# TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

# PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF THE LORD WHO CARES:

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF PSALM 23

BY JOEL JUPP SEPTEMBER 27, 2010 Psalm 23 A Psalm of David

The Lord is my shepherd. I will not lack.
In grassy pastures, He lets me lie down.
Beside restful waters, He guides me.
My inner life, He restores.
He leads me in right paths, for the sake of His name.

Even when I walk in the valley of death's shadow, I will not fear calamity because You are with me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my oppressors. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and loving-kindness will follow me, all the days of my life, And I will return to the house of the Lord many days.

For decades, Psalm 23 has remained a favorite psalm for many because of its comforting message for those who know the Lord. This is especially surprising because many of the poetic images are not very familiar to suburban and urban audiences, yet even still, the message of Psalm 23 continues to speak to the hearts of believers. To fully appreciate the meaning of this psalm, however, it is important to understand the context, literary and structural features, grammar and syntax, theological issues, and real-life application. In this effort, this paper will draw special attention to the three progressive scenes used in the psalm. By the end of this paper, it will be shown that Psalm 23 speaks of *personal* assurance in the faithful God who has shepherded the nation of Israel.

## **Scriptural Context & Author's Personal Life**

Broadly speaking, the Book of Psalms is a collection of various poems that express humanity's need for and appreciation of Almighty God. Within this corpus, we find a collection

of various authors (including David, Solomon, Sons of Korah, Asaph, Heman the Ezrahite, Ethan the Ezrahite, and Moses), and a text that can be divided into five sections "which respectively begin at Psalms 1, 42, 73, 90 and 107." There is variety within the Book of Psalms, and it is helpful for a reader to be familiar with this variety, so he or she can catch the unique nuances of a particular psalm.

In addition to the different authors, there are different types of psalms, including "Hymns of Praise, Personal Thanksgivings, Communal Laments and Personal Laments... [as well as] smaller categories such as Entrance Liturgies, Blessings and Cursings, Wisdom Psalms, Royal Psalms; and there were also mixed types." This variety within Psalms necessitates the importance of locating Psalm 23 within the entire book.

Psalm 23 is self-described as a psalm of David, and we have good reason to believe that David did in fact write it. With David's experience as a shepherd, as a warrior, and a king, he would have been well familiar with the concepts used in this chapter. Possibly written while overlooking the hilly countryside, while relaxing after a fellowship meal, or while remembering youthful days of shepherding, this psalm can be considered a thanksgiving psalm that expresses appreciation for the Lord's protection and provision in his life. Because of his own life experiences, David was the perfect person to write this psalm, and David's personal life can be used as a backdrop to understand the nuances of this psalm. In other words, the broad truths of Scripture are applied to David's personal life through metaphor.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, vol. 15, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary* (, Tyndale Old Testament CommentariesDowners Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed.; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 983.

# **Literary Features & The Individual**

Unlike many other instances of Hebrew poetry, Psalm 23 lacks some of the decisive features that we normally expect to find in poetic literature. As one scholar has noted, "there is a lack of symmetry, an absence of word pairing, of chiastic patterns, of envelope figure—all of those features which tend to give a poem its particular shape." However, despite the absence of these common literary devices, there is still the presence of poetic imagery, semantic coherence, and terseness of style. This psalm is different from other psalms, yet is it clearly poetic literature and should be interpreted as such.

Although there is some debate about the details Hebrew poetry, there is general consensus that lines A and B (and in some cases, C) relate to each other in a dynamic way. As James Kugel puts it, line B has a 'seconding' character by "carrying it further, echoing it, defining it, restating it, [or] contrasting with it." Such a relationship between lines A and B can be clearly seen as a feature of this poem.

Another literary aspect to keep in mind is the careful use of poetic scenes. Some commentators reduce this poem to the Lord as being a shepherd, but this seems overly simplistic and does not take into account the change of imagery in verses 5 and 6. More likely, this poem is comprised of two images – the Lord as Shepherd (vv.1-4) and the Lord as Host (vv.5-6) – set in the context of three scenes: a calm pasture (vv.1-3), a dark valley (v.4), and a royal feast (v.5-6). Through these scenes, the author's personal life serves as an example of what is true of the entire flock – that the Lord cares for each individual within the flock.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and William David Reyburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (, Helps for translatorsNew York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 230.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Kugel, James L. 1981. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*. New Haven: Yale University Press., 51.

As the psalm unfolds, the three scenes progress in power and significance. In the initial three verses, the Lord is presented as someone who provides and protects for His sheep. Adding on to this, verse 4 takes this further by using the image of a protector – not only does the Lord provide safety throughout life, but even in the darkest moments, even at the point of death. To continue this progression, verses 5 and 6 take this even farther: not only does the Lord provide protection, He gives victory over the enemy. As a result of this progression, the reader is led towards a greater recognition of who God is and what He does.

Compared to other psalms, it is significant that the community is not explicitly mentioned in the text, but that the content and structure of the psalm keeps the focus on the individual. Of course, what is true for the individual will also be true for the entire flock, yet this psalm maintains a personal and individual emphasis in all six verses.

