

The Fold and the Family -- Psalm 23

by A.B. Simpson

The 23rd Psalm is a beautiful expression of God's love and care for His people, reminding us of His provision, protection, and guidance.

Scripture: Psalm 23:1

Topics: "God's Provision", "Comfort in Trials"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the profound comfort and assurance found in Psalm 23, portraying God as both the Shepherd who cares for His flock and the Father who welcomes His family. He illustrates how the Shepherd provides for our needs, leads us to peace, and restores our souls, while also highlighting the security and abundance found in the Father's house. Simpson encourages believers to trust in God's provision and presence, especially during trials, and to recognize the joy and peace that come from being in His care. The sermon concludes with a call to share the message of God's love and faithfulness, as exemplified in the Psalm, with those who have yet to know Him.

Transcript

This beautiful Psalm deserves to stand as the gateway to the Palace Beautiful of the Messianic Psalms. It has been written on the hearts of many generations and many pilgrims to the heavenly home. It has furnished green pastures and still waters to God's flock through all ages, and has spread a table in the midst of their enemies for millions of God's redeemed.

Go to the walls of martyr prisons; look at the records of the sainted dead; recall the echoes of Christian deathbeds; look back upon your own memories and associations, and you will find nothing more sweet, or spiritual, or tender, than this Psalm of psalms.

It has two great themes, two central figures running through it. The first is the Shepherd and His flock; and the second, the Father and His family. In this respect it recalls the fifteenth chapter of Luke and the two most precious of our Savior's parables: The Good Shepherd and The Prodigal Son. It is the same picture that we find in the twenty-third Psalm.

I. THE SHEPHERD AND HIS FLOCK

No one but an Oriental can fully understand the vivid force of this beautiful figure. The shepherd of the East is not only a property owner, but he is a lover of his flock, and a friend and a father to every member

of his fold. He knows them all by name, he lives with them, sacrifices everything for them, and loves them with tender affection. In short, he stands between them and everything. Of all creatures the sheep is the most defenseless, helpless, and foolish; it cannot help itself. And so the child of God is absolutely helpless amid the elements surrounding him, and especially the consecrated child of God. They who have wholly yielded themselves to Christ, and not to their own strength and sufficiency, are peculiarly defenseless when they wander from their Lord; they have not the strength of other men to stand alone, and they do not need it if they abide in Him. The safest place is that of utter helplessness and utter dependence.

The trouble with most of us is that we try to be our own shepherds. We forget that the Lord is our Shepherd, and our business is not to trouble ourselves, but to let Him keep us, and to trust and follow Him.

The emphatic words are the two smallest in the sentence: "my" and "is." The first expresses the appropriating faith which claims Him. It is not enough to recognize Him as a Shepherd, but we must put ourselves under His protection and claim Him as our own by personal appropriation and trust. And we may do this. He allows us thus to claim Him, and He undertakes the everlasting care of all who do. "My sheep," He says, "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."

The other word is the very emphatic "is." David's confidence is without a doubt. So we must trust our Shepherd.

It is not because the sheep is worth so much in dollars and cents, nor the value of its flesh, that it claims the shepherd's care; but because he bought it and owns it; it is His and He belongs to it, to care for it as much for his own sake as for its sake. So the Lord allows us to claim His love and life because we belong to Him, and He has given Himself to us. Has He not justified our confidence? Has He not come to seek us when we were lost? Has He not given us His life to save us? Has He not given us His wonderful promises and His more wonderful love and care? Let us take Him at His word and answer back, "The Lord is my Shepherd."

"I shall not want." This covers every possible need of human life; every proper desire and want, whether it be for soul or for body, for this world, or for the world to come. We can claim the fullness of His supply and say, "My God shall supply all [our] need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." "The Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly." This is the state of utter content, thankfulness, and joy. It is the cry of the heart that has no pining, but can see nothing but blessing and goodness in its lot and in its future. So infinite is its Shepherd's love, so vast His resources, so kind His care, that it can think of nothing that He will not supply.

