

Psalm 23: From Pasture to Palace

If you ever memorized just one psalm, it's probably Psalm 23: "The Lord is My Shepherd." It is a beloved psalm, often used at funerals because it mentions "the valley of the shadow of death." It is especially comforting as we consider lying down in green pastures and still waters. We long for the idyllic scenes of the shepherd with his lambs, caring for them, providing for them, protecting them, feeding them. It is completely awesome to think of God caring for us the way a devoted shepherd cares for his flock. However, if we stop at that imagery, we'll miss the main thrust of this idyll.

I admit that in the past, I've been enamored with viewing this entire psalm as a picture of a shepherd with his sheep. David Holder, gospel preacher from Texas, however disabused me of this notion. And I'm thankful, because so much more has been opened up by recognizing that there are two significant scenes in this psalm.

Scene 1 (vss. 1-4): David adores his Shepherd. First, he praises his Shepherd to other sheep, and then he directly converses with his great Shepherd. Having such a great shepherd, David knows that he will not want. That is, he will not lack any needs. Why? Because the shepherd provides him rest in green pastures, slakes his thirst with still waters, rejuvenates and strengthens him, and leads him along paths that are right and sure. Additionally, though a weak sheep in constant danger from all kinds of predators, David's Shepherd uses His rod and staff to direct, discipline, and protect him. Even that rod of correction is a comfort.

Scene 2 (vss. 5-6): David applauds his Host. Though it is tempting to see this second scene as that of sheep on a seasonal table land, the picture is much more in keeping with moving indoors. The metaphor shifts from a sheep with his Shepherd to a guest with his Host. The scene shifts from the sheepfold to the house. Though enemies look on, the guest is protected and provided for by his gracious Host. Hospitality is extended in abundance as the guest's head is anointed with oil and his cup overflows. Where else would he go but this house where goodness and mercy follows?

But here is where this becomes really powerful. This psalm is both autobiographical of David, biographical of Israel, and prophetic (for lack of a better term) for us.

Consider **II Samuel 7:1-17**. **II Samuel 7:1** begins: "Now when the king lived in his house and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies" (ESV). As **Psalm 23** ends, David is in a house. But note especially **II Samuel 7:8**. What had God done for David? He had taken him from the pastures, from following the sheep, to being prince over Israel. He had moved him from pasture to palace. When David was a shepherd boy, God had guided and cared for him. He had helped him face the lions and bears. He helped him face down Goliath. He cared for David as he wandered sheeplike while hunted by Saul. Despite all the enemies that surrounded David, both within and without his own people, God established a house for David. He prepared a table for him. He literally anointed him when He sent Samuel to anoint him king in **I Samuel 16**. The blessings of his kingship overflowed.

In a sense, the same passage (**II Samuel 7**) shows us how this psalm is biographical of Israel. God had shepherded them in the wilderness as well, delivering them from the enemies of Egypt, Moab, Ammon, etc. He even refers to the leaders He set up over Israel as shepherds (**II Samuel 7:7**). But He moved from shepherding them in the wilderness to housing them in the Promised Land. They were no longer sheep wandering in the wilderness, they were guests in the land hosted by the Lord. They had shifted from wandering in the wilderness to planted in the Promised Land.

When we see this progression, we see something even deeper for us than simply God caring for us like sheep. We see what God does for His sheep. He moves them from pasture to palace. Presently, we wander in the wilderness of this world, letting Jesus shepherd and guide us. He refreshes us. He guards us with peace. He feeds us and gives us drink. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death as predators perch on every side, but with His rod and staff He comforts us. But something even better is coming. The shepherding of the Lord doesn't end in some field; it ends in His house. Though enemies look on, He is preparing a place for us, a feast table if you will (cf. **Revelation 19:9**). We will be anointed and our cup will overflow. For all eternity, goodness and mercy will follow us, and He will host us in His house forever. We have a heavenly home being prepared as we follow the Shepherd. It is being reserved for us by God and guarded through faith for a salvation to be revealed in the last time (**I Peter 1:3-5**).

No wonder David claimed he would lack nothing with his Shepherd. What more could we want? Hang on to this Shepherd and get ready for Him to become your Host. Follow Him and He will lead us from pasture to palace. Praise the Lord!

—Edwin L. Crozier