





PSALM 23

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The twenty-third psalm, like the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, can bear repetition. Indeed it is like a creed which could be studied and re-studied, it could be compared to solid gold which is only brightened the more it is rubbed. The heading over the psalm in our Bibles is "A Psalm of David" and it is an utterance of David's personal trust in the Lord giving a complete picture of happiness. In no other psalm does David speak of such perfect restful trust in God and it is a commentary on the New Testament words "the peace of God which passes all understanding."

Since this Psalm 23 is in the Old Testament we do not expect it to give us a complete picture of God. The complete picture of God was seen only when Christ came but that does not prevent us putting a christian interpretation on the psalm. We must, of course, ask what words meant when first spoken but we can see N.T. teaching concealed in the O.T. as well as seeing an application for ourselves today. If David could say "The Lord is my shepherd" we can say "Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gave his life." We know that David risked his life when minding the sheep, but he makes no mention of this in Psalm 23 when describing the shepherd's work whereas Jesus had to mention his sacrifice for that is why he came: "to give his life as a ransom for many."

We don't know when David wrote this psalm, though the depth of the experience displayed in it points to a composition by a mature king rather than a young shepherd. Some commentators feel that they can pinpoint the time of composition during the time when David's son Absalom was rebelling against him causing David to flee to the wilderness. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (v5) is said to refer to the time when the Gileadite chieftains came out to David who had fled Jerusalem and brought him supplies. If this is so it will be seen that not all of Psalm 23 is about the Lord as a shepherd but also about the Lord as an entertainer or host or friend.

This is a psalm of trust with an emphasis on the goodness of God but, while David realises that his needs are supplied and that God comforts him in affliction, God does not make him immune from affliction, rather he gives peace and patience in affliction.

Years ago in Scotland a young man John McNeill was a porter at Inverkip railway station which was run by the old London Midland and Scottish Railway. John McNeill did not stay many years with the L.M.S. for he left to train for the ministry in Edinburgh. But John kept his old L.M.S. cap badge and years later when he became a famous evangelist who travelled the world people in far off countries would ask what L.M.S. on his cap badge stood for and he would say Lord's My Shepherd!

In different parts of the O.T. God is spoken of as a shepherd of his people. In the book of Genesis it is recorded that when old Jacob was blessing Joseph and his sons he said (Gen 48. 15 New English Bible, cf 49. 24) "The God who has been my shepherd all my life ... may he bless these boys." Jacob said that God shepherded him all his life. When God wanted Moses to learn the job of leading his people out of Egypt he sent him to learn his task by the shepherding of sheep. For some time Moses minded the sheep of his father-in-law and it was when he was minding the sheep God spoke from the burning bush and told him to lead his people like a flock. In the book of the prophet Isaiah we read that God "will feed his flock like a shepherd" (40. 11). But David was probably the first to grasp firmly and clearly that the Lord was his personal shepherd.

Notice that "Lord" in verse one is written in block capitals and wherever in the O.T. "Lord" is written in block letters the Hebrew word at that place is the word Yahweh or Jehovah. The name Yahweh, which is the most common name for God in the O.T., is linked with the verb "to be" and this suggests that Yahweh or Jehovah or the Lord is the God who was, who is and who always will be. The Lord Yahweh is the Great I Am. David says that the great Yahweh God is a shepherd. To call the Lord "Shepherd" is just as startling as Jesus calling God "Abba Father" or "Daddy". For years Jews spoke of the Fatherhood of

God but it took Jesus to use the intimate word Abba or Daddy. David is saying something similar when he says that the great and mighty Lord is his shepherd constantly minding him. We know far more about the Lord's intimate dealings with us since Jesus came and can sing with John Newton "Jesus my Saviour, Shepherd, Friend, My Prophet, Priest and King." But David before the Christ came had a great grasp of the truth: the Great Lord he knew as his shepherd.

David as we know was himself a shepherd and we may be sure he was a good and conscientious one, and just as a good father will get a clear grasp of the fatherhood of God so David, an exemplary shepherd, got a good picture of the Lord his shepherd. It is well known that a shepherd in the East, in Israel, is very different from a shepherd in the western world. While occasionally we in this part of the world hear of dogs attacking sheep, generally speaking sheep are safe in the fields or in open spaces or on the mountains and the shepherd need only pay them regular visits to make sure that they are all right. The job of shepherd is very different in the land of King David. In Israel the shepherd is constantly with the sheep and is armed; today he carries a gun in case wild beasts appear, and shepherds often put themselves in danger risking their lives for their sheep. Even when David was too young to be a soldier he slew a lion and a bear when his flock was being attacked. Shepherds in this country know their sheep, they know one from another, but in the East a shepherd knows his sheep by name and he doesn't drive them, he leads them and we shall be thinking of that when we come to verse 2. The point to note is that the shepherd in the East is very close to his flock and so when David said "The Lord is my shepherd" he was saying that God took great care of him and knew him personally. And not only did God know David, David knew his Lord. The Lord is my shepherd. In this short psalm of six verses David refers to God 13 times and to himself 17 times. David knew that he and God belonged to each other. In cases of emergency we can dial 999 and we can have immediate contact with police or ambulance. David was in constant contact with God for he had dialled Mine Mine Mine. The Lord is my

shepherd.

