

Psalm 23

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

This is perhaps the most popular Psalm of our era. It has been put to music and has long been used in funeral ceremonies. [Harding/8-23]. But it is hazily understood (at best) and generally provides nothing more than a gushy feeling for faux religionists.

A good idea of what is at the heart of the opening words of this first verse can be obtained by considering the hearty passages found in Ezekiel chapter 34 and John chapter 10.

In the Ezekiel text, we find the Lord directing his prophet to **prophecy against the shepherds of Israel** who have callously disregarded the Lord's sheep: **Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock but instead with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them.** (Ezekiel 34:2-4). A most bleak picture is painted of these malignant shepherds as that chapter unfolds, but the sun arises beginning at verse 11:

¹¹ For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out.

¹² As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver

them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.

¹³ And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country.

¹⁴ I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.

¹⁵ I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD.

¹⁶ I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment. * * * *

²³ And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.

²⁴ And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David a prince among them; I the LORD have spoken it.

More light on this opening verse is available from the Lord's words found in John chapter 10:

10 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.

² But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

³ To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.

⁴ And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice.

⁵ And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers.

⁶ This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them.

⁷ Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep.

⁸ All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them.

⁹ I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

¹⁰ The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

11 I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

12 But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.

13 The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep.

14 I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.

15 As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.

16 And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.

The Lord's people scattered throughout the Gentiles, joining the spiritual Israelites, make up this one fold with one shepherd. That's this shepherd addressed in our opening verse, and when that shepherd is on the scene, there is no want – there is no need for more. And that's the shepherd discussed and described in the remainder of this Psalm. **Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.** (Isaiah 40:10, 11).

*Dear Shepherd, I hear, and will follow Thy call,
I know the sweet sound of Thy voice;
Protect and defend me, for Thou art my all,
And in Thee I will ever rejoice. [Joseph Swain]*

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

What is meant by “green pastures” and “still waters?” This Good Shepherd has promised both to his people. Before getting to those two phrases, though, we should note the “lie down” language referring to the siesta practice, or as was the case in the hot countries of the Middle East, a rest and repose at noon. **Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon[.]** (Song 1:7).

Green Pastures: At a minimum, this phrase connotes rest, tranquility, peace and safety. All are vitally needed and will be abundantly provided; they are “green.” This language conveys the idea of these provisions being made both for the souls as well as the bodies of these blessed sheep. Listen to Job’s rhetorical question: **Doth the wild ass bray when he hath grass?** (Job 6:5). I should say not! Here we see *flocks that lie down on the grass ‘fully fed’ or ‘satisfied’, their wants being completely supplied.* (Barnes).

Still Waters: Bodies of water have a natural calming effect on humans. Virtually every popular vacation site features water. But here we’re talking about a special kind of water – “still.” The original language here suggests waters of rest or refreshments. We are talking about *quiet and gentle waters, running in small and shallow channels, which are opposed to great rivers,*

which both affright the sheep with their great noise, and expose them to be carried away by their swift and violent streams, while they are drinking at them. (Benson). Jamieson-Fausset-Brown: *[T]he still waters—are, literally, "waters of "stillness," whose quiet flow invites to repose. They are contrasted with boisterous streams on the one hand, and stagnant, offensive pools on the other. These are waters that go softly like the waters of Shiloah.* (Isaiah 8:6).

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

The Hebrew translated “restoreth” means brings back; he will bring back my soul from its errors or wanderings. No creature is more ready to go astray than a sheep or more at a loss to find its way back. **All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.** (Isaiah 53:6). What does it say? It says “like sheep”, not like lions, or bears, or wolves. Like sheep! Sheep are exceedingly apt to go astray and lose themselves.

But the promise here is that our faithful and effective Shepherd will track down each and every one of his straying sheep and bring them back safely and securely to the fold. **For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.** (1 Peter 2:25). Here is how the longest Psalm ends: **I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments.** (Psalm 119:176).

As for the balance of this verse, Benson seems to fairly capture the meaning: *He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness — In the plain,*

straight, and safe paths, in which the sheep of the Lord's pasture are neither hurt, nor wearied, nor in danger of wandering. By his word and his providence he directs me to the right ways of truth and holiness, and by his Spirit he inclines and enables me to choose those ways, and to continue to walk therein; for his name's sake — Not for any merit in me, but merely for the demonstration and glory of his mercy, faithfulness, and goodness.

