

Portrait of Our Shepherd-King

Psalm 23

Intro. 1) Holy Scripture is filled with metaphors, pictures and images of our great and awesome God. They help us to understand His character and His nature, His holiness and goodness, His power and love. Herman Bavinck in his work *The Doctrine of God*, provides a very helpful list of the various ways God is described in the Bible. For example he is compared to a lion, an eagle, a lamb, the sun, a light, a fire, a fountain, a rock, a hiding place, a tower and a shield.

2) There are also more personal and humanly images to help us comprehend the incomprehensible God. He is called the Creator, a bridegroom, a husband, a judge, a king, a man of war, a builder and maker, a physician, and of course a Father (Grudem, 158). And yet there is another image found in the Bible that portrays with wonderful clarity our Lord's compassion and concern, his protection and guidance. It is the image of a shepherd, better, a shepherd-king. This is what we discover in the beautiful 23rd Psalm, a Psalm that is part of a glorious trilogy. In Psalm 22 we met our Suffering-King, in Psalm 24 our Sovereign King, and in Psalm 23 our Shepherd-King. I believe in each of these Psalms it is the Lord Jesus Christ who is in view.

3) Three times in the Bible the Lord Jesus is directly described as a shepherd:

- In John 10:11 He is the good Shepherd who gives His life for His sheep.
- In Heb. 13:20 He is the great Shepherd of the sheep who shed His blood to inaugurate and ratify the new and eternal covenant.
- In 1 Peter 5:4 He is the chief Shepherd who provides for His faithful servants the crown of glory that does not fade away.

Each of these images, no doubt, finds their origin in Psalm 23, what Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher of London, called “the pearl of Psalms” (vol. 1, 353). James Boice, for many years the pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia wrote, “The 23rd Psalm is the most beloved of the 150 Psalms in the Psalter and possibly the best-loved (and best-known) chapter in the entire Bible...[it] is a masterpiece throughout” (207). J.P. McBeth said, “The 23rd Psalm is the greatest poem ever written” (p.3).

4) In words that could readily be found on the lips of Jesus voiced to His Father following Psalm 22, we find here words of faith, confidence and assurance that should be on the lips of every servant of God as we trust our good shepherd, the Lord Jesus, to lead us in the paths of righteousness and to walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death. Much of the imagery in the Psalm is not only related to that of a shepherd, it also echoes the Exodus as Jehovah shepherded his people through the wilderness. This shepherd has a history. This shepherd has proven His faithfulness to His sheep in the past, and therefore He can be trusted in the present and the future.

Trans. As we give our lives in service and dedication to our shepherd-king, the Lord Jesus, what can we be completely confident that He will do in our lives? Three precious truths are ours for the taking.

I. Our Shepherd-King Provides For Us What We Need 23:1-3

A sheep has only one shepherd, and Jesus is a shepherd who knows His sheep by name and they follow Him. Further, as John 10:27-28 teaches, He gives them eternal life and they shall never perish. If that is what He will do in eternity, what will He do in this life, today, and tomorrow?

1) He gives us nourishment.

23:1-2

- The Lord (*Yahweh*), first and emphatic is my shepherd; I shall not want (*NIV*, “I shall not be in want”). The *NLT* says, “I have everything I need,” *The Message*, “I don’t need a thing.” The personal pronoun is crucial. In fact there are a total of 17 in the 6 verses of this psalm. The one true and living Lord is my shepherd. The Great I AM of Ex 3:14 who is bound neither by time or space, who is limited neither in power or knowledge, this One is my shepherd. He is mine through faith and trust in His perfect work of salvation, and I am His in absolute trust and surrender. In this life I may not have all that I want, but I will always have everything I need for joy and the fulfilling of the Lord’s perfect will for my life (Rom 12:2). “I lack nothing,” a phrase found only one other time in scripture, that being Deut 2:7 in the context of the Exodus. The Lord shepherded His people through the wilderness into the promise land meeting every single need they had! Left to themselves sheep lack everything, but cared for by the Good Shepherd they lack nothing, now and forever.
- The nourishment he gives is described as “he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.” Unlike a hireling, he thinks first and foremost of the sheep’s good and welfare. He will see to it that they have what they need for life. This is what He does for you and me.
 - He will feed me and quench my hunger. After all He is the “Bread of Life” (John 6:35).
 - He will be my water and quench my thirst. After all, He is the living water (John 4:14; 7:38).

2) He gives us rest.

