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## Psalm 23: A Psalm of David

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## **Psalm 23** **A Psalm of David**

(RSV)

The fundamental imagery of the shepherd and his sheep is intended to convey the LORD's tender, though sometimes tough, love and care, on the one hand; while on the other hand, it conveys our absolute need for such care, because, like sheep, we are helpless without a shepherd.

### **V. 1**

**The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.**

The LORD is the faithful covenant God who has called unto Himself a People. But within that People I do not get lost in the crowd; I can claim Yahweh as my shepherd, and he deals with me by name.

The verb "want" does not mean "to desire," it means "to lack." Of course, when we want (in the sense of lacking) something, we want (in the sense of desiring) to fill that emptiness. The great danger is always that, in order to fill our lack, we desire nourishment that is ultimately harmful. The Psalm leads us to entrust ourselves into the hands of our faithful Shepherd God. The LORD will not allow us to lack anything that we truly need. When we say, "I shall not want," that is a bold confession of faith. The LORD does not promise us that we shall never desire more; our own experience teaches us that our desires are insatiable. But the LORD does promise that we shall never lack anything that is truly necessary for us.

### **V. 2**

**He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.**

We could easily imagine that this verse pictures a God who makes me, that is, forces me, to lie down. When the Psalm says that the LORD makes me to lie down, it means rather to say that the Good Shepherd brings it about that I am able to lie down in green pastures; I do not have to settle for inferior pasturage. "Green pastures" are an image for wholesome abundance.

The still waters are waters that flow gently enough for sheep to drink, yet are not stagnant or brackish.

### **V. 3**

**He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.**

To "restore my soul" is an expression that pictures me as famished, exhausted, faint, on my last leg. But thanks to the Shepherd I can now eat and drink, and my soul is restored. In English we would say that my "spirits" have been lifted. It is simply a fact of life that when my body is hungry, my spirits are also depressed. When I am hungry, nothing revives my spirits so

much as a good meal well served. While there is always a spiritual overtone to these images, we ought not to super-spiritualize them out of our bodily needs. Jesus teaches us to pray for daily bread, and the gifts of God most assuredly include also all that we need to support this body and life.

The paths of righteousness are the right paths. But right for what? They are those that are right for the best interest of the sheep, as God defines and knows those interests best. They are the paths that avoid dangerous places and those that lead to abundant pasture where sheep may safely graze. One might think here of the way of the Ten Commandments. As Luther explains them, they point to such dangerous behavioral pitfalls as idolatry and disregard of the neighbor; but they also point to the way in which God would have us walk. The goal of the Shepherd's leading and guiding is that we might be and become the kind of human beings we were intended to become at our creation. The paths that lead in that direction are the paths of righteousness, and those are the paths in which our Good Shepherd leads us.

God leads us as a Shepherd "for His name's sake." The Name of God does not describe the hidden God or seek to define God as He is in Himself, but the Name of God is always that way in which God identifies and reveals Himself to us. The basic passage here -- once more -- is Exodus 3:13-17. The God who reveals Himself here wills to be known as Yahweh, the LORD, for all generations. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom He had made a covenant of promise, who then began the long historical process of redeeming that promise by freeing the Israelites from Egypt, and who continued to make still further promises. This long Old Testament revelation of His Name then finally comes to fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Son of God (2 Corinthians 1:19-20). Since His Name is the way He identifies Himself to us, His Name is in effect the record, beginning with the Bible, of how the LORD Yahweh has shown Himself, and continues to show Himself, to be the compassionate, powerful, faithful, promise-keeping God of Israel and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose Triune Name is praised in the Spirit-created Church.

Within the framework of this understanding, you can then use other phrases to translate the phrase, "for His Name's sake": on account of his name, for the sake of his reputation, as befits his name, because that is the kind of God that he is, etc.

#### **V. 4**

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**

**I fear no evil** (danger, harm, injury);

**for thou art with me;**

**thy rod** (club) **and thy staff** (shepherd's crook),

**they comfort me.**

The ultimate expression of faith and confidence in the faithful Shepherd comes as we face our last hour. We do not know when that last hour will come. But death casts a long shadow. Every life-threatening incident is a fearsome reminder of our mortality. It shows us repeatedly that we are fragile, that ultimately we do not control our own fate, and it raises again and again the question of our final destiny. This Psalm leads us to entrust ourselves even and especially in the hour of death into the hands of our compassionate Good Shepherd. In those hands we need fear no evil, for to this day those nail-scarred hands are his declaration of eternal love for us. With him we triumph over death in his Easter victory over the grave.

