

Ps 23: A Celebration of the Heaven-ordered Life

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A Shepherd's Heart

He came bounding down the dusty track after a hard day's work in the field tending his father's flock. A slap-happy lad, David had set off early in the morning draped in a shaggy cloak with a pouch of skin slung across his back. In one hand, he held a shepherd's staff and in the other a sling. And he marched ahead of the flock (John 10:4). On opening the pen, the sheep had piled out in their usual disorderly manner, the lambs frisking all over the place, but David's staff brought immediate discipline to the flock. He guided them into order, and they obediently followed him to find pasture.

Pasture! That was David's foremost concern as he led the flock. A hardworking, caring shepherd, David knew exactly the kind of pasture his sheep would love to graze -- luxuriant, succulent pasture. The last time he checked, the meadow was overgrazed and most spots were bare but for tufts of grass miserably squatting on the ground. Though a little far-off, the pasture on the foothills, which lay across the valley near the brook, must be fresher and greener by now.

Just the sight of it was an instant invitation to a wonderful feast of delicious greens. The pasture was just as the sheep loved -- dewy and lush from stalk to foliage. Under the intent watch of their young shepherd, David, the flock chomped through their delicacy at a leisurely pace, while some lazed about and crouched in the cushy grass.

The scene was captivating. The sheep were finally in their element and enjoying every bit of the moment. All around appeared peaceful and tranquil, even idyllic, but David knew from experience that danger could be close. He would not be overtaken by any disaster; he could not bear to lose one little lamb. He had his sling at the ready.

Only two days ago, while tending the flock, a lion had sprung on one of the lambs and dashed for the woods with it. But David was not one to lose a lamb. Almost instinctively, he pursued the lion with a throbbing but brave heart, shot and killed it with his sling and saved the lamb out of its jaws. "Who knows what predator would stage an attack today?" David said to himself as he eyes roamed over the field. He knew for a fact that bears also prowled the area looking for a prey (1 Sam. 17:34-35). He had better stayed vigilant! The life of each of his sheep was most precious to him, and he would defend each at the peril of his life (John 10:11).

By now it was midday, and it was time to water the flock. David this time signaled the flock to the brook with a high-pitched guttural sound recognizable to the sheep as their tender's distinctive voice (John 10:3-4). Another refreshing moment had come for the sheep. The thoughtful shepherd had led them to a quiet stream to quench their thirst with cool water in the dry arid climate. Each of the sheep from the small to the great drank to their fill. Afterwards, they trotted a few meters away from the stream and huddled together in the shade of an outcrop overlooking the stream. There, each sheep snuggled down in a particular spot and gently chewed the cud in perfect bliss. The coolness and gentle flow of the stream had created just the perfect environment for relaxation as well as for rumination. It was only at this time that the shepherd David took a quick nap wrapped in his rough mantle with his staff for a pillow!

As the sun sunk below the horizon, David prepared to head back home with the flock, making sure none was missing. With the crook of his staff he guided all the flock safely back home. As he led them to their pen, he made a final count to be doubly sure not a lamb was lost. And sure, all the flock had safely returned. Today, David did not work overtime which would have meant tending the sheep deep into the night (Luke 2:8). He didn't have to move very far from home looking for quality forage. He would not have hesitated, though, if he needed to do so. His flock were worth every sacrifice, and he would never treat them shabbily.

David was a shepherd worth his salt. The welfare of his sheep was dear to his heart. He cared and provided their every need - their pasture, water, protection, relaxation and growth. While he saw to these needs, the safety of the flock remained a relentless priority. Be it a ferocious attacker like a bear or a lion, David, at great risk to himself, would go after it and tear his hurting lamb from its cruel mouth.

David had the heart of a shepherd, and he reckoned His Yahweh too. Only His shepherding was on a far grander scale. He was the great Shepherd, the Shepherd of Israel:

"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; Thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth.

"Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh stir up Thy strength, and come and save us" (Ps 80:1-2).

