

Key words: Psalm 23
Shepherd, pastures, waters, valley, anoints, cup.

FAVORITE BIBLE CHAPTERS PSALM 23

A survey that I conducted to find which chapters were favorite chapters revealed that the top 3 chapters were: Psalm 23 – the Shepherd Psalm; Matthew 5 – the Sermon on the Mount chapter and I Corinthians 13 – the Love chapter. There are 929 chapters in the Old Testament and 260 in the New Testament for a total of 1189 chapters. The shortest chapter is Psalm 117 and the longest chapter is Psalm 119.

The more familiar and favorite chapters are often referred to as the "Great Chapters of the Bible." However, all chapters are the inspired Word of God and are important. Some chapters are more memorable and popular because of the nature of the teaching introduced or emphasized in them. In selecting some chapters I am not minimizing other chapters. All are essential and equally inspired of God.

Illust. A Chaplain in a hospital in Ohio had the responsibility of keeping the Bible on the altar of the Chapel of the hospital. The Chapel was open to the public 24/7 so that people could come in at any time of the day or night, seeking the solace of prayer and scripture. The result was that almost every year the Bible had to be replaced because just one page was worn thin to the point of disintegration. That was the page on which the 23rd Psalm was printed.

Psalm 23 is called "The Pearl of Psalms" and "The Shepherd Psalm." It is a favorite of most Christians.

- It is comforting in times of sorrow,
- Encouraging in times of sickness and
- Assuring as we journey day by day with Jesus, our Shepherd.

These words in Psalm 23 were written by a shepherd - David. He understood the role of the shepherd and the needs of the sheep. Let us examine these 6 verses phrase by phrase and notice the ordered confidence expressed in each stanza.

1) **HE SPEAKS WITH CERTAINTY** – *"The LORD is my shepherd"*

- ***His declaration records a knowledge of the Almighty.*** *"Jehovah is"*

Who is "The LORD"? "The LORD" in the Hebrew is "Yahweh-Rohi" – "Yahweh" is translated "Jehovah" in our English Bibles. Jehovah is the eternal, self-existing, all-sufficient covenant making and covenant keeping God of Israel. The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Lord Jesus Christ of the New Testament. Christ is pictured as the Shepherd and true believers are His sheep.

His declaration reflects a personal relationship with God. *"my"*

Submitting to the Lord as our Shepherd means that He is the Lord of our lives. The sheep are owned by the Shepherd. The Shepherd rules the flock. When we say, "The Lord is my Shepherd" we are acknowledging our relationship to Him as Savior and Lord.

His declaration reveals his subservience to the Lord. "Shepherd."

The term "Lord" is a title of supreme authority and when ascribed to the Lord Jesus it means a title of sovereign deity. When we submit to His Shepherdhood we are recognizing His deity and submitting to His authority. Consequently there must be obedience to His Lordship and a daily allegiance to Him as our sovereign Shepherd.

I have heard people quote the first verse saying, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"* and I knew that they lived in a veritable wilderness of want. What they meant was, "The Lord is my Savior, and I am glad He is." There is a vast difference between knowing the Lord Jesus as Savior and following Him as Shepherd. We cannot know Him as our Shepherd unless and until we know Him as our Savior. The proof that He is indeed our Savior is demonstrated by our obedience to Him as our Shepherd.

David's statement "The LORD is my shepherd" confidently reveals his knowledge of Jehovah and his relationship and submission to Him. When we say those same words, does our life match our language?

2) HE SPEAKS OF SUFFICIENCY – "I shall not want"

Our Shepherd is sufficient for all of our insufficiencies. It is a rare thing to see someone living without any wants whatsoever for we live in an age of discontent. Listen to these words by Jason Lehman in his poem "Present Tense":

*"I was a child. But it was adulthood I wanted,
The freedom, And the respect.
I was twenty. But it was thirty I wanted,
To be mature, And sophisticated.
I was middle-aged. But it was twenty I wanted,
The youth, And the free spirit.
I was retired. But it was middle-age I wanted,
The presence of mind, Without limitations.
My life was over. But I never got what I wanted."*

(From *Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth* - Faith & Life Press, 1996)

Yet, listen to these words of the Apostle Paul, *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."* (Philippians 4:11-12)

Obviously, God wants us to be a happy, satisfied people. We shouldn't be restless and anxious, always coveting what we don't have. There should be a spirit of thankfulness in us that brands us as belonging to our Great Shepherd.

