

Psalm 23 – THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD! (part 1 of 2)

INTRODUCTION -- Psalm 23 is the most famous and often used psalm in all of Christendom. It is arguably also the most loved of all the 150 psalms. It is used at funerals to comfort the bereaved. It is used to guide a young person as he begins life in the working world. This psalm has multiple applications and all of them apply very appropriately to the many different facets of daily life. Of all the 150 psalms, Psalm 23 is perhaps the psalm that is also most memorized by God's people. This psalm touches on the LORD's protection and provision for all His children. It is a psalm that depicts a compassionate and caring God which is often not revealed as vividly in the New Testament as in the Old Testament. The best way to describe a caring, loving and wonderful God is to use the imagery of a shepherd and his sheep. This is easily seen in David's deliberate use of the first person pronoun throughout this psalm.

David is the human author of this psalm. When we were first introduced to David, he was tending his father's sheep. His knowledge of sheep must have been very extensive and accurate. He looked after them and protected them. He provided for them by ensuring that they grazed at the right places and drank the right kind of water. The nature and demeanour of the sheep and the shepherd's life were David's experience. He knew his sheep very well. He was more than qualified to pen this psalm for our blessing and encouragement.

I. THE PERSONAL SHEPHERD (v1) – First and foremost, it is the relationship of the sheep and shepherd that must be established. If there is no relationship established between them, the rest of the psalm is meaningless to the sheep. The shepherd is neither in control nor is he duty bound to care for other shepherds' sheep. His own sheep hears only his voice. Therefore, David declares from the onset that "the LORD is my shepherd!" The LORD had to be David's Shepherd for this psalm to apply and be meaningful to the reader. If the LORD was not David's Shepherd, then David was not His sheep. Then all the promises of the shepherd's protection and provision become meaningless as they are not applicable to him. The first thing the reader must do when he reads Psalm 23 is to become a sheep of the Shepherd. The Shepherd here is none other than Jesus Christ who is also known as the Good Shepherd. Jesus says in **John 10:11** (KJV), "*I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.*" The only way to become a sheep is to accept Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Saviour who died on the cross for our sins. If we confess with our mouths and believe in our hearts that Jesus Christ died for us and rose from the dead on the third day, we shall be saved. This is what the Bible says: **Romans 10:9-11** (KJV), "*That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. 10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.*" The phrase "shall not be ashamed" means "shall not be disgraced." There will be no disappointment and no rejection by God. Salvation is definite. Once this happens, the sinner becomes a saint with immediate

effect. He is no longer an enemy of God but has become a child of God. The Shepherd sheep relation is an act of grace from God. It is also an instantaneous occurrence that is the work of God which has taken place in the spiritual realm. The person may or may not feel anything. It is a judicial act of God.

Now the sheep can claim the second half of verse one which says "he shall not want." The certainty of this statement is seen by the use of the strong emphasis. It has the same strength as the Ten Commandments. This was how certain David was that he would not want. The word "want" means "to lack" David knew that he would lack nothing. As he grew older and as every facet and area of his life changed, he knew that the Shepherd would never fail him and that he would never experience lack all the days of his life. The meaning of "lack" is not to be understood in terms of the physical or material. It does not mean that the believer will not suffer persecution and hunger. David endured both when King Saul hunted him down like an animal. He had to run and hide and he had no food. He asked the high priest for food which greatly angered Saul and resulted in the slaughter of nearly all the priests, including the high priest. It also does not mean that the believer will not experience sickness and physical deprivation. Many of God's servants languished in prison because of their faith. They lost loved ones and some of them even died because they remained steadfast in their defence of the testimony of Christ and the perfect Word of God. "Shall not want" means that no matter what the external circumstances of life might be, God's grace will always be sufficient for the believer. He will be enabled by God to overcome all forms of persecution and seduction and to hold on to his faith even unto death. He knows that his life and death are in the hands of God and not man!

II. THE PROVIDING SHEPHERD (v2) – The Shepherd makes the sheep lie down in green pastures. This means that the shepherd is the one who tells the sheep when to stop moving and to start grazing. The sheep will not know that they have arrived at green pastures. They cannot tell the difference. They will move as the shepherd directs. They have no minds of their own. Any sheep that go its own way i.e. have a mind of its own, goes against their nature. They are considered bad and rebellious. The nature of sheep is to go where the shepherd leads. This is a good description of believers. They are not supposed to have a mind of their own but to have the mind of the Shepherd who is Christ. To have our own minds which go against the Shepherd's mind is disobedience. Wilful and disobedient believers will go astray. They will stumble and fall like the wilful sheep.

