Psalm 23

There was once a Shakespearean actor who was known everywhere for his one-man performance of readings and recitations from the classics. He would always end his shows with a dramatic reading of the 23rd Psalm. Each night, as the actor began: The Lord is my shepherd, the crowd would listen attentively to his perfect diction and impeccable cadence and timing. Then, at the end, they would thunder in applause at actor’s ability to bring verse to life.

One night, a young man spoke up: Sir, do you mind if I recite the Psalm? The actor allowed him to come forward, wondering if the young man could even come close to matching his own skill. In a far-from-perfect voice, the young man recited the Psalm. When he finished, there was no applause. There was no sound at all, and every eye was wet with tears. Amazed, the actor said: I don’t understand. I have been performing the 23rd Psalm for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training. But I have never been able to move an audience like you did. What is your secret? The young man replied: Well sir, you know the Psalm. I know the Shepherd.

I don’t know who first told that story. I don’t even know if it is true. However, I do think it teaches us what a powerful thing it is to know the Good Shepherd and what he has done for you. As we consider that Psalm, you have opportunity to learn what your Good Shepherd does for you!

David begins the Psalm with these words: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. David describes the Lord as the Shepherd of his people, and David saw the Lord as his personal Shepherd also. David lived and worked as a shepherd himself, so he knew what he was talking about in this picture of words.

If you think about sheep for moment, do they have any advantage? Are they bigger than their predators? Stronger? More cunning or clever? Do they have vicious claws and scary fangs? Is their hide like iron or their coat so thick nothing can touch them? Are they able to survive where others cannot? Eat food others cannot? Find water where others cannot? Really they have none of these things, and in many ways they are just the opposite. The only thing sheep have going for them is their shepherd. He provides what they are lacking.

When David says, I shall not be in want, he can only say that because The Lord is my shepherd. On our own, each of us is lacking, especially in matters of the soul. By ourselves, where would we turn to nourish our souls? Too often junk food calls the loudest: seeds of selfishness, grasses of getting-my-own-way, grains of gossip and hurtful language, shoots of immorality, kernels of worldly choices, the fruit of foolishness. But this food leaves our souls gaunt and starving. By ourselves, we turn away from the quiet waters. Rather we churn and pollute our water with strife, vengeance and drama. And as far as the righteous path goes, again by ourselves, we happily choose any other path.

But you have one thing going for you: The Lord is your shepherd. Because of that, he will supply what you lack. He leads you to food and water that restores the soul. That food is the Gospel. Drink deeply of his Word. Refresh yourself in the promises he made to you in the waters of Baptism. Sustain yourself with food he offers in his true body and blood. In the Gospel you find food that truly satisfies. That food supplies the righteousness you lack. It offers the righteousness your Shepherd earned for you, and so
your soul feeds on it through faith. When the righteousness of the Shepherd fills you, you can turn away from the momentary satisfaction of sin. Follow your Shepherd’s lead.

Why does he do this? Why does the Shepherd guide and lead and provide for a sheep like me? David gives us that answer too: **For his name’s sake.** The reason our Good Shepherd does these things is to live up to his name. And his name is the **Lord!** This name: **Lord, Jehovah, Yahweh,** the I AM God, was the special name for himself he revealed to his people. That name tells us our God always keeps the promises he makes. And the overwhelming message of those promises is this: **I am the Lord who loves his people. I protect them. I provide for them. I rescue them. I redeem them no matter the cost to myself. I will keep my promises to my people because I cannot lie, nor would I lie to them. That is who I am, and that is what I do for you!**

What an important lesson to learn about your Good Shepherd, and how good it is to remind ourselves of that truth again! The Good Shepherd supplies what we are lacking, but how far will this promise go? How long will it apply to me? David gives an answer to those questions next.

The Psalm continues: **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.** David’s words remind us of how we lack certainty and comfort in the face of fear. When do realize that most? When does it hit us the hardest? For most, it strikes when we face the **valley of the shadow of death.** That makes sense really, because there is nothing certain about facing death if we must do it on our own. Death targets each one of us. You cannot outrun it. You cannot escape it.

But then you realize, along with David: **You are with me, Good Shepherd!** You do not face death or any hardship and trouble or any evil, no matter how great and terrible, on your own. Your Shepherd stands beside you. He is there through the darkest days of life and he will be with you in your final day on this earth.

The tools of the shepherd are **his rod and his staff.** He uses them to defend his sheep against any enemy that seeks to harm them. The Good Shepherd drives off Satan, that ancient serpent, with his venom. He strikes the gaping mouth of death that seeks to devour us. He bars the way to hell so none of his sheep may enter. You can be certain the rod and staff of the Good Shepherd are greater than the power of your enemies. As you stand at his side and under his protection, so you can say too: **I will fear no evil, for you are with me.**

Your Good Shepherd is with you always as he continues to supply whatever you lack. Again how good it is to learn what he has done for his people! But there are two more verses of the Psalm, and one more point we want to learn about our Good Shepherd.

We just sang the hymn: **The King Of Love My Shepherd Is.** In a way, that title illustrates the subtle change of imagery in the Psalm. David concludes with these words: **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.** But these words speak about a lavish banquet of a king with his people, not the simple life of a shepherd and his sheep.

But too often, the temptation comes to focus on what we lack. **If only we had more money, if only we had more things, if only we could do more or travel more or even volunteer more.** Doesn’t the shepherd see that? Why doesn’t he bless me more? Why
doesn’t he lavish such a banquet on me and honor me and stick it to my enemies? But such a focus comes more from the venom of the Serpent than from the voice of the Shepherd!

It blinds us to the many blessings we already see from our Shepherd-King. Spend some time counting your blessings. When you do, you will find they add up more quickly than the stars. We have so much compared to so many in the world, compared to so many throughout most of history. Every last bit of those blessings come from the hand of your Good Shepherd.

But if we only consider blessings in this world, we will again miss the main point of this beautiful picture. The greatest blessing we receive from the Lord is heaven which the Bible often describes as a feast. There you have a place of honor, anointed for celebration, feasting on the best of meats and finest of wines. The enemies of the Shepherd and his people can no longer do any harm. The words: in the presence of my enemies tell me those enemies are helpless and can only stand and watch. This celebration will last forever.

Rather than complain about what we lack, how much better off we are when we concentrate on the promises of the Lord. Again just consider this one phrase: Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. The Shepherd promises me his love and good things. They will not just follow me. They will hunt me down. They pursue me. Every day of my life good things and the love of the Lord chase after me because that’s how he treats his people. And when those days are done, I can say with confidence: I will dwell in house of Lord forever!

How can I be sure? Because my Good Shepherd is the Lord and he always keeps his promises. He has to because that is who he is! When you consider the words of this Shepherd’s Psalm, may you always learn to know him better! Amen.

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