

THE GOODNESS OF THE LORD
A SERIES ON THE 23RD PSALM
(1) THE SHEPHERD'S PROVISION

Psalm 23:1

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PROLOGUE

Not knowing how to distinguish contentment from unbridled desire leads to problems. A little boy went to see his favorite aunt. When he arrived, his aunt asked him what he wanted to do. He answered, "I love your pancakes, and when we have pancakes at home, I only get to eat three. While I'm here at your house, I want to eat as many pancakes I want." The next morning, the boy's aunt began to pile the pancakes on his plate. The little guy just kept eating and eating the pancakes as fast as he could. By the time he had eaten his ninth pancake, his pace had slowed considerably. In the middle of eating his tenth pancake, the boy came to an abrupt stop. His aunt asked, "Are you ready for some more pancakes?" With a pained expression on his face, the boy looked up at his aunt and said, "Oh no, I don't want any more. I don't even want the ones I've already eaten."

SCRIPTURE

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 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 (Psalm 23 KJV).

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want (Psalm 23:1 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

David was a shepherd. He tended sheep. He had a knack for caring for these creatures who were often helpless and easily led astray.

There is something about a shepherd that tells us something about God. God is like a shepherd. David discovered this and later he would pen the immortal words that we know as Psalm 23. God is very much concerned about those of us who are often helpless and easily led astray.

Psalm 23 is one of the best known, best loved passages of the Bible. It speaks directly to the joys and fears of any human being. It reminds us of the goodness of the Lord toward his people. We are like sheep under the care and guidance of the Divine Shepherd.

The opening verse tells us of the Shepherd's provision:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want (Psalm 23:1 NRSV).

We can trust God to watch over us and provide for us. This is what is known as providence. Unfortunately, if you asked the average American, "What is providence?" the person will either say it is the capital of Rhode Island or return a blank stare. But the city of Providence was named by Christians who believed in God's faithful care and oversight. David also believed in God's faithful care and oversight and so can we.

1. THE SHEPHERD'S PROVISION IS GOOD

We can believe in God's faithful care and oversight because the Divine Shepherd's provision for us is good. To appreciate this we need to see how David puts two contrasting words for God together: "LORD" and "Shepherd." "LORD" is a translation of the personal name of God revealed to Moses (see Exodus 3:13-15). This name can be represented in English letters by the four consonants YHWH. This name is by far and away the most frequently used name for God in the Old Testament. Ancient Hebrew writing did not use vowels, only consonants. Pronunciation was intuitive or kept alive through oral tradition. Orthodox Jews, out of peculiar reverence, would not pronounce this name, but would say instead the word "Adonai" which means "Lord," a practice that continues today.

Over time, the actual pronunciation of YHWH was lost. In the 12 century A.D., scholars took the vowels from Adonai and added it to YHWH and came up with "Jehovah." "Jehovah" is a 12th century Latinized attempt to pronounce the inexpressible name of God. So it is a made-up word to represent the Hebrew name for God. You may want to keep that in mind the next time representatives from a certain religious group come knocking on your door. [This reminds me of the old joke, "What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a Presbyterian?" Answer: "A person who knocks on your door but then has nothing to say!"]

The earliest Christians tried to write the name of God in a way that would help them to pronounce it. Using English letters the equivalent spelling would be "iaoue." (All vowels and no consonants!) From the study of this and also the structure of the Hebrew language most scholars today believe that YHWH was probably pronounced Yahweh (YAH weh). Most English translations, however, do not use this term but instead will put the word LORD in all capital letters.

The name YHWH means something like, "I AM." This is why, when Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I AM," (John 8:58-59) religious leaders wanted to kill him. It was not that they thought Jesus was using bad grammar but they believed he was claiming he was the LORD and so was a blasphemer.

To say the God is LORD is to say that God is the Creator of all things, the source of all existence and the sustainer of all that is. Nothing ever happens beyond the scope of God's

sovereign providential rule. God is in charge.

The second term, “Shepherd”, gives us an entirely different concept of God. To call the Supreme Sovereign of the universe a shepherd is as startling as Jesus calling God, “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36). The idea of addressing God as “Father” is not a major theme in the Old Testament. The word is used as an analogy but rarely as a way of speaking directly to God (Deut 32:6; Ps 103:13; Isa 63:16; Mal 2:10). Even so, Jesus went beyond the regular word for “Father.” The term he used to speak of his own intimate relationship with God is - *Abba*, meaning “Dear Father” or even “Daddy.”

We should regard the reference to “Shepherd” in a similar way. LORD speaks to the power of God. Shepherd speaks to his love. Adrian Rogers makes this observation:

Did you notice that the title God chose to describe Himself is an incomplete sentence? Most people would finish that sentence—“I am love” or “I am light” or “I am . . .” But not our Lord. He purposefully did not complete the sentence. “I AM.” He ever exists. He is always God. He is. Are you hungry? He is the bread. Are you in the dark? He is the light. Are you searching? He is the truth. Are you lost? He is the way. Are you in need? He is the Shepherd.