David spoke of his Shepherd's sufficiency. He said:

- *I shall not want for rest* – "He makes me to lie down in green pastures";

- *I shall not want for refreshment* – "He leads me beside the still waters"

- ***I shall not want for restoration*** – “*He restores my soul*”;

- ***I shall not want for righteous paths*** – “*He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.*”

Illust. In his book, *I Shall Not Want*, Robert Ketchum tells about a Sunday school teacher who asked her group of children if any of them could quote the entire twenty-third psalm. A little four-and-a-half-year-old girl was among those who raised their hands. A bit skeptical, the teacher asked her to quote it. The little girl came to the podium, faced the class, made a little bow, and said: “*The Lord is my shepherd, that’s all I want.*” She then bowed again and sat down. Ketchum added, “She may have overlooked a few verses, but I think that little girl captured David’s heart in Psalm 23.” The idea throughout the psalm is that we are utterly contented in the Shepherd’s care and there is nothing else that we desire.

Notice that our Lord supplies our every need, not our every want. Paul told the Philippians, “*My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*” (Phil.4:19)

3) HE SPEAKS OF REALITY – “*Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil....*”

It would be so wonderful if God would simply promise to us that we would never go through difficult times, however, that is not realistic. We do go through difficult times, and God constantly warns us of these dangers and difficulties in His Holy Word.

Peter wrote in his first letter “*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.*” (1 Peter 4:12) The Bible constantly tells us that there will be difficult times in life, and Psalm 23 voices such a warning. It does not say, “God will keep you from danger,” but rather it describes those times when we feel like we are walking through a dark, dangerous valley - a “*valley of the shadow of death.*” But what the Word of God does make very clear is that as we move through such times, God is with us. God is there to comfort us and sustain us.

Some believers seem to be surprised when they experience adversities. I have counseled with many who, when they encountered difficulties, felt that God had stopped smiling upon them and that He Who promised to “never leave nor forsake” had done both. Let us face reality: there will be valleys, shadows and evil along the way. To expect “skies always blue and flower strewn pathways all our lives through” is not realistic! “*In the world you shall have tribulation*” said the Lord Jesus. (John 16:33) He added, “*But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*”

David faced life realistically knowing that he was not immune to the difficulties of life. He spoke of:

- ***The reality of valleys.*** There will be adverse terrain in life.

“Yes, though I walk through the valley...” The reality of life is that there will be up’s and down’s; mountain top highs and valley lows; smooth roads and rough; smiles and tears.

The valleys are “throughways” – not “dead ends”! It reads, *“Though I walk through the valley.”* Notice that the verse does not read, “though I walk *in* the valley” as though that is where we spend all of our lives! But it reads, “though I walk *through* the valley.” The Psalm does not read, “though I get lost in the valley!” We pass *through* the valley! Why, or how? Because the Shepherd is with us to guarantee our safe passage.

The variety of the terrain makes the journey more pleasurable. If there were no valleys there would be no mountain tops. Smooth roads do not make good drivers. Warren W. Wiersbe wrote a book titled: “Bumps Are What You Climb On.” Though the path may be rough and steep, remember that Jesus, our Shepherd, walks beside us to “brighten the journey and lightens every heavy load.”

*“It’s not an easy road we are traveling to heaven,
For many are the thorns on the way;
It’s not an easy road but the Savior is with us
His presence gives us comfort each day”*

- **The reality of shadows.** There will be adversities in life.

“...the shadow of death....”

Light rays stream from the sun. Shadows are caused when something blocks the light beam. When light hits an object it is diverted, preventing the light beams from passing onward. Behind the blockage is the shadow.

No one lives a shadow-free life. No one lives in the sunshine all the time. Shadows make us appreciate the sunshine more. To become fixated upon the shadow is to forget the sun. Shadows prove that somewhere the sun is shining! We must not permit the shadows to obscure our vision and to cloud our minds for doesn’t the verse say, “You are with me”? He is present in the shadows as well as the sunshine!