All the sheep's food is well taken care of by the shepherd. Those who have worked with sheep before have said that perhaps sheep are the dumbest animals on four legs that ever walked on earth! They cannot look after themselves and cannot discern between what good green grass and poisonous weeds. They depend on the shepherd to bring them to green pastures and eat whatever the shepherd allows them to eat. Their trust in the shepherd is total and absolute. If the shepherd is bad, i.e. he is a hireling who does the work of

shepherding for money, the sheep will suffer. If the hireling is not careful and allows the sheep to eat poisonous weeds, the sheep will simply die. It is very important that the sheep hears only its master's voice and no other!

Likewise, believers must listen and follow only the voice of the Christ. Jesus Christ will take care of all believers' needs. They will be provided with just enough so that their faith and their trust in Christ will be strengthened in the process. When believers go their own way and look for pastures that they think are green but are in fact weed infested, they will be poisoned and ruined by their greed. They will lose the faith and whatever they do will no longer be of faith. Anything that is not of faith is sin! (Romans 14:23)

The shepherd also leads the sheep beside the still waters. Still waters are usually stagnant and therefore not safe and good to drink. It is quite difficult to find fresh and still water but the shepherd will make sure that his sheep is placed beside still waters that are refreshing and safe. Sheep do not dare drink from running waters, although they are much easier to find. There are streams of running water that branch off the River Jordan and the many rivers that flow from the mountains to the Mediterranean Sea. But the sheep are timid and easily frightened by sounds. The sound of running water frightens them so they would not go near it. The shepherd will lead them to the still waters. He will allow them to drink at their own pace.

The verb "to lead" has the idea of gently protecting. The good shepherd will not rush the sheep, including the lambs and older sheep. All of them will be led gently and carefully and not one would be left behind. A hireling will find it easier to lead the sheep beside swift running waters, which is mean and unkind especially after a long and thirsty journey. The sheep, too fearful to drink, would suffer from thirst because of the way they are. The good shepherd will not taunt his sheep just to make his life easier. He will always have the sheep's best interest first and foremost in his mind.

The LORD will always ensure that believers who are His children are well taken care of. He knows what we can endure and will never taunt us. When trials come our way, He knows how much we can bear and He knows our pace. He ensures that all His sheep are looked after according to the measure of faith that He has given to us that we might grow thereby.

III. THE RESTORING SHEPHERD (v3) – Sometimes, the sheep find themselves in trouble. One of the most common scenarios is getting lost. It is not unusual to have sheep going astray especially from a flock of some size. They tend to wander off, in particular those that lag behind at the rear of the flock. That is why the LORD Jesus Christ told the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:4-6 to teach the importance of finding even one lost sheep.

Once the shepherd realizes that one of his sheep is lost, he would readily look for it until it is found. He knows that he needs to do this as soon as possible because the sheep is helpless to fend for itself. If there are wolves, lions or wild animals about, that sheep is as good as dead. Sheep cannot run fast. They do not know how to take cover or blend into the background. They would stand where they are and wait silently to be eaten by the wild animal! There is no one who understands this more than the shepherd of the flock. There is an urgency to find the lost sheep before it is too late! To restore is part and parcel of the shepherd's duty. This is also the Good Shepherd's duty toward all His children. No matter how down we are, the LORD is there to pick us up. No matter how "lost" we are, the Good Shepherd will find us.

He leads the sheep in the paths of righteousness. This verb "lead" is different from the verb "to lead" in verse 2. In verse 2 the idea is one of gentle protection. The sheep feels safe. Here it has the idea of making straight something that is crooked. In other words, the shepherd having restored the sheep back to the fold will then ensure that the sheep does not get lost again. He will straighten the paths of the sheep so that it will walk in the right paths from henceforth. One of the ways might be to put the sheep at the front of the flock so that it will keep on the right path and not lag behind and stray. This is also true for believers. The Good Shepherd does not just bring us back to Himself but will also make sure that we do not stray from the paths of righteousness again. To stray away from Him is to sin and put ourselves in danger. What is at risk is not our salvation, for no one can take us out of the Father's hand, but our testimony. The believer's testimony will be shattered and the name of Christ will be brought to shame.

That is why David says that the leading back to the right paths is for His own name's sake. This is not done out of selfish reasons. Every believer bears the Name of Christ everywhere he goes. His entire life is to reflect the character of Christ. When he sins and strays away he brings shame to the Name of Christ. Sinners would be stumbled. Sinners need to believe in Christ to be saved from their sins and the penalty of sin which is death and Hell. Leading believers back to the paths of righteousness will restore their testimony of Christ back into their lives and thus bring them back on the right track. Then the sinners will once again see Christ in their lives as they walk the paths of righteousness. There is much at stake in the Shepherd's care and restoration of His flock.

[To be continued]