

# WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES COMMENTARY

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## PSALM 22

### Introduction

Psalm 22 is the fourth of those Psalms which are specifically called "Messianic". For an explanation of this term see Note 5 in the general Introduction to this Commentary. It is also the first of a delightful trilogy of Psalms in which the Psalmist moves from suffering in Psalm 22, through shepherd care in Psalm 23, to future glory in Psalm 24. These are, respectively, the Psalms of the Saviour, the Shepherd, and the Sovereign. Or, as is often said, the Psalms of the Cross, the Crook, and the Crown. The two sections of this Psalm are an exposition of those words of Peter as he writes of "The sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow" (1 Pet 1:11). The first part of the Psalm, \_\_\_Ps 22\_\_\_ verses 1-21, is a Sob. The second part, verses 22-31, is a Song. The reader is on holy ground and must come in the utmost reverence, with unshod feet, to learn the thoughts and feelings of the Prince of Sufferers, the Man of Sorrows.

There is no reason to question the Davidic authorship. The date must therefore be agreed at around 1050 BC, but it is not possible to associate the Psalm with any particular event or circumstance in David's life. Does he write beyond his own experience? Is he not one of those OT prophets in whom the Spirit of Christ was speaking, and speaking of things not fully understood by the prophets themselves? There are some who suppose that David has written out of the depths of his own sorrow, but has, by inspiration, written of the deeper sufferings of Christ. Those who wish to consider this in depth might consult Plumer who has treated the question most thoroughly and at great length. In his very detailed summing up he writes, "There is no part of this Psalm which may not be applied to Messiah. Many parts of it are expressly applied to Christ in the New Testament, Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34. In the same chapter of Matthew, \_\_\_Mt 27\_\_\_ v. 35, and in John 19:24, the evangelists show that \_\_\_Ps 22\_\_\_ v. 18 of this Psalm was fulfilled at the crucifixion. Matthew also tells that v. 8 of this Psalm contains the very words of taunt and bitterness used by Christ's murderers (\_\_\_Mt\_\_\_ 27:43). The whole history of the crucifixion shows the fulfilment of that clause in v. 16, 'They pierced my hands and my feet'. Now crucifixion was not a Jewish but a Roman punishment. Paul in Hebrews 2:12, arguing on the humanity and sufferings of Christ, expressly applies to Him the whole of \_\_\_Ps 22\_\_\_ v. 22. Immediately on His resurrection Christ calls the disciples, 'My brethren' (Mt 28:10; Jn 20:17), in fulfilment of the twenty-

second verse of this Psalm. Indeed it would be hard to frame any argument proving any prophecy directly and exclusively Messianic, if this is not so".

The title of the Psalm has words familiar and unfamiliar. It is, with those fifty-four other Psalms, dedicated to the Chief Musician, the Precentor, the Master of Temple Song, and it is a Psalm of David. The unfamiliar are those Hebrew words, "Ajeleth Shahar". As to the meaning of these strange words there is no problem. The difficulty arises in seeking to understand their import and their relevance to the content of the Psalm. "Ajeleth" (<H365>) is rightly rendered "hind" in Proverbs 5:19 and in Jeremiah 14:5. "Shahar" (<H7837>) is rendered "morning" in Genesis 19:15, Psalm 139:9 and Song of Solomon 6:10. There is no doubt that the words mean "The Hind of the Morning", or, as some prefer, "The Hind of the Dawn".

But how then does this apply to the Psalm? Was it a title of some piece of morning music used in the service of the tabernacle or temple? Or was it the name of a musical instrument for which the Psalmist is stating a preference for use in the singing of his Psalm? We cannot know with certainty. Many devout readers, lovers of the Lord Jesus, will have no difficulty in seeing here a tender description of Him who, gentle and meek, was pursued by enemies from the dawning of His earthly life at Bethlehem until eventually they slew Him at Calvary. The gentle hind appears to be almost defenceless. It does not retaliate or engage in battle. It is a fitting symbol of Him of whom it is written that He, "when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not" (1 Pet 2:23). In the early morning hours, before the animal creation has properly awakened, the hind may be seen drinking and feeding. It is indeed "the hind of the dawn". But when the beasts of prey have aroused themselves then the hind will be hunted, its only defence being a keen sense of danger and a fleetness of foot. So it was with the Lord Jesus, Herod cruelly seeking His life in those morning hours of His holy infancy, and, after that, enemies following Him relentlessly with evil intent until His death at Golgotha in the prime of sinless manhood. This Psalm, then, may be clearly seen to be an account of the sufferings of the Messiah and of the vindication and glory that follow. It is an inspired record of His death by crucifixion, composed over one thousand years before His incarnation, with an accompanying meditation upon His present and future exaltation.

