

The Wonderful Relationship Between God and His People

Psalm 23

Psalm 23 - *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads 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 You are with me. Your rod and Your staff comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs 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."*

Background Notes

Psalm 23 is not only one of the most loved psalms in the Bible - it is also one of the most well-known and well-loved poems in all of English literature! There was a time in this country when the average American could quote Psalm 23 by heart, as this psalm was memorized in school as well as in church.

This psalm compares the wonderful relationship between God and His people to the close relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. The theme of shepherds and sheep runs throughout the Bible. In Psalm 80:1, we read, *"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth!"*

Speaking prophetically of the Messiah, Isaiah 40:11 says, *"He will feed His flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom. He will gently lead those who are with young."*

And in Micah 7:14, we read, *"Shepherd Your people with Your staff - the flock of Your heritage, who dwell solitarily in a woodland, in the midst of Carmel. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead, as in days of old."*

In Ezekiel 34, the Lord is seen as the true Shepherd, in stark contrast to the false shepherds – the corrupt leaders of Israel.

And when we come to the New Testament, there's that wonderful portion of Scripture in John 10 where the Lord Jesus declared that He is the good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep so that they might be eternally secure. *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep... I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own..." "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand."* (John 10:11,14,27,28).

In the New Testament our Lord is described not only as the **Good Shepherd**, but also as the **Chief Shepherd** (1 Peter 5:4) and the **Great Shepherd** (Hebrews 13:20). If we study the contexts of “shepherd passages” throughout the Bible, we find that the Lord is the Shepherd to us as individual sheep, and He is Shepherd in His flock. In the Old Testament, His flock is the nation of Israel, and in the New Testament His flock is the Church.

So when we read Psalm 23 and see all the benefits and blessing for the sheep, we should see this psalm as written for us as individual sheep, and for God’s entire flock as well. For example, the future godly remnant of restored Israel will go through the valley of the shadow of death during “the time of Jacob’s trouble” - but after they have passed through the valley, they will come to know the loving-kindness and blessing of the Lord in His millennial kingdom on earth. This glorious kingdom will merge with eternity, where restored Israel and all believers will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord is my Shepherd in His provision for me.

Psalm 23 could be entitled “the best fringe benefits anywhere”! Employers pride themselves on providing their employees with the best fringe benefits possible. Well, when you become a Christian, you not only receive salvation from your sins, but much more – the best fringe benefits anywhere! But remember - the benefits and blessings of Psalm 23 would not be possible without the death of the Shepherd in Psalm 22.

The theme of Psalm 23 is not about **becoming** a sheep. It’s about the blessings of **being** a sheep that is included in the flock of the greatest Shepherd. All the way through Psalm 23 the relationship between the sheep and the Shepherd is in view. And notice - it is from the perspective of the sheep. Throughout this psalm, the sheep is either speaking **about** the Shepherd or speaking **to** the Shepherd.

In verses 1-3 the main theme is the Shepherd’s **provision** for the sheep. The Lord as the good Shepherd provides both spiritual nourishment and spiritual restoration for His sheep. *“The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters” (v1-2)*. That’s spiritual nourishment. There’s nothing like the Word of God to give you spiritual nourishment. It is food and drink for the hungry and thirsty soul. *“He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters” (v2)*. Have you ever had that experience of finding healing and rest in the Word of God - and being well fed and content under the watchful eye of the good Shepherd?

In verse 3 we have spiritual **restoration** for the sheep: *“He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”* Christians may sometimes face discouragement or weariness - even burnout - but the Lord knows how to restore our souls. If we look to Him, He will guide our lives in paths that will bring restoration to our souls, and

honor to His Name. I have found this to be true more than once, and I trust that's been your experience as well. The Lord is my Shepherd in His provision for me.

2. The Lord is my Shepherd in His protection for me.

In verses 4 and 5, the main thought is the Shepherd's **protection** for His sheep: *"Yea, 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 comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over!"*

Notice - when the "valley of the shadow of death" is entered, there is a change from the third person to the first person. The sheep changes from using the word "He" to using the word "You." Up to this point, the sheep is speaking about the good Shepherd to other sheep: *"He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."*

But now, in the valley of the shadow of death, the sheep speaks directly to the Shepherd:

"Yea, 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over!"

In the valley, the sheep and the Shepherd enter a close "I-Thou" relationship. Have you ever faced the valley of the shadow of death, and had the privilege of **knowing** that the Lord is right there beside you? That was my experience when I went through open-heart surgery. Those verses were no longer just reports about how the Lord was near someone else in the valley - they became personal! Your relationship with the Lord will become an "I-Thou" relationship when you go through the valley of the shadow of death.

The Shepherd's "rod" protects the sheep. It's used to defend the sheep from predators, and it can also be used to discipline the sheep. And that discipline is certainly a form of protection as well! The Shepherd's "staff," or "crook," protects by keeping the straying sheep in line and away from danger. The sheep are so protected by the Shepherd that they can rest and feast, even in the midst of enemy territory!

Psalms 23 gives us glimpses of an annual cycle of shepherding – glimpses that show us the relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep throughout the year. Remember, David was a shepherd and had first-hand knowledge of this annual cycle. During the cycle, a shepherd will lead the sheep from the home fold to higher pastures. Thus the "table" (v5) may refer to the lush pastures of the elevated "tablelands" where the Shepherd leads the sheep during hot summer months. Protection was most needed in the distant pastures - not only from predators, but also from summer insects and pesky gnats. Oil was applied to the sheep's head to protect it from insects. Our great Shepherd knows how to protect us from big fierce enemies as well as small bothersome and annoying enemies.

The “table” can also speak of our Lord’s providing the protection, sustenance and close fellowship with Him that we desperately need in times of distress. What a picture - we are His protected and honored guests, with anointed heads, at our Lord’s banquet table - even in the midst of enemies that would like to eliminate us and destroy our faith. The Lord is my Shepherd in His protection for me.

By the way, Psalm 23 is a good spiritual manual for church leaders today. As “under-shepherds” who work under the direction of the Great Shepherd (1 Peter 5), church leaders have the serious responsibility of protecting the flock and providing for the flock.

3. The Lord is my Shepherd in His program for me.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (v6).

There is no better **program** for us sheep than this - to know that the Lord’s goodness and His loving kindness - His loyal and steadfast and covenanted love - will follow us, even when we make mistakes. This is **great encouragement!**

There is no mention of the sheep somehow falling short of this security, or being kicked out of the flock. No! Once we are sheep, we are programmed for blessing. And there is confidence and is great assurance in the final line: *“I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”!* The Lord is my Shepherd in His program for me.

Practical Application

Can you say, “The Lord is my Shepherd”?

Many people today would be willing to call Jesus “a” Shepherd – maybe even a “great” Shepherd. They recognize that Jesus of Nazareth was a great moral teacher and moral leader. They may even be willing to admit that He is the greatest person the world has ever known.

But they will not admit that Jesus is God. They refuse to believe that when Jesus died on the cross He was dying for their sins, and they will not trust in Jesus as their personal Savior. They’re not willing to call Him “my” Shepherd. They cannot say, “The Lord is my Shepherd” because they’re not part of His flock.

What about you? Can you say, “The Lord is my Shepherd”?