This last clause conveys confidence in God, that he will always lead his people in the paths in which they should go. No one who obeys will ever ultimately go astray. **The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way. All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies. (Psalm 25:9, 10). But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. (Proverbs 4:18).** As this journey unfolds, there is more wisdom, more light, more understanding and more love of God.

⁴Yea, 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.

Here we look death in the face. The Hebrew phrase translated “shadow of death” occurs elsewhere, referring to the grave or underworld such as Job 10:21-22: **Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death; a land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness (Job 10:21-22) but also as a pathless desert at Jeremiah 2:6 (through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt) and**

the dull, heavy, somber look that grief wears that Job described at chapter 16 and verse 16: **My face is foul with weeping, and on my eyelids is the shadow of death.**

There are other times in the Bible this phrase is used, but the bottom line is this: It's not a happy or upbeat place or condition being conveyed. Benson describes it this way: *Through a dark and dismal valley, full of terrors and dangers, as this phrase signifies, that is, though I am in peril of death, though in the midst of dangers, deep as a valley, dark as a shadow, and dreadful as death itself: or rather, though I am under the arrests of death, and have received the sentence of death within myself, and have every reason to look upon myself as a dying man.*

And Barnes has some good words for us: *[T]he word is applicable to any path of gloom or sadness; any scene of trouble or sorrow; any dark and dangerous way. Thus understood, it is applicable not merely to death itself - though it embraces that - but to any or all the dark, the dangerous, and the gloomy paths which we tread in life: to ways of sadness, solitude, and sorrow. All along those paths God will be a safe and certain guide.*

Though spending significant time (walking) in that environment, the child of God will “fear no evil”, which is to say he will not give into the natural fears of death but instead will rely, in one fashion or another, on the promises of God. At the end of the day, this is what he says: **O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?** (1 Corinthians 15:55). Some times that is hard to grasp, but that is a sure promise that we can confidently and successfully rely on.

*Where dost Thou, dear Shepherd, resort with Thy sheep
To feed them in pastures of love?
Say, why in the valley of death should I weep,
Or alone in this wilderness rove? [Joseph Swain]*

And why this great mercy; because God is with us and his rod and staff comfort us especially in that circumstance! Among other things, the rod and staff speak to shepherd tools used in (1) containing and keeping the sheep from running away from the flock, (2) returning the sheep who has wandered away, (3) correcting individual sheep when disobedient and (4) protecting the flock from attacking enemies. Jamieson-Fausset-Brown keeps it simple: *[T]hy rod and thy staff—are symbols of a shepherd's office. By them he guides his sheep.*

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Here we abruptly migrate from the figure of a flock to that of a banquet. That is a pleasant transition, the “table” representing the place where strength is derived. If you are faint and hungry, you need a dinner table. Jesus fed the multitude who were faint from **having nothing to eat.** (Mark 8:1-9).

Proverbs 9:2 tells us that wisdom has **furnished her table.** **Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield.** (Isaiah 21:5).

The Bible speaks of the same figure of this hospitable host applied to God, such as we see in our present verse. For example, Isaiah wrote of a **mountain where the Lord of hosts (shall) make unto all people a feast of fat things.** (Isaiah 25:6). The figure presented here signifies that God provides, spreads and furnishes a plenteous variety of provisions and comforts for his people while on this earthly journey.

But we should also perceive from this language heaven where the joys are compared to a feast and the enjoyment of them to sitting at a table. **And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.** (Luke 22:29, 30). Never underestimate the values of a well-furnished dinner table.

And this abundant, overflowing, variety-laden and plentiful table (cup running over; head anointed with oil) is provided right out on Front Street (not as in Hawaii), in the presence of baffled enemies who look on in harmless spite. They see it, they envy, they fret over it, but they can't do anything about it. They know it is proof of divine favor. And this is so right up to the glorious end: **And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud; and their enemies beheld them.** (Revelation 11:12).

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Focusing on the “follow me”, you will like this from Benson: *Hebrew, ירדפוני, jirdepuni, shall pursue me, by which emphatical expression he signifies God’s wonderful freeness and readiness to do good to his people, and that his blessings not only prevent us, but even pursue them who flee from them, or that they follow us in our journey through life, as the water out of the rock followed the camp of Israel through the wilderness.*

This occurs all of life’s days, through changes, in every situation.

Concerning the last clause: **Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee. Selah.** (Psalm 84:4). This language designs the writer being a member of the church of God, a pillar in the Lord’s house. **Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out[.]** (Revelation 3:12).

LORD’S SUPPER

[Mark 14:22-25; 1 Peter 4:8-11 (John Brown)]