A Heaven-ordered Life under the Great Shepherd

Psalm 23 is an outgrowth of David's shepherding experience recast in the light of Yahweh's providential care for His people. It's a celebration of the satisfying and purposeful life God's people enjoy under His care. The tender heart of a shepherd pervades this Psalm because all that a worthy shepherd does for his flock the LORD does much more for His people--even forever!

It's a Psalm which tacitly juxtaposes life under the loving care of a shepherd with life where every sheep is on its own - where each searches for its own pasture and water, faces any danger all alone and must find a place to sleep whether safe or not. If a sheep had a choice, which life will it prefer? Being a typical weakling in the animal kingdom and often a prey for predators, I am sure it will choose 'life under a shepherd'.

In Ps 23 the Shepherd is no David armed with a sling and tending a score of sheep but the Great Shepherd Himself, Yahweh, the God of Israel, the Great I AM. His people, His followers, are "the sheep of His pasture": "Know ye that the LORD He is God: it is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture" (Ps. 100:3). Under His able care, none of His flock ever lacks or fears harm. Instead, He satiates them with His goodness.

This role of Yahweh as the great provider and protector of His people flashed back scenes of David's own pastoral days in such an overwhelming way that he burst into song in celebration of the great Shepherd Yahweh has been to him personally and how that has meant a satisfied assured life now and forever. An ace musician as well, King David set the testimony of his life experiences as God's sheep to music (1 Chron. 15:16-21), and Psalm 23 was born:

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

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

"He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the 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 preparast a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

"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" (Ps 23:1-6).

Here's King David's poetic rendition of a believer's heaven-ordered life where the LORD is His Shepherd and he "shall not want". But he sings the poem in the first voice ("my", "I"). He has *personally* experienced the care of the LORD in His role as the Shepherd of his life. No sheep could tell how caring a shepherd is unless it had experienced life under his charge. So with David. Yahweh was his Shepherd and he did not want at any point in time (see Ps 34:8). He was satisfied fully in all circumstances in this life extending into time without end.

Now, I place before you the same choices the little helpless lamb faced: What would you prefer? Will you go for the heaven-ordered life Ps 23 presents or the 'free-range' Satan-manipulated life which is exposed to all sorts of dangers?

I believe all of us here will be sensible enough to choose the heaven-ordered life where the Great Shepherd, the everlasting Father, the Creator and Possessor of heaven and earth, takes care of all our needs. But we must be sheep first before the LORD can be our Shepherd.

So what are the characteristics of a sheep?

Sheep are generally gentle, patient, docile and meek. When left to roam free unattended, they are quite helpless and often find it difficult to find their way back home. By their gentle nature and obvious need for care, they are easily domesticated than most mammals. The predominant sheep spirit is submission.

"My Sheep Hear My Voice"

In John chapter 10, Christ describes Himself as "the good Shepherd" (v. 11) and goes on to identify obedience as a core trait of His sheep: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (v. 27).

That His sheep *NOW* follow Him at the sound of His voice presupposes that they were previously disorganized and leaderless. And that was exactly the case in the past life of every obedient believer:

Isa 53:6

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all".

1 Peter 2:25

"For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls".

Formerly we all were like lost sheep -- roaming aimlessly about at the mercy of Satan and his demons -- but with the throbbing heart of a shepherd He called us to Himself. As a true Shepherd, He couldn't simply bear to see us lost for eternity. The sheer joy of finding us compensates for any sacrifice and effort expended. He commemorates His own joy with a Parable:

"And He spake this parable unto them, saying,
"What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?
"And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.
"And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.
"I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance". (Luke 15:3-7; cp Ezek. 34:12).

Such is the great joy that comes to Christ when we heed His voice and return to Him, and He assures us that no one shall pluck us out of His hand:

"And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand.
"My Father, which gave them Me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of My Father's hand.
"I and My Father are one" (John 10:28-30).

The flock is under the combined care of the Father and the Son who together constitute the one Great Shepherd of the believer. No devil, no man, no trial and no temptation can tear you out of their hands. They won't allow it; they will jealously guard and defend you at all times. They have already made the greatest investment in you -- at the price of the life of the Son of the Highest:

"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth His life for the sheep.
"But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.
"The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep.
"I am the good shepherd, and know My sheep, and am known of Mine.
"As the Father knoweth Me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down My life for the sheep.
"And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.
"Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down My life, that I might take it again"(John 10:11-17).