Beloved, have you this unbounded confidence in God? Are you taking thus from Him of His fullness? Are you honoring Him thus by your testimony and your praise, or are you reflecting upon your Shepherd by miserable discontent and meager, thankless lives?

"He makes me to lie down in green pastures." This is the testimony of His rich provision for our needs. Not one pasture, but many are supplied, and they are all green. He does not feed us on the stale bread of past experiences, but He gives us fresh supplies every day, like the morning dew and the morning light. And so abundant are they that we lie down among them for very satiety. We lie down because we cannot hold any more, even as we have seen the beautiful herds in the English meadows lying down amid the tall, green grass for very fullness. This is the picture of a happy, joyful, victorious Christian life. He "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

"He leads me beside the still waters." Rather it should read, "the waters of rest." Here again it is not one stream, but many; they are "waters." This is the picture of the Holy Spirit and tells of the Divine Comforter as He brings us into the deepest rest of Jesus; the peace that passeth all understanding, peace like a river, and righteousness like the waves of the sea. But it is only when we follow His leading that we can have this peace. In our own paths we shall not find the waters of rest; but as we follow Him, taking His yoke upon us and learning of Him who is meek and lowly in heart, we shall find rest unto our souls.

"He restores my soul." In the Hebrew this might mean "my life," and thus express His physical redemption and healing love and life. He is the constant Quickener of our life, for the body as well as for the soul. It may also mean His restoring mercy when we go astray or stumble in the way. How often this is realized in our experience! How often we need our Shepherd's tender, restoring mercy, and how tenderly and gently He does rest the erring and bring back the lost one! How different God's dealings with sin from the devil's, and even from men's! How tender and patient His mercy! Look at Him as He meets Elijah on his running away, and tenderly rests him, feeds him, pleads with him, and then restores him! Look at Him as He looks on Simon Peter and melts his heart to penitence, and then gives him back more than he has lost! Listen to His tender words to the erring and the weak, and never, never fly from Him again, whom we have even offended, but

"Go to His bleeding feet, and learn

How freely Jesus can forgive."

And not only forgive, but heal our backslidings, cleanse from all unrighteousness, and turn even our mistakes into means of establishing and settling us.

"He leads me in the paths of righteousness." That is, the right paths. Not only does He rest, but He sanctifies. He cleanses, He keeps, He leads into the land of uprightness. He "is able to keep you from falling [stumbling], and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy." For His own name's sake He does all this.

This is the way He becomes our Sanctifier. It is Christ Himself who does it all. We do not deserve it; we cannot accomplish it. We can only receive it as the gift of His mercy, through the blood of Jesus Christ and His exceeding great and precious promises. "For his name's sake." "I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel," He says. We cannot claim any credit for our holiness. It is a free gift of His suffering grace, and we can only wonder and adore as we think of the love that does so much for us so undeservedly.

"Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for You are with me." This is because of our wandering. This is the way back from the forbidden paths, from the dark wilderness. It does not necessarily mean death itself, but any dark vale overshadowed like the grave. After we have wandered from God, we do often find such dark and lonely passages. It is also true that after we have become fully the Lord's, we are often called to pass through the darkest trials, and are tested in the most painful ways, drinking of a cup more bitter, often, than death itself. Thus it is that the promise becomes so precious.

How much comfort there is in this verse! First, we go through the valley. We do not fall in the midst of it, but ever before us we can see the light at the farther end, the opening vista of the larger place that lies beyond. Again, we are saved from fear. This is often worse than any other evil. If we have no dread, we can have no harm. And He has said, "Whoso hearkens unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from

fear of evil." How sweetly the Master's presence can charm away our fears and whisper comfort and rest in the darkest hours!

Next, we have His promise, "You are with me." This is the spirit of nearness and safety. Notice now how beautifully the grammar changes. Up to this time he has been speaking of his Shepherd in the third person, as "He"; but now it all changes and becomes "You." The reason is obvious. The promise has become nearer; the Shepherd is no longer at a distance; he is not talking about Him any more, but talking directly to Him. Going through a deep tunnel one day, my little child drew close to me and held my hand. When we were on the other side and in the bright light, he was not afraid to sit away at a distance and play; but in the dark and narrow place he wanted to feel my touch every moment. So He lets us draw close to Him in the valley, and hold His hand and hear Him say, "I am with you, fear not."

