

23rd Psalm

SHEEP

Dr. Andrew Bonar told me how, in the Highlands of Scotland, a sheep would often wander off into the rocks and get into places that they couldn't get out of. The grass on these mountains is very sweet and the sheep like it, and they will jump down ten or twelve feet, and then they can't jump back again, and the shepherd hears them bleating in distress. They may be there for days, until they have eaten all the grass. The shepherd will wait until they are so faint they cannot stand, and then they will put a rope around him, and he will go over and pull that sheep up out of the jaws of death. "Why don't they go down there when the sheep first gets there?" I asked. "Ah!" He said, "they are so very foolish they would dash right over the precipice and be killed if they did!" And that is the way with men; they won't go back to God till they have no friends and have lost everything. If you are a wanderer I tell you that the Good Shepherd will bring you back the moment you have given up trying to save yourself and are willing to let Him save you His own way.

Moody's Anecdotes, pp. 70-71.

There is no inspired title to this psalm, and none is needed, for it records no special event, and needs no other key than that which every Christian may find in his own bosom.

It is David's Heavenly Pastoral; a surpassing ode, which none of the daughters of music can excel. The clarion of war here gives place to the pipe of peace, and he who so lately bewailed the woes of the Shepherd tunefully rehearses the joys of the flock.

Sitting under a spreading tree, with his flock around him, like Bunyan's shepherd-boy in the Valley of Humiliation, we picture David singing this unrivalled pastoral with a heart as full of gladness as it could hold; or, if the psalm be the product of his after-years, we are sure that his soul returned in contemplation to the lonely water-brooks which rippled among the pastures of the wilderness, where in early days she had been wont to dwell.

This is the pearl of psalms whose soft and pure radiance delights every eye; a pearl of which Helicon need not be ashamed, though Jordan claims it. Of this delightful song it may be affirmed that its piety and its poetry are equal, its sweetness and its spirituality are unsurpassed.

The position of this psalm is worthy of notice. It follows the twenty-second, which is peculiarly the Psalm of the Cross. There are no green pastures, no still waters on the other side of the twenty-second psalm. It is only after we have read, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" that we come to "The Lord is my Shepherd." We must by experience know the value of blood-shedding, and see the sword awakened against the Shepherd, before we shall be able truly to know the Sweetness of the good Shepherd's care.

It has been said that what the nightingale is among birds, that is this divine ode among the psalms, for it has sung sweetly in the ear of many a mourner in his night of weeping, and has bidden him hope for a morning of joy. I will venture to compare it also to the lark, which sings as it mounts, and mounts as it sings, until it is out of sight, and even then is not out of hearing. Note the last words of the psalm "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" these are celestial notes, more fitted for the eternal mansions than for these dwelling places below the clouds. Oh that we may enter into the spirit of the psalm as we read it, and then we shall experience the days of heaven upon the earth!

Charles H Spurgeon (1834-1892) - Exposition of Psalm 23 from The Treasury of David

David extolls the goodness of God as his shepherd, and expresses his confidence in him, ver. 1-6. A psalm of David.

Commentary on Chapter 23

2. Lie down - To repose myself at noon, as the manner was in those hot countries. Green - Where there is both delight and plenty of provisions.

3. Restoresh - Hebrew. He bringeth it back; from its errors and wandering. For - Not for any worth in me, but for the glory of his justice, and faithfulness, and goodness.
 4. Thy rod and thy staff - Two words denoting the same thing, and both designing God's pastoral care over him.
 5. A table - Thou furnishest me with plenty of provisions and comforts. Oil - With aromatic ointments, which were then used at great feasts; thy comforts delight my soul. Runneth over - Thou hast given me a plentiful portions, signified by the cup, given to the guests by the master of the feast. Wesley's Notes on the Bible (John Welsey, 1703-1791)
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Confidence in God's grace and care.

The Lord is my Shepherd

In these words, the believer is taught to express his satisfaction in the care of the great Pastor of the universe, the Redeemer and Preserver of men. With joy he reflects that he has a shepherd, and that shepherd is Jehovah. A flock of sheep, gentle and harmless, feeding in verdant pastures, under the care of a skilful, watchful, and tender shepherd, forms an emblem of believers brought back to the Shepherd of their souls. The greatest abundance is but a dry pasture to a wicked man, who relishes in it only what pleases the senses; but to a godly man, who by faith tastes the goodness of God in all his enjoyments, though he has but little of the world, it is a green pasture. The Lord gives quiet and contentment in the mind, whatever the lot is. Are we blessed with the green pastures of the ordinances, let us not think it enough to pass through them, but let us abide in them. The consolations of the Holy Spirit are the still waters by which the saints are led; the streams which flow from the Fountain of living waters. Those only are led by the still waters of comfort, who walk in the paths of righteousness. The way of duty is the truly pleasant way. The work of righteousness in peace. In these paths we cannot walk, unless God lead us into them, and lead us on in them. Discontent and distrust proceed from unbelief; an unsteady walk is the consequence: let us then simply trust our Shepherd's care, and hearken to his voice. The valley of the shadow of death may denote the most severe and terrible affliction, or dark dispensation of providence, that the psalmist ever could come under. Between the part of the flock on earth and that which is gone to heaven, death lies like a dark valley that must be passed in going from one to the other. But even in this there are words which lessen the terror. It is but the shadow of death: the shadow of a serpent will not sting, nor the shadow of a sword kill. It is a valley, deep indeed, and dark, and miry; but valleys are often fruitful, and so is death itself fruitful of comforts to God's people. It is a walk through it: they shall not be lost in this valley, but get safe to the mountain on the other side. Death is a king of terrors, but not to the sheep of Christ. When they come to die, God will rebuke the enemy; he will guide them with his rod, and sustain them with his staff. There is enough in the gospel to comfort the saints when dying, and underneath them are the everlasting arms. The Lord's people feast at his table, upon the provisions of his love. Satan and wicked men are not able to destroy their comforts, while they are anointed with the Holy Spirit, and drink of the cup of salvation which is ever full. Past experience teaches believers to trust that the goodness and mercy of God will follow them all the days of their lives, and it is their desire and determination, to seek their happiness in the service of God here, and they hope to enjoy his love for ever in heaven. While here, the Lord can make any situation pleasant, by the anointing of his Spirit and the joys of his salvation. But those that would be satisfied with the blessings of his house, must keep close to the duties of it. Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Bible (Public Domain).