

Theme: Exploring the Meaning of the 23rd Psalm and It's Wonderful Blessings to Us

Text: Psalm 23 (NKJV)

A Psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. ³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. ⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.

In the name of Jesus Christ, who is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us so that we could be a part of His sheepfold, dear fellow redeemed;

Of all the psalms in the Bible the one psalm that is unquestionably the most widely known and best loved is the 23rd Psalm. Over the years many individuals have memorized this psalm of David and on numerous occasions have called to mind its meaningful verses. Its message has been an unfailing source of comfort and support in times of sickness, danger, loss, distress, guilt, depression, and impending death.

The great spiritual benefits we derive from Psalm 23 are not at all attained through a mere superficial reflection on the imagery found in it. The message of this psalm is not in any way like the secular recordings of subliminal messages or the sounds of nature like the gentle waves of the sea caressing the shoreline. These are promised to alleviate all sorts of personal stresses and uplift the spirits by the power of suggestion or by creating a mood through tranquil scenes or soothing sounds. The pastoral scene depicted in Psalm 23 does certainly present a tranquil and soothing picture. However, it is the message of how our Savior God as the Good Shepherd cares for all the needs of the sheep of His pasture which blesses us with the spirit of comfort, peace, hope, and contentment.

To attain the bountiful blessings the psalmist David speaks of in this psalm it is important for us to first of all recognize and acknowledge our likeness to certain characteristics of sheep in the animal kingdom. We need to be conscious of the fact that we are like sheep who by reason of our spiritually weak and helpless condition are completely dependent upon our Good Shepherd to lead us, to nourish our souls, to protect and deliver us from spiritual harm and danger, and to comfort and sustain our spirits in this life.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us of yet another similarity to sheep that we have when he writes, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way." (Is. 53:7) On account of our sinful and rebellious nature we have the tendency of turning aside from walking in the paths of righteousness by transgressing God's holy will. Because of this, we are greatly in need of being sought after by our Good Shepherd to rescue, reclaim, and save us from spiritual and eternal destruction.

But then also, if we are to receive the benefit of the shepherding care of our Lord, it is of absolute importance for us to act like the sheep of His fold by listening to the word and voice of our Shepherd Jesus Christ and follow after Him in faith and love. The Lord Jesus says of those who are not the sheep of His pasture as opposed to those who are, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand." (John 10:25-28)

Having a good understanding of Psalm 23 concerning the ways and means our Good Shepherd deals with us is also crucial to receiving and enjoying the wonderful blessings this psalm speaks of. In this regard, Psalm 23 should not be misunderstood as describing the Lord using the demands and threats of the holy Law of God. The Law with its righteous requirements and its fearful pronouncements of punishment upon the transgressor does not at all serve to comfort us in the way David writes in this psalm. Instead, the psalmist speaks of the Lord dealing with us according to His rich grace and mercy, and His infinite love. It is the good news of the Gospel of Christ that is resounding throughout the verses of Psalm 23. So then, with His wondrous Gospel our Good Shepherd nourishes, tends, and cares for us who are the sheep of His pasture.

In verse 2 we hear of the Shepherd's loving care for His sheep as the psalmist declares of Him, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul." What a truly serene and restful picture depicted here in God's Word. Under the gracious care of our Good Shepherd we are described as being completely at ease with a contented spirit. This is in striking contrast to the troubled and vexed spirits of many who are fraught with fears, worries, and anxieties. The Good Shepherd enables us to lie down with a peaceful and contented spirit because He leads us to feed upon His sweet and nourishing pasturage, and to drink of His clean, cool, and refreshing water.

This special food and drink the Lord provides us with is revealed in these words of Jesus, "'Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.' And Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.'" (John 6:27,35) And in John chapter 4 Jesus also said, "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." (John 4:14)

The nourishing food and the refreshing drink Jesus gives us to eat and to drink for our souls is His gracious words and teachings. His Gospel message satisfies our hunger and quenches our thirst for spiritual peace, hope, and salvation as it tells us of God's forgiving love through our Savior Jesus Christ. With the knowledge that in Christ Jesus God looks upon us with favor and delight, and blesses us in life with His grace and mercies, and grants us life and salvation, we can lie down in complete contentment and rest at ease with a peace filled mind. In this our Good Shepherd truly restores our souls.