Again, even His rod comforts us. Even the thing that hurts us so is shown to us to be for our good, and we can say: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted." "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept Your word."

Again, "You have known my soul in adversities." Often has the suffering Christian sung:

"Trials make the promise sweet;

Trials give new life to prayer;

Trials bring me to His feet,

Lay me low and keep me there."

A daughter of the East has told this beautiful story of the Oriental shepherd. Sometimes when his sheep would wander and would not answer to his call or come back to the fold, he would take his sling and a little stone and hurl it through the air. Lo! the wandering sheep is stricken, perhaps on one of its foolish feet, and falls wounded to the ground, to pick itself up again, to hobble back with its suffering member, but to escape the perils of the wilderness through its wound. So He wounds to heal and smites to save, and pains us only that He may save us pain.

But, again, not only does His rod comfort us, but His staff comforts us still more. It is not all chastening, but more blessing, and, "As the sufferings of Christ abound, so our consolation also abounds by Christ." God has two hands; the one presses us down, the other presses us up. Thank God, it is the right hand that holds us up, for He says: "The Lord your God will hold your right hand, saying unto you, Fear not."

How beautifully these two hands are described in the First Epistle of Peter: "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God." This is the hand that presses us down. But he adds very soon, "Casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you." That is the hand that holds us up; that is the staff that comforts us when the rod has smitten us. It is like the mother eagle, who stirs up her nest and hurls her young ones in mid-air, and leaves them to fall, screaming, earthward. But soon her mother-heart flies to the rescue, and swooping under them, she spreads abroad her wings and bears them up again in safety and repose, telling them, doubtless, in strange speech, that she has only done it all in order to teach them to use their little wings and learn to fly themselves. So God lets the pressure of trial come, and then upholds us in it with His everlasting arms, and bears us as on eagle's wings.

This is the trial that comforts us. His precious promises -- oh, how they cheer the sorrowing heart! How sweet they grow in trial, until the heavens glow with stars of hope we never realized before, for

"Sorrow touched by God grows bright

With more than beauty's rays,

As trials show us worlds of light

We never saw by day."

II. THE FATHER'S HOUSE

The figure now changes. There is, perhaps, a spiritual gradation here. Trial and deeper experience, as we have already discovered, may bring us into a closer place with God; and so we have the Father's house next. It is not the fold and the shepherd, but the family circle meeting at the table, the child dwelling in the house forever.

The first feature of the picture is danger; there are enemies. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." We never know the real force of spiritual conflict until we come into a closer place in the life of God. But the victory is so complete that we are not fighting now. He does all the fighting for us, and surrounds us with a wall of fire so wide and secure that we sit in the center, happy, fearless children, eating and drinking at the festal table as though there were no foe in sight. What a perfect picture of security! Eating and drinking in the midst of our enemies! Like the great Apostle, on the tossing ship in the Adriatic storm, bidding his companions eat and drink because they were safe under the promises of God. This is no longer the picture of the wilderness, but it is the prepared table of the feast where all the fullness of His love is freely given to us; and we sit down and partake of the riches of His bounty until our cup runs over in the full measure of our blessing and our joy.

Beloved, is this our place? Are we so victorious that, like our Master, we sit down expecting until all our enemies are made our footstool? Are we so full that our cup runs over and we can hold no more, so that we have ceased to think of ourselves and our blessings in the overflow with which we bless others?

"You anointest my head with oil." This is the figure of the Holy Ghost. This is the spirit of the overflowing joy. This is the symbol of healing, of gladness, of sweet fragrance. In the East, when a traveler comes in from his journey, travel-stained and wet from perspiration, his feet are washed to take away the dust of the road; his head is anointed with oil, and the sweet perfume removes the odor of heat and perspiration; and he sits down all sweetened and restored at the table of his host. So He anoints our head with oil, fills us with His gladness, sweetens us with His fragrance, and brings us into the innermost chambers of His love.

