

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

PSALM 23 AFEKOLU, CHRIS (BISHOP)

PREAMBLE

This lesson is on one of the best known and best loved passages in the Bible; so reassuring. Probably no section of the Bible has brought more comfort than Psalm 23.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anoints my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”. (Psalms 23:1-6 KJV)

One can imagine the great king David thinking back to his former humble existence as a shepherd boy, guarding and protecting his sheep. Then, as his thoughts turn to the love and care he has received from God, the two lines of thought come together with this realization: **“The Lord is my shepherd!”** He thinks, “The Lord’: The One who is all-faithful, never failing in His promises; almighty, all-powerful; all knowing; the One who created the heavens and the earth, who spoke and it was done, who upholds all things by the word of His power; the One of whom Job said, ‘I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be restrained’ (Job 42:2); the One who is able to supply all our needs! This Lord ‘is my shepherd’: ‘Me’—the dust of His footstool and yet He looks after me with the same tender care that I gave my sheep in days gone by!”

As this truth sinks home, it is followed by an inevitable conclusion: **Since the Lord is my shepherd, “I shall not want.” I shall not lack for anything I really need, anything that is essential to my well-being.** The remainder of the Psalm is an expansion of this thought. Let’s consider these familiar words as David, guided by the Holy Spirit, stresses God’s provision for him—and by extension God’s provision for all men who will claim Him as the Shepherd of their lives.

I SHALL NOT WANT” FOR NOURISHMENT

David begins with these words in verse 2: “*He make me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside still waters.*” **Because “The Lord is my shepherd,” says David, “I shall not want” for nourishment.** The shepherd provides for the sheep the comfortable green pasture and the refreshing waters. To appreciate these words fully, we have to understand several peculiarities of sheep.

First, a sheep that is hungry will not lie down; it will continue to graze. **A sheep that lies down in a green pasture is full, satisfied, nourished.** Second, a sheep will generally not drink from running or turbulent waters. Apparently, it instinctively knows that if it falls into deep water, its wool can become saturated, and it could lose its life. Sheep will often even refuse to cross a very small stream of water running across a path after a rain.

But the shepherd pictured in verse 2 leads his sheep beside “the still waters.” If the only water supply is a running stream, he will dig a shallow hole beside the stream, let it fill and then settle to provide his sheep with the cool, still water they need.

In these verses David is depicting the loving and caring way that God nourishes our souls. First and foremost, that nourishment is found in God’s Word as we read it, study it, and meditate on it.

The Bible is milk for the immature (*1 Corinthians 3:1, 2; 1 Peter 2:2*); it is meat for those who are growing (*Hebrews 5:12–14*). **Again, God nourishes us by giving us opportunity to put that Word into practice in our lives.** Jesus said, “*My meat [or food] is to do the will of him that sent me*” (*John 4:34*). Further, God nourishes us with His own presence as obedience to the Word draws us closer and closer to Him—as we drink of that spiritual “water” spoken of by Jesus to the woman at the well of Samaria:

Whosoever drink of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up into eternal life (*John 4:14*).

God’s provision is abundant (He makes us to lie down in green, lush pastures); **God’s provision is suited to our needs (He knows our peculiarities as the shepherd knows those of the sheep); and God’s provision satisfies and strengthens.**

A sheep must have nourishment to produce wool. A boy must have nourishment to grow. An athlete must have nourishment to do his best. A man or a woman must have nourishment to fulfill his or her responsibilities in life. And we must have spiritual nourishment to be what we should be spiritually.

How often we neglect God’s provision! We do not study our Bibles.

We are not primarily concerned about His will for our lives. We do not draw closer to Him in prayer. And then we wonder why we do not grow spiritually. Before leaving this verse, we need to note the words *“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.”* In the hottest part of summer, the shepherd tries to get the flock to the pasture by about 3:30 in the morning, to let them graze until about 10:00. Then he insists that they lie down in the shade during the hottest part of the day.

One writer noted that sometimes, for our own good, God may make us “lie down” for a season. On occasion when one have gotten so busy that he/she neglected what was most important—to deepen his/her ties with God through study, prayer, and meditation. Sometimes at that point one may have been “made to lie down”—generally through illness or other exigencies. There is nothing like lying on a bed of affliction, looking up at the ceiling, to make one rethink his priorities. This, too, is part of God’s provision for us. The psalmist said, *“It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I may learn thy statutes” (Psalm 119:71).* **Yes, our God loves us, and He provides for us so abundantly!**

2. “I SHALL NOT WANT” FOR GUIDANCE

In verse 2 David introduced the thought of God’s leading us: “He leadeth me beside still waters.” He expands that thought in verse 3: “He restoreth my soul: He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

Because “the Lord is my shepherd,” “I shall not want” for guidance. Sheep are not the most intelligent of creatures and sometimes they wander off and become lost. But the shepherd was concerned about all his sheep, even the most careless. So he would find the lost sheep, bring it back, and restore it to the flock. He would then lead them all in the right path.