Years ago two ministers were on a walking holiday in Snowdonia in Wales and came across a shepherd boy who had not much schooling and whom they wished to teach the lesson of the 23rd Psalm. They taught him five words, one word for each finger. "The Lord is my shepherd." The two ministers emphasised to the boy the need of faith in the Lord, laying stress on the fourth word (fourth finger) "my". The two ministers came back to the same place for their holiday the following year and though they looked out for the boy they did not see him. But one day they went into a cottage for a drink of water and there on the mantelpiece was a picture of the boy they had been looking out for. They explained to the woman of the house, who turned out to be his mother, that they had met the boy and would like to see him again. The mother however had sad news for the boy died during a storm the previous winter. She went on to say how puzzled they all were when he was found dead for he was clutching his fourth finger. The ministers were able to comfort that mother for they told her that in this way he was saying the Lord is my shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. "I shall not want" is the only negative statement in the psalm but what a lot it says. But is it true that those who have the Lord as their shepherd never want? Generally speaking it is probably true that most if not all people who end up in the poor house, if we can use such an expression in this day, are there because of carelessness to say the least. Generally speaking those who follow the Lord as their shepherd through life are able to "hold their heads above water." Having said that, however, we have to admit that in this complex modern world some people may suffer when someone else breaks the law and hardworking Christians sometimes land on the rocks. But do such cases prove that God's promise sometimes fails? If we look to Jesus we shall understand the mystery. Jesus spoke cheerfully of God's good providence saying that God who looked after the lilies of the field would surely look after his children. Yet Jesus also said that foxes had dens and birds had nests but he, the Son of man, had no where to lay his head; Jesus died forsaken and

outcast. Still, through all, he kept his eye fixed on God and never doubted but that good would come out of evil. And he wasn't disappointed for out of his loss and suffering came the salvation of the world. So if any are feeling want, consideration of the experience of Jesus will encourage fresh hope. His supplies are not confined to this life for even after death God can fulfil his promise. If God causes any of his saints to want one thing, it is only that he may give a better thing.

Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill,  
He treasures up His bright designs,  
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and will break  
In blessings on your head.

Verse 2: He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

David knew that if the Lord were his shepherd he would lack nothing: "I shall not want." And the first necessity which David mentions which he will not lack is rest: "he makes me lie down."

Think again about the time when it is thought that David composed this psalm. A coup-d'etat has taken place. King David is on the run for his life. He knows that he can not hide in Jerusalem and so he runs to the hills. Absalom his own son is the rebel who is after him. David is out on the hills with no tents or food for his soldiers and family. In such circumstances he couldn't sing "I shall not want". But on the horizon David sees three riders who turn out to be Shobi, Machir and Barzilai

and they have with them (2 Sam 17. 27ff) "beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, and curds and sheep and cheese from the herd for David and the people with him to eat; for they said, 'The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness.'" We may take it that the time of day is high noon. The morning wandering is just over and when the sun is high and it is too hot to march it is time for rest and refreshment. So just at the right time the men come along with their supplies. The eye of faith in David sees God as the source of the supplies, and the scene and time of day suggests the picture of God as a shepherd giving his sheep the food and rest they need. "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." In the East sheep are led not driven and they graze from about half three in the morning until about ten a.m. and then they lie down for about four hours when the sun is high. Woe to the sheep and woe to the shepherd who find no shade or green grass during the midday when the sun makes the stones so hot that they burn the feet. Just as a good father puts his family before himself a shepherd thinks about his flock and brings them to a place where they can lie down in peace and stretch their legs.

If a sheep with a good covering or wool falls into water the wool soon soaks up the water and becomes so heavy that the sheep is quite unable to climb the bank and will eventually drown. By instinct sheep know this and have an inbred fear of water, especially fast flowing water, and so the shepherd must lead them to calm waters. But the emphasis in the words "He leads me beside still waters" is not as much on the stillness of the waters as on the stillness of the flock which drinks peacefully. Actually the Hebrew in the verse reads "He leads me beside the waters of rest", that is, the place where the sheep can drink and rest peacefully and lie down on the grass which is young, tender and sweet. Such a situation produces sheep with plenty of flesh on them and with heavy luxuriant coats of wool. David thought of this picture of God as a shepherd when he received good things in his time of need.

What do green pastures and waters of rest mean to us? They represent, surely, the prosperity which God sends us. Life is

not all a bed of roses, there is the dark valley to go through at times (v4), but if we think about it God is good to us and sends us both temporal and spiritual prosperity. God gives his people the best blessings even of this earthly life. God gives us health which is a blessing upon which many other blessings depend. Good things don't look all that good when a man is sick. All things are pleasant when the sheep are stretching themselves among the green grass and a man enjoys life when in health. Health may be an aspect of the green pastures and still waters to which God leads us. But do God's children have better health than those outside his care? While it is true that some of God's greatest saints have suffered through ill health, nevertheless good health is most likely to be the possession of those who obey God's laws. Too much strong drink, and indeed over-eating, can abuse the body and bring on bad health. Jealousy and resentment and spiteful thoughts also can damage health.