#### The Individual In Three Poetic Scenes

Keeping in mind the personal emphasis of Psalm 23, it is helpful at this point to focus on the three scenes of the psalm – since that is how the author intended us to understand this piece of writing. Rather than dissecting this psalm in an unnatural manner, the rest of this paper will focus on the author's way of presenting his material – moving from a peaceful pasture to a dark valley to a royal feast.

#### Peaceful Pasture

This psalm's opening scene depicts the Lord as a shepherd who sufficiently supplies all that is needed. With beautiful visual imagery, the author expresses the assurance that comes

from being in the Lord's flock. There is no need to worry about food, water, or anything necessary to survival because the Lord knows what His people need.

Shepherding was a crucial part of life in the ancient near east – both within Israel and without – and David knew from personal experience what it meant to be a shepherd. Caring for a flock required constant care and vigilance. Shepherds worked hard to ensure that the flock had enough to eat and drink, as well as to protect the flock from danger. Without a shepherd, an animal could become lost, famished, or injured, so shepherds played an important role in ancient near east microeconomics. It is not surprising, therefore, that similar imagery is found in other ANE cultures as well.<sup>5</sup>

Shepherding imagery is more common than one might initially think. In addition to the psalmist, other biblical authors also recognized that God's care of Israel could be compared to shepherding. Even though the term "shepherd" is not always explicit, shepherding imagery was "common and remained a favorite idiom throughout Israelite history." Just to name a few examples, the Lord is compared to a shepherd in Psalm 28:9, Psalm 78, Psalm 80:2, Isaiah 40:11, Jeremiah 13:17, and Micah 7:14. When considering the many instances in the Old Testament, there certainly is an "extensive use of shepherd/flock imagery."

In light of these other occurrences, what makes Psalm 23 so unique is the personal pronoun ("my") in the first verse. Psalm 23 places a fascinating emphasis on the taking care of an *individual*. Several passages in the Old Testament refer to Israel as a flock, but this psalm speaks of the Lord in an especially personal way. The *hireq yod* of 'יִשָּׁ' is what distinguishes this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Victor Harold Matthews et al., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament* (electronic ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ps 23:2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> David Noel Freedman, vol. 5, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 1189.

passage from others in the Old Testament. This makes logical sense because just as the Lord has shepherded the nation of Israel, so will the Lord act as a shepherd on a personal level.

Because the Lord knows each of His sheep individually, the psalmist can truly say, "I will not want." This confidence is the *result* of the fact that the Lord is the shepherd. There is no reason to fear. Along these lines, it should be noted that "want" is a misleading translation of because the affirmation here is not one of self-denial, but of divine provision. Because the Lord is as faithful and vigilant as a shepherd, there will be no lack for those He provides for.

Verses two and three provide visual examples of how the Lord provides for an individual: He provides with enough food supplied ("grassy pastures"), He guides to fresh and peaceful water ("quiet waters"), He renews ("my inner life"), and He leads towards what is proper ("paths of well-being"). Each image weaves together to portray a beautiful testimony of the Lord's work in an individual's life. The Lord is not a distant God who stands aloof when His people are in need, but He attentively cares for those within His flock.

# The Valley of Darkness

While the preceding verses are serene, verse four introduces a darker scene: passing through a dark valley. In Hebrew, the description of the valley ("מַלְּמֶּרָת") is not entirely clear, but there is tremendous beauty in the ambiguity. The Hebrew word can refer to deep darkness, despair, impenetrable gloom, death, and so on. Centuries later, the Septuagint would translate this phrase as "shadow of death," which may or may not be an idiom, but suggests one possible interpretation. (Of course, the genitive used in the Septuagint also needs to be unraveled!) As a result, even though the original Hebrew text does not include the word "death," many translators recognize that "shadow of death" (or in my translation, "deathly darkness") poignantly captures

the nearness, danger, and depth of this darkness. It is possible, however, to leave out "death" and merely speak of the darkness.

Regardless of how we translate אַלְּמָּוֹת, for individuals going through trial or tribulation, it is very significant that in verse four, the psalmist was *led* into the dark valley. In other words, because there is a vigilant shepherd, this was not an accident. This is comforting (as well as corrective) in the sense that even during dark days, the Lord is ever-present. The Lord does not desert his flock; on some occasions, the Lord *leads* into and through the valley if it is for the betterment of the flock.

In contrast to the grassy pastures and calm waters described in the first scene, the dark valley is a shocking contrast, but the contrast communicates a powerful truth about the Lord's character. Not only does the Lord provide what we need during the good times, but the Lord *protects* during the challenging times. When we as readers apply this passage to our own personal situations, we should be encouraged and know that nearness of danger or death does not mean that we are distant from the Lord.

