

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 5, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

For nearly thirty centuries the twenty-third Psalm has been one of the most beloved passages in the whole Bible. There are only 118 words in this great psalm yet these 118 words go to the very depths of our beings, and form a rock foundation to sustain us in hours of difficulty and trial. Let me read these familiar words to you again,

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
He leadeth me beside still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He guideth me in 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 hast anointed my head with oil;
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

To the 20th century city-dwellers the figure of the shepherd and a flock of sheep may not be particularly meaningful or inspiring, yet I do not believe that we have had many generations of time in which mankind has been more like a flock of sheep needing a shepherd. When you think of the troubles of our world and the problems that we individually and collectively face, then truly we are like a flock of sheep which needs the Shepherd of shepherds. Nearly 500 times the Bible refers to the idea of a shepherd and his sheep. It is a favorite figure of speech in the scriptures. This passage takes hold of us because it is a positive, faith-filled, hope-filled approach to life. It is constructive, optimistic, and confident, and it is full of faith. Let me hold up some of the phrases so that we may look beneath the words at the meaning that David intended.

I Shall Not Want

That opening line says, "The Lord in my shepherd, I shall not want." Mankind has sought for security down through the ages. A child stands close to his mother and finds in her security. All through life we strive for security in so many different ways. We guard our health; we save for old age; we take out insurance. We long for security, but this passage emphasizes that God is our real security.

"The Lord is my shepherd," therefore "I shall not want." How true, how very true that is. Even before we began to exist, God was aware of our needs and provided for them. He knew we would be hungry, so he provided the seasons of the year and the productivity of the soil to make possible the growth of food. He knew that we would be cold, so he caused to be embedded in the earth great areas of coal and vast storehouses of gas that we might heat our homes and our bodies.

We are reminded of the passage in Matthew 6:8 where Jesus says, "Your Father knoweth that things ye have need of before ye ask him." He provided for our needs, even before we asked him. There is another passage in the psalms in which David says, "I have been young, and now am I old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread." (Psalm 37:25). That is another way of saying that God will take care of us. We believe it.

In the great Sermon on the Mount Jesus deals with so many things that we need to know about and among them he deals with our anxiety. "Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than the food, and the body more than the raiment? Behold the birds of the heaven, that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye of much more value than they? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these ... Be not therefore anxious for the morrow: for the morrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." (Matt. 6:25-26, 28, 34). We would add to these passages one from Paul's pen, Philippians 4-19: "And my God shall supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Truly, as David said it so long ago, the Lord is our shepherd and therefore we shall not want.

He Maketh Me To Lie Down

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” The shepherd in the Palestinian hills and plains would start his sheep to grazing very early in the morning. Four o’clock was not an unusual hour. They would eat and move on and eat some more until the sun had warmed the earth. By mid-morning they would be hot and tired and their stomachs filled with undigested grass. To drink water was a most natural thing, yet a most dangerous thing. To drink while hot and to drink with a stomach filled with undigested grass would have meant disaster for the sheep. So the wise shepherd made the sheep lie down for a while and then when they were cooled and rested and had chewed the cud for a while, digesting the grass, they were ready to drink.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” Sometimes God makes us to lie down in order that we may have some time to think about things more important than the humdrum things of life. A period of illness, time on our backs, may be God’s making us to lie down.

“He leadeth me beside still waters.” The sheep, as you may know, is a very timid animal and is afraid of rushing waters. The sheep is not a good swimmer. The heavy wool on his back becomes so soaked with water that he cannot swim, so he is frightened by rushing waters and seeks out still waters for a place to drink. The good shepherd guides him off into some area where the water is still and quiet and there he drinks.

He Restoreth My Soul

“He restoreth my soul.” When David was young, as a shepherd boy out in the hills, he was very close to God. God gave him the strength to kill a lion and a bear; God gave him the power to kill Goliath and to free the people of Israel. Then David moved to town and got so busy with other things that he was separated from God to a great degree. He fell into great sin; he needed to be restored. God’s prophet called David’s sin squarely to his attention. David repented and then he was forgiven. “He restoreth my soul.” Only God can restore the souls of men. Like a clock, man’s spirit has a way of running down and needs to be rewound. As one translation has it, “he revives life in me.”