Love is another of the blessings of life which comes to those who follow God's leading. God has laws about love making and while those who break them may get satisfaction for a season they are really robbing themselves of some of the greatest pleasures in life.

Another blessing in this life, our equivalent of verse 2, is happiness and success in our daily work. We are well aware that financial and business success may become a god in a man's life. but, on the other hand, it is possible to think that God is not all that interested in our daily affairs. The fact of the matter is that God in his providence has ordered life in such a way that men and women devote most of their time and the best of their strength to their daily work. If God has so ordered life he must be interested in our daily work and be pleased to send us happiness and prosperity in it. "Those who honour me I will honour" says God and Christians in business down the centuries have found pleasure and success in their work when they applied God's law to it.

Many who have followed the Good Shepherd have found that he has led them to the green pastures of health of body, love of

friends and happiness and success in daily work. But we have to admit that it is astonishing how often in the Bible spiritual improvement is ascribed not to health and success but to illness and misfortune. We may have heard of someone who has been brought closer to God because of bereavement or someone who has been converted to the Saviour when on a bed of sickness. But have we ever heard of anything like that when someone fell in for a fortune? And yet it is not only loss which helps to make us holy. Happiness can do this as well. Health and prosperity can produce an interest in God's work; zeal in service and liberality in giving. A heart made happy by pure love is not far from the kingdom of God. If we at some time look back over the good things that we have received in years gone by will we not in that look back see a thousand reasons for gratitude and loyalty to the Lord our shepherd?

But when David says "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters" he is not thinking only of earthly blessings such as the supplies which the friends brought. These words also describe spiritual blessings. A Christian lives in this world like other men; he goes to work, has friends etc. But the Christian has a life which the non-christian has not. The Christian has a life which is hid with Christ in God. He is in personal contact with God and a part of his nature, which in other men is dormant, is awake and active, interested in God, in Christ, in truth and in eternity. This part of the Christian in contact with God we call the spiritual life which taken as a whole is a happy life and is able to make up for any loss we may suffer in this life. Think of a man like the apostle Paul. He lost a lot when he became a Christian: but was he an unhappy man? It can be seen from his writings that he was full of joy.

It is God who gives the enjoyments of the spiritual life. He makes us lie down in green pastures. As there are so many spiritual blessings we note only a few of them.

Love. We have noticed something about human love but there is a love more profound and more lasting than the love of friend or wife. All men are capable of loving God but we know that many do not love him. Where, however, the capacity to love God

springs into action there is present the most delightful and satisfying emotions that the heart can know. If human love, being held dear by another person, is one of the best experiences of life, what must it be to love God and to know that the Saviour Christ holds you dear?

Another blessing is the happiness which comes from doing good to others. All human beings have a share in this happiness but a Christian sees other people through the eyes of Christ, and looking through his eyes a Christian sees not only the great value of each individual but also the great danger that those who know not Christ are in. Having experienced the saving love of Christ the Christian seeks to pass on the secret to others. And while such an interest may bring trouble and opposition, on the whole the reward for such work is great.

The final blessing which we shall note is one which the words of our text have often been used to illustrate: it is the blessing received by feeding in the rich pastures of the Bible. One writer has said this: "What are these green pastures but the scriptures of truth, always fresh, always rich, and never exhausted? Sweet and full are the doctrines of the gospel, fit food for souls, as tender grass is nutriment for sheep." We can lie down as it were and get refreshment from the Bible, even from as small a part of it as the 23rd psalm. Some people might read the Bible because it contains history or because it is good literature, but for the Christian it is one of the principal ways of maintaining contact with God. The word of God gives rest and strength and life, it is a green pasture which never withers. But just as the sheep need to eat the grass as well as lie on it, so we must read the Bible and meditate on it. Why not start with Psalm 23, reading and thinking about each verse?

There is only one valley in the hill country of Judea where David and his men were that had green pastures and still waters. It is a place 9 miles north-east of Jerusalem called the Wadi Fara. In 1926 during a drought the water in the Wadi Fara spring was piped to Jerusalem but later abandoned. In 1948, however, when the truce line divided Jerusalem leaving the

water supply on the Israeli side the pipeline was reopened and it is said that this spring yields 600,000 gallons of water a day. God's blessings are of course without end and new every day.

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Verse 3: He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

When we were thinking about verse 2 we noticed that "he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters" was a picture of prosperity and success feeding on the good things that God supplies for our material and spiritual needs. But in verse 3 we meet with a picture of adversity for the words "he restores my soul" imply the need for restoration. When David composed the words "he restores my soul" he may have been thinking of a sheep straying from the rest of the flock and becoming faint through tiredness and heat; the sheep is about to pass out when the shepherd catches it in the nick of time. This is a very different picture from verse 2; there among pastures green life was happy and enjoyable but here in verse 3 there is anxiety, for life is at a low ebb for the straying sheep about to faint.