*“Has the storm over shadowed your sunshine,
And life lost attraction for you?
Have the dreams that you cherished been broken,
Is you soul filled with bitterness too?”*

*Standing somewhere in the shadows you’ll find Jesus,
He’s the Friend who always cares and understands.
Standing somewhere in the shadows you will find Him
And you’ll know Him by the nail prints in His hands.”*

- **The reality of enemies.** There will be adversaries in life.

“... a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

David, the shepherd writer of the Shepherd Psalm, knew what it was to have enemies who hunted and hounded him unmercifully. When we declare that “The LORD is my shepherd,” Satan’s minions marshal against us. Enemies are both seen and unseen; they exist in the realm of the spirit, spirit beings, and in the realm of the physical, human beings.

That the redeemed of the Lord should have enemies must not daunt us. It has ever been so and until we are at home in the Father’s House, we will have enemies who dog our steps. Let us resolve to do as did David: *“I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies.”* (Psalm 18:3) and, *“Teach me Your way, O LORD, And lead me in a smooth path, because of my enemies.”* (Psalm 27:11)

There is irony in the statement, *“a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”* The enemies have been overcome and are made to watch as the overcomers sit and feast while they look on! The day will come when the believing victors will triumph and the enemy vanquished will trouble us no more!

4) HE SPEAKS OF PROSPERITY.

- ***We have a table of delights*** – *“You prepare a table before me...”*

“There is a storehouse of rich fare with plenty and to spare; yes, God’s own Word spreads a feast for every hungry guest.” There before us is not only the water, honey, and milk of the Word – there is also the Bread of Life – soul food!

- ***We have anointing oil*** – *“You anoint my head with oil...”*

The anointing oil was medicinal for the sheep. Oil is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit, our Comforter.

- ***We have a cup overflowing*** – *“My cup runs over.”*

An overflowing cup means blessings in abundance. Have you counted your blessings recently? It will surprise you what the Lord has done!

- ***We have a duet of companions*** – *“goodness and mercy.”*

How does Goodness and Mercy follow us? The Lord is Good and He is Merciful – He not only goes before us but He is also our rear guard!

The saints who have not earth’s riches are nevertheless prosperous for our Good, Great and Chief Shepherd has a spiritual feast spread for us; we have the oil of the Spirit’s presence, power and joy; our cups overflow with blessings and we have the Good and Merciful God as our constant Companion! *“The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it.”* (Prov. 10:22) The prosperous poor are those who are rich toward God.

5) HE SPEAKS OF ETERNITY – *“I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”*

David’s psalm is an analogy picturing himself as a sheep and the LORD as his Shepherd. It begins with himself as an earth-bound sheep in green pastures, along streams of water and walking in valleys. He concludes his journey, not on earth, but in “the House of the LORD” in eternity. “From Here To Eternity” was a movie made in Hollywood in 1953, but Psalm 23 is a

“From Here To Eternity” reality story, the story of every child of God following Jesus, our Shepherd, from earth to heaven and the Father’s House!

- **He announces that the after-life is real** – *“I shall dwell...”*

We shall live after life on the earth ends. There is no annihilation as some teach. Death is not the end. We shall live hereafter in one of two places: heaven or hell. Job said, *“And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God.”* (Job 19:26) And Jesus said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.”* (John 11:25)

- **He gives his address** – *“the House of the Lord”*

He knows where he is going! Jesus’ statement in John 14 is definitive: *“In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know.”* (John 14:2-4) The address of “The Father’s House” and the “House of the Lord” are the same!

- **He has assurance of immortality** – *“for ever”*

David had the assurance that, when his earthly pilgrimage was over, his life would not be ended but he would live *“for ever.”* He was saying the same thing that Jesus said when He spoke those life-giving words in that most famous of all statements that He uttered: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* (John 3:16)

Is the Lord your Shepherd? Let us examine our lives and see if these marks of the Savior’s sheep in Psalm 23 are evident in us.

Conclusion

In this psalm of David, he spoke with certainty, sufficiency, reality, prosperity and eternity in six short and succinct stanzas. This was his personal testimony. It has been embraced and quoted by millions who have made it their personal faith statement.

Is the Lord your Shepherd? Let us examine our lives and see if these marks of the Savior’s sheep in Psalm 23 are evident in our lives. Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

JdonJ