“He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Did you know that a sheep really has no sense of direction? A dog or a cat or a horse, when lost, will find its way home, but not a sheep. A sheep’s eyesight is very limited. He sees only a few yards ahead of him. How like sheep we are. When you think of all the affairs of life and how easy it is for us to get lost, how wonderful it is to know that, “He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” Our Lord guides us. We, too, are nearsighted and have no real sense of self-direction, so our Lord who knows the way serves as our guide.

These things being true, David writes, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” The valley of the shadow of death signifies any of the valleys of life: disappointment, serious illness, loneliness, age, death, or any of the other valleys through which men must go. Yet David says, “I will fear no evil because thou art with me.” As long as our God is with us; as long as we are close to him, there is no valley through which we must go that can really hurt us for long. Most men are frightened by death--all of us to a great degree and some men to a tremendous degree--so we need our Lord close by.

Rod and Staff

“Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” The sheep is a defenseless animal, having no talons, no claws, no means of fighting back. The sheep is an easy prey of the animals of the forest and the field, so the shepherd carries a rod with him. It is a heavy stick two or three feet long, a kind of club. He carries also the shepherd’s crook, eight feet long with a hook at the end. With it he can reach down and lift a lamb back onto the path. These are the only defenses for the sheep. Without these he is defenseless.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” Perhaps the figure has changed, but maybe not. In Palestine there were thorns that grew in the fields. There were also poisonous weeds in the fields. We read that the shepherds, those that really loved their sheep, would go out in the spring and grub out the thorns and the poisonous weeds and burn them. In a sense they were preparing a table for their sheep, preparing a pasture that the sheep might graze in safety.

“Thou hast anointed my head with oil, my cup runneth over.” If the figure of the sheep and the shepherd is continued then you think of the sharp rocks over which the sheep pass, the occasional thorn and the cut on the side of the face or the nose. In the evening when the sheep come within the safety of the sheepfold the shepherd applies the healing oil. “Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup runneth over.” For a sheep the cup would be a cup of pure, clean water after the day of walking on the hot, dry ground.

Goodness and Lovingkindness

When all of this has unfolded, David says in the last lines of his great psalm a word or two about what he intends and what he hopes for the future. “Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me all the days of my life.” Think of the diseases that have been anticipated, and all the terrible tragedies that are looming on the horizon. But David, somehow says, “I know all of that, but I have such faith in my God that I surely believe that goodness and loving kindness will come my way.”

In the face of all our dangers today do we not also need this hope-filled, faith-filled attitude toward life? Do not talk about the city being annihilated or blown to bits; talk about God's care for his people. It is on the same theme of faith and God's great love for his people that you can build a life. Fears and doubts tear a life to pieces, leading to frustration and ruin. You cannot build a life on fear; you can only build a life on confidence and faith.

Then comes that last great crescendo of self-dedication, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." David controls that end of things. He is saying, in effect, "I am determined not to stray away; I am determined to live in God's family." That last great determination is the determination that you need and I need. David is getting ready to go home--to God's home. What a tragedy it is when people have no home. They go home to empty houses, or empty apartments, or to single rooms. What a tragedy it is in this life, but now definitely more of a tragedy when a man has no home to go to when life is over. There is a wonderfully beautiful thought in that last line, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

There are three simple words which can serve to summarize the message of this great psalm, They are the words: contentment, courage, and confidence. Contentment is registered in the opening line, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Courage is shown in the middle of the passage as David says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Finally, confidence is seen in the concluding lines, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

As we close this study of the shepherd psalm do you not want to make ready for your home? Believe in the Lord; let him be your shepherd; repent of the wrongs in your life; turn and let him guide you; dedicate yourself to living in God's way and being a part of his family; then plan confidently to go home to live with God eternally. You do all this by becoming a Christian, and by living the Christian life. The Shepherd's invitation is extended to you. Will you be one of his sheep?