

Psalm 23 – THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD! (part 2 of 2)

III. THE PROTECTING SHEPHERD (v 4) – In every phase of the sheep's daily life there is danger. Where the sheep drinks there could be poisonous snakes. There could be wolves or lions preying about where it is grazing. The sheep are not able to protect themselves and are also oblivious to what is happening around them. They will eat and drink as if all is well and safe because the shepherd is around. Their safety and security lie in the presence of their shepherd; not just any shepherd, but only the shepherd of the sheep and they know his voice. This church had a visiting preacher from America many years ago who preached from this psalm. He lived in Israel for many weeks as an archaeologist and had visited one of his friends, a local shepherd. He shared that he decided to test the "truth" about sheep hearing only the master's voice. There were many sheep from different flocks grazing together. The preacher asked his shepherd friend if his sheep hears only his voice. The shepherd made certain sounds and only his sheep moved and followed him. The other sheep that belonged to other shepherds remained and continued grazing. His next test was to imitate the shepherd's voice, making the same sounds. He thought that perhaps the sheep would move at the same command. Not one sheep moved! He tried a few times but nothing happened.

David understood very well when he said that even though he walked through the valley of the shadow of death, he would not fear any evil. The places where David faced mortal danger were to him the valley of the shadow of death. He testified to King Saul that when he was a shepherd boy looking after his father's sheep, he had to kill a lion and a bear that came after the sheep. The same LORD who helped him to kill those ferocious animals would also help him kill Goliath. This was young David's accurate theological reasoning. When he became an adult and had to run for his life from King Saul, he understood experientially the safety he had in the presence of the LORD. The evil that came after David which could very well have resulted in death did not make him fearful because the LORD was there. It was not that the enemies were not powerful, for both the wild animals and King Saul were powerful enemies, but David's LORD was more powerful than all of them.

David used the shepherd's "weapons" to illustrate the protection of the LORD. The shepherd carries with him two instruments which have their own distinct functions. The rod is a short little stick very much like a policeman's baton. The shepherd throws it to frighten his own sheep who are wandering away from the flock, maybe toward a ravine or cliff or danger. The shepherd cannot get ahead fast enough to steer the sheep away from danger and so he throws the rod to frighten the sheep toward another direction. The rod can also be used as a weapon against wild animals, to hit as well as to throw. The staff is much longer and is used as a walking stick as well as a weapon and tool to help the sheep. It is probably about 5 to 6 feet long. The end part of the staff has the shape of a hook. The reason is that if the sheep falls into a hole which is too dangerous or difficult for the shepherd to climb down to rescue it, the hook is used to noose the sheep's neck and pull it up to safety. The staff can also be used to fight off wild animals as the length of the staff makes it a very good offensive weapon against

attackers. An appropriate modern term to describe these two instruments is pastoral care for the flock.

The life of every believer is fraught with problems of every kind, like the sheep. When he is transformed by the power of God through Christ, he will have enemies aplenty. He has Satan and his hosts and all his followers as his foes. This cannot be avoided. Persecution and slanders are but common and perhaps favourite methods employed by the Evil One to thwart the work of God that His children are doing. Satan knows that when the believer falls, the work of the LORD is hindered. The Lord's sheep must know that his Shepherd is always there for him. The good Shepherd died for His sheep. He will never leave the flock unattended or unprotected. No enemy who try to enter the fold and kill His sheep will escape His notice. He will never let that happen. David understood this care, love and protection of the Shepherd in his life! In spite of the dangers, the sheep must never feel insecure because they are always under the ever watchful eye of the Good Shepherd.