The imagery of a club suggests that the Shepherd will aggressively defend us from all attacking wolves and lions, particularly in our last hour. The shepherd's crook suggests that he will keep the wandering sheep on the straight and narrow path of righteousness, in life and also at life's end. The shepherd's crook is the symbolism of the bishop's crosier. That is what bishops are for; they are to concern themselves with the spiritual life and well being of the sheep.

Notice how in verse 4 the third-person Shepherd now becomes the second-person "Thou." The otherwise hidden, unknown, and awesome God is, as the LORD Yahweh, approachable and addressable, because He has revealed himself as merciful, faithful, and powerful to save.

### **V. 5**

**Thou preparest a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil,  
my cup overflows.**

Although the theme remains the goodness and love and care of the LORD, the imagery now changes from that of Yahweh as Shepherd to that of Yahweh as a Host. There are three images:

1. To prepare a table is to prepare a feast, a festive meal. God hosts a heavenly meal in my honor! Jesus uses this imagery when he speaks of the good shepherd creating joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:3-7). And what is more, God so honors me with my enemies looking on; my faith and reliance on the LORD have found their vindication. My enemies' threats and taunts can no more worry or distress me.
2. To anoint the head with (olive) oil was a necessary part of good etiquette for a host who welcomed his guests. That is why its omission was so glaring in Luke 7:46.
3. An overflowing cup is an image of abundant generosity. Thus the Psalm leads us in a praise and blessing of God for unimaginable divine generosity. God treats us (of all people) as honored guests at His table!

It is impossible for Christians to pray this Psalm and not think of the LORD's Supper here. It is the foretaste of The Feast to Come, where the enemies within and without can no longer harm us. The enemies within might be, for example, our bad conscience for our sins or our fears and anxieties in the face of our mortality. The enemies without might be, for example, people who harass us at work, those who taunt us for our Christian confession, or the mastermind behind it all, the Devil. These enemies, as we have ample reason to know, are powerful. But God's determination to be overwhelmingly generous to us for His name's sake - is more powerful still.

### **V. 6**

**Surely** (I am completely confident that) **goodness and mercy shall follow** (accompany, perhaps even pursue) **me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD** (the Temple) **forever** (literally: length of days, as long as I shall live).

In Hebrew poetic parallelism "goodness and mercy" stand in parallel to "the house of the LORD," while "all the days of my life" stand in parallel to "as long as I shall live." The goodness and mercy of God to us has its focal point in the Temple as the house of the LORD. Not until very late in the Old Testament (perhaps ca. 200 B.C.) was there any confident expectation that the goodness and mercy of God extended also into the next life in the resurrection. So when the Psalm was composed, it is most likely that the final phrase did not connote an eternity hereafter in the mind of the author. The vista of our human future, however, expanded infinitely when Jesus was raised from the dead. So we Christians are justified for Christ's sake to read it as we traditionally do; namely, that here on earth we shall experience the LORD's goodness and mercy throughout our life-time, and hereafter we shall dwell in God's heavenly mansions forever. That also makes of our earthly temples and houses of worship a sign of the heavenly house of God, where the generous God of goodness dwells. God's goodness and mercy are to be found in our church buildings. They are not, of course, intrinsic to the bricks and mortar, but God is to be found there in His proclaimed Word, in the celebration of His Sacraments, and among the two or three (hundred?) of His family who assemble there in the Name of Jesus.

**The LBW prayer to accompany Psalm 23:**

Lord Jesus Christ, shepherd of your Church, you give us new birth in the waters of baptism; you anoint us with oil, and call us to salvation at your table. Dispel the terrors of death and the darkness of error. Lead your people along safe paths, that they may rest securely in you and dwell in the house of the LORD now and forever, for your name's sake. Amen.

**Guide for Reflection:**

Psalm 23 is undoubtedly the best known psalm of the Psalter. It is so frequently used, especially at deathbeds and funerals, that it will have personal associations that endear it to every one who prays it. That will also be the case with you. I want to call your attention to a few items of the Biblical development of the key term, Shepherd.