23:3

- “He restores my soul.” Here the phrase “my soul” simply means “my life.” It is the Lord who revives me when I need strength. It is the Lord who restores me and gets back on my feet and back into the fight when I stumble and fall. It is the Lord who puts life in proper perspective and helps me see things with a Godward, eternal perspective. The Lord revives me and refreshes me through His word. As Psalm 19:7 reminds us, and needs to remind us daily, “The instruction of the Lord is perfect, restoring (*NIV, ESV*, “reviving”) the soul” (my life).
- How different life is for those who do not have the Lord Jesus as their shepherd, or for the believer who forgets Jesus Christ is your shepherd. Marcia Hornok captured the endless frustration and disappointment so many experience in her poem:

Psalm 23, Antithesis

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest.
 It makes me lie down only when exhausted.
 It leads me to deep depression.
 It hounds my soul.
 It leads me in circles of frenzy for activity's sake.
 Even though I run frantically from task to task,
 I will never get it all done.
 For my “ideal” is with me.
 Deadlines and my need for approval, they drive me.
 They demand performance from me, beyond the limits of my schedule.
 They anoint my head with migraines.
 My in-basket overflows.
 Surely fatigue and time pressure shall follow me all the days of my life,
 And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration forever.
 (*Discipleship Journal*, #60, 1990).

Trans. Not so for the one who walks with the Great Shepherd. No, the good Shepherd restores, renews and revives the soul. He gives us nourishment. He gives us rest.

3) He gives guidance.

23:3

“He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name’s sake.”

- God’s care is constant and it is compassionate. He leads (*NIV*, “guides”) me. He does not drive or coerce. He does not manipulate or trick.
- Paths of righteousness. His leading is always in the right and proper direction. He leads me by His Spirit and through His Word to do the right thing, to think the right thing, to say the right thing, to live the right way. As Psalm 119:105 wonderfully reminds us, “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path.” I like John Piper’s thoughts here: “A path of righteousness is a right path followed with the right attitude” (Sept. 7, 1980). Doing the right thing in the right way is a sign of true spiritual maturity, and it is essential for effectiveness in ministry. This insight prepares us for the last phrase of v. 3.
- For His name’s sake. Do you see what is here? Do you grasp the power and promise of this statement? He meets my needs, renews my life, leads me in the right paths putting His reputation on the line! His name! His glory! Psalm 106:8 says of God’s deliverance of Israel, “He saved them for His name’s sake, that He might make His mighty power known.” God wants everyone to see who He is and what He is like. God in His sovereignty is working in all things to display His greatness, His glory, for

the joy and blessing of His people, His children, His sheep. Dr. Piper again hits the nail on the head: “God is the beginning and God is the end of all my righteousness. The path of righteousness has His grace as its starting point (for He leads me into it) and it has His glory as its destination (because His leading is for His name’s sake).” How might this effect my prayer life? My approach to life? To ministry? I will speak to God like this:

- Lord use me for your name’s sake.
- Lord make me holy for your name’s sake.
- Lord keep me from evil for your name’s sake.
- Lord make me like You for your name’s sake.

Trans. Our Shepherd-King provides for us what we need.

II. Our Shepherd-King Protects Us Where We Are

23:4-5

- My friend Russ Moore at Southern Seminary makes an interesting observation about heroic figures and “wild things” in the Bible. In a commentary entitled “Where the Wild Things Are” he writes, “heroic figures in Scripture are often pictured as heroic slayers of dangerous animals, like David or Samson...[In] the shepherd imagery of the Bible...The shepherd’s primary duty is to protect his flock from predators, by fighting them off. That’s why the Psalmist is comforted by the Good Shepherd’s rod and staff. It’s not that they look cool and shepherd-like. It’s that they are used to knock the teeth out of wolves and big cats...the shepherd-warrior imagery in the Bible is then applied to the Davidic king of the people of God: “The good ruler, like the bold shepherd, devotes himself, to

exterminating predators whenever and wherever they can be found.” (“Moore to the Point”: 11-27-06).

- This is exactly what David has in mind when he affirms our shepherd-king is about the business of protecting us from wolves and big cats, including the biggest cat of all: death.

1) He is with us when we face death.

23:4

- Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Do we ever lack anything I life? Of course the answer is yes. Here we are walking in the very valley of the shadow of death, a very deep shadow, deep darkness, the darkest valley. Here there are no green pastures or restful waters. Here it is dark, unclear and uncertain. Life is like this. Ministry is like this. And yet David can say, “I will fear no evil.” When I move thru the deep and dark valleys of life, when death itself is past the horizon and is staring me in the face I will fear no evil. Why?
- For you are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. Do not miss the message David has for us. It can revolutionize your life and your ministry: The reason we are going through the deep, dark valleys is because our Good Shepherd is leading us! The valley is part of the path of righteousness. Why would the shepherd lead us through a place of danger and death? To get us to a better place! You see we may lack many things in life if we follow our good shepherd, but we will never, never, never lack anything that the good shepherd thinks and knows is good for us. Ps. 84:11 reminds us,

“For the Lord God is a sun and shield; The Lord will give grace and glory; No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.”

The rod is an instrument to protect and provide safety. It guards.

The staff is an instrument to comfort and provide support. It guides.