To make this verse even more visual, the psalmist uses an image to describe how the Lord protects: He uses a "rod" and a "staff" when shepherding. A few translators have conflated these two terms, but there is not sufficient reason to do so. Archeological discoveries suggest that the rod and staff had distinct purposes. The rod was a club worn at the belt, and the staff was a walking tool that doubled as a weapon and a guiding tool for the sheep. These weapons were necessary to fight off wolves, lions, or any other predators encountered along the way.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Victor Harold Matthews et al., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament* (electronic ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ps 23:4.

Bringing this text into today's context, we should realize that Psalm 23 has a message of strength, in addition to its message of tranquility. This psalm describes the Lord as a provider and a *protector*, and as a protector, the Lord guards the sheep with strength. This psalm should not be dismissed by men as being "feminine." Rather Psalm 23 should draw men's attention to the fact that the Lord is powerful and He uses his power to protect the flock. In fact, verses 1-3 would be irrelevant and far too idealistic without the reality of verse four.

# The Royal Feast

Psalm 23 concludes with the scene of a feast – suggesting thanksgiving, fellowship, and victory. Given the context, it is possible that verse five refers to the "fellowship meal which followed the thanksgiving sacrifice in the Temple," but this is not completely necessary or certain. A certain degree of vagueness permits the reader to imagine this scene for oneself, yet any meal in the Lord's presence would require that this meal occurs in a royal setting.

Tragically, the final two verses are often neglected by modern readers – probably because they seem unrelated to the shepherding imagery. It is true that in verses 5 and 6, the Lord is portrayed as a generous host who welcomes His guests. However, this new image serves as a climax to the overall theme of Psalm 23: how the Lord takes care of His people.

Several snapshots give the sense that the Lord is incredibly gracious. First, there is a luxurious feast that is not only enjoyed for its food, but for its defiance of the enemy. Secondly, the Lord anoints the guest with oil, which was a sign of hospitality and compassion in the ancient near east. Thirdly, the Lord provides an overflowing cup, which reflects the abundance that He

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and William David Reyburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (, Helps for translatorsNew York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 234.

offers. Each image is rich in itself, but when combined together, the overall effect is a "deluge" of blessing.

In this way, the verses 5 and 6 escalate this psalm to an even higher level. Not only does God *provide* all that the flock needs, and not only does God *protect* in the midst of heavy darkness, but God *blesses* abundantly. This final scene is not needed, but that is the point. In His compassion for His people, the Lord goes far beyond what we would expect.

#### From Israel to the Individual

In conclusion, Psalm 23 is beautiful not only for its poetry, but also for its realization that God is a personal God who takes care of individuals within His flock. By looking back at the history of Israel, we can clearly see that God provides, protects, and blesses His people – even when they are near the point of death. By looking forward, we meet the Lord Jesus, who introduces himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The imagery is some of the most beautiful in all of literature, yet the greater beauty is that this is more than metaphor. Not only does God shepherd the nation of Israel, which is amazing enough in itself, but He cares for individuals like David, you, and me.

#### Sermon Outline: Psalm 23

#### I. Introduction:

- a. We have much to worry about financial problems, broken relationships, sickness and disease, crime, violence and enemies just to name a few things.
- b. Usually our response is to panic (like "Chicken Little"), to complain, to run, or to fight.
- c. But Scripture offers us good news that can help us through life's difficulties whether they be minute or life-threatening.

### II. Passage:

- a. Psalm 23 was a favorite passage of my grandmother; like some of you, one of my childhood memories is quoting 23 to my grandfather (in the nursing home).
- b. Psalm 23 should not be reserved for rainy days or funerals, but should be part of our daily walk.

# III. Proposition & Organization

- a. As a whole, Psalm 23 teaches us that we as individuals can trust that the Lord will provide, protect, and bless.
- b. This morning, we will look at **three assurances** in Psalm 23 that we find in the three scenes of the psalm.

### IV. The Three Assurances of Psalm 23

- a. The Lord will provide for you. (vv.1-3)
- b. The Lord will protect you. (v.4)
- c. The Lord will bless you. (vv.5-6)

# V. Application

- a. There are many applications of Psalm 23 and you probably know better than I do, but here are a few:
  - i. Are you in the fold?
  - ii. Have you strayed from the fold?
  - iii. Are you burdened by the worries of life?
- b. Wherever you are today, the Lord is inviting you back into His care. You can experience this same kind of assurance that David did when He wrote Psalm 23.
- c. Here are a few practical ways to apply Psalm 23:
  - i. Thank the Lord for his provision, his protection, and his blessing.
  - ii. Take some time today and write your own psalm to the Lord.
  - iii. Come back to the Lord and confide in Him for what you need.

# VI. Conclusion

- a. Remember that Jesus Christ is described as the Good Shepherd in \_\_\_\_\_; this is not an accident, but a reference to Psalm 23.
- b. The Lord Jesus will take care of you, and you can be assured of that because He has given His life for His sheep. In the face of danger... and even death... the Lord will take care of His own.
- c. Be assured this morning that you have a Good Shepherd who provides, protects, and blesses beyond comprehension.

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