

"THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD"

"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." Psalm 23:1-2.

This twenty-third psalm originated in the cascade of God's infinite grace. It has been called "the Pearl of the Psalms" and "The Sweetest Song Ever Sung." It is the most beautiful, beloved and used of all the psalms. Its depth is unfathomable and its promises are everlasting. It is unrivalled for calm serenity and perfect faith. More than 3000 years have passed away since the sweet singer of Israel first sung this psalm about the shepherd-care of God. Thirty centuries is a long time, but this psalm is as fresh today as though it were just composed.

Think what a ministry this psalm has had through these centuries, as it has gone up and down the world, singing itself into men's hearts, and breathing its quiet peace into their spirits. How many sorrows has it comforted! How many tears has it dried! How many pilgrims has it lighted through life's dark valleys! It sails the seven seas; it is at home on the five continents; it visits the islands of the oceans; it walks the highways of the world, and it speaks in a language the universal heart can comprehend.

This psalm is very familiar to us all, and very precious also. It has ever been a source of comfort and encouragement to the people of God. It breathes of confidence in God and introduces the soul into an atmosphere of restfulness and satisfaction, refreshing the weary, strengthening the weak, and awakening the spirit of thankfulness and worship. Written in the loftiest strain of devout poetry, this little song breathes the spirit of a simple dependence upon and a perfect trust in God. It is a joyful outburst of grateful praise, the outflow of a heart thrilled with a strengthening elevating and ennobling inspiration. It has sent more gladness into human hearts than any other one piece of literature ever written. It has given hope to the faint, strength to the weak, food to the hungry, comfort to the sorrowing and light to the dying.

These precious words in this psalm are the first taught to our children and among the last that we whisper to our loved ones who are standing in the twilight between the darkening day of earth and the breaking day of heaven. It has comforted the noble host of the poor, sung courage to the army of the disappointed, poured balm and consolation into the hearts of the sick and visited many troubled souls bringing them numerous blessings.

This psalm is a bit of retrospect. David was looking back and telling us what he had found God to be. David had lived and thought much, had sinned greatly and had been forgiven gloriously. There in his palace in the city of Jerusalem memory led him into a far-off yesterday. Like most old men he was living in the past. He thought of how the days and years had gone by so swiftly, how the shepherd lad had become a conqueror, then an intimate friend of the Prince, then a hunted outlaw and finally a king.

Thinking of the past with all of its varied experiences, David called for his old harp which had been so precious to him long ago when he was only a shepherd lad. With delight he once again grasped the old harp and ran his fingers over the strings, and at the first chord the walls of the palace seemed to melt away and his eyes seemed to rest again on the familiar scenes of the sheepfold.

Again he saw himself waking with the dawn of the morning, arising, opening the door of the fold, giving the old call to which the sheep always responded so well and leading them forth amid the dew and freshness for the morning meal on the meadows before the sun arose. That was the most favorable feeding time of the day. Before the sun had gotten so warm the sheep had enjoyed a bountiful repast. He also saw the time passing and mid-day coming with its scorching hot sun and the sheep panting with heat and burning

with thirst. He then led them to the water in order that their thirst might be quenched. Because it was still too hot for them to be exposed upon the sun-smitten hills, he sought out a good shade for them so that they could rest until the fiercest noon-tide heat was passed.

Then he saw the adventures in the shadowed glen as the sun was sinking in the West, and it was just time for the evening meal before going home. The chords swelled to the fullest tone of sweetness as the final picture came back to the player; the night within the gates where the contented sheep were safe within the fold.

When his memory had painted for him all of these scenes of his earlier days as a shepherd, he struck the strings again and joining voice and harp he sang that song which more than thirty centuries later men call the dearest psalm, the song which has brought peace, comfort and cheer to countless multitudes.

In the Orient, particularly in the earlier centuries, the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep was most beautiful and meaningful. The Eastern shepherd occupied quite a unique position towards his flock; and a friendship sprang up between him and the dumb creatures of his care to which there is no counterpart among ourselves. The shepherd knew the members of his flock individually. A special name was given to each one, and to that name the sheep responded. Constantly with them, he learned their varied habits, their differing characters, and the little ailments with which they were often troubled.

Applying the figure, the Psalmist indicated that as the shepherd was to a sheep of his flock so was Jehovah to him. Jehovah knew him personally, by name; loved him and would sacrifice supremely for him; was quick to note his needs and to provide for them; that He guided him daily and protected him constantly.

That the Lord was his Shepherd was an actual fact with David. He was not going to be his Shepherd in the future, but right then. David found great satisfaction in that fact. He knew the Lord as his personal Shepherd. He enjoyed His protection, His shelter, His care and His guidance. He not only knew that fact, but he delighted to meditate upon that fact and to talk about it.

