

The Lord Is My Shepherd

In the name of our Good Shepherd, dear friends in Christ: There are 150 Psalms in our Bible, some well known, others not so much; but the 23rd has got to be the most familiar and best loved of them all. Still, it seems, you have to be careful how you use it; at least that's what a pastor friend of mine discovered. He had only recently begun serving a particular congregation when he was called upon to visit a member in the hospital. The patient's situation was serious and potentially life-threatening, but there was no reason to believe that with proper care there wouldn't be a full recovery. Anyway, when the pastor arrived for his visit, there were several other members of the family there in the patient's room. After introductions, gathering information about the situation, and chatting a bit, the pastor led the whole group in a short devotion. He began with the 23rd Psalm. But as soon as he read the words, "The Lord is my shepherd", they all gasped in horror. As he read on, they began sobbing, louder and louder as he continued. All the while he's wondering, "What's wrong with these people?" By the time he finished they were wailing outright. Unable to continue for all the wretched crying and carrying on, he asked, "Why are you so upset?" One of them replied, "Oh, Pastor, don't you know? That psalm is only used when someone's about to die!" Apparently that's how their long time former pastor had used it: only near times of death. So when the new pastor began reading it, they all jumped to the conclusion that someone at the hospital must have told him some bad news that they were keeping from the rest of the family.

To be sure, this psalm is well suited for use at times of death. The line about having no fear when walking in the valley of the shadow of death, and its closing with the reference to living in the house of the Lord forever, makes it a natural for such occasions. But I hope no one here associates it exclusively with such times, because as helpful as it is for comforting the dying, it is primarily a bold confession of faith for the living. And that makes it fairly unique. Many (perhaps most) of the psalms are prayers directed to the Lord. Others are praises to the Lord or a recounting of his saving work for Israel. Still others are exhortations to godly living. But the 23rd Psalm is a confession of complete faith in the goodness and mercy of God, which means that it is pure, sweet Gospel and nothing else. So what I'd like to do this morning is examine it in more detail.

We begin by noting that it was written by David, which makes its opening all the more remarkable. When we're first introduced to him in the biblical storyline, he's a shepherd boy – so he knows a thing or two about being a shepherd. But strangely, he doesn't identify himself with the shepherd. By saying "the Lord is my shepherd", David is identifying with the sheep. And that's unexpected. That would be like someone around here identifying themselves with the hogs or cattle they raise. It doesn't happen. It's too far of a step down. And yet David does it. And what he's saying is that in the same way the sheep are completely dependent upon their shepherd, so I am completely dependent upon the Lord for everything. Domesticated sheep have no natural survival skills. It's been bred out of them. They can't find food or water on their own. They can't defend themselves against predators. And they're too slow to run from them. Without a shepherd to lead, guide, and defend them they're lamb chops. In the same way, we would be quickly scattered, lost, and destroyed in this dark and dangerous world without the Lord as our shepherd.

But David goes on, "I shall not want". So, it's more than a matter of mere survival. With the Lord as my shepherd, I'm not going to lack any good thing that I need. Quite the

contrary, because the Lord is kind, wise, and good, he's going to see to it that my life abounds with all things needful. "He makes me lie down in green pastures." The picture is of a fresh, untrammled meadow after a spring rain, the grass luxuriously thick, rich in nourishment; and there after eating my fill I can rest peacefully. "He leads me beside still waters": streams, crystal clear, flowing gently; the water sweet, pure, cool, and refreshing. Thus our shepherd ensures that we get only the very best.

But we want to be careful not to think of this only or even mostly in material terms. It's true that the Lord provides us with what we need to survive: food, shelter, clothing, and so on; but David has even more in mind our spiritual needs. The Lord hasn't promised to make us all rich in this world; but he does lay open for us the rich food of his Holy Word. That's the bread of life from heaven. It's nourishment for our souls. And he causes us to drink of his Holy Spirit who enables us to digest and take to heart the saving and soul-strengthening truth of his Word.