The LORD, who is like a shepherd, has promised to take care of his people and has revealed himself to be full of love, compassion, patience, faithfulness, and mercy (see also Exod 34:6-7). But what does it mean to say, “I shall not want”? The meaning is not that we will not desire, but that we will not be left wanting. John Piper puts it this way:

“What David means is that God's sheep never lack anything that the Shepherd thinks is good for them.”

One of the historic documents that has helped Presbyterian and Reformed Christians understand the teachings of the Bible is the Heidelberg Catechism (1563). In answer to the question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” it says, in part:

“That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ who...so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that all things must work together for my salvation.”

This is similar to what Paul told the Romans:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28 NIV).

This does not mean that everything that happens to us is good. But God’s provision is always good.

2. THE SHEPHERD’S PROVISION IS PERSONAL

David exclaims, “The LORD is *my* shepherd,” with the emphasis on “my.” The Shepherd’s provision is personal. He is not just THE Shepherd — He can be YOUR shepherd. Even as he is MY Shepherd.

A poet looks at flowers and sees thoughts too deep for tears. A man can look at a woman and know that he loves her. He not only sees her with his natural eyes but also with his heart. Many can read the 23rd Psalm and understand the words and phrases. But some read it with their hearts and feel the message because they know the Shepherd of whom the psalm speaks.

Ian Barclay tells of two ministers who used to vacation together every summer in Northern Wales. One summer they befriended a shepherd boy and they taught him about the 23rd Psalm using the boy’s left hand as a memory aid. The next summer, they returned to the same place but did not see the shepherd boy. Then one day, they happened to be visiting a woman who lived in the area. To their surprise there was a picture of the shepherd boy on the mantle and so they inquired about him. But the mother said they would not be able to see him as her son had died in a terrible storm the previous winter. She went on to say that there was something unusual about the position of the body when it was found - the boy was grasping the fourth finger of his left hand (what we would call the “ring” finger). The ministers understood at once and explained how they had taught the boy the opening words of the 23rd Psalm using the fingers of the hand. At the point of death, the child was expressing his faith, “The Lord is MY Shepherd.”

Is the Lord YOUR Shepherd?

3. THE SHEPHERD’S PROVISION IS COMPLETE

The Divine Shepherd’s care for us is not only good, his interest in us not only personal, but his provision for us is complete being concerned with the whole person — body and soul. His mercy knows no limits. David affirms, “The LORD *is* my shepherd.” He does not say, “Some day when I get my act together and I am worthy of it, the LORD *will be* my shepherd.” But, “The LORD *is* my shepherd.”

We do not know when David penned this psalm. The mature outlook suggests a time later in life. Some think it likely it came out of the time when David’s son, Absalom, rebelled against him and split the kingdom into civil war (2 Samuel 15-17). David had to flee for his life through the valleys of Gilead. The physical danger may have awakened him to the greater danger of having neglected the Lord for so many years. The signs were there — court intrigues, polygamous marriages, a palace full of concubines, and the absence of personal devotion. Perhaps as king he had become complacent. There were no more Goliaths, and no more Sauls. He didn’t need God’s protection or provision. If there was a battle he dispatched soldiers. If he had a personal wish, he sent a servant to get it. Rich in material blessings, his spiritual experience had run dry.

But it is never too late to turn back to God; a lesson he should have learned twenty years earlier after that sad affair with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 12:7; Psalm 51). So now both physically and spiritually at the bottom of a valley he cries out, “Oh God, you are my shepherd!” And perhaps his earlier words came back to help him as they have helped so many of us:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit (Psalm 51:10-12 NRSV).

The joy of salvation is the reason Jesus came. Psalm 23 does not mention Jesus by name but ever since Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd,” Christians have thought of him when this psalm is read. One of the responsibilities of a shepherd is to look out for strays. We know from the Scriptures that the Lord has a special fondness for strays. Jesus taught:

“What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray” (Matt 18:12-13 NRSV).

And, of course, he was not really talking about sheep but about us. And there is no place into which we can stray where the Divine Shepherd cannot find us.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 23 is frequently used at funerals to comfort the bereaving, and that is fine. It is often used as a confident expression of faith in worship, and that is wonderful. But we need to remember that it was likely written by a guy who was in deep trouble *and* it was his own fault. So that if we ever find ourselves in a similar situation (and we often are!) we need not despair. For our hope is in the God who loves us like a shepherd, in spite of ourselves. We can trust God to provide only what he thinks is good for us. He wants to restore our relationship with him and he wants this restored relationship to last forever.