

"Our Shepherd"

July
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A.M.

Text:- Psalm 23: 1. "The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want".

Introduction:- The 23d Psalm is the dearest and best loved of the entire collection of the Psalms. So pure is the tone of these simple strains, so richly does the spirit of trust and hope arise from these verses that people of all races have found here a song and a shrine. There is at once the triumphal note of "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" and the tender trustfulness of "Our Father who art in heaven".

I.

The Lord. The glory of the psalm is the psalmist's assurance that his guide and protector is God. It is no cause for surprise that God is found in the Bible. These songs and sighs, these precepts and prophecies, were gathered together into one, because God was their subject. But before God could be ~~reality to the writers~~ the subject of the writings he must have been a reality to the writers. Before any man, he he prophet or psalmist, could speak of God in the clear ways these writers speak of him, that man must have found God for himself, in deed and truth.

The sincerity of this note has never been challenged. It is neither forced nor fancied. It is the simple utterance of the experience of great souls. It was a fact in the life of the singer of this song. As he looked back upon the course of life he had traced he turns in thankfulness and confidence to the One who had led him along that uncertain path; and out of a rich experience, and a full heart his first word is the Lord.

For every human soul this discovery of God is fundamental. Until it is made, the leaves of the book of life remain uncut. One may indeed, like Noah's dove, have plucked an olive branch from the waste of waters, but he has found no resting place for his foot. "O Lord", said Saint Augustine, "Thou hast

made us for thyself, and our souls are restless until they find rest in thee".

The psalm gives us no light upon the experience which led its author to this exalted faith in God. We are not told whether it grew gradually, in the pious culture of the home, or whether the path of righteousness had been found through the sudden turning of some sharp corner of life. When Jacob dreamed about the house of God he exclaimed, "How dreadful is this place". No matter how he finds God, whether it quiets or disturbs him, it is a real experience, it is a dynamic experience, it is a positive experience. It has become a determining factor in the life of the man who has found him. For the Christian it will be the most precious experience of the soul.

II.

The Shepherd. The inspiration of the psalmist did not end with his consciousness of God. It began there. From thence he looked out upon a world and found the scene transformed into a poem of the presence of God. Then, first, did the psalmist know his fellow men. There are a number of time-honored words, scriptural words, which have long served to illustrate God's love and care. According to these, God is a "rock", a "strong tower", a "shield", a "shepherd". These objects belong to an ancient and Oriental day. But they have a meaning for those of our day. Men thought and spoke of their religion, and of their God, under the familiar figures drawn from the common life of their own day. They found in that common life such divine affinities as to make these expressions natural and spontaneous. In the psalmist's day few sights could have been more familiar than that of a quiet shepherd ~~shepherd~~ and slow moving sheep. Let us look at him. There he ~~stands~~ stands, with his sheep huddling around him. It is in this homely, familiar figure in which the psalmist finds his picture of divine care. The picture is so reverent, so true, that the word "shepherd" has been glorified for all time. He, the psalmist, found the shepherd-likeness in God, because he found a God-likeness in the shepherd. Between the lines may be found rich nourishment for the soul, in that rare

spirit which discerns the divine traits in human shepherds.

After one's heart has been thrilled by the psalm's pure, transparent beauty, and its beauty is beyond all praise; after one has marvelled at the matchless perfection with which the Divine Shepherds is here portrayed; after one's soul has been sustained in sorrow and cheered in defeat by the blessed consolation which this psalm affords, there still remains the psalm's profound appeal to a modern spirit, which in the midst of this urgent, ingenious, insatiable twentieth century, feels so deeply the truth of God's presence in his world today. The pursuits of daily life shall again be enshrined by repeating that glory by which men heard, in the language they were born, the wonderful works of God.

III.

I shall not want. What a glorious statement. You shall not want. Why? Because the God of the 23d psalm is your God. He has for centuries been looking after his own. In the psalm the words "I shall not want", are rather to be understood to mean, "I did not want in the past, I do not want in the present, I shall not want in the future". The Oriental feeling of eternity is here. The shepherd of Israel slumbers not or sleeps. The tender words, which speak of the "still waters", the refreshing of the soul, and the security even in the valley of death, are at the same time singing to each other, "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be".

Into this world of God's unfailing love and care, inspired by an experience none can dispute, the psalmist steps with simple sincerity and quiet confidence. He has found God; he has found his fellow men; he has found himself. He sees his true place to be within the sphere of God's wise and loving providence. If earthly shepherds know how to care for their earthly charges, how much more shall the Divine Shepherd give good care to those who trust him, and I trust him.

It is not the courage nor the wisdom of the sheep

but the wise love of the shepherd, that protects in time of danger, and provides in time of need. Not only does the psalmist feel that all his help has come from the shepherd, but he feels that any path along which the shepherd leads, is the way of true welfare.

It is a great temptation to find in the words, "I shall not want," as assurance that one shall never know ease and never meet danger. The psalmist could hardly have meant this. The landscape of his life included dark valleys as well as green pastures. His soul could hardly have been restored unless it first had fallen. If his life had always been peaceful there could hardly have been the presence of enemies. The calm courage of these words, simple words, implies no blindness to life's bitterness and sorrow. His faith is sure, because of the recognition that life's true welfare comes from the Shepherd.

The experience reflected in this psalm came to utterance only after it had come into being in the life of the psalmist. And the psalm itself finds its true, its only true home, today, in the soul of that reader who again translates to story from speech to life. This experience, now as then, is for all those who seek the Lord with all their hearts, who discern the sanctity of human life and character, and who, meeting ease without ~~dis~~ indolence and danger without dismay, trust in the guidance, the presence, and the love of the Lord, the Good Shepherd.

He leadeth me! O blessed thought!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.