

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Psalms 23 & 121

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road / Plymouth, MI 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 01.16.2005

“Head for the hills! Trouble is coming!” Well . . . that is not quite what Psalm 121 says. It says, “Look to the hills” in the hope of finding help. The Psalm reads:

I turn my eyes to the mountains;
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot give way;
your guardian will not slumber;
See, the guardian of Israel
neither slumbers nor sleeps!
The LORD is your guardian,
the LORD is your protection
at your right hand.
By day the sun will not strike you,
nor the moon by night.
The LORD will guard you from all harm;
He will guard your life.
The LORD will guard your going and coming
now and forever (Tanakh Translation).

This psalm expresses great confidence in God as a guardian. The Hebrew word translated “guard” or “keep” or “watch over” appears six times.¹ In many contemporary Jewish communities, Psalm 121 is recited in times of trouble as a way of offering comfort and assurance.

In this psalm, faith is professed in God’s providence and God’s protection. And the language and imagery of this profession are easily understood in terms of a journey—seeing mountains in the distance, being concerned with stumbling and safety in general, recognizing the need for protection from the heat of the sun and the dangers of darkness, and the going and coming of departing and entering. Psalm 121 speaks of life as a journey, and it speaks of the trust in God that can sustain the journey of life.

¹*shamar* – vv. 3, 4, 5, 7a, 7b, 8.

Although we cannot be certain, the reference to hills or mountains is most likely an allusion to the hills around Jerusalem, including Mount Zion. Mount Zion was a symbol not of danger but of divine help. Like the folk song that moves from God's "got the whole world in His hands" to God's "got you and me in His hands," this psalm affirms that the sovereign ruler of the universe has a personal concern for the lives of all His people.

Because Jesus is God with us,² the New Testament emphasizes the strength and security that Jesus gives to those who belong to Him. According to John 10, Jesus is the "good shepherd" who provides for and protects His sheep. "No one," Jesus said, "will snatch them out of my hand."³ In the first Epistle of Peter, Jesus is described as the "shepherd" and "guardian" of all those who trust themselves to Him.⁴

Speaking of shepherd, we now turn to the well-known 23rd Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd;
I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me to water in places of repose;
He renews my life;
He guides me in right paths
as befits His name.
Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness,
I fear no harm, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.
You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my drink is abundant.
Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
for many long years (Tanakh Translation).

There are some biblical texts that appear to the reader so obvious and so clear that it seems no commentary is required. Psalm 23 is such a text. Any preacher or teacher who attempts to explain this psalm runs the risk of actually taking away from its poetic beauty and power. However, I shall take this risk. Hopefully, in our study together, our

²See Matt 1:23; 28:20.

³John 10:28.

⁴1 Pet 2:25; cf. Phil 4:7.

appreciation for the 23rd Psalm and our attachment to it will grow stronger.

This psalm has touched the hearts of countless people down through the centuries. Here is a poem that children have learned by heart, that has sustained older folks in the perplexities of life, and that has been a peaceful prayer on the lips of the dying. No single psalm has expressed more powerfully many people's prayer of confidence to the God whose purpose alone gives meaning to the span of life, from womb to tomb.

The biggest problem in interpreting Psalm 23 is that it presents two images that appear to be quite different. In verses 1-4, the Lord is portrayed as the good shepherd who cares for the flock; in verses 5 and 6, on the other hand, the Lord is the host who offers hospitality to a guest and protects the guest from enemies. What do the shepherd and the host really have to do with each other?

This problem begins to resolve itself when we stop thinking in terms of our modern, industrial society and start thinking in terms of the pastoral way of life that still prevails in some parts of the world. The shepherd can be portrayed from two points-of-view. He is the protector of the sheep as they wander in search of grazing land. Yet he is also the protector of the traveler who finds hospitality in his tent from the dangers and enemies of the desert. Even today the visitor to certain parts of the Middle East can see the scene where the traveler receives Bedouin hospitality, and the surrounding pastureland where the sheep graze under the protection of the shepherd. In Psalm 23, the Lord God is portrayed as the shepherd in both aspects of the shepherd's life: as the leader of the flock, and as the hospitable host.

In the ancient world, kings were known as shepherds of their people. Therefore, to claim that "the LORD is my shepherd" is to declare one's loyalty to God and one's intention to live under God's reign. As it was then so it is now, in a world of competing shepherds, Psalm 23 is a declaration of allegiance: it is Yahweh, the Lord God, who will be my shepherd—I will trust in Him to provide for me and to protect me, and I will follow wherever He leads.

