

The 23rd Psalm

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (2) He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. (3) He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. (4) 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. (5) Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. (6) Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalm 23:1-6).

Psalms, containing 150 chapters, is the longest book in the Old Testament. They were written by different inspired *men*. David, referred to in 2 Sam. 23:1, as *“the sweet psalmist of Israel,”* is generally credited with having written 73 of the psalms, including the 23rd psalm, a psalm which, for good reason, is often called *“the shepherd psalm.”*

The 23rd psalm is, without doubt, the best known, most loved, and most often quoted of all the psalms. It is loved in life, and very often quoted in death.

To be able to better grasp the contents of this psalm, it is appropriate that we mentally put ourselves in the situation of the Jews at the time this psalm was written. The nation of Israel abounded with shepherds and flocks. This fact is especially evident in Gen. 46:32 which in point of time related to when Jacob and his sons settled in Goshen in the land of Egypt after having come out of the land of Canaan during a time of intense famine. In this verse Joseph was saying to his brothers what he would tell Pharaoh regarding them, namely that: *“the men are shepherds, for their occupation has been to feed livestock; and they have brought their flocks and their herds and all that they have.”* David himself, as a youth, was a shepherd, I Sam. 16:11; 17:15. David ultimately became one of Judah’s greatest kings. With this in mind, we note Psa. 78:70-72 wherein we read that God *“chose David His servant, and took him from the sheepfolds; From following the ewes that had young He brought him, to shepherd Jacob His people, and Israel His inheritance. So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands.”*

That the nation of Israel abounded with shepherds and herds is further evidenced by the fact that when Jesus was born shepherds were in the fields, *“keeping watch over their flock by night,”* Luke 2:8. Moreover, Jesus spoke a parable of a man *“having 100 sheep,”* and one of them straying from the fold, and of the shepherd leaving *“the ninety and nine in the wilderness,”* and going after the *“one that was lost until”* he found it, and then rejoicing for having found His *“sheep that was lost,”* Luke 15:4-6. In fact, Jesus described Himself as *“the good shepherd”* who *“gives His life for the sheep,”* John 10:11. For that matter, members of His church are called *“the flock,”* Acts 20:28, and Jesus is referred to as *“that great shepherd of the sheep,”* Heb. 13:20. In view of the fact that Christians are His *“flock,”* and Jesus is our *“good shepherd,”* who *“gave his life”* for us, then the 23rd psalm (the shepherd psalm) should be especially meaningful to faithful Christians (His *“flock”*) today. Hence, it is appropriate that we examine this psalm more

closely, and in so doing we will break it down into two main sub-divisions, listed as **A** and **B** in that which follows.

A. “The Lord is my shepherd,” Ps. 23:1-4. Please note verse One: “*The Lord is my shepherd..*” Herein “*The Lord*” (Jehovah!) is referred to as “*Shepherd!*” Moreover, “*the Lord is my shepherd,*” a term depicting a personal relationship between the psalmist (and by application, Christians today) and “*the Lord.*” Please note also that “*the Lord is my shepherd.*” The “*shepherd*” is in charge. In this verse David is not describing himself as a shepherd, but as a sheep! Because “*the Lord is my shepherd,*” then “*I shall not want.*” As a good shepherd provides for the needs of his sheep, “*the Lord*” (who has unlimited resources) provides for His sheep; hence, that being the case, then “*I shall not want!*”

With the Lord being “*my shepherd,*” then “*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters,*” v. 2. Sheep are pretty helpless on their own. They are unable to cope with turbulent waters, and they need proper food. The shepherd thus leads them “*beside the still waters,*” and makes them “*lie down in green pastures.*” As a part of His “*flock*” today, Christians must continually feed upon the word of God, and upon which they ought to “*meditate day and night,*” Psa. 1:2.

Since the Lord is “*my shepherd,*” then “*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake,*” Psa 23:3. We, too, “*like sheep have gone astray,*” Isa. 53:6; at such times our souls need restoration, Gal. 6:1, and we must ever follow the Lord’s instructions so that we truly will be “*led in paths of righteousness.*” There is no other **safe** course to follow!

By seeking the restoration which can only come from the Lord, and by walking in “*the paths of righteousness,*” then we can confidently say “*yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...*” v. 4. Sheep were continually subjected to danger — from the passage ways to the high plateaus, from dogs, cougars, coyotes, bears, etc. And, with the devil as our “*adversary,*” I Peter 5:8, and living in a world of intense evil, we, too, are subjected to perilous dangers, but “*with God all things are possible,*” Matt. 19:26; by following His will we can enjoy “*the peace of God, which passeth all understanding,*” Phil. 4:7, and even “*fear no evil*” as we “*walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*” Even as the shepherd’s rod and staff comforted the sheep, we can find comfort in the firm conviction that “*God is faithful,*” that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we “*are able*” to cope with, and that He will provide a “*way of escape,*” enabling us “*to bear*” whatever comes our way, I Cor. 10:13.

B. The Lord is My Host. Please note verse 5: “*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*” Good shepherds abundantly provided food for their sheep, and kept watch over them in times of danger. God has provided for His “*flock*” “*all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ,*” Eph 1:3, and God has provided for us a spiritual banquet (His word) upon which we should feed daily, Matt. 4:4; John 6:48,51. David, who looked to “*the Lord,*” His “*shepherd,*” could say with certainty that “*my cup runneth over,*” and faithful Christians today are blessed beyond measure (Eph., 1:3). With assurance we can say as did the apostle Paul: “*He that spared not His Own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things,*” Rom. 8:32. Yes, if you are a faithful Christian, following Jesus “*the good*

shepherd,” then your “cup runneth over!”

And the best is yet to come! With the psalmist, you can also say “*surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever,*” v. 6. Yes, in life, there are trials and tribulations; yea, even “*persecutions*” (Mark 10:30), but if you remain faithful, then “*goodness and mercy*” will follow you all the days of your life, and one day you can go home to heaven and there “*dwell in the house of the Lord forever!*” And what a grand homecoming it will be “when we all get to heaven!”

Conclusion: Jesus is our “*good shepherd,*” John 10:11. We must follow Him, for He is “*the way, the truth, and the life,*” John 14:6. We sometime sing that Jesus “is all the world to me.” Indeed, He is! He is my **creator**, John 1:1-3. He is My “*savior,*” Matt. 1:21. He is my sacrificial **lamb**, Isa. 53:7,8; John 1:29. He is my **shepherd**, John 10:11. I must follow Him! Friend, if you are not a Christian you are depriving yourself of real happiness, both now and forever! Based upon your relationship with God, can you, with biblical assurance, say with conviction “*the Lord is My shepherd?*”

**** — B. Witherington