Can you say, "The Lord is my Shepherd"? The sheep of God are His property. The Lord, our Shepherd, paid a great price for us. He said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life: and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." John 10:27-29. Here you have two marks which distinguish the sheep of our Good Shepherd. There is the mark of the ear—"they hear His voice;" and there is the mark of the feet—"they follow Him." No man has any right to call himself the sheep of Christ if he does not follow Him. And to follow Him means to walk in obedience to the Father.

Our Saviour is a Shepherd. He is a Provider, a Protector and a Preserver of His sheep. He is a true Shepherd, for He never forgets, never fails and never forsakes one of His own. He knows His sheep; He knows their needs and is able to supply them. He has a shepherd's heart pulsating with love; He has a shepherd's eye that is always upon the whole flock; He has a shepherd's voice and we hear that voice and know Him; He has a shepherd's memory, for He calleth His sheep by name; He has a shepherd's knowledge, for He understands all our needs far better than we do ourselves.

A striking word in this verse is "my." He might be a Shepherd and not be my Shepherd, but He is mine. He is my Shepherd because He purchased me at so great a price, leads me by His Spirit, feeds me with His Word and keeps me by His power. "The Lord is my Shepherd"—this is the language of faith, love and assurance. He is mine even if He is no one else's. "My Shepherd"—this is the language of confession. I am not sufficient to care for myself. I need One to provide for me and to protect me. "My Shepherd"—this is the language of experience. I know His care.

"I shall not want." The fear of want is a most disturbing thing. The only thing that can expel that slavish bondage is an unbounded, undismayed confidence in the tender and watchful Shepherd. With the passing of the years the meanings of words change. Today the word "want" means desire, but when our text was written it meant what we mean today by the word "lack." This statement does not mean that I shall have whatever I want, but that I shall have every needful want supplied. Sometimes we want things we do not need. No real need will be left unsupplied. However, no one can say, "I shall not want," until he can truthfully say, "The Lord is my Shepherd." With Him as my Shepherd I shall not lack any good thing. He will supply my spiritual needs and my material needs. He will supply all that is needed for the spirit, soul and body for this world and the next. His riches are unsearchable; His power is almighty; His faithfulness is unfailing; His love is unchanging.

If the Lord is our Shepherd, we shall not lack rest and refreshment. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." The Eastern shepherd knows that the sheep do not lie down until they are satisfied. He provides suitable pasturage for the sheep until they have grazed sufficiently, and then he has them to lie down. After the desire for food has been compensated or relieved, and the mind has been calmed, he has them to lie down in the midst of plenty.

The shepherd provides for his sheep. The sheep have no care as to what they shall eat, or as to what they shall drink. This is the shepherd's obligation. It is he who chooses the pastures and locates the waters.

"Saviour, like a Shepherd lead us,
Much we need Thy tender care,
In Thy pleasant pastures feed us,
For our use Thy folds prepare."

To cause the sheep to lie down for rest at noon indicates the shepherd's concern for the welfare of the sheep. So, life is not all toil. God gives us many quiet restingplaces along our pilgrim way. Night is one of these, when after the day's toil, struggle and exhaustion, we are led aside and the curtains are drawn to shut out the noise, and He giveth His beloved sleep, and in sleep He giveth the wonderful blessings of renewal. The Lord's Day is another of these quiet resting-places. God would have us drop our worldly tasks and have a day for the refreshing of both body and soul. Then sometimes God makes us lie down to rest awhile, in order that we may be renewed in spirit. It may be in a sick room. But, whenever the Good Shepherd makes us lie down, there is blessing for us; and, if we submit and trust, we shall be enriched in our spiritual life, and prepared for better service afterward.

"He leadeth me beside the still waters." Green pastures are only one essential. The sheep must have water. Nothing proves a shepherd's ability more than his knowledge of where adequate supplies of water can be found. In David's time water was precious in Palestine. It was far from plentiful. After the rainy season there was a temporary abundance, but the blistering sun soon caused it to disappear. Therefore, it was incumbent on those who tended the sheep to know exactly where water was obtainable--and even then water that the sheep would drink. It is a well-known fact that sheep will not drink from rushing, tumbling, turbulent waters, but only from a quiet source. There were occasional pools, fed by the backflow of the stream, where the sheep could drink their fill of the cool and refreshing waters. In many cases the shepherd had to lead the sheep to where wells had been dug, and from these wells draw water and fill the troughs. "He leadeth me beside the waters of quietness."

"In shady green pastures, so rich and so sweet,
God leads His dear children along;
Where the water's cool flow bathes the weary one's feet,
God leads His dear children along."

If the Lord is our Shepherd, we shall not want for leadership and guidance. I shall not want rest, for He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. I shall not want refreshment, for He leadeth me beside still waters.