

Christ Our Good Shepherd
Reflections on Psalm 23 From A New Testament Perspective
Part 2:
The Lord's Protective Care of His People

Scripture: *Psalm 23.*

Exegetical Big Idea: Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd who blesses us daily with His secure *protective* care.

Introduction

Last Sunday we began a three-part series of sermons in which we are reflecting on **Psalm 23**, which is probably the best known and best loved of all the Psalms.

For the sake of those who were not with us last Sunday, I noted then that most Bible scholars agree that David wrote **Psalm 23** although they don't agree on when he wrote it. In his youth David had been a shepherd. When, as an adult, David became the King of Israel, he was known as the Shepherd King of Israel. David wrote **Psalm 23**, however, not from the perspective of being a shepherd, but from the perspective of being a sheep of the Lord, *Yahweh*. Along with all the OT people of God, David saw himself as being a sheep of *Yahweh's* pasture, as **Psalm 100:3** confirms to us.

David lived under the Old Covenant and so he thought of the Lord as *Yahweh*, God the Father. You and I, however, live today under the New Covenant and we think of *the Lord* as referring to our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ identified Himself as our Good Shepherd in **John 10**. He is also referred to as *the great Shepherd* in both **Heb. 13:20** and **1 Peter 5:4**. For this reason, in this three-part series, we are reflecting on **Psalm 23** from a NT and Christ-focused perspective. We are therefore meditating on the Psalm in the light of what God has done for us in Christ that calls us to follow Jesus Christ as our Good Shepherd.

I noted last week that as I have meditated on this Psalm over the years I have been amazed by how the Holy Spirit took David's knowledge and experience of both being a human shepherd and a spiritual sheep of God to make the six verses of **Psalm 23** a very inspired and inspiring metaphor of how the Lord daily blesses His people with His abiding *presence*, His secure *protective* care, and His all-sufficient *pastoral* care (**3P's**). It is my prayer that we will all be encouraged in some way as we meditate on these **3P's** from **Psalm 23**.

Last Sunday we began our reflections on the Psalm by looking at the first of these **3P's**; The Lord's abiding *presence* with His people. This morning we will continue our reflections on **Psalm 23**, therefore, by looking at the second of these **3P's**; The Lord's secure *protection* of His people. Specifically, we are going to look at how the Lord protects us against our three deadly enemies; the world, the flesh, and the devil. *Read Psalm.*

I. Protection Against the World (Verses 4-5)

- 1) We see the Lord's protection of His people against the world in the second part of **verse 5** that says: *You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.*
- 2) At the time David wrote this Psalm, and even today, during the summer, one of the greatest threats to the health of the sheep came from, and still comes from, the wide variety of Summer insects that swarm around the sheep. One of these insects is the nose fly that is quite deadly because they try to deposit their eggs on the damp mucous membranes inside the nose of the sheep.
- 3) Once these eggs hatch they form small, slender, worm-like larvae that work their way up the nasal passages of the sheep into the sheep's head. This causes an intense irritation and severe inflammation in the head of the sheep that can lead to blindness. To get relief from this intense irritation sheep deliberately beat their heads against trees and rocks or anything else they can find. In cases of very serious infestation a sheep can even kill itself just to get relief from the pain.
- 4) In the days of David shepherds protected the sheep against these nose flies by smearing over the sheep's nose and head a homemade remedy consisting of olive oil and spices. Today shepherds use a remedy made of linseed oil, sulfur, and tar. Once this remedy is applied to the nose and head of the sheep the insects would leave the sheep alone, giving them relief and allowing them to feed and to lie down peacefully in their green pastures.
- 5) Applying this to Christians today, as the sheep of the Lord, the equivalent for us of the nose fly is the worldly culture all around us that seeks to get its godless ideas into our heads to adversely affect our spiritual health. As you may know, one almost unavoidable way in which our culture influences us today is through the media, especially the internet, which, as you know, brings to us everything you can imagine; both good and bad.
- 6) As Christians, it is as we daily spend time in the Bible, that the Holy Spirit, who is symbolized by oil in the Bible, applies the truths of the Word of God to our hearts and mind so that our minds are renewed and we are protected from being infected with the godless ideas and behaviour of this world, just as shepherds, both in the days of David, and even today, apply the various forms of protective oil to the nose and head of their sheep to protect them from the harmful nose fly.
- 7) This is how Christ our Good Shepherd, who is also referred to in **John 1:1-4** as the living Word of God, uses the written Word of God, the Bible, to offer us His secure protection from the godless influence of the world all around us today.