- In death valley days do not fear. You have the one you need, and He has the resources He needs to lead and guide you to a better and more wonderful place.
- In the darkest moments of life who do you really need? Who do you really want? I want the Lord.

2) He is with us when we face the enemy. 23:5

- A number of Bible students note a change in the imagery in vs. 5 from that of a shepherd to the host of a great banquet. I recognize why they see this, and yet I do not see a completely new image so much as I see an extension and development of the Shepherd-King picture. This king is constantly with us and caring for us in the fields and in the valleys, at the table and in the house (v.6). He has brought me from the fields and thru the valley and into His house! Here I am both safe and satisfied.
- You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. This is a truly amazing scene. The Shepherd-King is here serving His sheep. Enemies may be all around us and yet right in the midst God is serving me and sustaining me. This says something both to me and to them. Walking in the paths of righteousness in complete trust and dependence on my Shepherd-King I am confident I will lack nothing I need. To my enemies this is a witness, a

testimony, to the favor of God in my life and His faithfulness to his sheep, His children. They would harm be but God helps me. They would starve me but God feeds me and honors me.

- You anoint my head with oil. He publicly acknowledges us as honored guest with an ancient ritual of hospitality. The oil, mixed with perfume, would smooth the skin and give off a sweet fragrance. It is a mark of friendship, acceptance and celebration.
- My cup runs over. He gives me more than I need in a gracious and lavish display that all can see. You see the Lord's cup is never empty or even half-filled. It is always filled to the brim and then running over.
- Enemies pale in comparison and fade fast away in the presence of the Good Shepherd and all the good things He has and does for us.

III. Our Shepherd-King Promises Us What We Have 23:6

When one thinks of Psalm 23, probably the image that most readily pops into your mind is that of a funeral. I understand that and recognize that Psalm 23 can certainly be a comfort at a time of death. However, a careful and balanced reading and interpretation of Psalm 23 will reveal it is not about death, it is about life. It is not about dying it about living (now and forever!). It is life on a different plane, it is life more abundant as described by the Good Shepherd Jesus in John 10:10. You see He laid down His life that we might have life, eternal life, a God-quality kind of life, a life lived in His presence forever.

1) We will always have His gracious love.

- One man has said God is a heavenly highway patrolman! He is always in hot pursuit of us with goodness and mercy. You see instead of being pursued by your enemies who watch you feast at a great banquet prepared in your honor (v.5), it is the goodness (*tob*) and mercy (*hesed*), the loving-kindness of our Shepherd-King that is constantly running after you and running you down. It aggressively is chasing after you.
- And I have news: you can't outrun or outlast God. Our Shepherd-King is swift and He is fast. In a 100 meter race He crosses the finish-line and no time has ticked off the clock.

Trans. We will always have this gracious love.

2) We will someday enjoy His gracious acceptance.

- There is a popular praise song that says, "Better is one day in your house than thousands elsewhere." I have no doubt that is true, but the Word of God has a much better promise than that: "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Notice the Psalm begins (vs. 1) and ends (v.6) with "the Lord" (*inclusio*).
- In this life you may be a nomadic servant of the Good Shepherd. You may live overseas in another country. You may serve Christ in relative obscurity. Ministry may take you far away from family, friends and familiar and comfortable surroundings. But you may rest assured that the Good Shepherd will feed you and lead you, protect you and provide for you, and when He is through using you, He will bring you into His house as His child

forever! What greater privilege could be imaginable than to dwell in the house of the Lord, our Shepherd-King, forever! Indeed neither death nor life or any other thing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:35-39).

Conclusion

- 1) Everyone needs a shepherd. In Ezk. 34:23 God says to His people, “I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them-My servant David.” Here is the promise of a future Shepherd-King in the mold of Ps. 23. Couple this with Micah 5:2-4 which promises that out of Bethlehem will come one “whose goings forth are from everlasting...[and who] shall stand and shephard His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God,” and you have a Shepherd-King who is also God and man! Here is a shepherd for life and a shepherd for eternity. Why do we need such a shepherd? 1 Peter 2:25 helps provide the answer: “For you were like sheep going astray.” Sin had confused you, deceived you, it had promised one thing but it did not come close to delivering on its promises. Then Jesus came looking for you, and He found you and rescued you by laying down His life for you as the Good Shepherd. He rescued you from sin and Satan. He rescued you from yourself. Now you have returned to the one the Bible calls “the Shepherd and Overseer (the supervisor!) of your soul.”
- 2) And what does this Shepherd promise for those who are His sheep? Listen to this precious promise found in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, ch. 7 and vs 16-17: “They neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore (Ps. 23:2!), the

sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb (the Lord Jesus) who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of water (Ps 23 again!). And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

- 3) This is our good Shepherd. This is our great Shepherd. This is the Shepherd-King who will receive and lead and love and care for all who will say: the Lord (Jesus) is my Shepherd, I have everything I need.