We have but to think about it to recognise that nature is full of restorative processes. If there is a landslide and part of a hillside breaks away it is not very long before grass and other things grow on the soil which moved and help to bind it together. You cut your finger and in a short time a scab grows over it for protection. When we are in need of restoration God comes and does it for us.

David knew what it was to be restored by God. He had drifted away from God and just as his political career started to decline we are told that Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel (2 Sam 15. 6) David recognised that he was like a stray sheep about to faint and in his time of need he rediscovered

God's provision. "He restores my soul" he says. "Soul" means his "life". David is simply saying, "God restores me, all of me."

Time and time again we need restoration. All men, saints as well as sinners, can fall in for misfortune; lightning strikes the roof of good and bad indiscriminately. Indeed a Christian may suffer in this life because he is a Christian; persecution may be absent from the church in the western world but Christians in other places are being persecuted. And even if we don't live in those places our concern for the cause of Christ there might be a cause of despair, for which we need restoration. In any case the Christian seeks to be like his Master and the fact that he falls far short from the perfect standard might cause despair.

The need of restoration in a Christian may of course be due to neglect, neglecting to do what he knows God would have him do, neglect of worship and bible study.

We have just noted a few things which can cause depression but David in this psalm does not say what caused his trouble: he says simply "he restores my soul." He speaks as if the only thing that he can remember is his deliverance from suffering. And what a truth lies here! What would we know of the kindness of God if it were not for the days of darkness? If God is ever to be near his people it is when they are in trouble. The shepherd is sure to be with the sheep that is ailing. To which child does a mother give most attention? Is it not to the one who is weak and in danger? The heart of God is no different. Our Saviour is never as near as when we need him most. And when this is realised the storms of trouble within us are changed into a calm. Grief is easier to bear when we can say: "My shepherd knows all about it."

We can mention only a few of the numerous ways in which God can restore our souls. Sometimes the adversity which comes our way is the pathway to prosperity and the apparent calamity is only the disguise in which something good is concealed. God may use the word of a friend or a passage in a book to put new life

into us, but if we may concentrate on one thing we are probably more often restored when we think of the cross of Christ.

The Belgian flag is a tricolour of black, red and gold. The red represents the blood of those who died for their country and the message from the black, red and gold flag is "through blood we passed from black night to golden day." A fresh realisation of the sacrifice of Christ for us can lead us out of the slough of despond.

Jesus our good shepherd is very anxious to restore those members of his flock who are fainting. Think of the attention our Lord gave to the apostle Peter. Peter denied his Lord three times but Jesus restored him three times. Jesus the good shepherd restored his erring disciple. Even before Peter denied his Master Jesus prayed for him that his faith would not fail; he also warned him, and when Jesus was arrested and Peter denied him we are told that Jesus looked at Peter in a loving correcting way. At the time of the resurrection our Lord gave the angels instructions to tell the women to inform Peter, and Jesus met with Peter alone on that first Easter day. That is a brief outline of how Jesus the good shepherd dealt with one of his wandering flock and what he did for Peter he can do for us when we are in danger of falling.

"He restores my soul, he leads me in paths of righteousness." If a sheep wanders and is restored by the shepherd it usually has been through such a frightening experience that it sticks very close to the rest of the flock and the shepherd. It is when a sheep has no awareness of danger that it is prone to wander. Fear makes the sheep stick closely to the shepherd. Can we say that the same thing is true in our experience? Adversity or trouble in our lives has a close connection with sanctification. Prayer can be made very real when trouble comes our way. When there is no suffering or anxiety, when one day is the same as the next, prayer and our thoughts about God can become very formal and weary but when we suffer a great loss our attitude is different. To take but one example, the prayer "Lighten our darkness we beseech thee O Lord and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night ..." takes on a new

meaning in war time when the enemy is expected to be on a bombing mission every night.

The same might be said of the Bible. If we are seeking comfort or restoration our bible reading will be different. Passages which we have often read will for the first time perhaps have a message for us. So just as a sheep might learn its lesson when restored by the shepherd and so keep close to him and be led along right and safe paths, so we should learn from our troubles and follow our shepherd along paths of righteousness.

A fainting sheep is restored with water and young tender grass but a sheep is restored not to lie down all the day amid the green pastures and still waters, he is restored so that he will be strong enough to be led along straight paths. We should drink for strength not drunkenness. A bath can be very refreshing but if a man lies too long in a hot bath he will weaken. As a bath can weaken for idleness or refresh for work so we can use or abuse God's goodness. "He restores my soul, he leads me in paths of righteousness": the restoration is for walking.

