

## Psalm 23 A Paean of Praise

(A Bible Reading with A J Pollock, Hamilton Smith, W Bramwell Dick, J T Mawson, & E D (Dennett?). Extracted from Simple Testimony Vol. 35, 1918-19, page 143 etc.)

### Psalm 23: 1

**P. V. W.** APPROPRIATELY the translators of our English Bible labelled this psalm "David's confidence in God." God's grace it was that relieved us of the burden of sin; it supports us all along our journey, and teaches us to walk in God's ways.

**Q.** How far is the language of the psalm that of the Lord Himself in His pathway here?

**A. J. P.** Surely as a dependent Man (though "God over all blessed for ever" at all times), the Lord could adopt the language of Psalm 23, save on the cross itself, when His language was, "Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" rather than "Thou art with Me." But in all His perfect life down here He could surely adopt the language of this psalm. Remember "He restoreth my soul" is in the sense that rest or food restores, and not the recovery from backsliding which, needless to say, could never apply to the Lord.

**Q.** How far may a Christian employ the psalm as expressing his own experience? Does it not rather belong to Israel?

**P. V. W.** This psalm cannot be sung by Israel until she is restored. As the redeemed of the Lord, we anticipate Israel in this song of praise to our Saviour.

**A. J. P.** It is one of the psalms that the Christian can quote entire as his experience, for it describes a *Person*, and personal relations with Him. Dispensations may change, but Jehovah is ever the same.

### "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want."

**Q.** Who is the Shepherd?

**H. S.** The Lord, Jehovah. And Jehovah of the Old Testament is Jesus of the New. He is the forsaken Man of Psalm 22, the accepted Man of Psalm 24.

**W. B. D.** Psalms 22, 23 and 24 form a group presenting Christ as the Good Shepherd in death, the Great Shepherd in resurrection, and the Chief Shepherd in glory.

**A. J. P.** The connection is obvious. Psalm 22 gives us the Saviour, in His past activity; Psalm 23, the Shepherd in His present activity; Psalm 24, the Sovereign in His future activity.

**H. S.** In Psalm 22 His strength is "dried up like a potsherd"; in Psalm 24 He is "strong and mighty." In the former He is "a worm and no man," in the latter, "the Lord of hosts" and "King of glory." This is the One who is "my Shepherd," One who has descended first into the lower parts of the earth, "who has ascended up far above all heavens that He might fill all things." He has filled every position in which a man can be found, from the utmost distance to the highest glory. He has trodden every step between these vast extremes. With such a Shepherd we need fear no evil, nor wonder at any blessing He bestows.

**Q.** What thought is conveyed to the mind by the word "shepherd"?

**W. B. D.** It suggests solicitude, strength tenderness and, in the case of our blessed Lord, before everything else, self-sacrifice. Can we conceive anything more beautiful than the words of Isaiah 40: 11: "He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom"?

**Q.** There must, of course, be the appropriation of the Shepherd as one's own, must there not?

**H. S.** It is one thing to speak of the Lord as *the* Shepherd, quite another to say, He is my Shepherd. The first is a matter of knowledge; the last, a question of experience. "The Lord is my Shepherd" is the language of one who has proved the Lord in the varied circumstances of his pathway and gladly submits to His leading.

**E. D.** To say "my" Shepherd is the language of faith; the word "my" is therefore the doorway into the psalm.

**H. S.** All questions as to our standing before God must be presumed to have been settled. I could not say, "my Shepherd" if I had a lingering thought that after all He may be "my Judge." "My Saviour" must come before "my Shepherd."

**J. T. M.** This Psalm is full of wonderful blessings, and all depend upon the first sentence. Think of the immensity of the grace that is in it, the love that has made it possible for poor, despised people, thought nothing of in the world, to say: The Lord is my Shepherd, I belong to Him and He is mine.

**Q.** This implies, does it not, that we are everlastingly safe?

**J. T. M.** To be sure! If you can say "The Lord is my Shepherd," then, on the authority of His own Word you can say, "I am everlastingly safe." Do you not remember how He said, "My sheep hear My voice . . . and I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand." The hand that broke the power of death, and that annulled the mighty power of the devil, is the hand that holds your soul secure.

