

PSALM 23

THE DIVINE SHEPHERD

AUTHOR: David

INTRODUCTION: The superscription attributes authorship of Psalm 23 to David. The psalm was probably written later in his life, after having experienced innumerable trials, but from the context of his original occupation (i.e., a shepherd; 1Sam16:19). In this psalm, JEHOVAH is presented in His role as the divine Shepherd who loves and cares for His sheep. It is no surprise that the great typological figures of the Lord Jesus Christ so often began as shepherds (e.g., Joseph, Moses, David). The application of the message of Psalm 23 transcends dispensations, as Scripture describes the nation of Israel (Ezek34:2; Jn10:11,14), the saints of the Church (Act20:29; Rom8:36; Heb13:20), and even believers among the Gentile nations (Matt25:32-33) as sheep in need of a Shepherd. As David, "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2Sam23:1), found comfort and confidence in the knowledge that the LORD cared for him and was responsible for providing for all of his needs (as a Shepherd for His sheep), so the believer in every age should derive the same solace.

- [1] The "LORD" is the personal name of God (i.e., JEHOVAH). A shepherd is responsible to provide for all the needs of his sheep (e.g., feed, water, protect, rescue); if a sheep is in "want" of anything, it is a failure of the shepherd.

When used as a symbol, the "shepherd" is the **king** of Israel (cf. Ezek34:2-24). Since the chief characteristic of sheep emphasized in Scripture is that they consistently follow their shepherd (Jn10:4,27), it is a necessity that the sheep have a good shepherd. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd" (Jn10:11,14). In this psalm, the shepherd is JEHOVAH. Furthermore, "There is none good but one, that is, God" (Matt19:17; Mk10:15; Luk18:19), reinforcing the deity of our Shepherd. Jesus is also called the Great Shepherd (Heb13:20) and the Chief Shepherd (1Pet5:4).

- [2] The shepherd must feed/nourish the sheep (cf. Jn21:15,16,17); pastors (Lit., shepherds) are commanded to "feed ... the flock", which is "the church of God" (Act20:27; Cp., 1Pet5:2). Food for the soul is the Word of God (cf. Heb5:12-14; 1Pet2:2). Note that before feeding the 5,000, Jesus commanded the people to "sit down ... upon the **green** grass" (Mk6:39), implicitly alluding to this psalm. Here, "still waters" are waters of quietness, suggesting not only the satisfaction of thirst, but peace and tranquility (Cp., Rev7:17).
- [3] The shepherd "restoreth my soul", which is to rescue the wandering or lost sheep (both physically and spiritually); every individual sheep is important to the LORD (cf. Luk15:3-7). He leads/guides the sheep "in the paths of righteousness", since "righteousness" is required to "enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt5:20). The shepherd does these things, in part, to safeguard his own reputation (i.e., "for his name's sake"); Jesus could boast, "those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost" (Jn17:12).
- [4] It is the responsibility of the shepherd to protect the sheep. An understanding of and reliance on the LORD's omnipotence should remove every fear of the believer (Cp., Philip4:6-7; 1Pet5:7). No matter how

deep the "valley", "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb13:5) says the LORD (Cp., Matt28:20).

The "rod" and "staff" are a "comfort". The "rod" was a club used to drive away predators; the "staff" was the classic shepherd's crook used to guide/retrieve wandering sheep.

- [5] Here, the imagery shifts from pastoral to royal; the Shepherd-king provides an abundant, even lavish (i.e., "thou anointest my head with oil", "my cup runneth over"), banquet for his subjects; that it is done "in the presence of mine enemies" implies protection and security.
- [6] David was convinced of the surety of God's "goodness" (Matt19:17) and "mercy" toward him. The "sure mercies of David" (cf. Isa55:3; Act13:34) were an assurance of salvation and eternal life. Here, "mercy" is the translation of the Hebrew word *chesed*, often translated "loving-kindness" or "steadfast love", has the idea of faithfulness to a commitment/covenant (in contrast to *ahab*, which is an emotional love); thus, the love of God is a commitment, not an emotion.

The "house of the LORD" was the Temple (cf. 2Sam7:13; 1Kgs8:10; Jn2:16). To "dwell in the house of the LORD forever" expresses intimate fellowship with the LORD, living in His very presence, and it was David's "one desire" (Ps27:4). The desire of God, realized in the eternal state, is found in Revelation 21:3, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and **he will dwell with them**, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God". Compare with John 14:1-3 ("that where I am, there ye may be also"); 1 Thessalonians 4:17 ("and so shall we ever be with the Lord").