Since we are the sheep of the Lord's pasture, as we walk down the path of life there will be many predators along the way - enemies who would seek to separate us from our loving Shepherd and rob us of our soul's salvation. The devil and the unbelieving world would use deceptive lies to cause us to lose sight of God's saving truths, and use temptations to entice us to rebel against God's righteous ways. They would also use various forms of persecution to cause us to forsake our Christian faith.

In the face of this fierce opposition we can say with all confidence together with the psalmist concerning our Shepherd, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over." The Lord enables us to remain firm and immovable in the faith as He prepares a table before us of soul strengthening, soul sustaining nourishment in His Word. Jesus, who is the Bread of Life, tells us of how He has overcome the world and gained the victory over the devil, and that one little Word can fell them, namely His Word of grace and truth. As we use the Word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit, not even the gates of hell shall be able to prevail against us.

And while we may suffer wounds from our battles with the forces of darkness, our Shepherd pours His soothing oil upon us for healing, comforting us with His forgiveness where we have fallen short and with a rejoicing spirit in the knowledge that those who suffer with Him for His name's sake shall also reign with Him in the glory of heaven.

We are also comforted in the knowledge that our cup runs over. This overflowing cup points to the rich and abundant measure of blessings our Lord graciously grants us each and every day both for our spiritual and bodily needs. So bountiful are His many blessings that we should all be able to say, "I shall not want," that is, there is nothing that I lack of which I truly need in this life. Our Shepherd so amply provides for us that we have every reason to live a contented and satisfied life here on earth.

When we are confronted with harsh and oppressive conditions of life such as sickness, hardships, and tragedies that would strike terror in our hearts or fill them with heartaches, we have the Lord's promise that He will always be with us. As our Good Shepherd He will bear us up in His loving arms and graciously take care of us.

One of the most dreaded fates that awaits mortal man is death. In this regard we cannot help but think of and be concerned about our final days on this earth. We may wonder if we will experience progressively worse physical and mental health. Will we die a natural death or be the victim of an accident? When we die, will we have our loved ones around us or will we be all alone? Should these and other thoughts trouble us, we need only remember our Good Shepherd and put our faith in His abiding care for us, and we will be able to say with psalmist, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Knowing that the Lord is always there by our side to help us in our every need there is no room in our hearts for fear and dread no matter what condition of life awaits us down the road of life. The Lord, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, will be continually keeping a watchful eye on us, and will comfort and sustain us with His word of grace and mercy. With the Lord Jesus as our Savior we fear death itself as little as our bed, for because of Him we know that death is the portal which leads to life everlasting with God in heaven.

As we then continue to listen to the voice of our Good Shepherd which sounds forth from the pages of Holy Scripture and we follow after Him in faith and love, we know that goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life, even to the very end. The Lord God, who is faithful and true, has given us the assurance of His abiding love, His unfailing help, and His never ending tender mercies.

Knowing that our Good Shepherd tends and cares for us according to His rich grace and mercy, and that He works through the Gospel in His Word and Sacraments, we share the same desire and resolve as the psalmist who in the final verse declares, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." In Psalm 27 David says in a similar vein of thought, "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple." (V.4) Whenever and wherever we inquire of the Lord by looking to His gracious words and teachings, there we find where His glory dwells, and He speaks to us for our blessing. Therefore, when the psalmist David says that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, he is declaring that we will turn again and again to God's Word in order to give ear to it so that through that Word our Good Shepherd will continue to lead, nourish, protect, comfort, gladden, and sustain us through out all our days.

May this always be our will and resolve so that the wonderful blessings set forth in Psalm 23 will ever be ours as the Good Shepherd of our souls tends and cares for us in His rich grace and mercy. Amen