"For his name's sake". A shepherd helps his sheep when they faint, he leads them back when they go astray; he does this for their own sake, he knows them and is attached to them. But his own reputation and character are also involved. The whole countryside would talk if a shepherd neglected his sheep and left them to die. Just as a school teacher or a school gets credit when the pupils pass their exams, so the shepherd gets credit when the sheep are safe from danger and walking along the correct path. David would have us understand from his words in this psalm that the honour of God is involved in the welfare of his people. Our good shepherd has undertaken to save us his people and having begun such a work he will complete it. If all Christians were unfortunate and got into a mess Christianity would not attract very many. It brings disgrace on the name and character of God when his professing followers become backsliders and fall into careless habits. The fact that God is dishonoured when his people fall away provides us with a strong argument in prayer. We can ask God to save us from our sins and to make us holy and give us our reason that he will get the

credit if our lives are consistent. We can pray for a friend who may be under the power of some sin in this way: "Good shepherd, lead him back to the paths of righteousness for your own name's sake, lead him in the right way so that you will get glory and praise." Think also of the dignity that such thoughts will give to our own lives. We are all too prone to seek deliverance from adversity for our own sakes alone. We want to be close to Jesus and enjoy the sunshine of prosperity for our own sakes alone. But the life of a Christian should have a nobler aim. If we see to it that we glorify God he will see to it that we enjoy him for ever. We need to remind ourselves constantly that all we do we should do for Christ's glory.

In poets' corner in Westminster Abbey in London there is a monument to the famous poet John Milton who wrote among other things Paradise Lost. A point about the inscription on the plaque which has often been noted is that it does not mention the name of the poet John Milton, the writing simply refers to the author of Paradise Lost. But the name of William Benson who erected the monument is there as well as some detail about him. The monument is supposed to remind us of John Milton and yet the only name on it is that of the man who put it there! How like us! All our good works ought to bring glory to God and yet we often do them to get praise for ourselves. Jesus leads us in paths of righteousness for his own name's sake. Let us see to it that we follow obediently and so give him the credit.

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Verse 4: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

In many cases these are the last words spoken by dying saints and they are often the words spoken to the dying by a clergyman or nurse. We must, however, bear in mind that this verse does not help us only at the time of death as there are many dark valleys that the Christian must pass through. The point of

emphasis in the verse is that we are not alone in the dark valleys of life: our good shepherd is with us.

If we have placed the composition of this psalm in the right place, that is, written by David when on the run from Absalom the son of his foreign wife, then in the first place "the valley of the shadow of death" is probably a memory of the night before when in the dark David may have feared the worst.

I wonder if you noticed that in the first three verses David speaks of the Lord and uses the pronoun "he" four times, he speaks about the Lord, but in this verse 4 when he refers to the dark black valley he speaks to the Lord: "for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." He continues in verse 5 to speak to the Lord but we note that it is in the valley that he uses the more intimate pronoun for the first time.

When David composed these words thinking of the Lord's protection of him through his dark valley he used the figure of the shepherd as an illustration: his mind went back to the time when he kept his sheep. A modern shepherd has written about what he thinks is the valley that David was thinking about. It is, he says, south of the Jerusalem-Jericho road where the Kedron valley becomes very narrow through the mountain range. This valley is  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles long and 1,500 feet high in places, i.e. its height in places is about 3 times the length of a football field.. Also in places it is only ten or 12 feet wide and according to this modern shepherd there is an unwritten rule that shepherds, in order to avoid meeting other shepherds coming in the opposite direction in the narrow valley where it is in places difficult to pass, agree to go up the valley in the morning and down in the evening. The shepherds in David's day may have called this, or some other one, 'the valley of shadows', or 'the valley of the shadow of death' because in such a place the darkness would fall earlier than elsewhere and the dark of night would be deeper as well. Such a valley would be a favourite hiding place for snakes and wild beasts for there would be plenty of holes and ravines on each side. David could well remember as a young shepherd going through the valley and how the sheep huddled closely around his feet as he prepared to fight, if necessary,

to protect them. Since those far off days when he was a young shepherd David had learned that the life of man had also such dark passages, but from the sheep he had learned to rely on a presence with him: "I fear no evil for thou art with me." David knew that a shepherd led along right paths and not only among green pasture but also through the dark valley. And so we must not think that the Christian will be led only to still waters where he can rest, but rather we ought to be prepared for the dark valleys as well.

John Bunyan in his Pilgrim's Progress places the valley of the shadow of death not at the end of the pilgrim's journey but rather in the first half of it. In Bunyan's book Christian is given a description of the valley. "Why the valley is as dark as pitch; we also saw there the Hobgoblins, Satyrs, and Dragons of the Pit; we heard also in that valley a continual howling and yelling as of people under unutterable misery ... over that valley hangs the discouraging clouds of Confusion; Death also doth always spread his wings over it." A man writing an explanation of Bunyan's work says this: "The episode of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, is a reflection of an experience of Bunyan's own when in a time of serious illness he was haunted by depression, and found even the shadow of Death to be chill and dark." Bunyan had experienced depression which he considered to be his dark valley of the shadow. And if you or anyone known to you has suffered depression you will know what a terrible thing it is. A man once was prescribed drugs by his doctor in order to prevent him going blind but the drugs brought on depression and in the end the man refused to take the drugs; he would rather be blind than depressed!