**Q.** But on our part there must be a cleaving to the Lord, must there not?

**J. T. M.** Yes. We are exhorted to cleave to the Lord with purpose of heart. But it does not say, Cleave to the Shepherd, or to the Saviour. We are to cleave to Him as our *Lord*, another character entirely.

**W. B. D.** But our safety is not the only thing. He who can truly say "The Lord is my Shepherd" is entitled to add "I shall not want." To question the latter would be to doubt the former, and to have fears as to the efficiency of the Shepherd.

**H. S.** If we look at this world with its many wants and failing supplies, it is no small thing to say "I shall not want." But with a great Shepherd we can say great things.

**E. D.** We shall not want, not because we are sheep, but because He is our Shepherd. This conclusion flows not from what we are to Him, but from what He is to us.

**P. V. W.** What He is, has done, and is now doing, gives perfect rest to those that know Him. He has charged Himself with all our cares and needs—we shall not want. Both vagabondage and want have ceased for those represented in this psalm, because they have returned to the Lord.

**A. F. P.** The emphasis is on *Lord*, who by virtue of the sufferings of Psalm 22 is qualified as Shepherd, having proved faithful unto death; and also because of who He is the Psalmist can triumphantly say, "I shall not want."

**W. V. B.** The Psalmist seems to give a graphic review, under the eye of the Shepherd, of his whole life in the wilderness pathway, commencing from the moment of his realization that since Jehovah was his Shepherd it was impossible for him to want.

**Q.** But the children of God are often in want. Take Paul, for instance. According to Philippians 4: 11, 12, was he not sometimes in want?

**W. B. D.** Certainly; otherwise how could he say, "I shall not want"? If a child is hungry, it comes to its mother to have its want supplied. It knows that its want will be met, so that it can say, "I shall not want." When Paul had wants he turned to the Shepherd, confident in His care, and as a result He could say, "I have all things and abound."

**REMARK.** What we lack sometimes may not be good for us to have. It says, "They that seek the Lord shall not want any *good* thing" (Psalm 34: 10).

**A. J. P.** Paul might be in want of food, raiment, shelter and liberty. But the Shepherd supplies what is necessary to keep the soul at rest in whatever circumstances the sheep may be. Whatever might be Paul's privations affecting the outer man, the inward man knew no lack.

**P. V. W.** If we think of our many needs, both in our testimony for God and for the present life, He is (and we must learn to make Him so) our competence for all the way. With Him filling the soul's vision it is easy to say, "I shall not want." With Him on board, our little boat cannot go down, no matter how big the waves. It is the sense of the Lord's love and presence that gives the holy boldness in our psalm's expression, "I shall not want."

### **LOVE'S SWEET COMPULSION, Psalm 23: 2, 3**

**"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters."**

**A. F. P.** A sheep only lies down when satisfied. When it says "He maketh me," the idea is not force, but the result of satisfaction in consequence of the Shepherd's care.

**W. B. D.** The sheep is not here brought to green pastures to have need supplied, but because it has eaten well. Every want has been met, and amid peace and plenty, under the protection of the Shepherd, it lies down.

**P. V. W.** What a lovely picture of repose in safety! We could not thus lie down if the enemy was at our gates, and we were in fear of what might befall us. The soul is in sweet contemplation of Him who, having defeated the enemy and borne sin's judgment, becomes now the object of the soul's affection. Now, in LOVE'S SWEET COMPULSION, He makes His obedient sheep to "lie down."

**H. S.** Not only does He provide for our temporal needs, but He satisfies us with spiritual blessings. He would set me free from earthly cares to fill my soul with heavenly joys. He not only brings His sheep to pastures of tender grass, but there He makes them lie down. No hungry sheep will *lie down* in green pastures; the hungry sheep will *feed* in the pastures of tender grass, but the satisfied sheep will lie down and rest. So our Shepherd not only provides us with spiritual nourishment, but He fills our souls with satisfaction and rest.

**J. T. M.** Then He leads us beside still waters. The words are better rendered "waters of quietness," signifying peace, no matter what the circumstances.

**W. B. D.** It is what another has termed "a scene of satisfied desire."

**A. F. P.** Not only does the Shepherd satisfy hunger, but thirst also, by these still waters, as He himself said, "He that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst."

**J. T. M.** You may have to go through scenes of trouble; the storm may rage about you, and you may have your share of trouble. But the quietest life in regard to these things is not always the most fruitful; that is, those who have the least trouble in this world do not always yield the most glory to God.

