

The Promise of Promises

Each week we say a psalm as part of our reading of scripture. The Book of Psalms is the only book of scripture contained in the Book of Common Prayer. This one biblical book is privileged over all others which may seem strange, but there are reasons the Psalter is so important. The Book of Psalms has been called “the Prayer Book of the Bible” because it is a book filled with prayers of petition, thanksgiving, praise, wisdom, and lament. Almost any type of prayer we need to pray is included in the psalter. The Book of Psalms has also been called the “the hymn book of the Bible” because for centuries Protestants felt that the only appropriate words to sing in church were the words of the Psalter. The psalms, which are credited to King David although there were many authors, were also the prayer book of Jesus. He most probably knew many of them by heart. Indeed, according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ last words are from Psalm 22, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

The Twenty-third Psalm, along with the Lord’s Prayer, John 3:16, and the beginning of Genesis, is one of the most recognizable pieces of scripture in western civilization. I would guess that many of us could recite it without prompting and the rest of us would only need a little help to say these famous words (at least in the King James Version). There have been dozens of musical settings of this psalm in sacred and popular music from Brahms to Vaughn Williams to Bobby McFerrin. There have also been paraphrases of the psalm and re-imaginings of it in poetry and hymns by George Herbert and Isaac Watts, among others. There have even been some profane versions of the psalm, especially among soldiers.

I think that many people find the meter and pace soothing. Perhaps because it is so familiar it is comforting. I wonder in our post-agricultural era what meaning people took away from the psalm. After all, very few of us have any but the most peripheral experiences with sheep. We wear wool clothing, but we are not engaged in the shearing of sheep nor the carding and spinning of wool. Some people knit but they get their wool from a shop. Additionally, very few of us know a shepherd so why would we take comfort in saying the Lord is my shepherd? However, by looking at the psalm in depth we may come away with a deeper appreciation for its importance beyond the familiar and comfortable.

In the very first phrase every word is vitally important. “The LORD” as presented here in all caps indicates that the Hebrew word behind it is the proper name of God, YHWH. This is not a generic word for the Almighty, this is God’s proper name as revealed to Moses from the burning bush. The psalmist is speaking of a specific god and claiming that god, YHWH, as his very own shepherd. This relationship is intimate. He knows God by name.

Furthermore, the verb “is” indicates a present relationship; not one that is past or future. He also says “my” not “our.” “My” indicates that the psalmist stakes a personal claim on this shepherd and the shepherd has staked a claim on him. This is not your shepherd or our shepherd or their shepherd, but **my** shepherd.

Speaking of shepherds, they are special within the Middle Eastern culture. There was a trend in preaching about 20 years ago to call shepherds the lowest of the low, scum of the earth. At Christmas preachers wanted to make the point that these lowly ones were the first to receive a celestial message about the Messiah’s birth and

then to visit Jesus in the manger. But shepherds were by no means the lowest of the low. If they were so low God would not describe Godself as a shepherd nor would Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd." Indeed, shepherding was an important and honorable profession. Unlike cattle, sheep and goats can graze in the hilly and rocky terrain of Israel. They were not just a source of wool but also of milk and meat. Even today you are much more likely to eat lamb or goat in Israel than you are to eat beef.

What follows in the second phrase is remarkable. The psalmist says, "I shall not want." The psalmist does not say I shall not want for food, drink, or clothing. The psalmist is saying I will never want for anything. I know this shepherd by name, and he takes care of my every need.

The next two verses are in the second person. The psalmist tells us that "He" sets me down in green pastures and takes me to still water. These are places where there is plenty of food and water that is clear and drinkable. But it is not just the necessities that God takes care of. This shepherd God also restores my soul and leads me in paths of righteousness. This shepherd takes care of my spiritual needs not just my physical needs.

The middle of the psalm turns dark for a moment. We hear that the shepherd leads the sheep through the dark valley. This alludes to the darkness that comes into our lives, our fears of despair, danger, misdeeds, and death. The times when we feel all is lost and we are about to die. Despite this darkness we do not need to fear for the shepherd is with us. The very tools of the shepherd's trade, the rod and staff, are comforting. The rod is the tool that the shepherd uses to defend the sheep from predators. The staff is the tool the shepherd uses to keep the sheep together; the crook of the staff can snag a sheep that wanders and pull it back into the fold.

In the next verse there is a dramatic change as the psalmist speaks to the shepherd directly, saying "thou" which in Elizabethan English is the informal version of you. That is, you, the God who is familiar and close to me prepares a table for me even amid my enemies. You anoint me with oil and my cup overflows. Even when I might be surrounded by those that want to do me harm, the shepherd is preparing a feast for me and anointing me, and my cup is never empty.

Finally, the psalmist realizes the magnitude of the shepherd's love and care. The psalmist recognizes, "If all this is happening, then God's goodness and mercy must be **pursuing me** (a better translation than "follows me") all my life. I will live in God's house, which is the Temple, for all eternity."

We cannot expect this from any shepherd. We may think that money, earthly power, possessions, IRAs, stocks, or other earthly things are our ultimate help, but they are not. Money can be lost, power is fleeting, possessions can be stolen or destroyed, and stocks and bonds go belly up. Only the LORD who is my shepherd is eternal and faithful. We can flee from the flock, and we can look for greener pastures, but they do not exist. What is without God is a mirage. It is ephemeral. It is nothing.

Pray the Twenty-third Psalm with all your heart. Accept its promises, which are the promises of God. It points us to the life-giving love that we all seek. Here it is as short as a greeting card, easily learned by heart, and worth cherishing all the days of our life. Accept its invitation to be your personal psalm, your personal prayer, your personal hymn to our loving God who treasures us all the days of our life.