

5) THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD (PSALM 23)

The 23rd psalm is by far the most popular, most memorized, most requested psalm and, some would argue, most popular passage in the whole bible. Whether at a funeral, before a surgery, sung or spoken, it communicates God's presence, guidance and assurance of peace like no other. What is the secret to its success?

A GUIDING METAPHOR

"The Lord is my Shepherd." There are various literary devices in the psalms. There are metaphors and there are similes. A simile is a comparison or parallel descriptor. "As" a deer longs for flowing streams, "so" my soul longs for you, O God (42:1). Such words are similes, as are words such as "like" or "as." Metaphor is much stronger and more direct a descriptor. The Lord "is" my Shepherd. The "is" makes "shepherd" the guiding metaphor for the whole psalm. The rest of the psalm defines the benefits and privileges of being shepherded by God.

SHEPHERD AS METAPHOR

A shepherd is someone who herds sheep. He guides sheep to food and away from danger. He is also liable for the welfare of the sheep. In the ancient world, many leaders and kings were called shepherds. Pharaohs were depicted with a shepherd's staff across their chests. David is described as a good shepherd when he is young. His experience caring for and protecting sheep is good training for his eventual assumption of the kingship. Alternatively, Israel's shepherds are accused of feeding on the sheep, of abusing their power and privilege (e.g. Ezekiel 34:1-10).

THE DIVINE SHEPHERD

The Old Testament associates God's Shepherding with 2 defining experiences in Israel's collective life.

1) The Exodus of the people from Egypt and their wilderness wandering (Psalm 77:20, 78:52-53, 80:1) which is God's rescue and guidance of the people until they reach the promised land.

2) The exile of the people in various lands and the dream of their return to the promised land (Isaiah 40:11, 49:9-10)

Psalm 23 echoes the experience of the wilderness.

- 1) "I Shall not want." During the 40 years wandering in the wilderness, the people were always provided for (e.g. Deuteronomy 2:7)
- 2) "He leads me in the right paths." God guided Israel to the promised land (Exodus 15:13).
- 3) "You prepare a table before me." God can "prepare a table in the wilderness for the people." (Ps. 78:19)

“MY” SHEPHERD

Nowhere else in the bible does anyone say that the Lord is “my” shepherd. This offers us one key to the personal vibrancy of this psalm for the life of faith. The sovereign of the universe, the creator of all, is “my.”

PSALM 23 AS LAMENT

This psalm is an individual lament or prayer for help of an individual. Those who pray feel free to express their fear and longing to God because they have an intimate relationship with God. They are certain God will hear and answer. Complaint psalms typically move from plea for help, to a description of enemies, to an assurance that the Lord will deliver. Psalm 23 offers no complaint and is thoroughly a statement of trust. Yet behind it there is allusion to trials requiring the psalmist to seek the shepherd’s staff and sustenance for shelter, protection and nourishment. The entire psalm is an exposition of the first verse: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

v.2 offers two pastoral (shepherd) images to complement the shepherd metaphor. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. The image is of tranquility. “Green pastures” can also be translated as beautiful new grass (quite rare in the Holy Land). “Still waters” can be translated as “restful waters.”

v.3 – “He restores my soul (or life)” – from physical danger or is it a rejuvenation or revival of spirit? “He leads me in right paths...” or back on track in life. The shepherd is always leading the sheep.

v. 4 – There is real danger but it is not clear exactly what it is. “Though I walk through the darkest valley...” (“darkest valley” is one word in Hebrew). There is a threat to the psalmist’s life, a sense of real danger. Is it physical or spiritual? Regardless of what the threat is, the psalmist is kept safe by the Lord’s comfort and protection. The “rod and staff” are typical tools of the shepherd to secure and protect the sheep, and bring them out of any pit they may fall into. Also, a staff is a physical comfort and necessity for the elderly or wounded (exodus 21:19, Zechariah 8:4). The rod is a weapon for protection (2 Samuel 23:21) and a means to assemble and count sheep (Leviticus 27:32)

THE DIVINE HOST

v.5 – “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” There is an ancient tradition of hospitality. God is the host who gives refuge to one beset by enemies. When in the shelter of a host’s dwelling, a person is offered food and drink, oil for grooming, and assurance of safety. The metaphor of host is parallel to the metaphor of shepherd.

GOODNESS AND MERCY

v.6 - Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." Mercy or loving-kindness (*Hesed*) combines faithfulness, trustworthiness, and abundant, tender love. This word more than any other, defines the character of God as shepherd. Dwelling in God's house is not primarily about life everlasting, as we read it with New Testament eyes. Rather it is about God's temple, the place of safety and abundance in spiritual more than material terms. In the temple and temple worship, the experience of God as faithful loving-kindness is most possible. Perhaps the person who composed this psalm is a temple musician (1 Chronicles 15-16).

Psalm 23 also foretells the words of Jesus: "I am the good shepherd." (John 10:11) Jesus is also described as "the shepherd and guardian" of souls who leads believers when they "are going astray like sheep." (1 Peter 2:25)

For next Week: Read Psalms 51, 32, 130, 139