The "house of the LORD" is most likely the Temple, and it provides a communal dimension to this psalm. In our culture, we tend to read Psalm 23 individualistically; however, the goodness, faithfulness, and love of God are finally experienced in the community of God's people.

Unfortunately, the 23rd Psalm is almost exclusively associated with one particular contemporary setting: the funeral service. Yes, this psalm should be read and heard in the midst of death and dying. But, this psalm must also be read and heard in the midst of life and living. Psalm 23 is more than a prayer of hope on the lips of the dying; it is a profession of trust on the lips of the living. Furthermore, it calls us beyond simply claiming individual assurance; it calls us to take our place in the fellowship of God's people. We belong to God, and we belong to one another.

In our consumer-oriented society, it is extremely difficult to hear the simple but radical message of Psalm 23: *God is the only necessity of life!* Although the opening verse is best translated "I lack nothing," the traditional translation "I shall not want" is appropriate in a culture that teaches people to want everything. Driven by greed rather than need, we can hardly imagine having only the necessities of life—food, drink, shelter for protection. Clever advertisers have succeeded in convincing us that what former generations considered incredible luxuries are now basic necessities. To say in our prosperous setting that God is the only necessity of life sounds quaint and naive. Then again, the words of Jesus also strike us as naive:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt 6:25, 33, NRSV).

The story is told of a little girl who, when reciting Psalm 23, began this way: "The Lord's my shepherd; that's all I want."

One of my favorite books is *A Tale of Three Kings* by Gene Edwards. It is the story of David, Saul, and Absalom. I want to share with you the brief chapter in which Edwards tells the tale of the origin of the 23rd Psalm. Yes, the story as Edwards tells it is imaginative; although fictitious, it is realistic. Things could have happened this way. Let's read:

The youngest son of any family bears two distinctions: He is considered to be both spoiled and uninformed. Usually little is expected of him. Inevitably, he displays fewer characteristics of leadership than the other children in the family. He never leads, he only follows, for he has no one younger than he on whom to practice leadership.

So it is today. So it was three thousand years ago in a village called Bethlehem, in a family of eight boys. The first seven sons of Jesse worked near their father's farm. The youngest was sent on treks into the mountains to graze the family's small flock of sheep.

On these pastoral jaunts, this youngest son always carried two things: a sling and a small, guitar-like instrument. Spare time for a sheepherder is abundant on rich mountain plateaus where sheep graze for days in one sequestered meadow. But as time passed and days became weeks, the young man became very lonely. The feeling of friendlessness that always roamed around inside him was magnified. He often cried. He also played his harp a great deal. He had a good voice, so he often sang. When these activities failed to solace him, he gathered up a pile of stones and, one by one, swung them at a distant tree with something akin to fury.

When one rockpile was dissipated, he would walk to the blistered tree, reassemble his rocks and designate yet another leafy enemy at yet a farther distance.

He engaged in many such solitary battles.

This slingsman-singer-shepherd also loved his Lord. At night, when all the sheep lay sleeping, and he sat staring at the dying fire, he would strum upon his harp and break into a concert of one. He sang the ancient hymns of his forefathers' faith. While he sang, he wept, and while weeping he often broke forth in abandoned praise until mountains in distant places picked up his praise and tears and passed them on to higher mountains still, from whence they eventually were cast up to the ears of God.

When he did not praise and when he did not cry, he tended to each and every lamb and sheep. When not occupied with his flock, he swung his companionable sling and swung it again and again until he could tell every rock precisely where to go.

Once, while singing his lungs out to God, angels, sheep and passing clouds, he spied a living enemy: a huge bear! He lunged forward. Both found themselves moving furiously toward the same small object, a lamb feeding at a table of rich, green grass. Youth and bear stopped half way and whirled to face one another. Even as he instinctively searched into his pocket for a stone, the young man realized, "Why, I am not afraid."

Meanwhile, brown lightning on mighty, furry legs charged at him with foaming madness. Impelled by the strength of youth, he married rock to leather and soon a brook-smooth pebble whined through the air to meet that charge.

A few moments later, the man, not quite so young as a moment before, picked up the little ewe and said, "I am your shepherd and God mine."

And so, long into the light, he wove the day's saga into a song. He hurled that hymn to the skies again and again until he had taught the melody and words to every angel that had ears. They, in turn, became custodians of this wondrous

song and passed it on as healing balm to brokenhearted men in every age to come.⁵

. . . The Lord's my shepherd; that's all I want.

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⁵Gene Edwards, *A Tale of Three Kings: A Study in Brokenness* (Christian Books, 1980), 1-4.