**Q.** But what about the waters of quietness? How can we talk about waters of quietness if a storm is raging about us?

**J. T. M.** We have a lovely illustration of it in the case of the sudden storm on the Galilean Sea, when

"All but One were sore afraid  
Of sinking in the deep  
His head was on a pillow laid,  
And He was fast asleep."

But why did not the disciples lie down beside Him? They would have been just as safe as they were when the great calm, at His bidding, stretched itself upon the waters. It does not matter what our circumstances are. If we can say, "The Lord is my Shepherd," we can have quietness and peace like that.

**P. V. W.** Everlasting goodness takes us by the hand and leads us beside the still waters. These waters were not always quiet, they were not so in the former psalm, but now He has stilled them for His own beloved sheep. When the waters came in unto His soul at the cross (Psalm 69: 1) they were a mighty flood. But these waterfloods are passed; Christ has stilled them; He has made them "still waters" for us.

**H. S.** Our Shepherd ministers refreshment to our souls. He leads us not by running streams that dry up, but the deep still waters of the well. We sometimes sing:

Is the wilderness before thee,  
Desert lands where drought abides?  
Heavenly springs shall there restore thee  
Fresh from God's exhaustless tides.

Like Israel, who forsook "the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that could hold no water," we too often seek satisfaction in earthly things, only to find that all earthly springs run dry. If only we could trust the Lord, not only to save our souls, but to satisfy our hearts, He would lead us into the green pastures that never wither, and beside the still waters that never run dry.

**"He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."**

**P. V. W.** This is not a once accomplished work, never to be repeated, but a present ministry of our Lord toward us. It is the expression of His care and thoughtful provision for every step of our journey through the world. "He restoreth" and "He leadeth."

**W. V. B.** The Shepherd takes the direction of the sheep entirely under His own supervision, conducts it the whole length of the pathway; nothing can harm it, for He is there. It is "He" and "me" all the way through. How touching are these expressions: "*He maketh me,*" "*He leadeth me.*"

**Q.** What is the thought of restoration in verse 3?

**J. T. M.** When it says "He restoreth my soul" it means, He invigorates my soul. He gives me spiritual tonics. They are not tonics that brighten you up for a few hours and then leave you more depressed than you were before. When the Lord invigorates us He makes us strong for that which is before us.

**A. F. P.** The sustainment is constant, giving strength to *walk* in the paths of righteousness.

**Q.** There is also the thought of restoration from wanderings, is there not?

**W. B. D.** If wearied, He lifts us up; if downcast, He encourages us; if wandering, He brings us back.

**H. S.** Alas! we often turn aside. And after a season of deepest spiritual blessing we are in the greatest danger. In Matthew 26 we find priests and scribes plotting to kill Jesus. But in the upper room all is quietness and peace. The Lord has been leading His poor weak and weary sheep into green pastures and beside still waters, and they close that time of sweet fellowship by singing a hymn. But the Lord warns them that that same night all would be offended because of Him, and every one would be scattered. Singing a hymn in His company one hour; offended and scattered the next. But if they wander, He restores. He restored Peter. How often we are like Him, and like Naomi who said, "I went out," but had to add, "The Lord hath brought me home again."

**W. B. D.** He who in verse 2 leads us beside still waters, in verse 3 leads us in paths of righteousness. Having led us in, He leads us out, that, satisfied with His provision, refreshed with His blessing, encouraged of Himself, we may walk here to His praise and glory.

**Q.** What is meant by paths of righteousness?

**J. T. M.** It was once true that all we like sheep turned every one to his own way. Then our straying feet trod the paths of unrighteousness. But now we have heard the Shepherd's voice, and as we follow Him obediently and adoringly we are walking in the paths of righteousness, for we are taking His way, not our own.

**REMARK.** He leads us beside the still waters *for our sake*, that we may be refreshed. But He leads us in the paths of righteousness *for His Name's sake*, that He may be glorified.

**H. S.** He leads us so to walk as to glorify His Name. That Name stands for all that is holy. He leads in paths that accord with His Name.

