

The Lord Is My Shepherd

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Of all the biblical Psalms, the 23rd is without question the best known and most well loved. I'm sure many of you can recite it from memory. Why is it so popular? If I were a cynic, I'd say it's because it's so short: only six verses in all. But that's the wrong way to look at it. No, it holds its high place in the hearts of God's people because of its succinct and beautiful imagery. It's Hebrew poetry at its finest and its author's, David, at his best. In six short lines it sums up the whole truth of the Lord's loving care and final goal for his people. Let's look at it in detail.

The first line, "The Lord is my Shepherd", sets the stage for us. In my mind's eye I can see David sitting under a tree on a hill with his stringed instrument (whatever it was) and keeping watch over his grazing sheep while he composes both the words and the melody of the psalm. It occurs to him that what I am to these sheep: their caretaker, their provider, their guide and leader, their protector from danger – that's what the Lord is to me. It's a remarkable thing for a shepherd to say because a shepherd better than anyone knows how stupid, weak, and defenseless sheep are. They rely on their shepherd for everything – but that's the point. We are equally dependent upon the Lord for protection and all our needs. In this regard the dimwitted sheep are sometimes smarter than we are. They know they need a shepherd. They recognize their dependence on him. We humans too often do not. David's words remind us that we really do need a shepherd to take care of us.

And not just any shepherd, but the Good Shepherd; which is why David continues, "I shall not want." Human shepherds sometimes fail in their duty. They can be lazy, inattentive, even abusive. They care more about themselves than for the sheep. But none of that can be said of the Lord. He honestly cares more for his sheep than he does for himself. He lays down his life for the sheep. If he's willing to go that far, how much more will he ensure that those who belong to him have all that they need to thrive? This is why David can assert with confidence that because the Lord is my shepherd I will never lack anything I need.

With green pastures and quiet waters David describes a life of abundance and peaceful fullness for those under the Lord's care. The Lord *more* than satisfies our appetites – and not just in a physical sense. Surely the psalmist has in mind our greater spiritual needs as well. These needs he attends to with the nutritious food of his Word and the living water of the Spirit.

These are what restore the soul in us. The sense of it is giving new life to the dead. We who are dead in trespasses and sin are raised to life when by his Word of forgiveness for Christ's sake the Spirit works in us the faith to believe it. It's the daily ritual of dying to sin and rising with Christ that is the pattern of the Christian life. It began in our Baptisms and continues in confession and absolution. And it will continue until the day we die to sin for the last time and are raised with Christ in the final resurrection.

This spiritual food and water are also what enable us to follow the Good Shepherd in the righteous paths he directs. With souls restored, we follow him – his example of sacrificial love, patience, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, and willing service for others. Left to ourselves we would stray and get lost. But following in the footsteps of the Shepherd we can be sure we're on the right path.

Even in those times the Shepherd leads us into the dark and scary places David refers to as the valley of death's shadow. It's worth noting that this is where David gets more personal. Up to this point in the psalm he has spoken of the Lord in the third person – the Lord does this or that. But now

he speaks directly to the Lord: “I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

I expect that every pastor can relate to this. It’s when someone is in that dark valley that the phone call comes. There’s been an accident or a bad lab report or a family crisis of some kind. Then it’s “Pastor, can you come to the hospital, to our home, to the nursing home, whatever.” It isn’t the pleasure of my company the person wants at such a time; no, they want to hear the voice of the Shepherd. As Jesus says in today’s Gospel, they know it when they hear it. And hearing it, they know that Jesus is with them in their dark valley. And they follow – follow comforted, strengthened, confident that the Good Shepherd who already led the way through the darkest of death’s valleys and came back again, knows the way and will bring them safely and securely through this one.

It’s at this point in the psalm that the metaphor changes. We leave the Shepherd and the sheep in the green pasture and move to the dining room. No shepherd sets a place at the table for the livestock. To be sure, the only time you invite livestock to the dinner table is when they are on the menu. But again it’s worth noting that here David continues to address the Lord directly: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” Interesting: the Shepherd has become the servant laying on a feast for us. He’s the ultimate host. And there’s a lot to unpack here.

First is the idea of table fellowship. In biblical times to be invited to someone’s table was an expression of intimacy. It was saying I consider you to be a member of my family. So when the Lord lays on the table and serves us as host he’s saying you’re not my sheep; you’re my sons and daughters. You’re the heirs of my kingdom. Second, we’ve got the Lord preparing this dining table for us in the presence of our enemies. It’s like they’re looking on in anger and resentment while we feast. Certainly it recalls the Exodus when Israel feasted on the lambs whose blood adorned their doorposts, while the Lord worked their deliverance by slaying the firstborn of Egypt. Even more it points to the Lord’s Supper. Satan, the greatest of our enemies, looks on in sullen silence when we receive Christ’s body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. He’s lost his power to accuse and threaten us when we eat the fruit of the cross – the true Tree of Life. Finally this table the Lord prepares points to the final feast of the Lamb in his Kingdom that is without end. It’s the feast of salvation that we will enjoy in the new heaven and earth.

David continues to extol the Lord’s excess: “You anoint my head with oil”. This has to do with being chosen. Kings were anointed. Priests were anointed. The Lord’s anointing means that he has chosen us to be kings and priests in his kingdom.

“My cup overflows”. It’s the good wine of joy that gladdens the heart. It foretells the eternal joys we will share in the age to come – joys that go above and beyond our wildest dreams.

And then in summary a statement of absolute confidence: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The word goodness there is the same one used in the creation account. At each step in the process the Lord evaluates his work and sees that it is good. It means that all is the way it’s supposed to be, the way God designed and wants it to be. And the word mercy is the same that’s elsewhere translated “grace” – that is, the unmerited favor of the Lord. He pours out this grace and mercy upon us because he is good, not because of anything we are or can do. These are ours all the days of this life, and they will come to complete fulfillment in the eternal age when we will dwell in the Lord’s house forever.

The Lord Jesus is our Good Shepherd. So may he who leads us, feeds us, cares for us, corrects us, and is with us in the dark valleys, bring us to the final goal he has prepared for us. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!