Winston Churchill the wartime leader suffered from depression; indeed he had such recurrent fits of depression that he had his own name for it, "Black Dog", and the fact that he chose such a nickname "Black Dog" indicates that it was a fairly frequent companion. Most people to some degree suffer depression but some people are unfortunate and suffer in a severe way. Disappointment or sorrow can bring it on. The physical make-up of women makes them more prone to it and depression often comes, for example, at the time of childbirth. Some people are born with a temperamental weakness and are fairly often in a depressed state. So whenever we may suffer in this way this verse can

comfort. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me." Depression may of course be brought on by the person himself. If we do not trust God for the future, if we have not sought God's forgiveness or if we are not willing to forgive others we are making ourselves liable to depression. David may have experienced depression in the period in which we have placed this psalm, for looking back on careless living is one cause of it. David may have said "If only I hadn't married that foreign woman there would be no son Absalom to rebel against me." "If only I had not drifted away from God I would not be out here among the hills on the run." "If only ..." How depressing to think in this way! But David now felt that he had the cure: the Lord his shepherd was with him.

Death is of course a valley which we will all have to go through. In all the valleys of our life our Lord is our best companion but in the case of the valley of death all other companions must turn back; we are on our own as far as our friends are concerned and yet we are not alone for Jesus is with us. Our good shepherd once went down the valley of death alone but now he goes down with each one of his flock.

David knew what comforted the sheep in the valleys of Israel. Fear huddled the sheep close to the shepherd and through contact with his body or the sound of his voice or by the touch of the crook laid on them to keep them together, the sheep were comforted.

The staff was the shepherd's crook which he used to help him as he walked but also in dealing with the sheep. At times a shepherd made the sheep pass under the staff so that he could examine them and count them; the staff was also used when the sheep started to wander for the shepherd could catch them by the legs and pull them back, or if a sheep fell where he could not climb back the staff could give the needed help. The staff was long and light but the rod was short and heavy and was used not with the sheep but with enemies of the sheep such as wild animals which might attack. When we think of the Lord our shepherd the rod represents his defending power. Do we sometimes fear attacks

of Satan because we think that we have to defend ourselves? Sheep could not hope to defend themselves and neither can we.

The staff used by the shepherd in dealing with the sheep was often used to give a correcting blow to a wayward sheep. The blow was intended to do the sheep good and such a thought can be a comfort to us when we are facing some trial. The Lord loves those whom he corrects. Suffering and anxiety might be sent to make us better and if we think of it in that way it will be easier to bear. If a sheep had any sense it would know that the correction of the staff was for its benefit. There is an old Arabian proverb which says that all sunshine makes a desert. So while we should not be seeking tribulation we ought, when it comes our way, to regard it as something sent for our good.

As a matter of interest our word "tribulation" comes from the Latin word "tribulum" which was a threshing machine: a "tribulum" was a heavy wooden platform with spikes sticking out of it and an ox dragged it to and fro across corn and it divided the wheat from the chaff. If the corn could talk it might have expressed dislike at the tribulum, just as we do not like tribulation, but its purpose was to do good. The good shepherd might hit us with his staff and make us bend low under it but it will be for our good.

The rod and staff are a comfort only because they are in the hands of the shepherd; it is he who is our comfort.

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Verse 5: Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

We noted as we looked at verses 1-4 that David as he composed Psalm 23 had in mind the picture of a shepherd looking after his sheep, feeding and protecting them, and from that picture in his mind of the shepherd's care for the flock David thought of God's care for him. We are not surprised that David who spent the

early years of his manhood minding sheep should have pictured God's care for him in this way. But just as David was not a shepherd all his life so this psalm appears to drop the idea of God as shepherd. At verse 5 we are introduced to a different illustration of God's care for David and for us. David was not only a shepherd he was also a king and as a king he would often have entertained guests. So just as we can divide David's life into shepherd and king we see a similar division in this psalm, for at verse 5 we see a picture of God as the host or entertainer at a banquet where there is no shortage of supplies; the cup is running over.

No doubt the actual historical situation in which we think David composed this psalm helped in the inspiration. The men who brought the badly needed supplies to David and his men, who were out on the hills on the run from the rebel son Absalom, must have been pleased when David said, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Whether Absalom had his army mobilised at that time or not, in the mind of David the enemy was not far away. Barzillai and his friends were good to David in his time of need; they brought him supplies when he was on the run. They prepared a table at a time when David felt surrounded by enemies and King David appreciated this. A fact of life which is often observed is that a person who is kind is the one who is most appreciative when a kindness is done to him. David must often have helped and entertained people in his palace in Jerusalem, and one group of people whom we know he was especially good to was young soldiers whom he encouraged to be proficient in their profession. So it would be no surprise if the meal laid on for David who was on the run reminded him of the feasts he had prepared for his young warriors in the days past and these feasts in turn reminded him of the overflowing bounty and goodness which the Lord continually provided for him, but especially at times when he needed encouragement.

David drawing from the experiences of his early life spoke of God as his shepherd, now, with his mind going back to the time when he entertained visitors, he says that he receives the Lord's hospitality and friendship. A shepherd is very close to his sheep, he knows them all by name, but a guest is much closer to

his host and can receive sympathy, encouragement and friendship of a quality that no shepherd can give to his sheep.