II. Protection Against the Flesh (Verses 4-5)

- 1) Still in **verse 4**, we see the Lord's protection of His people against the flesh. The verse reads: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*
- 2) In Israel, at the time David wrote this Psalm, during the summer months, shepherds took their sheep to pasturelands on the mountains. The best routes to the top of the mountain pastures were usually through dark valleys dogged by dangerous and threatening predators such as wolves and mountain lions. This is why these valleys were called *the valleys of the shadow of death*.
- 3) Often in our Christian lives we experience deep disappointments and despair in various forms that can make us feel as though, spiritually, we are travelling through the dark shadowed valleys of death that the sheep had to pass through to get to the mountaintop pasturelands. When we go through these spiritual valleys of despair, we are often tempted in our flesh to look away from Christ our Good Shepherd and to grow weary and discouraged. How does Christ our Good Shepherd protect us from our flesh at times like these?
- 4) The first part of **verse 5** says: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.* The *table* David is referring to here are the mountaintop pastures where the shepherds took their sheep to graze during the summer months which were often referred to as the tablelands because they were very flat, like Table Mountain in South Africa. Before taking the sheep up to these tablelands the shepherd would go ahead to prepare the pastures up there. He would remove any poisonous weeds that could harm the sheep, he would remove leaves, twigs, and small stones that have fallen into the water holes during the fall and winter months and carefully examine the mountaintops for the footprints of any predators such as hyenas and wolves that may be up there.
- 5) If he finds any such footprints, once the sheep get up to the tablelands, the shepherd kept a sharp eye out for these predators. So when David writes here that *you prepare a table before me* he is referring to the shepherd's careful preparation of the tableland pastures to ensure that when they get up there the sheep can graze and feed safely even in the presence of predators that may be nearby.
- 6) The parallel of this in our Christian life is that Christ our Good Shepherd has Himself already gone ahead of us into every situation that we will ever encounter in our Christian lives in this world because **Heb. 2:17-18** and **4:15-16** tell us that during His earthly ministry Christ was tempted in every way just like ourselves but was without sin. As a very real human being Christ has known our sufferings, experienced our sorrows, and endured our struggles in this life exactly like ourselves in order that His victory over sin and temptation might be our own experience today.

- 7) So, when we go through our valleys of the shadow of death it our awareness of this truth that dispels our fear. This is why the Psalmist says in this verse that *because the shepherd is with him he walks through* the valley of the shadow of death, he does not say that he dies there. Because Christ our Good Shepherd has already been over every territory of our human experiences to prepare the table of our Christian lives in plain view of our enemies, we can be rest-assured that, as we prayerfully look to Him in faith, He will protect us against the temptations and despair of our flesh that could so easily derail us.

III. Protection Against the Devil (Verses 4-5)

- 1) Still in **verse 4**, David declares that the reason the sheep will fear no evil as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death is that as the shepherd would protect them with his rod and his staff.
- 2) The rod was a sturdy hardwood stick about thirty inches in length with a knob on one end. The staff was a longer stick, usually with a crook on one end. The shepherd used his rod to protect his sheep in three ways.
- 3) First, he used it to ward off predators. We see an example of this in **1 Sam. 17:36** where David the shepherd narrates how with his rod he killed a bear and a lion that had come to threaten his sheep. Second, the shepherd used his rod to redirect the sheep whenever they begin to wander away on their own or if they got too close to danger. Third, at the end of the day, as the sheep entered the sheep pen, the shepherd would count the sheep with the rod to make sure they were all there, calling them by name, and he would use the rod to part the wool of the sheep to examine their skin to see if there was anything harmful beneath the wool. This is what Christ our Good Shepherd was referring to in **John 10:3-5** where He tells us that He calls His sheep by name.
- 4) In our Christian lives the rod represents the Word of God. **Heb. 4:12** tells us that the Word of God examines our hearts to correct us and to keep us from sin. The Word of God also protects us from the harmful heresies of spiritual predators who seek to introduce spiritual deception into our lives.
- 5) So whether Satan comes to harm us with spiritual lies as the tempting serpent or as the roaring lion it is the same Word of God that we rely on to counter his assaults and attacks. In **Luke 4** and **Matt. 4**, it was the rod of the Word of God with which Christ our Good Shepherd Himself beat off the temptations of the serpent Satan during His 40-day fast in the wilderness.
- 6) Just as the rod is symbolic of the Word of God, the staff is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Christ our Good Shepherd tells us in **John 14:26 & 16:13** that it is the

Holy Spirit who reminds us of what Christ has taught us in His word and who guides us and leads us into all of God's truth.

- 7) This means that it is the Holy Spirit who takes the Word of God and makes its spiritual truths understood in our hearts and applicable in our lives. This is how we receive Christ our Good Shepherd's secure protection against the devil with the rod of His Word, and the staff of His Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

So, these are the ways in which **verses 4 and 5 of Psalm 23** remind us of how Christ our Good Shepherd provides to us His secure *protective* care against the world, the flesh and the devil.

Illustrate with story of armed robbers' attack at Twiga Towers. As I held the hands of Shiro and Edwin to pray the Holy Spirit reminded me of this verse from **Matt. 5:44-45**: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Share my prayer.* This is how the Lord used His rod and His staff to inspire us to pray in a manner that the Lord used to provide to us His secure protective care against this very real threat that we faced.

It is my prayer that all of us here this morning have the assurance deep in our hearts that we are safely in the fold of Christ our Good Shepherd and can therefore be assured of His secure *protective* care.

Once again, as I said last week, if this morning you do not have that assurance but you do want to have it the good news is that Christ made clear in **John 10:9** that the only way into His sheep-fold is by placing our faith in Him and committing our lives to Him. This is what He said in that verse: *I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.* You can enter his sheepfold, His family, His Kingdom, and be saved this morning through a prayer of repentance and faith in Him so that you too will become one of His sheep who can be assured of His secure *protective* care.

Next Sunday we'll look at our **third** and final **P** from **Psalm 23**; the Lord's *pastoral* care of His people.

Let us pray.

*Rev. Canon E. Kwasi Amofo, PhD,
Tigoni, Kenya.
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