

## Chapter 15

# THE GOOD SHEPHERD WITH HIS SHEEP

## Psalm 23

Although the 23rd Psalm is one of the Bible's shortest chapters, its six verses contain many evidences of divine inspiration, in terms of both its interesting numeric structure and also its wonderful message. It is quite likely the best-loved chapter in the Bible, one of the first learned by Sunday School children and the last requested for death-bed reading by dying Christians. It was written by David, and its shepherd theme no doubt grew out of his own experiences as a shepherd boy, but its message far transcends anything that could be devised by David or any other man, speaking with great power and blessing to all people of every time and place.

The psalm's shepherd, of course, is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. He frequently spoke of Himself as the shepherd (John 10:14; Matthew 25:32; 26:31, etc.). He called Himself the good shepherd, dying for His sheep (John 10:11); Paul spoke of Him as the great shepherd, guiding His sheep (Hebrews 13:20, 21); and Peter saw Him as the chief shepherd, rewarding His sheep (I Peter 5:4).

The psalm also refers to Him as the Lord (i.e., *Jehovah*). This Old Testament name of God has been appropriated and applied

to Christ in the New Testament—for example, Acts 2:21,36, quoting Joel 2:32. Thus, “Jehovah my Shepherd” in Psalm 23:1 is to be understood as none other than Jesus Christ.

### The Remarkable Structure of the Twenty-third Psalm

Psalm 23 is probably the greatest testimony to the believer’s security to be found in the Bible, at least in the Old Testament. This theme of security is woven into the very structure of the psalm.

All six verses are intensely subjective, with the writer opening his deepest heart in his expressions about, and to, the Lord. There is beautiful symmetry in the respective verse themes, which can be summarized as follows:

Verse one.	Statement of Faith in the Present
Verse two.	Testimony of God’s Faithfulness
Verse three.	Testimony of God’s Faithfulness
Verse four.	Prayer of Thanksgiving
Verse five.	Prayer of Thanksgiving
Verse six.	Statement of Faith for the Future

These themes are accompanied by twelve references to the Lord, organized symmetrically as follows:

Verse one.	“The LORD” (once)
Verse two.	“He” (twice)
Verse three.	“He” (thrice)
Verse four.	“Thou” (thrice)
Verse five.	“Thou” (twice)
Verse six.	“The LORD” (once)

It seems obvious that this remarkable arrangement could not be attributed to chance, and almost as unlikely that David contrived it. It can best be explained by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Six is a number usually associated with human weakness and incompleteness, but the number twelve seems always associated with God’s special provision for mankind in calling and organizing chosen servants for dealing with the spiritual needs of His people.

Note also that there are no less than 17 references in the psalm to the believer himself, through use of the first person pronouns (“I,” “me,” “my,” etc.), and this number commonly is peculiarly connected with the doctrine of assurance and security in Christ. For example, there are 17 categories of opposition to the Christian listed in Romans 8:35–39 which can *never* “separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.” The Ark of safety which carried believers through the awful judgment of the cataclysmic deluge rested “on the seventeenth day of the month,” after the flood had come on “the seventeenth day of the month” five months earlier (Genesis 8:4; 7:11—the first mention of 17 in the Bible).

In John 21:11 there were “153 great fishes” brought to shore by the disciples in a net which did not break, symbolically representing those believers in all nations who would be won to Christ through the witnessing of those “fishers of men” whom Christ would send forth into all the world, and who would be brought safely to shore in the gospel net. The number 153 seems to have been particularly mentioned because it is the sum of all the numbers 1 through 17 and the product of 9 by 17. The sum of its digits (1 + 5 + 3) equals the other factor 9, while the sum of the cubes of its digits again equals 153.

But while such mathematical features are interesting, and while they provide incidental evidences of divine origin of the psalm’s structure, it is the message of the words themselves which brings blessing and the assurance of salvation and security to the heart of the believer.

## All Needs Supplied By Christ

### Verse 1

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

In each of the last five verses of Psalm 23 two vital needs are mentioned, needs shared by all men but probably felt most openly by the believing Christian who, like a lost sheep in a dangerous country, is living in a world which is at enmity with God. He desperately needs care and direction which he himself cannot provide, just as the sheep needs the shepherd. Verse one simply contains the comforting assurance that all these needs will be supplied. *"The LORD is my shepherd."* Jehovah is the great covenant and redemptive name of God, and the expression here is actually a compound name—"Jehovah my Shepherd." The immediate conclusion that necessarily follows is: *"I cannot lack!"* A human shepherd may occasionally be careless or ineffective, but not Jehovah. *"My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:19).

### Rest and Peace

#### Verse 2

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.*

The first need is rest. God rested from His great work of creation, and the lost sinner needs to find rest for his own soul. He has attempted unsuccessfully to find rest in his own way and to provide his own needs. A great burden is lifted when he finally places complete trust in the Shepherd. *"There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his"* (Hebrews 4:9,10).

