

## PSALM 23:1-6

### CHAPTER STUDIES ON THE PSALTER

"The infinite Lord assumes the duties and character of a shepherd toward His people."

The position of this Psalm is worthy of notice. It follows Psalm 22, which is a "Psalm of the Cross." There are no green pastures, no still waters, on the other side of the twenty-second Psalm. It is only after we have read, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46) that we come to, "The LORD is my Shepherd." We must, by experience, know the value of blood-shedding, and see the sword awakened against the Shepherd, before we truly know the sweetness of the good Shepherd's care.

What the nightingale is among birds, this divine ode is among the Psalms. It has sung sweetly to many mourners in their night of weeping. It has offered hope for a morning of joy. I compare it to the lark that sings as it flies and flies as it sings, until it is out of sight but not out of hearing. Note the last words of the Psalm, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." These are celestial notes, more fitted for the eternal mansions than for these dwelling places below the clouds. Enter the spirit of the Psalm as you read it, and you will experience the days of heaven on earth!

**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green**

**pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**

**(Ps. 23:1) The LORD is my shepherd.**

What condescension! The infinite Lord assumes the duties and character of a shepherd toward His people. This should be the subject of grateful admiration. God permits Himself to be compared to anything that sets forth His great love and care for His people. David had been a keeper of sheep; he understood both the needs of the sheep and the many cares of a shepherd. David compares himself to a creature who is weak, defenseless, and foolish. God is his Provider, Preserver, and Director. God is his everything. People have no right to be considered the Lord's sheep unless they have renewed their nature. The scriptural description of

the unconverted does not picture them as sheep but as wolves or goats. A sheep is property. It is not a wild animal. Its owner sets great value by it, and frequently it is bought with a great price.

It is well to know, as David did, that we belong to the Lord. There is a noble tone of confidence about this sentence. There is no "if," "but," or "I hope." He states, **The LORD is my shepherd.** We must cultivate the spirit of assured dependence on our heavenly Father. The sweetest word is that monosyllable, my. He does not say, "The Lord is the shepherd of the world at large, and leads the multitude as His flock," but, **The LORD is my shepherd.** If He is a Shepherd to no one else, He is a Shepherd to me; He cares for me, watches over me, and preserves me. The words are in the present tense. Whatever our position as believers, we are even now under the pastoral care of Jehovah.

The next words are an inference from the first statement. They are abounding and positive, **I shall not want.** I might want, but when the Lord is my Shepherd, He is able to supply my needs. He is willing to do so, for His heart is full of love, and so **I shall not want.** I will not lack for temporal things. Does he feed the birds (Matt. 6:26) and cause the lilies to grow (Matt. 6:28)? Then how can He leave His children to starve? I know that His grace is sufficient for me (2 Cor. 12:9). To those resting in Him, He will say, "As your days, so shall your strength be" (Deut. 33:25). I

may not possess all that I wish, but **I shall not want.** Others, far wealthier and wiser, may want, but I shall not want. "The young lions lack and suffer hunger; but those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing" (Ps. 34:10). It is not only that "I do not want," but **I shall not want.** Come what may, if famine devastates the land, or a calamity destroys the city, I shall not want. Old age, with its feebleness, will not bring me any lack, and even death, with its gloom, shall not find me destitute. I have all things and abound. Not because I have a good store of money in the bank, not because I have skill and wit to win my bread, but because **The LORD is my shepherd.** The wicked always want, but the righteous never. A sinner's heart is far from satisfaction, but a gracious spirit dwells in the palace of content.

**(Ps. 23:2) He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.** The Christian life has two elements, contemplative and active, and both are richly provided. First, the contemplative, **He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.** Green pastures are the Scriptures of truth, always fresh, always rich, and never exhausted. There is no fear of biting the ground where the grass is long. Sweet and full is the gospel's doctrine; it is fit food for souls, as tender grass is natural nutriment for sheep. When by faith we find rest in the promises, we are like sheep that lie down in the pasture.

We find food, peace, rest, refreshment, calmness, and satisfaction.

