

Radio Message: Word of Hope, Psalm 23

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**Rev. "Ted" MacDougall was born November 19, 1935, in Charlottetown, PEI. He was the minister from 1962 to the time of his death in March, 2003, for the Free Church of Scotland, Eastern Charge, in PEI. In the early years of his ministry, starting in 1968, Ted was also involved in the work of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, for which he latterly served as Atlantic Divisional Director. In 1979 he teamed up with radio producer-announcer Loren Fevens to broadcast the gospel message, "Word of Hope". This programme reached countries around the world via short wave radio, including Lebanon, West Africa and the former Soviet Union.*

This week we will consider one of the most famous portions of scripture in the whole Bible – the Twenty-Third Psalm. Let's get our Bibles and turn to the Old Testament. We will read the psalm first and then go back over it in detail. Reading from the first verse of the Twenty-Third Psalm (KJV):

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. ³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. ⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶ 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.

This beautiful psalm is by far the most popular of all in the Bible. The Lord's Prayer, or the Our Father, is the only other scripture that surpasses it in being well known. It is called a Psalm of David and has

its origin from the “sweet singer of Israel”, who himself was a shepherd as well as a king. It is an interesting perspective because it is a sheep’s-eye view of God. We know that this is a common biblical theme, as the people of the Lord are called “the sheep of His pasture”. This theme is fulfilled in the coming of Christ who calls Himself the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep.

It is interesting that the shepherd theme in its attractiveness finds a source in classical literature. A part of ancient Greece was called Arcadia and was known for its gentle, pastoral landscape populated by simple, shepherding people. This simple lifestyle was idealized and picked up later in the Romantic period. It became a poetic image popular in paintings and other works of art. This was part of the quest of the period for peace of soul by returning to the simple things of life. People are not above this today, but there is so much poverty and privation in the world it is difficult to idealize it. Our media make it hard to be wealthy and ignorant.

The peace they sought in classical and ancient times, and even down to the present, was a very illusive thing. To truly find it, we have to go back to the land of Israel and a shepherd boy singing to his God. The God of the universe has uniquely revealed Himself to the house of Israel, and the peace that mankind has sought over the centuries is to be found in a spiritual knowledge of Him. This psalm comes out of the life experience of David and is far more profound than the Arcadian dreams of the Romantics.

Let’s begin our look at the psalm and consider verse one: “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.” In the New Testament Jesus declares Himself to be the Good Shepherd and calls us to come to Him. This means that if we really want to know the Lord as our Shepherd, we have to come to His final revelation in Christ, the Son of David. The Messiah, or Christ, was prophesied to come to the earth and lead His people like a shepherd.

Let’s turn to Isaiah chapter forty and verse ten in our Bibles and read some of the prophecy. Reading from verse ten:

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. ¹¹ He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

The Christ is come and calls us to come to Him, so that when we believe on Him, we can truly say: "The Lord is my shepherd." The wonderful knowledge of the Christ is saving in its content. We are given eternal life and the inheritance of the kingdom of God. This is the peace that we have been looking for. That means we can truly say: "I shall not want."



Verse two: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." Tender green pastures are not so common in the Middle East that they are taken for granted. In a dry land a well-watered pasture is a choice blessing for sheep. The faithful shepherd always plans the journey with his sheep so that they will get tender pasture to feed upon. So with our souls the Lord has provided grace and mercy and food through His Word to take us on our journey through life. There is no higher calling than to be able to feed the people of the Lord through the Word of God and the sacraments.

Another figure is shown to be the quenching of the thirst. Jesus reveals Himself to the woman of Samaria in the Gospel of John, chapter four, and speaks of Himself as being able to give her the water

of life, or living water. This is without question an oblique reference to the River of Life which was lost to man when he was banished from the garden of paradise. The Lord is thus able to lead us to the River of Life and enable us to drink of it. We can find the fulfillment of this in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, Revelation. In the Twenty-Third Psalm, the still waters are the still waters of a river like the Jordan. Sheep cannot drink out of a rushing river any more than we can drink out of a gushing fire hose. The Lord brings us to the still waters of a river backwater so we can drink.

Verse three: "He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." It is clear now that the food given to the sheep is on a spiritual level, for the soul is restored. God alone can do this, for in our natural state our souls are sick through sin. They are empty and without nourishment. God alone has provided this in the coming of Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of this psalm and portrays a multiple role in that fulfillment. For example, He is the Good Shepherd as well as the Messiah, the Son of David, heir to the throne of Israel and heaven. He is also "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world...". He is thus the final Lamb of sacrifice and can Himself say, "The Lord is my Shepherd." Moreover He is the food for the sheep as the Bread of Life and the Source of the River of Life. He brings us His peace as the peace that passeth understanding and so fulfills the rest for the soul that was the desire even of the Romantics and the Greek poets. God leads us in the paths of truth and righteousness, for His name embraces the final absolutes of truth and goodness and love.

Verse four: "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." To get to the quiet river valley in Palestine, it was necessary to descend El Ghor, a precipitous way often called the Valley of the Shadow. The shepherd went ahead of the sheep just as Christ has gone to death before us and now leads us through the pathway. We need not fear death if we have a true knowledge of Christ, for He promises He will neither leave nor forsake us.

The rod has been interpreted as the protection against anything that would hurt the sheep, while the staff is a symbol of deliverance and support. The shepherd's crook so often seen is of just the right size to go about a sheep's neck without choking it to free it or lift it from danger. This is a comfort to the sheep. So the Lord is able to deliver us from sin and to protect us against spiritual enemies.

Verse five: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

The sheep are fed while the silhouette of the wolf is plainly seen against the rising moon. Yet they are safe...Jesus says that no man is able to pluck them out of His hand. He is our great Defender.

Paul's letter to the Romans says in chapter eight, "If God be for us, who can be against us." And again, "We are more than conquerors through him that loved us." He did the same for Israel in the wilderness journeys while their enemies surrounded them. So also He does for us as believers in Christ.

The anointing of the head with oil has been interpreted as fulfilled by the anointing of the believer with the Spirit of God. Every Christian should pray to be filled by the Holy Spirit. The oil was put upon the head of the sheep by the shepherd to heal any wounds that might have been received during the day. In a far deeper way, the Holy Spirit is our Comforter and Healer of wounds upon the heart. By His filling us, we are given peace and joy and love that overflow our personalities and become a blessing to others. We are given power to overcome sin and the temptations of our daily life. Truly the cup runs over as the Lord anoints His flock.

Verse six: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Goodness and mercy have been likened to two sheep dogs that constantly follow the flock and keep it in line at the Shepherd's orders. It is an apt illustration, for the goodness and mercy of God truly follow us all the way through our lives and are a great blessing. They hold us together when we might wander and then lead us back to the Shepherd.

So we have come to the end of the Shepherd's Psalm. It is of little use to us to read this psalm or even to memorize it unless we truly seek the Lord as our Shepherd and our Guide. Let's not leave this to another time, but even now as we listen to the broadcast, let us call upon Jesus to come into our hearts and forgive our sin. Then we will be as the Scripture says, sheep who have gone astray but have now returned to the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls. May God bless the Shepherd's Psalm to our souls today.

Dear Heavenly Father, bless us today as the sheep who are returning to the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Guide us by the Spirit to pray and come to Him. In Jesus name, amen.