If this is true, then why do believers stumble and fall and there are casualties in the work of the Lord? More often than not, these are casualties that are a result of believers' faithlessness. Believers fall because they do not study God's Word and are ignorant of the truth. They fall because they do not exercise faith even though they possess genuine faith. Not a few casualties are the result of lack of faith and trust in the LORD. The presence of sin in the believer's life also jeopardises his witness and thus he falls under the Evil One's temptations. When that happens, the believer suffers and the testimony of Christ in his life will be shattered unless there is genuine and sincere repentance. Unrepented sins will cause the believer to behave like the straying wayward sheep. But the believer's faith and witness will not be hurt if he would only trust in his Good Shepherd to care for him and not go astray.

IV. THE PREPARING SHEPHERD (v 5) – What better way to demonstrate safety and tranquillity than to prepare a meal in the face of one's enemies! The verb "to prepare" means "to arrange" or "to put in order." The shepherd prepares the meal for his sheep regardless of the external circumstances. Whether it is calm and peaceful in surrounding area, or tumultuous as if the world is about to end, it does not matter to the Shepherd. He will always ensure the safety and the feeding of His flock. He cares for them and will provide for them what He deems best for their well being. These enemies are adversaries whose only agenda is to hurt and harm the flock. They are like the wolves, lions and bears described above. They will do their utmost to destroy the children of God. However, the Shepherd will demonstrate to His enemies, who are also the enemies of His sheep, that He is aware of their evil agenda. He is not afraid of them. He will carefully set the table to feed His sheep in the enemies' presence!

With such an assurance, the sheep feel safe and have nothing to fear. The shepherd anoints his sheep's head with oil to refresh them as well as to keep them safe. It is said that the flies will rest on the sheep's head and nest on the sheep's nostrils, and the eggs that breed will make them sick. The oil will be applied on the vital areas of the sheep's head to ward off such attacks. The phrase "my cup runneth over" refers to an over abundance of provision by the

shepherd for the sheep. The shepherd will not give in drips and drabs but in great overflowing abundance to guarantee all the sheep's needs.

Similarly, the Good Shepherd will supply all His children's needs even in the face of the greatest danger. The children of God will need Him most when the enemies abound and the Good Shepherd will always be there to succour them. There will be no lack at all. There will be an over-the-top generous supply of all sustenance, spiritual and physical. The nature of the Shepherd's supply is always for the betterment and good of the believer's faith and trust. This means that when the believer faces trials and want of physical food, it does not mean that the Shepherd has not been supplying. The Shepherd will supply all that the believer needs to ensure his faith is strong and true. The LORD will not give so much such that his faith is diminished or worse still shattered. In OT times when the witness was national, the spiritual blessing of the Shepherd upon Israel was both spiritual and material. But in NT times whereby the witness is ecclesiastical, the blessing is spiritual rather than physical. It is not wrong for Israel in OT times to see a direct correlation between their material blessings and spiritual. When Israel was spiritually blessed, they were also physically blessed (cf Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28). However, in the New Testament the local church would be gravely mistaken if she thinks that material blessings equal spiritual blessings. This is the deception of Satan! The individual believer must also not fall prey to this false notion of Satan that material blessings mean spiritual blessings. The blessings of the church in NT times are always and only spiritual. The reason is that the nation of Israel was married to the land, for without the land there was no nation. The local church is the people. Without the land and the church building, the church remains. That is why local church can rent premises and can be considered a church even though she does not own real estate!

V. THE ETERNAL SHEPHERD (v 6) – With confidence in his Shepherd, David concluded that goodness and mercy would follow him all the days of his life. This is the goodness and mercy of God. God alone will provide this goodness to His children. Nothing bad or evil can come upon them without the Shepherd's permission. If the Shepherd allows a threat like that of a lion or a wolf to confront David, then the LORD will enable David to deal with such a foe. A New Testament parallel of such a comforting assurance is found in **1 Corinthians 10:13 (KJV)** *"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."* Anything that comes upon a child of God will ultimately result in his becoming more like Christ! It is not even remotely possible that something can happen to God's child without the God Shepherd's knowledge and hence His permission! The Bible says that God neither slumbers nor sleeps (cf Psalm 121:4).