**He maketh me to lie down.** It is the Lord who graciously enables us to perceive the preciousness of His truth and to feed on it. How grateful we ought to be for the power to appropriate the promises! Some distracted souls would give worlds if they could do this. They know the blessedness, but it is not theirs. They know the **green pastures**, but they are not made to **lie down**. Believers who enjoy a "full assurance of faith" should greatly bless their gracious God.

The second part of a vigorous Christian's life consists of gracious activity. We not only think, but also act. We are not always lying down to feed, but also journeying toward perfection. **He leadeth me beside the still waters.** What are these **still waters**? The influences and graces of His blessed Spirit, as He attends us in various operations, are waters (in the plural) to cleanse, refresh, enrich, and cherish. They are **still waters** because the Holy Spirit loves peace and sounds no trumpet of ostentation in His operations. He may flow into our soul, but not into our neighbor's. Our neighbor may not perceive the divine presence. The blessed Spirit may pour His floods into one heart, while those sitting next to the favored may know nothing of it:

In sacred silence of the mind  
My heaven, and there my God I find.

**Still waters** run deep. Nothing is more noisy than an empty drum. The silence is golden when the Holy Spirit meets the saints. It is not raging waves but peaceful streams of holy love, when the Spirit of God leads the chosen sheep. The Spirit is a dove not an eagle; He is the dew not the hurricane. Our Lord leads us beside **still waters**. We could not go there by ourselves; we need His guidance. Thus, **He leadeth me**. He does not drive. Moses drove by the Law, but Jesus leads by example and by the gentle drawing of His love.

**(Ps. 23:3) He restoreth my soul.** When the soul grows sorrowful, He revives it. When it is sinful, He sanctifies it. When it is weak, He strengthens it. **He** does it. His ministers could not do it unless He does it. His word would not avail by itself. **He restoreth my soul.** Are any of us low in grace? Is our spirituality at its lowest ebb? He who turns the ebb to the flood tide can soon restore our soul. Pray for the blessing, "Restore me, Shepherd of my soul!"

**He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.** The Christian delights to be obedient, but it is the obedience of love. **He leadeth me.** Christians are not obedient to some commandments and neglectful of others. They do not choose, but obey all. Observe the plural, **the paths of righteousness**. Whatever God may give us to do we will do it, led by His love. Some Chris-

tians overlook the blessing of sanctification, and yet to a thoroughly renewed heart, this is one of the sweetest gifts of the covenant. If we could be saved from wrath and yet remain unregenerate, impenitent sinners, we could not be saved as we desire, for we chiefly desire to be saved from sin and to be led in holiness. All this is done out of pure free grace **for His name's sake**. It is to the honor of our great Shepherd that we should be a holy people, walking in the narrow way of righteousness. If we are so led and guided, we must not fail to adore our heavenly Shepherd's care.

**(Ps. 23:4) Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.** This unspeakably delightful verse has been sung on many a death bed; it has helped to make the dark valley bright. Every word has a wealth of meaning. **Yea though I walk**, as if believers did not quicken their pace when they came to die, but still calmly walked with God. Walking indicates the steady advance of a soul who knows the road, knows its end, resolves to follow the path, feels quite safe, and is perfectly calm and composed. Dying saints are not in a flurry. They do not run around as though alarmed or stand still as though they would go no farther. They are not confused or ashamed, and therefore they keep their pace.

It is not walking in the valley, but **through the valley**. We go through the dark tunnel of death and emerge in the light of immortality. We do not die. We sleep to wake in glory. Death is not the house but the porch, not the goal but the passage. Dying is called a **valley**. The storm breaks on the mountain, but the valley is quiet. Often, a Christian's last days are the most peaceful. The mountain is bleak and bare, but the valley is rich with golden sheaves. Many saints have reaped more joy and knowledge when they came to die than they ever knew while they lived.

This is not "the valley of death," but the **valley of the shadow of death**. Death in its substance has been removed and only the shadow remains. Someone said that where there is a shadow there must be light, and so there is. Death stands by the side of the highway in which we have to travel, and the light of heaven shining on us throws a shadow across our path. Rejoice that there is a light beyond. Nobody is afraid of a shadow, for a shadow cannot stop you even for a moment. The shadow of a dog cannot bite; the shadow of a sword cannot kill; the shadow of death cannot destroy. Do not be afraid.