Provision is made the future. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Not only is the present abundantly supplied, but it is all right beyond. Goodness covers every temporal need; mercy, every spiritual need. Goodness includes every gift of His love; mercy, every provision for our sinfulness. Not only will He love us and care for us as His dear children walking in holy obedience, but His mercy will keep us holy and guard us from even our own unworthiness.

The "house of the Lord" in which we shall dwell in His presence. We are in it now and never shall be withdrawn. But surely it looks forward to His glorious coming, to the house made without hands which is awaiting us when He shall appear.

I cannot withhold a personal testimony. On the first night of a new year, after I had retired and fallen asleep in very close communion with the Lord, I had one of those rare dreams which leave behind them an impression of the voice of God. In my dream I was gazing into the heavens at night, looking at one of the brightest constellations, when suddenly there appeared among them a wonderful star as bright as Venus at its brightest. As I gazed upon it, wondering at its strange beauty in that quarter of the heavens, I became conscious that it was rapidly growing larger every moment. In a few moments I was aware that it must be swiftly approaching; so fast did it enlarge that it seemed to be literally rushing earthwards, and my whole being was stirred with the consciousness that some stupendous event was happening.

Then there passed over my spirit a distinct consciousness that the Lord was coming; that this was the Morning Star and that He was just behind it. The best part of the dream was that it brought only rest and joy. Startling as was the appearance and the certainty of the coming King, there was no fear, but a sweet consciousness that all was right; that I was glad He was coming; that I knew in a few moments He would be here. Although I saw no one around me, I had the quiet assurance that all was right for them, too; it was all right for those I loved as well as for myself. Just at that moment I awakened with the quiet sense that God had spoken to my heart with a personal message respecting what His glorious coming would be to me. Oh, that we all may so live each moment that "when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming"!

There is one thought more in this Psalm. The grammar changes once again to the third person, and the Psalmist is talking not to but about God. It is the voice of testimony to the world. It is the call which we should echo to those who know Him not as their Shepherd and their Father. Is there any such lonely lost one reading this message? Oh, let this little Psalm that has led so many to heaven lead you to God!

Down in a southern hospital a soldier was dying; he was a Scotchman and an infidel. A Christian worker stood by his cot, but he would not listen to the Gospel; he covered his face with the bed cover and turned away in pride and scorn. Noticing that the patient was Scotch, and knowing, himself, the sweetness of the old Psalms to the Scottish ear, the worker sat down a little way off and began to sing the twenty-third Psalm in the old Rousse version:

"The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;

He makes me down to lie

In pastures green; He leadeth me

The quiet waters by."

He sang on quietly, tenderly. Before he was half through the Psalm, the patient was trembling from head to foot and sobbing aloud. He threw the covering down and asked, "Why did you sing that Psalm? My mother taught it to me by her knee, and it was her last message to me when she died." The ice was broken; the heart was open to the truth; tenderly the seed was sown, and the soul was saved.

Two days afterwards the worker returned, but the Scotch-man had passed through the gates. The nurse told him that the night before, as she was passing down the corridor, she heard him singing that verse about the dark valley, and before he got through it, he began to choke with exhaustion. Then he gave a great cry, and said, "Mother! Mother! Mother! I'm coming! The Lord's my Shepherd, too!" The nurse hastened to his side, but he no more needed the care of human hands. He had been saved by the

twenty-third Psalm.

I venture to add another incident which illustrates the preciousness of this Psalm for the living as well as for the dying. A well-known Scotchman in New York, a man of great influence and high Christian character, was lying in the stupor of apparent death. A Scotch minister, also widely known, was leaning over him trying to recall his attention from the sleep of approaching death. At last he began to repeat to him the twenty-third Psalm; and when he got to the second verse, Mr. P., roused from his stupor and began to follow him, repeating the words after him until the Psalm was finished. The effect on the sinking man was electrical; he was completely aroused and began to talk with those around him. From that moment he grew better and lived for many years, well and happy, a useful Christian, saved from death by the twenty-third Psalm.

Blessed watchword for both worlds! May the Lord make it gloriously real to us, and may we all be truly able to say with its closing refrain: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

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