Note the relationship of the sheep and the shepherd. The shepherd knows the sheep and the sheep knows the shepherd. Where he led, they followed. Sheep are not led from behind, when this is done, that is leading from behind, it results to lot of shouting and arm waving. The shepherd in Bible led his sheep.

Again, note the foresight of the diligent shepherd. He led his sheep only in the right paths. The shepherd knew the paths that crisscrossed the land, and he chose only those that led to the green pastures and the still waters, only those that could be traveled in safety. The sheep knows the right paths by noticing the paths which the shepherd followed.

Further, note that he chose these paths, not only because of his concern for the sheep, but also “for his name’s sake.” His name, his reputation, was important to him. He had a quality of good workmanship. **He was determined that his job would be done to the best of his ability.** We, too, like sheep, may go astray (Isaiah 53:6). And God is concerned when we do! He is like the shepherd who leaves the

ninety and nine to seek the one who is lost (Luke 15:4). And when we are restored there is rejoicing even in heaven! (Luke 15:5–7).

Most of all, God wants to lead us in the paths of righteousness so we will not go astray. How does God lead us? Again, we need to understand that God’s principal provision for us is His Word. Psalms 119 begins, “Blessed are they that are perfect in the way, who walk in the law of Jehovah” (v. 1). Later the same psalm says that God’s Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our pathway (v. 105; see also v. 130).

There are also secondary ways God can help us know the way to go—such as the advice of mature Christians (**Hebrews 5:14**), God’s providentially opening and closing doors (1 Corinthians 16:9), and so on. These must always be interpreted in the light of the Bible but can be of great value in helping us find our way through the complex challenges of modern life.

God does provide guidance for today. And then let it be impressed upon our minds that the pathways God sets before us are the right paths. I am sure that the pathway the shepherd took did not always look like the right path, when viewed from the sheep’s viewpoint. As we will note in a moment, sometimes those pathways led through uninviting territory. But if the shepherd was diligent and knowledgeable, concerned about his reputation, concerned about his flock, those paths were right whether they looked right at the moment or not.

Sometimes today we may not like the paths God has chosen for us to travel “We cannot understand why God has set this path before us,” we cry. “This way is hard. This way is long. This way is uninviting.” But rest assured, if it is God’s way, it is the right way. **God gives His personal guarantee. He leads us in the right paths “for his name’s sake.”** God’s name is even more precious to Him than ours is to us (Exodus 20:7). His reputation is at stake. He will not lead us in wrong paths.

Though the pathway He would have us follow may be hard today, ultimately it will lead to safety, happiness, and salvation (Matthew 7:13, 14). **Our great need is to develop a relationship with the Shepherd, where we do not have to be driven (motivated or compelled) to walk the pathway, but rather will follow Him in perfect trust wherever He wants us to go.**

3. “I SHALL NOT WANT” FOR PROTECTION

Verse 4 tells us of the type of pathway we may be called upon to tread: “Yea, 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.” Up to this point, David has used the third person, discussing more or less dispassionately what God did for him: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul: He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

In verse 4, David ceases using the third person and starts using the second person: “Yea, 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.” The psalm ceases to be a discourse and becomes a prayer, a song of praise directed to God Himself! **David says, in effect, “Lord, because you are my shepherd, I shall not want for protection!”**

Sheep had to be moved frequently from one grazing area to another, in quest of greener pasture. But to get from pasture A to pasture B often involved crossing barren areas where there was no grass and no water, and sometimes even areas where danger lurked.

Hugo McCord notes that near Bethlehem, where David took care of his sheep, there were two principal grazing areas, several miles apart, connected by a deep ravine.

Perhaps it is this ravine David has in mind as he speaks of “the valley of the shadow of death.” One can imagine the sheep following the shepherd through this valley with danger on every hand: on one hand the caves in which wild animals live, on the other hand clefts into which the sheep might fall. But the sheep are following without fear for they have confidence in the shepherd. He has his rod—the long heavy club with which he can beat off any beast. And he has his staff—the long wooden stick with the crook on the end. If a sheep falls into a crevice, the shepherd can reach down with the staff, put the crook about the sheep’s neck, and pull it to safety.