**I will fear no evil.** David does not say that there will be no evil. He was beyond even that high assurance and knew that Jesus had put all evil away. Rather, **I will fear no evil**, as if even his fears, those shadows of evil, were gone forever. The

worst evils of life are those that only exist in our imagination. If we had no troubles but real troubles, we would not have a tenth of our present sorrows. We feel a thousand deaths in fearing one. The psalmist, however, was cured of fearing. **I will fear no evil**, not even the evil one. I will not dread the last enemy. I will look on him as a conquered foe, an enemy to be destroyed, for **Thou art with me**. This is the joy of the Christian! **Thou art with me**. The little child at sea in the storm is not frightened; he sleeps on its mother's bosom, content that his mother is there. It should be enough for believers to know that Christ is with them. **Thou art with me**. I have in You all that I can crave. I have perfect comfort and absolute security, for **Thou art with me**.

**Thy rod and Thy staff**, the ensigns of Your sovereignty and Your gracious care, Your tools for governing and ruling Your flock, **they comfort me**. I will believe that You reign. The rod of Jesse will still be over me as the sovereign comfort of my soul.

**(Ps. 23:5) Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.** David had enemies. He would not be like his Lord if he did not. If we were without enemies, we might fear that we were not friends of God, for "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4). Yet see the tranquility of the godly man in spite of, and in the sight of, his enemies. How refreshing is his calm bravery! **Thou preparest a table before me in the pres-**

**ence of my enemies.** When a soldier is in the enemy's presence, if he eats, he grabs a hasty meal and then hurries to the fight. Yet, **Thou preparest a table**, just as a servant unfolds the damask cloth and displays the china, crystal, and silver as on an ordinary peaceful occasion. Nothing is hurried. There is no confusion, no disturbance. The enemy is at the door, yet God prepares a table, and the Christian sits and eats as if everything were in perfect peace. Oh the peace that Jehovah gives His people, even in the midst of the most trying circumstances!

**Thou anointest my head with oil.** Live in the daily enjoyment of this blessing, receiving a fresh anointing for every day's duties. Every Christian is a priest, but we cannot execute the priestly office without unction (anointing with oil). We must go day by day to God the Holy Spirit to have our heads anointed with oil. A priest without oil misses the chief qualification for office, and Christian priests lack fitness for service when they are without new grace from on high.

**My cup runneth over.** He not only had enough, but also more than enough; he had a cup that overflowed. The poor may say this as well as those in higher circumstances. "All this, and Jesus Christ too," said a poor cottager as she broke a piece of bread and filled a glass with cold water. People may be wealthy, but if discontent, their cup cannot run over; it is cracked and leaks. Contentment is the

philosopher's stone that turns all it touches to gold. Happy is the one who has found it. Contentment is more than a kingdom; it is happiness.

**(Ps. 23:6) Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.** This is a fact as indisputable as it is encouraging. A heavenly **surely** is the seal. This sentence may be read, "only goodness and mercy," for there will be unmingled mercy in our history. These twin guardian angels will always be at my beck and call. When great princes travel, they go attended; so it is with the believer. Goodness and mercy always follows me, **all the days of my life.** It follows me in black days as well as bright days, in days of fasting as well as days of feasting, in the dreary days of winter as well as the bright days of summer. Goodness supplies our needs, and mercy blots out our sins. **And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.** "A slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever" (John 8:35). While I am here, I will be a child at home with my God. The whole world will be His house to me. When I ascend to the upper chamber, I will not change my company, not even change the house. I will only go to dwell in the upper story of the house of the Lord forever. May God grant us grace to dwell in the serene atmosphere of this most blessed Psalm! (*The Treasury of David*, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, updated by Mark Wash)

**Comment on the meaning of the words "green pastures" and "still waters" in Psalm 23:2.** 2 Sam.7:1 Ps. 3:3-6 Ps. 116:7 Matt. 11:28-29

**How does He restore our soul and lead us in paths of righteousness (Ps. 23:3)?** Ps. 3:7-8 Eph. 1:6

**What personal meaning does Psalm 23 have for you?**