particular way to the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. But this can only be a Psalm which is a closed door to us unless we can say what David said about the Lord. I am referring to his words right here at the beginning of the Psalm: "The LORD is my Shepherd." He is not everybody's Shepherd, but He is the Shepherd of His people. And His people are only those who are trusting in Him for the salvation of their souls. The Lord in His grace may see fit at times to help and bless others, but the truth of this Psalm belongs especially and primarily to those who know the Lord. So if we are to benefit ourselves by what we find here, we must be able to say, "The LORD is my Shepherd."

And if we can say that, then we can go on to say, "I shall not want."

Do you see the position that this places us in? This means that we are sheep! Now there are not many people who want to think of themselves as sheep. Sheep are so defenseless. They cannot face a lion or a bear in the field and have any hope at all of coming out alive. We human beings like to think of ourselves as being strong and able to take care of ourselves, or, as we hear it said so often, that we are able to do anything that we want to do. But we are likened, not to a lion, or a bear, but to sheep. We can't make it alone. We need the shepherd's care and protection in this world, and without a shepherd we cannot survive. So King David was taking a very humble place before the Lord, and before men, when He said, "The Lord is my Shepherd." Many would have been inclined to say that we don't want that kind of a man to be our King. They would want a man of strength, not a weak, defenseless sheep. They were so blinded to

their own need that they did not realize that it was in David's Shepherd that David was strong. Even as a shepherd himself, trusting the Lord, he defeated a lion and a bear. Let me read to you how David responded to Saul when Saul told him that he was not prepared to face Goliath, a seasoned soldier, when he, David, was only an inexperienced young man. Here are the words:

33 And Saul said to David, Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth.

34 And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock:

35 And I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him.

36 Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the living God.

37 David said moreover, The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine. And Saul said unto David, Go, and the LORD be with thee (1 Sam. 17:33-37).

So David had a reason for saying here in Psalm 23, "The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want." This is Jehovah Whom he was calling his Shepherd.

I think that many misinterpret the meaning of the word "want" in the KJV. It does not mean that he had no needs. He had plenty of them. No, it meant that he would never be in any situation where he would *lack* what he needed to face the situation, or to get through it. He was declaring that the LORD was fully sufficient to meet his needs, or to provide for him in any situation. David wrote with absolute confidence in the ability of the Lord to feed him, to protect him, and to guide him. The LORD was and is *the Ideal Shepherd*, the One Whom all other shepherds should seek to be like.

So we have a lot of wonderful truth before we get out of the first verse of this Psalm.

But before we leave this verse, trusting that all of us can say what David said, I want to point out a unique thing about this Psalm which ought to be

a blessing to all of us.

I don't know how much experience any of you have had with sheep, but I frankly tell you that the closest I have been to sheep was when we were visiting Frank and Carolyn in England nine years ago, and we went for a week to Wales where we stayed in an old farm house that was available for visitors to rent. All around us on that farm, or ranch, were sheep. And one day we went over to see the shepherds shear their sheep. Allison was a little girl at the time, and she had a wonderful time holding the little lambs in her arms. Frank tried his hand at shearing, but didn't do too well. That is as close as I have been to sheep. Of course, I am like most of you, I have seen sheep all my life, and have been where sheep were kept, but I could never qualify as that kind of a shepherd.

But this I know about sheep: they live in flocks. If you see a sheep by itself, you can usually count on the fact that there are others close by – unless one sheep is somebody's pet.

But the unique thing about this Psalm is that David speaks of himself as the only sheep that the LORD had. We know that the Lord has a large flock of sheep, but in reading this Psalm you would think that the LORD was David's Shepherd, and that the Lord had no others. After all what does this mean, "The LORD is my Shepherd." He did not say, "The LORD is your Shepherd." He didn't even say, "The LORD is our Shepherd." He said, "The LORD is my Shepherd."

May I suggest a very possible reason why David spoke this way? It is because he wanted us to know that the LORD took care of him just like He would if He only had *one sheep!* And David expected that under the direction of the Holy Spirit all of us who know the LORD would make the same application to ourselves because that is the kind of care the Lord gives us. He takes care of you, and He takes care of me, with the same personal attention and love if you were His only sheep, or as it I were His only sheep. Do you get the point.

In fact, the Psalm has been called *the He and me Psalm*.

Now let us notice this as we examine what David said about

II. THE SHEPHERD'S CARE FOR HIS SHEEP (singular).

This is found in verses 2 through 5. (Read the verses emphasizing the

"He" and "me" in each statement.)

- A. "**He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.**
- B. "**He leadeth me beside the still waters."**
- C. "**He restoreth my soul.**
- D. "**He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."**
- E. "**Yea, though I walk ...: for Thou art with me."**
- F. "**Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."**
- G. "**Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."**
- H. "**Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."**

As you look at all of these statements, you see how the LORD provided for David's needs, how He guided Him, how He lifted David up when he was down, how He sanctified David, how He promised to be with David in the hour of death, or in a time of extreme danger where his life was threatened, how He protected him with His rod and rescued him with His staff, how He provided for David when his enemies would try to starve him out. And through all of this would give him such joy that his cup was continually running over.

Can you think of anything that is left out? Oh, how wonderful are those He's and me's or my's.

But we still have one verse to go. It seems from what we have already seen that the LORD's provision had been continual up to the time that he wrote, but how long would it last? That answer is given in verse 6.

III. DAVID'S PROSPECT FOR FUTURE BLESSING (Psa. 23:6).

Notice in verse 1 that you have a future, but then from verse 2 through verse 5 there are a series of present tenses. Now in verse 6 David looked into the future. And this included:

A. "All the days of my life."

B. "And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

- The house of the LORD could mean the tabernacle, or the place where the LORD lived among His people before the Temple was built. But it seems that following "all the days of my life," it has to refer to heaven!

Concl: The fact that this Psalm has become such a popular Psalm year after year, is not just because people like the simplicity of it, and the promises that it gives. It certainly is not because people like to be compared with sheep. But it is because the LORD keeps bringing His people back to this wonderful truth. You and I can repeat this Psalm just like it was written for us, for us individually. And we can apply it to the present circumstances in our lives. We need to make it our own. And what peace and joy it should bring to our hearts to know that the LORD cares for each one of us, and for all of His people in any generation, wherever they might be, in whatever country they might live, and regardless of what language they might speak, just like each one was the only sheep He had on earth at any particular time.

- So none of us must hesitate at all to say, "The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me ..." Since He is the LORD, He will never die, nor will He ever change at all. And so that which brought peace and joy to David, can bring the same to us.

Quote it or read it with me as we close.