**J. T. M.** He does it; but He does not drive or drag, He leads. I watched a lady teaching her little boy of fifteen months to walk. She did not make him take long strides nor make him go fast. She shortened her steps to his, and went the pace that he could manage, and she knew it exactly. As I watched her, this verse came to my mind. That is how the Lord leads us. We may trust Him altogether, all the time, and for everything, and He will lead us in right paths for His Name's sake.

#### **COMPANY IN THE VALLEY, Psalm 23: 4**

**"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."**

**W. B. D.** This verse is full of cheer and inspiration. If it is a "valley," it means that there is something, or some place, above and beyond. If we "walk through," it indicates that we shall certainly emerge. And if there is a "shadow," it shows that the light of the scene beyond the valley is illuminating the darkness, cheering and beckoning us onward and forward.

**Q.** What is meant by the valley of the shadow of death?

**A. F. P.** It refers, I judge, to this world, where death abounds.

**A. J. P.** We can understand how, when David was being hunted from one place to another, that his experiences, never knowing when the bolt of death would reach him, would lead to such an expression. The valley of the shadow of death refers to the whole of our life down here. But the believer of this Christian dispensation can say in triumph, "Death is ours."

**J. T. M.** This world is just the sepulchre of Jesus, and the more faithful we are to the Lord, the more the world will be to us the valley of the shadow of death. The shadow of *His* death lies on the fairest prospects that present themselves to us here.

**REMARK.** In another sense, the valley of the shadow of death is the path we have to tread when death is actually in view, and perhaps even the path through death itself.

**H. S.** Speaking of it thus, the paths of righteousness may lead into the valley of the shadow of death. It was so with the martyrs. They suffered death rather than sin. But there is no need to fear.

**Q.** What is the particular "evil" referred to in this verse?

**A. J. P.** "I will fear no evil" simply means, "I will not fear evil." Evil, or harm, of any kind.

**H. S.** Four reasons are given in this verse why we need not be afraid.

(1) We are only "WALKING THROUGH" the valley. We do not fear when we enter a tunnel because we believe we are going *through* it, and that soon we shall reach the bright sunshine on the other side of it.

(2) It is only the valley of death's "SHADOW." When the Good Shepherd took His lonely way down into the dark valley it was to encounter the "substance" of death in all its terror, as the wages of sin. If the believer is called to go through the valley, it is but the "shadow" that he has to meet.

**P. V. W.** A shadow may frighten, but it cannot harm.

**H. S.** Sheep are poor timid things and easily frightened, even by shadows. We come now to another thing to silence our fears.

(3) If we pass the way of the valley we have COMPANY, and such company—the One who has already been through death's raging flood journeys with us. Well may we say, "I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

**Q.** Do we not find a striking illustration of this in the case of the three Hebrew youths in Babylon?

**H. S.** Yes: the path of righteousness led Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego into the valley of death, but the flames that encompassed them only unloosed their bonds and put them in company with the Son of God, according to the word that says: "When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned" (Isaiah 43: 2).

**Q.** What is the fourth reason given why we need fear no evil?

**H. S.** (4) Because of the Shepherd's rod and staff. The Psalmist says: "Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."

**J. T. M.** When the Psalmist comes to the valley of the shadow of death, he changes the pronoun. Up to this point he has been speaking *about* the Lord; now he speaks to Him, showing how near the Shepherd is to the sheep. He says "Thou."

**Q.** What is the difference between the rod and the staff?

**W. B. D.** The rod may speak of power (compare Ex. 7: 10-12; Ex. 17: 5, etc.), or, as is generally supposed, of correction, while the staff is for support. But whether His power, His correction, or His support, all are for our "comfort" in difficult circumstances.

**A. F. P.** I have thought that the rod with its crook would be used by the Shepherd to help the sheep out of a ditch back into the path, or to restrain it from straying into danger. The Shepherd would use the staff to drive off savage beasts. In Palestine they were in the habit of carrying a club for this purpose. In other words, what comforts the one who has to pass through the valley is the Shepherd's power to direct and to protect.

**P. V. W.** All that the rod in the hand of Moses meant to the people of Israel (see Ex. 14: 16; Ex. 17: 5) Christ Jesus is to us now, He who opened the sea for our deliverance from a worse bondage than Israel's. The staff occupies a large place in Scripture, and is a symbol of support and strength. For us, Christ is the reality of what the staff implies, to sustain the Christian through this life. Every other staff, every other confidence fails. Christ is the true Priest-not encompassed with infirmities as Aaron-Who can carry His people through the whole journey to the end. He is God's wisdom and resource for us, in all circumstances and in all things.