The relation of a sheep to the shepherd is a passive relationship: the sheep is fed, it is led and it is protected. A sheep does almost nothing for itself and this represents a side of our religion where God does everything and man simply receives. But there is an active side to our religion as well, there is a battle to be fought and a victory to be won. The phrase in verse 5 "in the presence of my enemies" hints at this aspect of our religion because these words tell us that it is a warrior's feast which is described.

The Bible is very clear in at least one thing which it says about an enemy: an enemy must not be treated lightly. In the spiritual warfare we must be well aware of our enemy for one of his tricks is to catch us unawares.

In the second world war the victory that Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery gained over Rommel is said to have been due in large measure to the study which Montgomery made of the enemy. Monty studied Rommel's character and habits and the tactics that he used in other battles and this enabled Lord Montgomery to plan a campaign which took account of Rommel's weaknesses.

We are up against a very crafty enemy. He is called by many names and a name in the Bible is nearly always a description of the person who bears it. Our enemy is called Satan which means the Adversary; he is also called the Devil, the Slanderer and Destroyer. He is also called the Wicked one, the God of This World, the Prince of Darkness, the Dragon, the Tormentor, the Accuser, the Deceiver, the Liar, the Murderer, him who has the power of death, the Ruler of this World, and the Tempter.

A day is coming when the Devil will be completely and finally defeated but he is not dead yet. Some Christians ignore the Devil as if he were dead and this can give a certain peace of mind. Our hope, however, is not in a dead devil but in a living God. Our God is so powerful that he can prepare a banquet in the presence of our enemy no matter how strong and wily the enemy

may be. We will never have peace if we avoid the devil. If we are to have true victory we must face him and we will find that at the place of temptation where we meet him God will give us victory.

We could spiritualise the table mentioned here and think of the good things which God has prepared for us in the pages of the Bible or we could think of the spiritual nourishment provided in the Lord's supper which certainly is a table prepared by God. But the main idea would seem to be the friendship of the meal rather than the food. Indeed if we were to say that God supplied us with the blessings of salvation from his table we would mean no more than the activity of God bringing himself nearer to us. When one man invites another to be his guest it is an expression of respect and affection, it means that the host wishes to know more of the other man, to come closer to him. This is a picture of our religion for it is fellowship or friendship with God. What is religion but to feel that God is near at all times, that we can seek his aid at every time of need, and in times of rejoicing confide in him. Religion is to see God everywhere which thought brightens life, and in this sense all a Christian's life may be said to be a banquet. God has anticipated our needs for he has the table prepared, prepared with all things necessary.

At an eastern feast the guests were anointed with sweet-scented spikenard ointment. You will recall how Jesus on one occasion was anointed in this way and on another occasion he pointed out to a man, who had invited him, that he had neglected to anoint him. God who is love breaks the jar of oil and pours it on our heads and the odour fills the house giving blessing to others as well. God lavishes on us what was purchased at great cost to himself. "Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows." What a picture of the bounty of God. Our Lord is no niggard host; for example, God does not only pardon, he abundantly pardons. Let us make sure that we take his cup of salvation, we will not need to add to it; it will be full and overflowing with no room for more in it.

The story of the prodigal son is a picture of God's dealings

with us. In that story the father did not feed his son with a cold potato; it wasn't any old calf but the fatted calf and not any old clothes either, but "bring the best robe and put it on him." We could go on spiritualising the oil and the overflowing cup but probably all that David intended was to give an illustration of a right royal banquet.

What is attractive about an invitation to a banquet? It is not because the food will be better than at home, though this may be welcome; it is not for all the splendour of the scene, though we would feel these to be in place: it is the friendship which takes us there. We go to meet a friend not to receive his food. And so in our religion. It is God himself we seek and the various blessings of salvation which he gives are of value only in that they bring us nearer to him.

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We come to the final verse of Psalm 23 and you will notice that David in this verse looks to the future. He thought of the future in the first verse "I shall not want" but in the rest of the psalm he thinks of the Lord's presence with him. He seems to pass to pure anticipation in the sixth verse, "Surely, or only, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Not only was David comforted by God's presence with him each day, he knew that God would be with him tomorrow and the next day and for ever.

There was an occasion in the life of David when he wanted to build a house for God and he prayed to God thanking him for success in the past, but he also mentioned the fact that God had promised goodness for a great while to come. 2 Sam 7. 18 "Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said 'Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in thy eyes, O Lord God; thou hast spoken also of thy servant's house for a great while to come, and hast shown me future generations.'" What a wonderful thing not only to remember the past with thankfulness but

also to think about the future with confidence. We often have fears for the future; we take out insurance policies, we don't know what a day might bring forth. But is there not a gospel which tells us that the best is yet to be, a gospel which tells us that the good wine is reserved for the end? There is, and that gospel is embodied in the last verse of Psalm 23. As we examined this psalm we noticed how it spoke of the Lord's presence in the varied experiences of the past but it also speaks of the future "for a great while to come." "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

When we were looking at verse 5 "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows", we noted how David felt that he was a guest at a great royal banquet prepared by God. To be a man's guest was much more than a mere social evening; a meal is still a way in which we get to know a person much better; and in the O.T. to be a guest was a bond of loyalty and often a covenant or agreement was made at a meal. Now in this verse 6 we learn that to be God's guest is really to live with him for ever.