That rest is symbolized here in Psalm 23:2 by the resting in *"grassy pastures."* The phrase *"maketh me to lie down"* is one word in the Hebrew and does not intend to indicate a forced rest, but rather can be expressed as *"causeth me to rest."*

The Christian may not often be able to rest physically, but even in the midst of great physical or mental toil as he serves the Lord, he does again and again lie down in great ease spiritually in God's green, grassy meadows, in living fellowship with the Lord.

And the Lord also gives great peace: He *"leadeth me"* means *"gently guideth me."* The *"still waters"* are not stagnant waters, but *"stilled waters,"* waters that have been brought to rest by the Lord's power. Even though the great storm may almost overwhelm us, He says, *"Peace, be still"* (Mark 4:39), and we find peace in the midst of turmoil. *"Your strength is to sit still,"* God told the fearful Israelites; *"in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength"* (Isaiah 30:7, 15). The Lord is well in control of every situation, and our peace is simply to be where He is!

### Health and Guidance

#### Verse 3

*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*"He restoreth my soul"* means literally *"bringeth back life."* Genuine health is one of God's choice provisions for His people. Rest and peace are, in themselves, the best medicines. *"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones"* (Proverbs 3:5-8).

The Christian normally does not need to worry over much about what he eats (Matthew 6:25; I Timothy 4:4; Romans 14:17) or what exercise he gets (I Timothy 4:8), as long as He is placing God's will and His kingdom first (Matthew 6:33). God, of course, is able to heal our diseases in answer to prayer if it is His will, but even if we have a "thorn in the flesh" which He elects not to remove, we always have His gracious assurance: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

One of our greatest needs, of course, is to know His will. And so, He also provides guidance. When the psalm says in this verse, "*He leadeth me,*" it is a different word from that in verse 2. There, "He gently guides me"; here, "He forcibly guides me." If we stray out of His will, that is, He will constrain us back into the "*paths* [literally 'tracks'] *of righteousness.*" "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD; and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand" (Psalm 37:23,24). All of this is for our good (Romans 8:28; Hebrews 12:11), but even more, it is "*for His name's sake.*" That He will show us His will (through His word, through circumstances, through inner conviction) without the necessity of falling and being chastised, if we are really willing to follow it, is obvious from such Scriptures as John 7:17; Romans 12:1,2; and others.

## Courage and Comfort

### Verse 4

*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.*

If we are in His will, we need not fear either man or devil. The word "*evil*" in this verse can refer to evil men, evil phenomena, to dangers of any kind. Even "*the shadow of*

*death*" (one word in the original connoting "the nearness of death") need generate no fears in the believer. God can deliver us either from death, or through death, depending on His will, and since "to live is Christ, to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21), we are victors in either case! The dark "valley of weeping" can be transformed into a flowing well (Psalm 84:6) of living water.

"*Thy rod*" (literally "thy club" or "thy sceptre") and "*thy staff*" (literally "thy cane" or "thy crook") suffice either to force us back or pull us back, as need may dictate, into the right tracks. This might seem at first a strange way of bringing "*comfort,*" until one notes that the same word also means "repent." God's chastenings and corrections are calculated to bring us to repentance, and we have here His gracious assurance that we, as His sheep, will never be allowed to be comfortable when out of His will.

## Protection and Provision

### Verse 5

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

There are enemies all around the believer in this world, both human and demonic, but He provides all our needs right in the very "*presence of our enemies,*" and they are powerless to prevent it. "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them" (Psalm 34:7). "And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom" (II Timothy 4:18).

"*Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*" The word "anoint" here is actually "fatten." Not only will the Shepherd protect the sheep from the enemies surrounding him, but also He will fatten (greatly bless and prosper) him, beyond measure, to God's glory and his enemies' discomfiture.

## Love and Life

### Verse 6

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

All this and heaven, too! Not only does the believer have rest and peace, health and guidance, courage and comfort, protection and provision, in Christ, He also has the promise of His unfailing love throughout this life and the endless life to come.

God's "*goodness and mercy* [literally 'loving-kindness'] *will follow him all the days of his* [earthly] *life.*" The word "follow" is a strong word, meaning "chase after." In addition to "leading me" (verses 2 and 3), He will pursue after me, like the great hound of heaven, never allowing retreat or escape. "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me" (Psalm 139:7–10).

Then, when this life is over, the believer "*will dwell*" with the Lord and His people "*forever.*" The "*house of the Lord*" means "the family of the Lord" (like "the house of David," etc.; note Ephesians 2:19–22; Revelation 21:2,3). "In the ages to come" (Ephesians 2:7), we will enjoy the fellowship of all the redeemed, as well as the Lord Himself.

Listen again to the Lord Jesus: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (John 10:27,28).