1. The Psalm addresses Yahweh as Shepherd, namely, as caretaker. That is consistent with frequent usage elsewhere. Look, for example at Psalm 28:8-9; and look also at Psalms 77:16-20 and 78:50-55, where both of these references recall God's leading His flock in the Exodus from Egypt.
2. David was a shepherd in his youth before God chose him to be king over His People. This was a momentous circumstance, because in the ancient Near East the kings were thought to be the shepherds of their people. Thus David passed from being literally a shepherd of sheep to being a shepherd in this political sense. David as king was metaphorically a "shepherd" of God's People Israel. The flock belonged to God, and therefore King David could always be only the

under-shepherd of God's flock. He could never be a shepherd in such a way as to displace Yahweh as Chief Shepherd. It is important to notice that, since Psalm 23 was traditionally thought to have been composed by David, the shepherd-king himself here acknowledged Yahweh as his Shepherd.

3. The title, as well as the intermediary role of the shepherd-king, stuck to the descendants of David, as we can see from the complaint of the prophet Jeremiah (23:1-4) against the callous and indifferent shepherds of Israel. He is speaking of the unworthy and unfaithful kings of Israel. Notice how Jeremiah holds them responsible for scattering the flock of God abroad, and how God Himself will gather them together again and set shepherds over them who will give them genuine care.

The best extended Old Testament oracle on the Shepherd is Ezekiel 34. This chapter was written in the Babylonian exile, after Jerusalem with its kingship and Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. Read this chapter and note the following:

1. Verses 1-6 record God's scathing indictment against the shepherd-kings of Israel;
2. Verses 7-10 are the consequences Yahweh God will inflict on those who are responsible;
3. Verses 11-16 are the promise of God that from henceforth He Himself will be the Good Shepherd of his own flock, with all the beautiful restorative and redeeming work that that will entail;
4. Verses 17-22 show how God will judge among the sheep between God's abused sheep and the pushy, selfish, callous bad sheep (goats!);
5. Verses 23-24 states that God will install an intermediary shepherd between Himself and His flock, the restored messianic shepherd-king, the son (descendant) of David;
6. Verses 25-31 promise, under a variety of images, peace and safety. And then, upon the basis of this redeeming and restoring work comes this climactic promise: "And they shall know that I, the LORD (the Name of Yahweh) their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord GOD. And you are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord GOD."

The message of the New Testament, especially in John 10, is that Jesus is both that Shepherd and the intermediary shepherd from the Father. But the course of Jesus' life made it abundantly clear that the redeeming and restoring work of which Ezekiel had spoken is not to be attached to a *political* kingly office. Jesus is the Messianic Shepherd divested of any political office or realm, except in a continuing metaphorical sense. When Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews? Are you a king of any kind?" Jesus replied, "My kingship is not of this world. I was born and entered the world to bear witness to the truth." Jesus created a new office, one that today we in the church call the pastoral office. ("Pastor" is the Latin word for shepherd.) In John 21:15-17 Jesus commissioned Peter to feed his sheep and lambs. Peter in the Epistle for this Sunday (the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter) 1 Peter 2:18-25, refers to Jesus and the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls. And in 1 Peter 5:1-4 he speaks of the elders who tend the flock of God as under-shepherd to the chief Shepherd.

So when we pray this Psalm and think of the Shepherd of our souls, we may think of Yahweh (God the Father), or we may think of the LORD Jesus, or we may think of the Spirit-called, Spirit-led, Spirit-filled under-shepherds in the Church. And maybe in the peculiarly layered Christian way of praying the Psalms, we need to think of all the layers, either simultaneously or serially.

### Nugget

Prayer is a form of communication between God and man and man and God. It is of the essence of communication between persons that they should talk with each other from the same agenda. Wherever this is not done, communication tends to break down. If, however, an atmosphere of trust can be maintained, then one learns how to wait and be still. It is instructive to examine the prayer life of the Master from this point of view. I am always impressed by the fact that it is recorded that the only thing that the disciples (as a group) asked Jesus was to teach them how to pray.

Howard Thurman in *A Strange Freedom*

*Walter E. Keller*

April 25, 1999 – **The Fourth Sunday of Easter**