But this confidence for the future is not the type which assumes that there will be no difficulties or dangers. David knows that his life is to be one of service and warfare. It is the same man who in verse 5 was a guest anointed with oil and drinking from an overflowing cup. But we noted that it was a warrior who was being feasted and when the feast was over the armour and weapons had to be taken up again. Enemies have been defeated and victories have been won but the entire campaign is not over yet, the whole war is not yet won. If we are in Christ's service he will give us times of refreshment but it is his will that we do our part in the struggle of life; if we are in his service we ought to be seeking to extend his reign. The earth is the Lord's so we must help in the fight so that the earth is not surrendered to the devil.

As he leaves the banqueting house to return to the battlefield the warrior notices two figures who follow him by order of the king. Who are these two followers? Goodness and mercy shall

follow me all the days of my life. Yes, David in this psalm speaks of "goodness and mercy" as if they were two persons, guardian angels, sent to protect him from all evil. At the time when we think David composed this psalm it was very much in his mind that his rebel son Absalom was following him but as he considered God's love and thought of pursuit by enemies gave place to the idea that God's steadfast love now followed him throughout his life. As surely as judgment and justice follow the wicked so goodness and mercy follow David. Goodness means that which is pleasant or enjoyable or agreeable. There can be no misfortune in life for which God's goodness cannot find a remedy. When this guardian angel as it were, called goodness, is present how can life be bare or empty? This verse could also be translated "Only goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." When we think of the life of David and what he went through at times, we can compare these words about only goodness following him to the end of his days with words of the Apostle Paul (Rom 8. 28) "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him." "In everything God works for good" "only goodness follows me."

If the following of goodness is welcome how much more so is mercy? Who feels no need of mercy? Quite often Christians have no fear of the enemy but they have a fear about themselves. We still have the old man in us; we still have a tendency to depart from the living God; at times we get fits of coldness and back-sliding. We need mercy every day. David says that God's mercy is eternal, indeed the story of David's life is a good illustration of the mercy of God; God still loved him with a steadfast love even though he had sinned grievously. Just as two detectives shadow a wanted man, so goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life. We have only to fall back and we will be caught in the arms of God's goodness and mercy. When things are going well they will be there to protect us from pride. When things are not going well they will encourage us lest we consider turning back. We don't know what a day may bring forth but if God's goodness and mercy are with us what need we fear? From youth to old age they will be with us, yes even at the time of death for they follow us all the days of our life.

When God spoke to David of "a great while to come" the reference

was not only to this life but also to a life beyond death. The final words of this Psalm 23 refer to it: "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." David speaks of the way along which goodness and mercy follow him and then he refers to the destination and both the way and the destination are in harmony. If you see great big elaborate gates, and a gate lodge built beside them and a long well kept avenue you don't expect to find a wooden hut at the end of the driveway! No. You expect a big house in keeping with the gates and driveway. If God's goodness and mercy follow us then we must be on the way to the house of the Lord, and from the goodness and mercy we get an idea of the Lord's house.

When looking at verse 5 we noted that David had in mind the banquets which he sometimes laid on for young warriors and this led to the thought of God's banquet. The house of the Lord mentioned here in the last verse is the same place as that where the banquet was held; David thinks on to the palace of the Divine King. As a reward and as encouragement the warrior was admitted once into the palace as a guest; but when the banquet was over he had to return to the battlefield. He looked forward, however, to a time when all his battles would be over and he would be invited back to the palace, not to enjoy a banquet for a night but to live permanently there. As we consider these words "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" they seem to say that when the struggle of this life is over, those who love God will dwell permanently with him in heaven.

These last words of Psalm 23 must be the nearest approach in the O.T. to the saying of Jesus when he said that he was the way to the Father's house where there was room for all. Certainly we who know the N.T. have no difficulty in interpreting them in this way. We can get an idea of what the house of the Lord is like by looking at Jesus. He raised the dead; he himself was raised from the dead; he spoke of preparing a place for us in his Father's house and by following him we are on the way to it. Jesus is the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls who leads us to fountains of living water and if we spend ourselves in his service here on earth he will by and by give us rest from our

labours in heaven for ever.

On verse 5 we noted that the emphasis was not so much on the food of the banquet or on other accompaniments but rather on the friendship of the host. There is a similar idea here. Good and secure as the house of the Lord is, a house is not a home just because it has a good roof or is well furnished. A man says that he is going home when he is going to life-long friends or relatives. It is the presence of God which makes heaven the house of the Lord.

And so through all the length of days  
Thy goodness faileth never;  
Good shepherd may I sing thy praise,  
Within thy house for ever.

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