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“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want,” Psalm 23:1.

The Shepherd Psalm

Lesson Aim: To encourage Christians to enjoy the privilege of continual fellowship with God.

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Topic: Fellowship: With God.

“What is the best loved passage in the Bible?” Most people would answer, “The twenty-third Psalm.” Such an answer would probably be correct. Through many generations the Psalm has sustained martyrs, comforted the sorrowing, and strengthened the weak. It has been memorized, recited, read, chanted, and sung by more people than any other sacred writing. Unnumbered sermons, devotional talks, and expository studies have been written and spoken upon the treasures of that text. The Psalm is best loved because it sets forth a blessed truth: God provides for and protects His own.

King David wrote the twenty third Psalm when he was an elderly man. It was based upon his experiences with God which reached back through many years. Recounting the mercy and provision of God, he drew an analogy of a shepherd carefully keeping watch over his own. God's dealings with him through all the vicissitudes of his past life created in the psalmist a calm confidence, a positive assurance, and a beautiful expression of trust.

This study aims “to encourage Christians to enjoy the privilege of continual fellowship with God.” If He is your Shepherd, you are the sheep of His pasture. God is committed to keep you. Your responsibility is to follow Him. Live in the light of the twenty third Psalm, and you will never backslide; you will live the abundant Christian life.

I. PERSONS

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." verse 1.

A personal relationship between God and man is the heart of revealed religion. Psalm 23 testifies to that blessed fact. Two persons are mentioned: "The Lord" who is the Shepherd and "I" who am His sheep: The comforting assurance of the psalm is dependent upon that relationship.

How significant it is for one to say, "THE LORD is my shepherd . . .!" It is much more meaningful than to say, "God is my shepherd." "Lord" is the personal name of God. It is used when His covenant-keeping and redemptive qualities are foremost. With that name is associated the ideas of fellowship, love, grace, forgiveness, and loving-kindness. By choosing the title, "Lord," the Psalmist showed his intention to say, "The God of grace, who is concerned about my welfare, who loves me perfectly, who redeems me completely, who keeps me safely, is my shepherd!" It is no wonder that he added, "I shall not suffer lack." ". . . There is no want to them that fear him," Psalm 34:9.

"The Lord is MY shepherd." Personally, intimately, forever, He is mine! All fretting and anxiety cease upon such a realization. All of life's problems are resolved when there is such a personal identification with the Sovereign of the universe. I enter into such a relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour, John 1:11-12.

"The Lord is my SHEPHERD." The shepherd's care for his sheep is often used to illustrate God's care for His own. God said, "**And ye are my flock, the flock of my pasture are men, and I am your God,**" Ezekiel 34:31. Believers accept the reality of that analogy and reply with joy, "**So we thy people and sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks for ever . . .,**" Psalm 79:13. Even in sin, God's people are said to be like straying sheep. "**All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way . . .,**" Isaiah 53:6.

Jesus called believers a "little flock," Luke 12:32. He spoke of Himself as the "door to the sheepfold" and as the "shepherd" of the sheep, John 10:1-18. He admonished Simon Peter, as a minister of the gospel, "Feed my sheep," John 21:15-17. Peter wrote of our spiritual pilgrimage, "**For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls,**" I Peter 2:25.

No wonder the psalmist wrote, "The Lord is my SHEPHERD . . ." His imagery is common through all the Bible.

II. PROVISION

“I shall not want” means “I shall not suffer lack.” Continuing the analogy of sheep, the psalmist explained his assurance of sufficient provision by speaking of green pastures and still waters. All the sheep needs, the Shepherd will supply. Remember **that “. . . there is no want to them that fear him,” Psalm 34:9.**

“He maketh me to LIE DOWN in green pastures . . .” Sheep do not lie down in the pastures until they have eaten to contentment. Lying in the lush grass of a fertile meadow, under the refreshing shade of a large tree, the flock will digest their food, be strengthened to produce their young and to provide their wool. Lying down suggests contentment. Blessed is the believer who is not only content with his present sufficiency but so sure of his future supply as well that he will lie down with perfect confidence in his divine Shepherd. Blessed is the grace of contentment and trust in God.

God provides abundantly for His people. Finding absolute sufficiency in Christ for present needs, and being assured of His sufficiency for the future as well, the believer reposes in calm assurance. Free from anxiety and care, he feeds upon the Lord's provision and produces a life of service. “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God,” II Corinthians 3:5.

God's supply is always enough. Along with the green pastures, there are still waters. Stagnant waters could be unhealthy; turbulent waters might cause alarm. Fresh water, running still and deep, is needed and provided. To be “in Christ” is to have a bounteous supply. **“I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture,”** John 10:9.

III. POWER

“He restoreth my soul.” He brings me to and preserves me in a state of soundness and health. What is the “soul”? It is the inner life which manifests itself in the deeds of the body. To say “He restores my soul” is the equivalent of saying, “He restores ME!”

You have experienced it, have you not? Troubled, anxious, exhausted with toil and care, you came to Jesus. He received you, refreshed you, assured you, invigorated you. You went from your prayer closet a new and better person. Such are the “times and refreshing” which come from the presence of the Lord, Acts 3:19.

Each of God's children can testify from personal experience, “He restoreth my soul.” The Apostle Paul wrote, **“At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me . . . Notwithstanding the Lord**

stood with me, and strengthened me . . .,” II Timothy 4:16-17. You have a similar testimony, do you not?

“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint,” Isaiah 40:31.

