

Psalm 23

Pairing this psalm with the story of Jacob fleeing from Esau and encountering Rachel, we can see this masterpiece of comfort in a new light.

“Lie down in green pastures” could correspond to Jacob’s sleep and dream of the ladder and God’s blessing.

Psalm 23:1 - “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

This is not David’s vow to stop wanting or desiring stuff. It’s a recognition that God is providing for all his needs, like a shepherd does for his sheep.

The Targum says, “It is the Lord who fed his people in the wilderness; they did not lack anything.”

The type of the shepherd runs throughout the Bible. Sheep actually are little “need machines.” They are dumb, they follow the sheep in front of them; still, they tend to get lost. But they recognize the shepherd’s voice, and he protects them with his rod from predators and guides them with his staff or shepherd’s crook, finding good pasture and “still waters” (sheep are skittish and afraid of a rushing stream) and bringing them into the protection of the sheepfold at night.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd

John 10:11 - “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”

Jacob speaks of “the God who shepherded me” (**Genesis 48:15**, cp. **Genesis 49:24**).

“I shall not want” - "Therefore I can lack nothing" is the fuller sense. The rest of the psalm describes God’s full provision.

Psalm 23:3 - “He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

“Restoreth” means he will “bring back” my soul/life - from death, from wanderings, from being lost, from sin through repentance. “He causes my life to return.” And, He renews, revives, refreshes and sustains it.

The Targum says, “He will restore my soul with *manna*.” Speaking of the manna, Jesus said, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” (**John 6:51**)

Isaiah 53:6 - “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Walking in the paths of righteousness must follow, not precede, the restoration of the soul. We are justified not by works, but for works, or, as the Apostle puts it in a passage which sounds like an echo of this psalm:

Ephesians 2:10 - “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them..”

The basis of obedience is the awareness of salvation. We work not for the assurance of acceptance and forgiveness, but from it. First the restored soul, then the paths of righteousness for His name's sake who has restored me, and restored me that I may be like Him. - *MacLaren's Expositions*

“For His name's sake” - Only for the demonstration and glory of his justice, faithfulness, and goodness.

Psalm 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.”

Pressed between the murderous intentions of Esau on one hand and the deception of Laban on the other, Jacob - like David - can still say “I will fear no evil.”

The Targum says, “for your word is my help, your straight staff and your Torah, they will comfort me.”

A deeper interpretation:

"Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me"; rod is applied to suffering while staff is applied to the Torah. Suffering is therefore not an evil to be avoided but an opportunity that points to a better life. "Whoever rejoices in the sufferings that come upon him in this life brings salvation to the world." - (Midrash on Tehillim, Shohar Tob, on Ps. 23:5; Taanit 8a.)

“for thou art with me” - recalls **Exodus 29:45-46** - “I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. They shall know that I am the LORD their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God....”

Psalm 23: 5 - “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”

Some commentators see in this “table” the joyous feast enjoyed in the peace offerings, in which the priest and the offerer both partake of the offering, representing Christ. The Targum has, “a table of manna.”

“In the presence of mine enemies” - either in the midst of the threats of the enemy, or after their defeat. Ancient custom used to humble defeated enemy kings by having them scramble around for scraps from the conqueror’s table (Judges 1:7).

"thou anointest my head with oil" - Compare Jacob anointing the rock, which he declared was the House of God and the Gate of Heaven (**Genesis 28:19-22**).

"My cup runneth over" - compare the overflowing well of Jacob of Jewish tradition.

Psalm 23:6 - "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."

"follow me" = "pursue me" i.e. goodness and mercy are directed by God's will. They relentlessly pursue us for good, in the same way a predator would pursue us for evil. We are not subject to fate or chance.

"I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." - the counterpart to Jacob's declaration that "this is none other but the house of God" in Genesis 28:17.