The mercies of God are new every morning. They can never be exhausted. Mercies refer to punishment that believers deserve but God does not impute on them because Christ has borne all on Calvary's cross on behalf of believers. This means that even now when a believer sins, the blood of Christ is sufficient and able to cleanse him of all his sins. Upon repentance he will receive God's mercy which never runs out, which is why Jeremiah says that His mercies

are new every morning (cf Lamentations 3:23, 24). The consequences of sins committed will still be experienced by God's children but nevertheless, they will be forgiven by the LORD. We must understand clearly the difference between the forgiveness of sin and the consequences of sin. God forgave King David for his sin of adultery and murder after he repented from his heart. But the consequences of his sin were the deaths of four of his sons. Another biblical example is that of Moses who smote the rock twice when he was supposed to speak to the rock. For such a serious and public sin, the LORD barred Moses from entering the Promised Land (cf Numbers 20). If a pastor commits adultery and later repents of his sins, there will still be consequences for his sin. He will be barred from serving as a pastor because he has desecrated this holy office by his sin while he was serving. The mercies of God include the forgiveness of sins that will spare him from going to Hell after he has sinned against God because of the finished work of Christ on Calvary's cross.

The verb "to follow" means "to run after." Therefore goodness and mercy will run after David all the days of his life on this earth. Goodness and mercy will be David's lifelong inseparable companions. And this is not only for David but also for all who are God's children. We will experience a constant supply of God's goodness and mercy if only we would believe and take hold of this truth from the LORD. The problem with many of God's children is a lack of faith which results in little or no trust in the power of God to supply all their needs. Taking matters into their own hands comes next, and then backsliding begins. But this was not David's experience. He experienced the closeness of God in his life.

The conclusion is that he will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. This house is not a reference to Solomon's temple because it was not built yet. The fact that it will be forever means that this house is not on earth; the earth will not exist forever and will be destroyed by the LORD in the future. Therefore this house of the LORD has to be a house in Heaven which will be his eternal home. It is called the house of the LORD because the house belongs to the LORD. It is the LORD's house; He is the owner and He dwells in it. David knew that the LORD's goodness and mercy will be with him wherever he goes and for as long as he serves the LORD on this earth. When he leaves this earth, he will be in Heaven with his God forever. This was deep assurance for him as a child of God. This was his conviction as a sheep of the Good Shepherd. From the moment he was born again, this deep assurance of the LORD's constant care and companionship remained with David. This does not mean that when he went through trials and great harassment from his enemies David behaved like a robot without any feelings. He had his fair share of fears and tears. He was troubled when he was pursued by Saul for having done nothing wrong. His psalms reflect those troubled times of sorrow and pain. But David was assured of the LORD's presence. Not once did he think that he would lose his salvation. The presence of the LORD in times of trouble did not mean the immediate removal of all his enemies and trials; but it resulted in the growth and deepening of David's trust in and fellowship with his LORD. His experiential knowledge of his LORD increased with every trial. Psalm 23 teaches the presence of the LORD in the midst of many difficulties.

CONCLUSION – Psalm 23 is a most wonderful psalm to calm every troubled soul. In the midst of the believer's trials or despondency, the truth of the LORD being his shepherd puts everything into proper manageable perspective. He can face the greatest storms of life and still hold on to Christ as the anchor of his life and soul. The believer's walk with the LORD will be a closer one and as recorded in Psalm 23, his head knowledge will become heartfelt experiential knowledge. This was David's journey from his service as a shepherd boy to being the king of Israel. His multifaceted troubled life makes Psalm 23 a meaningful psalm and not a theologically cold psalm that touches only the head but not the heart. When David said, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want," he meant every word of it from the depths of his being. Can we say the same? The LORD gave believers this psalm so that every child of God will go through life serving and trusting the LORD in the face of all difficulties, being able to truly say, like David, from the depths of our souls, "The LORD is [indeed] my shepherd, I shall [definitely] not want!" Amen.