IV. PATHWAY

God exercises a personal and detailed direction over the lives of His own: **“He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”** Though He has a universe to run, He exercises personal guidance over each obedient believer. How does He lead? The shepherd would guide his flocks by going before them and calling them to follow. God directs believers by His Word, the Holy Bible, interpreted to the heart by the Holy Spirit. He leads, too, by the example of other Christians. Above all else, God leads by the example and teaching of His Son and our Savior.

Where does He lead? “The paths of righteousness” are the paths of His leading. He does not permit His people to wander in ways which lead to ruin. The way of holy obedience brings the believer close to God. He leads His own along the highway of holiness.

Why does He lead? He leads His own “for his name's sake.” No higher glory could come to a Christian's life than for him to be used to praise the name of his God. The course that is “for His name's sake” fulfills life's highest purpose. You could have no greater ambition in life than to magnify your Savior by following Him.

He “leads,” not drives. The shepherd does not compel the flock to follow. They follow out of love and loyalty. If you are of God's flock, and Jesus is your Shepherd, how can you do less than to follow in the paths of service where He leads?

V. PERIL

The way of obedience is not always free from trials. “The paths of righteousness” sometimes lead through “the valley of the shadow of death.” Darkness, difficulty, and danger do not indicate that God has departed from guiding His flock. Not at all. It is all a part of His leading; blessings as well as burdens are of His appointment.

A significant change comes in the psalm upon mention of “the valley of the shadow of death.” God has been spoken of as “He” (third person) up to

this point. Suddenly, He is referred to as “thou” and “thy” (second person, “you”). Why? God becomes much more real and precious when one walks through the valley. H. A. Ironside has well noted, “We may talk about God; but when we walk through the valley, we will talk to God.”

The Shepherd is there when we walk through the valley. His “rod” and “staff” provide comfort to the flock because they represent protection and guidance.

How can you pass through life's valleys of the shadow without fear? Remind yourself over and over, “Thou (God) art with me!” The presence of the Shepherd is the antidote to fear. Someone has observed, “God will guide me in the path of righteousness, even though that path lie through the darkest and gloomiest vale in regions where there is no light, as if death had cast his dark and baleful shadow there. It is still a right path; it is a path of safety; and it will conduct me to bright regions beyond. In that dark gloomy valley, though I could not guide myself, I will not be alarmed; I will not be afraid of wandering or being lost; I will not fear any enemies there—for my Shepherd is there to guide me still.” Amen!

VI. PREPARATION

God's care for His own is not reserved for good times, but for the bad as well. He provided the green pastures and still waters. When the enemy is present so there is no opportunity to “lie down” in the green pastures or lounge in contentment beside the still waters, then what? **“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies . . . my cup runneth over.”**

The land of Palestine had many enemies which would harm a flock. Snakes with poisonous bites, wild animals with an appetite for mutton, harmful shrubs which would cause sickness, and ever-present robber bands threatened the flock. The shepherd stood guard against the intruders. While the flock grazed, he kept watch. He literally prepared a table for the flock in the presence of its enemies.

The “still waters” were not always available when the sheep was in the pasture. Occasionally the shepherd would have to draw water from a well and pour it into a trough hewn from solid rock. The sheep would drink from the “cup,” as the watering trough was called. On such occasions, the shepherd always provided all the water needed by the entire flock. He drew and poured faster than the sheep could drink so that the “cup runneth over.” Such a more-than-enough provision of water in a dry and arid land speaks beautifully of our Lord's provision of all we need, when we need it.

VII. PRESCRIPTION

“Thou anointest my head with oil.” Commentators see two possible meanings in that statement. (1) Some see the oil of healing being applied as the shepherd soothes any injury sustained by a member of the flock. (2) Others see the custom of anointing the head upon festive occasions. An interpretation of the psalm under the sheep-shepherd analogy suggests the anointing with healing oil as the most appropriate interpretation.

The shepherd brings his herd into the haven of the sheepfold each evening. He causes them to “pass under the rod”—pass slowly by him in single file that he may examine each one. Any injury is treated with healing oil. Our heavenly Father would have us come to Him at the end of each day to recount our blessings, confess our sins, and receive healing and restoration for our spirits.

VIII. PROSPECT

What will the future hold? God has made preparation for me there, also. **“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life . . .”** That is the prospect for as long as I live! Like two faithful sheep dogs following the flock to make sure that not one strays or is left behind, so God's goodness and mercy follow His children so long as they live. Each believer can confidently pray, **“. . . let thy loving kindness and thy truth continually preserve me,”** Psalm 40:11. So they shall. God exercises care for each one in the flock. **“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arms and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young,”** Isaiah 40:11.

What will happen when life is over? **“. . . I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever,”** What a blessed prospect! Consider it in the light of Acts 7:48-49, **“Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?”** When life is ended, believers will go to dwell forever in God's house, which they call heaven. That is the glorious consummation to which all of life is directed. Read in Revelation 21-22 the description of that blessed home.

God will be there. His glory will be fully manifest there. A new paradise will provide all our desires there. The redeemed of all ages will be there. Most precious of all, our Savior and Shepherd will be there. There we

“... shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. But the Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and lead them unto living fountains of water,”
Revelation 7:16-17.

The Lord becomes your Shepherd when Jesus becomes your Savior. Make sure that the Lord is yours and that you are His. Make your peace, calling and election sure right now.

“Come with me, and together, let us walk through God's pasture, unto His banqueting room, and then to the Father's home, and there we will abide for ever”—J. P. McBeth.

Questions

1. What is the aim of this study?
2. What is the significance of “Lord” in verse 1?
3. How does God become one's shepherd?
4. What is meant by “I shall not want”?
5. How does God restore the soul?
6. What is the valley of the shadow?