

Psalm 23: The Slain Lamb, Our Shepherd

I. OVERVIEW

- A. **Introduction:** Psalm 23 is very familiar to us, probably the most familiar song from the Bible in all of history. My desire is that the LORD would awaken our hearts from “nursery-rhyme” familiarity with Psalm 23, to see it in a new light. I want us to behold the glory of Christ (Lk. 24:25-26) in this psalm and correspondingly behold His *shepherding* of our lives, with the aim that the end-time Church would walk in the truth of this psalm.
- B. **Approaching Psalm 23:** 1) **Historic:** in the time of David; 2) **Messianic:** through the prophetic narrative in the Psalter and the life of Christ; 3) **Personal:** applying the truths of Psalm 23, specifically for the end-time church; 4) **Israel:** since David is not only a typological portrait of Christ, but also, as king, the head of the nation of Israel, this psalm embodies the intercessory cry to be delivered from sin-caused exile.

II. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS OF PSALM 23

- A. **Two images of YHWH dominate: Shepherd** (vv.1-4) and **Host** (vv.5-6). The Scriptures use *shepherd* as a **divine title** of YHWH (Gen. 49:24; Ps. 28:9; 74:1; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; Isa. 40:11; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:8-12; Mic. 7:14), a **messianic/kingly title** (2 Sam. 5:2; 1 Chron. 11:2; Ps. 78:70-72; Isa. 44:28; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24; Zech. 13:7; Mt. 2:6), and a **leadership title** for overseers of YHWH’s flock (Jer. 3:14-15; Jer. 23; 25; Ezek. 34; Jn. 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Jesus identifies with both the divine and messianic titles: He is the true, good, and seeking Shepherd, who lays His life down for the sheep (Jn. 10; Lk. 15).
- B. **Duties:** The primary responsibility of a shepherd is to **provide, protect, and guide** the flock. When shepherd leaders are commissioned to “feed” the people, it signifies teaching them about the knowledge and instruction of God (Jer. 3:14-15; Jn. 21:16; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Heb. 5:12-14).
- C. **Psalm progression: Good → Bad → Best** (pilgrimage, or return to the house of the LORD)

III. PSALM 23: HISTORICALLY (2 SAM. 15-18: ABSALOM’S REBELLION)

Historically speaking, there is no reason to doubt that the origin of this psalm is during the time of Absalom’s rebellion and David’s corresponding flight across the Jordan (2 Sam. 17:22) to the wilderness of Mahanaim (2 Sam. 17:24, 27-28). David fled from Jerusalem in order to minimize bloodshed from the civil conflict that his son Absalom began (2 Sam. 15:14), and, if possible, to preserve Absalom’s life as well. David also understood that this “in-house” adversity was God-orchestrated, having its origin in David’s “despising of the LORD” (2 Sam. 12:10) and resulting in his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, among other sins. Psalm 23 and other psalms based on the same context (Ps. 3, 4, 26, 27, 42, 43, 63, 84) look back, longing to be restored to Jerusalem.

IV. PSALM 23: BEHOLDING MESSIAH, THE LAMB

- A. Lack nothing: food and water

¹I shall not want. ²He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

By referencing Deut. 2, the Shepherd-provision of YHWH for Israel in the wilderness is invoked (Deut. 2:7; Neh. 9:21; Isa. 63:11). Though Israel **lacked nothing**, they lusted exceedingly, tested God, and loathed His provision of manna and water (Deut. 8:2; Num. 21:5; Ps. 106:13-15). Jesus, however, embraced the 40-day wilderness test, feasting upon *every word of the Shepherd* (Lk. 4:4); He is Himself *the bread of life* (Jn. 6:35-40) and *the living water* (Jn. 7:37-39).

B. Soul restored:

³***He restores¹ my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake [paths that show His righteousness – Rom. 3:21-26]. ⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death [see Job 10:21], I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff...comfort me.***

1. Restoring a soul entails much more than we think; it often meant **deliverance from death** (see Ps. 35:17; Job 33:30; Judg. 15:19; 1 Sam. 30:12).² As *lack nothing* in v.1 is developed by what follows, so also *he restores my soul* is understood by what follows (vv.3-4).

²¹***Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this child’s soul come into [restore] him again.” (1 Kgs. 17:21)***

2. Why would a shepherd lead his sheep into such a dangerous place? The difficult path *through death*³ that Christ walked was *for the sake of the Father’s name*, or reputation.⁴

²⁷***“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Jn. 12:27–28)***⁵

3. Though a great gulf lies between the words of His cry and His rescue (see Ps. 22:1), Christ was in communion with the Father until the very end (Lk. 23:46). “Unlike the psalmists themselves, whose deliverance saves them from death, God’s intervention to vindicate Jesus is a creative act of intervention in death that overturns death.”⁶

C. Table prepared in the temple (from Shepherd to host)

⁵***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Ps. 23:5-6)***

In a manner similar to Ps. 22, Christ comforts His soul through what lies ahead of death (Ps. 22:21-31). His enemies are either helpless witnesses of God’s vindication awaiting execution or former foes fallen on amnesic mercy, feasting at His table (Rom. 5:6-11).

V. PSALM 23: FOLLOWING THE SLAIN LAMB, OUR SHEPHERD

²⁰***Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20–21, ESV)***

⁹***“...tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake. (Mt. 24:9)***

“These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. ¹⁶They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; ¹⁷for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev. 7:13–17)⁷

¹ By itself, this verb has a wide range of uses, all of which though entail a sense of returning something to its original state (Ross, *Psalms*, Vol.1, 2011. p562).

² Douglass Green, *The Good, The Bad and The Better: Psalm 23 and Job*, in *The Whirlwind*, Sheffield Academic Press 2001

³ Biblically, the *shadow of death* does not *only* mean “near” death, but death itself and the realm of the dead: Job 3:4; 10:21-22; 12:22; 16:16. See also Ps. 49 & 88.

⁴ Thick irony is evident in that a shepherd would garner a bad reputation for leading one of his sheep near or into death. See also Jn. 10:17-18; 17:1, 25-26.

⁵ Jesus was resolute in walking straight into death: Lk. 9:51; Jn. 12:27, 18:11; Lk. 23:27-31.

⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p.260

⁷ See also Lk. 9:22-25; 14:26-27; Acts 5:40-41; 16:22-25; Jas. 1:2-3; Col. 1:24; 1 Thes. 1:6; Phil. 1:29; 3:17-21; Lk. 6:22-28; 1 Pet. 4:12-14