The sheep “fear no evil” for the shepherd is with them. Using the weapons at his disposal, young David had even killed a lion and a bear in protecting his sheep. We, too, are called upon from time to time to “walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” When Adam and Eve sinned, death came into the world and, as the days have gone by, the shadow of death has spread over all the earth and touched every man. Every pain, every heartache, every disappointment resulting from sin entering the world is part of the shadow cast by death.

But when we walk through the valleys of pain and anguish and heartache, we need fear no evil, for our Shepherd is with us and He will protect and help us. There is the rod of His providential care as He protects us from troubles, not allowing us to be tempted above that which we are able to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). And there is the staff of the memory of His love, which can pull us back to safety—even as the memory of home pulled the prodigal son back to his father (Luke 15:17,18).

Let it be stressed that it is not that we are exempt from troubles (Acts 14:22), but rather that we are promised help and strength in meeting these troubles. Paul said, “I can do all things in him that strengthened me” (Philippians 4:13); and Peter said, “Casting all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

Someday, for each of us the shadow will turn into reality, and it will be our turn to walk the valley of death (Hebrews 9:27). But we will not be alone. The Good Shepherd will be with us—and we need fear, no evil. **“O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? . . . but thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”!** (1 Corinthians 15:55, 57). Through the death of Jesus the Christian can overcome physical death!

4. “I SHALL NOT WANT” FOR LOVING KINDNESS

The next verse contains a number of illustrations of the care of the dedicated shepherd. To summarize the verse, let us suggest that since the Lord is our shepherd, **we shall not want for loving kindness**: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup runneth over” (v. 5). **The loving shepherd is not satisfied with the bare necessities; because of his love for the sheep, he takes care of every need.**

In our illustration, the sheep have now passed safely through the valley of danger. They have come to the new pasturing ground. But the shepherd does not allow them to immediately graze. Instead he has them stop at the edge of the pasture while he “prepares their table.” First of all he looks for any poisonous plants or harmful weeds or anything that could pose danger to the sheep. When at last all enemies have been located and neutralized, he brings the flock to the pasture where it can feed in safety.

But there are still other expressions of loving kindness. In verse 3, it is noted that he restores the sheep. This verse notes that he does it with concern and gentleness. When nighttime comes, he tenderly checks each sheep for cuts and bruises and, if he finds a wound, he anoints it with oil. If a sheep is ill or a little lamb is thirsty, he brings a bowl of cool water, a bowl overflowing—symbolic of the overflowing love he has for each of his charges.

Even so God cares for us; He does not do the bare minimum; He rather showers upon us the abundance of His grace. He gives to us His “peace . . . which passeth all understanding [or comprehension]” (Philippians 4:7). He “is able to do [and does] exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us” (Ephesians 3:20).

Though our enemies may be many, He prepares for us the table of nourishment. We know that “if God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31). Though we may have gone astray, if we return in penitence (Acts 8:22), He treats us with gentleness. Though our heads become battered and bruised, He treats us with kindness: “He knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). He anoints our heads with the healing oil of forgiveness; our cups overflow with love.

5. “I SHALL NOT WANT” FOR A HOME David concludes the psalm with these words: “Surely goodness and loving-kindness shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of Jehovah forever” (v. 6). With David the past was a pledge of the future. The picture is that of the sheep cared for in every respect, safe and sound in the fold. **David’s last point is this: Since “the Lord is my shepherd,” “I shall not want” for a home.**

As a child of my Father, I shall not want for a home in this life. *I am in the family of God, the church (1 Timothy 3:15). I have the fellowship of the saints, the privilege of prayer, the promise of God’s Spirit within to help and strengthen me (Romans 8:26), the assurance that nothing can separate me “from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38, 39). “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”*

And if I remain faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10), I shall not want for a home in eternity—a home that Jesus went to prepare for me (John 14:1–3), a home where God “shall wipe away every tear . . . ; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more: the first things are passed away” (Revelation 21:4). I can say with David, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”!

CONCLUSION

What a great psalm of comfort and triumph! The Lord is my shepherd! Therefore, I shall not want for nourishment. I shall not want for guidance. I shall not want for protection. I shall not want for loving kindness. I shall not want for a home.

Before we close, let us stress that the promises and blessings of the Twenty-third Psalm are not intended for everyone. But this psalm is for those who are faithful children of God who have a vital relationship with the Shepherd.

One may recite or present this psalm 23 very intelligently. **You know the psalm 23 very well! But it is more rewarding, worthy and excellent to know THE SHEPHERD!**

- 1) Do you know the Shepherd? Have you been baptized to become a child of God, a part of God’s flock, the church? (Acts 2:38, 41, 47)
- 2) **As one of God’s own, have you been following the Shepherd; have you been living as you ought to live?** If not, turn to the Lord.