No hireling watches over you but Yahweh Himself (Ps 121:4). And He is raring and committed to bring others of His lost sheep not yet in the fold to Himself, "and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd". He would attend to them with the tenderest care imaginable and shower them with love:

"He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (Isa. 40:11).

That's the Almighty's commitment to you as your Saviour, provider and protector. But will you remain His sheep forever?

A true sheep never listens to another but its owner's voice (John 10:4-5). So if you consistently refuse to heed the voice of Christ your Shepherd, then probably you were not a true sheep. For there are some wolves in sheep clothing (Matt. 7:15), while at the Judgment the good Shepherd will separate the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:31-34).

Nevertheless, some true sheep go astray through no fault of theirs; they are simply misled by others. Christ, the Great Good Shepherd, will always have under-shepherds (1 Pet. 5:1-4) but some claiming to be His under-shepherds are not of His appointing. They are greedy shepherds who seek their own gain (Isa. 56:11):

Ezek 34:1-5

"And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?

"Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock.

"The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them.

"And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered.

Jer. 50:6

"My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray, they have turned them away on the mountains: they have gone from mountain to hill, they have forgotten their restingplace".

But God, our Great Shepherd, will not remain unconcerned about this sorry situation; He won't leave His flock at the mercy of the wicked 'under-shepherds'. He promises His people faithful under-shepherds who will feed them high quality spiritual forage: "And I will give you pastors according to Mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer. 3:15).

Once these faithful under-shepherds speak, the true sheep will heed their voice as though the Great Shepherd Himself was speaking, for, indeed, they represent His voice. Such sheep, even if they go astray for a moment, always come back to the voice. They don't harden their hearts at the voice of their Shepherd: "... He is our God; and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand. To day if ye will hear His voice, Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted Me, proved Me, and saw My work" (Ps. 95:7-9).

So then, a true sheep of the Great Shepherd is an obedient, trusting follower of God. Such is the believer who is able to claim Yahweh as his very own Shepherd!

I hope you are such!

A Living Psalm

If you are a true sheep having the qualities of obedience and meekness, Ps 23 is not just a Psalm of David, but a truth you live out each day of your life as a sheep under the loving care of the Great Shepherd of Israel, Yahweh.

Of course, the Psalm's central point is that because the LORD is your shepherd, you shall not want. And then the succeeding verses expand on how the LORD ensures that you never suffer lack as His sheep.

The future tense "shall not want" means exactly what it says: Yahweh's providential care takes care of both your present and future needs. You do not lack now and will not at any point in the future. The LORD's care is absolute and assured for all time, even forever.

And that only the LORD, Yahweh, the Self-Existent One can provide. He's the Creator, the All in All, the Omnipotent, the source and sustainer of all there is, including eternal life. *He*, not your father or mother, or wife or husband or even the government, is your Shepherd. Yahweh is your personal care-giver and provider and defender. You *cannot* lack, no matter the circumstances you find yourself in now and in the future.

But how does He accomplish all that?

First and foremost, Yahweh provides His people spiritual sustenance in the form of the spiritual food of His word and the "still waters" of His Spirit. As sheep yearn for "green pastures" and the refreshing tranquil waters of a brook, so you will naturally crave for His word and the fellowship of His Spirit if you are truly His sheep. You cannot possibly turn down His summons to both. As He says in John 8:47, "He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God" (John 8:47).

For Job, the Word was his vital sustaining power: "Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of His mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:12).

To David it was his inestimable treasure: "The law of Thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver" (Ps 119:72).

What about you? Do you desire the word? Do you hanker for it? Do you regularly ingest it?

If you are a true sheep, the Word of Christ will "dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16).

In the meantime, you cannot resist the urge to drink of His Spirit:

"Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink.

"He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. "But this spake He of the Spirit, which they that believed on Him were to receive: for the Spirit was not yet given; because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:37-39 *RV*).