### **THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH, Psalm 23: 5**

**"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."**

**Q.** How does the Lord prepare a table for us?

**A. J. P.** The allusion is to the work of the Shepherd in finding out suitable pasture, and taking care that the sheep are secure from attack by serpents and wild beasts, the natural enemies of the flock. Surely it refers to the ministry of the Lord to His people, giving them the sense of His love and care so that it should be as a feast to their souls, and that in a hostile world like this.

**P. V. W.** The table is the place where the children sit down in their Father's presence and company to enjoy His prepared bounties.

**W. B. D.** There is not only the Shepherd's abundant provision for His own, but His VINDICATION of them. Surrounded by enemies who watch in order to see what it costs to be a Christian, and by reproaching us (if we give them cause) to malign our precious Lord, He anoints our head with oil, causing us ever to rejoice; and He makes our cup of blessing always to overflow.

**A. F. P.** The table prepared in the presence of enemies seems to indicate that He has made communion possible in spite of all the powers of evil. His being superior to all enemies is, I think, emphasized rather than the thought of the table.

**H. S.** Many of the sheep may never have to take the way of the valley, but even so, they will have enemies to face, and in the presence of the enemy the Lord can uphold His people. We have a Shepherd who can provide for, and sustain, His sheep in spite of all that man can do.

**Q.** What thought is conveyed to the mind by the anointing of the head with oil?

**A. F. P.** It suggests friendship, for did not Christ complain that Simon did not show this mark of friendship to him? (Luke 7: 46). The oil may well remind us that only the Spirit of God can make such friendship a possibility. The result is that the soul is more than satisfied, and there is the overflow.

**W. B. D.** For a practical illustration of this in real life, read Philippians 4. Then let us each look in the mirror and ask if there we see a present-day sample of it.

**J. T. M.** The Lord, spreading a table for us, makes us to feast. Then comes "the oil of gladness" that makes the face shine, joy. Then you have the overflowing cup.

**A. F. P.** The cup, I judge, simply indicates the soul's capacity, but surely the fullness to Over-flowing is the thought brought before us rather than the cup itself. The blessing is more than the soul can contain and runs over in worship to God, and in telling of His grace out of a full heart to those around.

**"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (v. 6).**

**H. S.** With such a Shepherd, what other conclusion can we reach? The Lord goes before, the sheep follow after, and goodness and mercy bring up the rear. How blessed that goodness and mercy should follow behind, just where they are wanted, for there are weak, and sick, and lame sheep, which lag behind and follow afar off. Goodness and mercy will pick them up. If we cannot count upon the tender mercies of one another, this at least we know, the goodness and mercy of the Lord will follow us *all* the days of our life.

**A. F. P.** This last verse is the language of a heart fully persuaded of the never-failing supply of God's goodness and mercy every step of earth's journey, and of glory in the life to come.

**Q.** What is meant by "the house of the Lord"?

**P. V. W.** No doubt the Psalmist was thinking of an earthly kingdom and city, with God's dwelling-place and throne in the midst thereof out of which should proceed law and authority, and light and blessing for all the earth. But the hope of the Christian is above even this glory and blessedness.

**REMARK.** For the Christian, "the house of the Lord" is the Father's house.

**J. T. M.** The Psalm that begins with "The Lord is my Shepherd" would not be complete if it did not close with "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The one is the consequence of the other; they go together; they are twin statements.

**W. B. D.** Faith always looks forward, and we have THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH over difficulties without and failure within, as the believer exclaims, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." HALLELUJAH!

**W. V. B.** What a Companion is Jesus! Food for my heart; Refreshment for my spirit; Restorer of my soul when I have wandered in a by-path; with me through the valley of the shadow of death; filling my cup to overflowing; His goodness and mercy following me every day, and I am going to dwell throughout all eternity with Him. HALLELUJAH!

**H. S.** This is the glorious end of a great beginning. For what can be greater, in this poor world, than to go through it with the Lord Himself for your Shepherd? And if He is indeed my Shepherd, it must follow that not only will He lead me through this wilderness, but will bring me at last into the glory where He Himself has gone.