

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

A Meditation on Psalm 23

After a Sunday school lesson one week, a little girl was heard quoting Psalm 23:1. Although she didn't quite quote it perfectly, she had the right idea when she said, "The Lord is my shepherd; I've got all I want." This is a picture of contentment, due to the fact that God is *my* shepherd—not just *the* shepherd. David is testifying that the LORD personally pastored him, just as He pastors us.

David goes on to say, "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters" (vs. 2). Phillip Keller was a pastor, who for eight years was himself a shepherd. Based on his experience he has written *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Keller says, "It is almost impossible for [sheep] to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met. Owing to their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free of all fear. Because of the social behavior within a flock sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind. If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when free of these pests can they relax. Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger." This explains how the shepherd "makes [the sheep] lie down in green pastures." He does it by providing the sheep with trust, peace, deliverance and pasture. "Makes" doesn't denote hostile force, but loving care and provision.

Next, David notes, "He restores my soul" (vs. 3a). Spurgeon reminds us, "When the soul grows sorrowful He revives it; when it is sinful He sanctifies it; when it is weak He strengthens it. *He* does it."

The Shepherd also "leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (vs. 3b). Frankly, sheep are dumb animals that have a propensity to wander where they shouldn't. Isaiah 53:6 says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." This isn't very complimentary, but it's the truth. Thankfully the wise shepherd leads us sheep down the right paths. And he does this "for his name's sake." It's utterly crucial that we stay on the paths of righteousness, since what's at stake is not our name or reputation, but God's. Therefore, He guides us for His glory. John Piper comments, "God is the beginning and God is the end of all my righteousness. The path of righteousness has *His* grace as its starting point (for *He* leads me into it) and it has *His* glory as its destination (because His leading is for *His* name's sake)."

There is a meaningful change of pronouns in verses four and five; the second person pronoun "you" replaces the third person pronoun "he." In the first three verses David was talking *about* God: "The Lord is my shepherd... *He* makes me lie down... *He* leads me... *He* restores my soul..." In verses four and five David talks directly *to* God: "I will fear no evil, for *you* are with me; *your* rod and *your* staff, they comfort me. *You* prepare a table before me... *you* anoint my head with oil..." The shift is a result of the presence of danger and enemies which compels David to draw closer to the protecting presence of his Lord.

Sometimes the paths of righteousness traverse through dangerous neighborhoods: "Even 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" (Ps. 23:4). Where we would expect to see David running frantically for his life, we observe him calmly walking. At least two things contribute to his peace of mind. First, David doesn't walk *in* the valley, but *through* the valley. God doesn't intend for us to stay in the valley. The valley is not the destination, the banquet hall in the house of the LORD is. This perspective will help us endure the temporary walks during dark and dangerous days. Second, David takes comfort in the presence of God. "The valley of the shadow of death" is a reference to literal shadows of wild animals and other life-threatening dangers that appeared down below in the valley where the sheep were walking. But if the Lord is at our side we will not be afraid, even if tens of thousands should surround us (Ps. 3:6).

In the last two verses the metaphor changes from the Lord being a shepherd to the Lord being a banquet host: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (vv. 5-6). As our enemies look on, a feast is spread before us by the Lord Himself. And no cup will be able to contain the wine of overflowing joy that will be ours forever in God's presence.

The fulfillment of Psalm 23 is found of course in Jesus, who is our good shepherd (Jn. 10:14) and banquet host (Lk. 12:37).

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