In this way "he restores my soul"; that is, he returns my soul to the condition it's supposed to be: forgiven, washed of sin, redeemed, and made right; trusting him perfectly. And so restored, "he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name sake." That is, by his Word and Spirit, he directs our lives in his ways so that we begin to show forth his character: his sacrificial love, his kindness, his compassion. He's placed his name upon us. He's said, "These sheep are mine". And so what we do reflects upon him, which is why he equips us with his Word and Spirit to represent him well. He wants others to see his character in us so that they will be drawn to him through us as we journey with him through life.

And yes, also through death: the valley of darkness, which pretty much all people fear; but not us. How can we? We're with our Good Shepherd. He's been this way before. He laid down his life for us and for our sin, and then took up his life again to show us that he made the way safe for us. Thus we face the troubles of this world and even death itself with quiet confidence in him. No fear. No worries. And if any begin to arise, we look to his rod and staff for comfort. What are these? We can look at them a couple of different ways. First, they are weapons the shepherd uses in our defense. With them he beats off the predators that seek our destruction: namely Satan, his evil host, and the temptations of this world. Secondly, the shepherd uses his crooked staff for discipline on the sheep. We're all aware that because of the sin nature that clings to us, we have a tendency to stray. Our worst enemy is within us. The shepherd's staff reminds us that his first instinct is to hook us and drag us back to his fold if we begin to stray too far. So we find comfort that he defends us even from ourselves.

But if you allow me a little allegorizing, a third way we can look at the rod and staff our shepherd carries is to note that they are both instruments of wood. And that ought to remind us of another instrument of wood he carried for us: his cross. There's where we look for assurance and courage when the path of life leads through dark and fearful valleys. There's where we see his perfect love and the great extent to which he was willing to go to bring us safely through to life immortal.

At this point the psalm takes a sudden shift away from the shepherd/sheep metaphor that has sustained it thus far. With the Lord preparing a table for us in the presence of our enemies, we go from being sheep to being sons and daughters. You don't invite sheep to your table. You invite family. You invite loved ones. Note also that the psalm changes voice. It goes from talking about the Lord in the third person to addressing him directly in the second: "*You* prepare a table for me." This is remarkable in that the Lord goes from the role of leader and guide to that of servant and host. And as Christians, this ought to make us think immediately of the Lord's Supper. That's the feast the Lord prepares for us – which is a neat

twist: the Lord who was the shepherd now becomes the paschal lamb whose body we eat and whose blood we drink. –In the presence of our enemies, no less. Satan and the world look on in hostility, grinding their teeth with fury; but they can't stop us from receiving this life-giving and faith strengthening feast of redemption.

There's more: "You anoint my head with oil." This speaks of even higher elevation. In David's day it was kings and priests who were anointed for service. The point is that the Lord isn't satisfied to simply raise us to the status of his children, as if that weren't enough. No, he goes all out, making us a royal nation and a holy priesthood to rule and reign with him in everlasting righteousness. This is why David goes on to say, "My cup overflows." In ancient Israel, wine was an expensive commodity used rather sparingly; but it was seen as a symbol of God's vast love and care for his people and his desire to fill them with joy. So to have a cup that overflows speaks of a lavish grace that abounds beyond all measure. This is way the Lord pours out his grace upon us: so much that we cannot contain it.

And with this in mind, David can assert with the utmost confidence, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life". Unfortunately, that translation is a bit weak. What he actually says is that goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me. There's an almost aggressive quality to them. Instead of being chased by threats and dangers, God's great goodness and mercy are hunting us down and will catch us wherever we go. We can't escape them. But then, why would we try? We want them to catch and hold us – hold us in our Savior's loving arms forever.

And that's where David ends the psalm: dwelling in the Lord's house forever. We dwell in the Lord's house even now as members of his Holy Church, and we will for all eternity when we join the saints who have gone before us and those who are yet to be born in the Church Triumphant. And what makes us members of this Church? It's our confession of faith in our Savior Jesus Christ – the living faith so boldly confessed by David in this psalm, and that we too confess when we say, "The Lord is my Shepherd". May our gracious God and Father continue to give us the overflowing grace to trust and declare this precious truth now while we live and also when we die. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!