This is where the soul finds true rest: "To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear" (Isa. 28:12).

The result is spiritual renewal. "He restoreth my soul". The soul is at home with God and luxuriates in an ecstatic spiritual fellowship only possible with the Great Shepherd. And why not? He that is joined unto the Lord is one Spirit with Him (1 Cor. 6:17), and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (3 Cor. 3:17).

Meanwhile, the Great Shepherd continues to lead you without fail, not just by any path, but "in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake".

This is the right path that safely brings you home. The "paths of righteousness" lead not only to Himself, but also to His Kingdom (2 Pet. 3:13) and to eternal life (Prov. 12:28). And the motivation is His "Name". As His sheep, you are now associated with His name (2 Chron. 7:14; Isa. 43:7), and He cannot allow His reputation to be jeopardized because you commit acts of unrighteousness (Rom. 2:17-24).

Righteousness is the essence of God; it's His badge of identity: "He is the Rock, His work is perfect: for all His ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He" (Deut. 32:4).

So the Righteous Shepherd faithfully leads you, but sometimes the pathway must necessarily meander through a rough terrain; at other times, a marauder may be lurking in the woods and launch a surprise attack. That's what David poetically calls "the valley of the shadow of death". At the same time, he conveys a profound spiritual truth--the reality of the demonic forces arrayed against you as a sheep of God. Even so, the Good Shepherd insists "the gates of hell" shall not prevail against His sheepfold: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

That's why death only casts a "shadow". Its threats do not hold because "the gates of hell" cannot possibly prevail against God's sheepfold. Although people often apply the expression "valley of the shadow of death" to the physical demise of a believer, the term "death" is also figurative of Satan (Heb. 2:14-15, 1 Cor. 15:26) which, in this instance, should be understood in terms of the attacks he mounts against God's sheep. For the believer "wrestle[s] not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12).

However, you don't face the devil in your own strength. The Good Shepherd is with you, and His rod and His staff give you comfort. The temptations and trials of Satan can be some of the trickiest moments in the believer's life (see Luke 22:31-32). They can sap faith and demoralize you to the extent of causing you to backslide. So you need the rod of correction to discipline you should you go astray. At the same time, His staff is in His hand to keep off and protect you from spiritual predators.

The journey through "the valley of the shadow of death" is not a journey of fear but one of comfort because the Good Shepherd is with you. He has replaced fear with the consolation that death shall not prevail in destroying your faith or life. The assured truth is that you will not remain low for long. The glorious word out is that "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it" (Isa. 40:4-5).

The glory cannot be stopped! From the pit of the valley of death, you now ascend the high table of Yahweh as His honoured guest anointed with oil in PLAIN SIGHT of your enemies who fought so hard to bring you down! "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over".

Just as the Good Shepherd does not withhold spiritual blessings from His sheep, so He does not withhold material blessings from them. Indeed, once you have the spiritual, the material have been guaranteed to you:

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

His promise is that you will never lack any good thing so long as you remain His sheep:

"O fear the LORD, ye His saints: for there is no want to them that fear Him.

"The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that seek the LORD shall not want any good thing" (Ps. 34:9-10).

The conclusion can only be a fitting summation of your blessed life as an obedient sheep of the LORD:

"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".

Not all people have it this way. As long as you live, the "goodness and mercy" of the LORD shall follow you every single day of your life. Even if you fall on hard times, even if a misfortune strikes, you are assured of God's goodness and mercy throughout your life. That means the devil never wins. God's goodness and mercy overturns every one of his troubles. Yahweh will do you good and be merciful to you all your life. What grace! Each day of your life is a day to reap His goodness and mercy. And the relationship is eternal - you dwell in His house forever. You belong to the Good Shepherd forever, presently and time without end.

Even death dare not cause a breach. Eternal life is in view. The humble flock of God will live this promise in the heavenly Kingdom: "And this is the promise that He hath promised us, even eternal life" (1 John 2:25).

All for being an obedient sheep of the Almighty. Lord, give us the grace to remain yours forever. Amen!