### **Verses 1-21: The Sob**

The Psalm begins with a cry from the depths of a suffering which can neither be comprehended nor expounded. It is a cry of abandonment, of desertion, of utter loneliness—"*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*". Is this the only occurrence, in all of Holy Scripture, of the repeated "My God, my God"? What mystery is this? The sinless One is forsaken by the Holy One. Who can understand it? Judas may betray Him. Peter may deny Him. But, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?". However, this is not a cry of despair, or of complaint, or of impatience, or of arrogance. It is the cry of a willing, voluntary sin-bearer and

substitute, who has assumed and accepted accountability for the sins of others and is now paying the price in deepest suffering. His God is far from helping Him, apparently unheeding the loud crying. Like the scapegoat in the land of forgetfulness, laden with the iniquities of the people, so does the Saviour cry alone upon the cross (Lev 16:22). There is none to hear Him or to come to His salvation. It is a wilderness of sorrow. The groanings of the sufferer are compared to the lion's roar. In the case of the Psalmist this may have been literally true, but not so with the Lord Jesus. With Him there was no such audible roaring during His hours of suffering, but nevertheless there must have been wrung from His heart, unheard by men, the sad and solemn cries of One in the intensity of indescribable anguish.

His cries continue. He calls to men, and to His God and Father, in the daytime and in the night season. They crucified the Saviour at the third hour, nine o'clock in the morning. For three hours he hung suffering under the burning Jerusalem sun. At the sixth hour, noonday, there fell an unnatural, supernatural, darkness which persisted until the ninth hour, three o'clock in the afternoon (Mk 15:25, 33). These were His daytime and His night season. For six hours, in the light and in the darkness, He endured the pain with none to help. His cries ascended to a silent heaven and dissolved in the darkness. There was no one to hear or to help the abandoned One. Forsaken! Alone! A sin-bearer on the behalf of others, Himself sinlessly perfect. There was no answer from God to the cry of desolation. "Thou hearest not".

It is, however, a consolation for every sufferer in the darkest hour to remember that God is holy. In His holiness, whatever the circumstances of His saints on earth, He is to be praised. Did Job grasp this, when, from the depths of his sorrow he cried, "Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21)? Job's friends might not understand. Even his wife criticised him and gave ill advice. But Job looked up from his grief and blessed the Lord. In the case of the holy sufferer seen prophetically in this Psalm, it is holiness which demands the forsaking of the sin-bearer. He who sits in holiness, enthroned amid the praises of Israel, cannot look upon sin. Messiah, in His sinlessness, voluntarily and vicariously takes the place of sinners and is accordingly forsaken.

He remembers the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses, Joshua, Samuel and others. They trusted, they cried, and were delivered. They trusted and were not confounded (<H954>). They were not disappointed. They had no reason to be ashamed about their trusting, for their God heard them and delivered them. Notice how David twice says, "They trusted", "They trusted", but between these he says, "They cried". There was an intensity and an earnestness with their trust. It was expressed in cries. They trusted with fervour. They cried in confident hope, and Jehovah had heard, and delivered.

"But I ..."! O the sadness of this. The pronoun "I" is emphatic. "*I am a worm*" (<H8438>). This is neither nature nor character, but expresses the human weakness of One who is

utterly despised and rejected. The worm, in its helplessness, is trodden underfoot by men, despised and defenceless. But there is more yet. As F. W. Grant comments, "Gone down to a depth far below that of any man whatever. The word "worm" (*TOLAAT*) applies especially to the coccus from which the scarlet dye of the tabernacle was obtained, of course by its death: in that way, how significant of the One before us! But only as suffering under the judgment of sin could this be true of Him: indeed the word is used (Isa 1:18) for the crimson red colour of sin, and that of a heinous kind; and thus the application is still clearer: He was made sin for us, He who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor 5:21)". His people must bow their heads in deepest reverence, and view with wonder and worship that which they cannot comprehend.

Those are sad words in John 1:10-11 which tell us that "the world knew him not", and that "his own received him not". Jesus lived unrecognised in the world that He had made, and His own people, Israel, to whom He had been sent, despised Him. In His closing hours men laughed at His suffering. The Gospels record the literal fulfilment of these verses at Calvary. "They that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads ... Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders" (Mt 27:39, 41). It was the reproach of men indeed. He was "despised of the people". Did they know, these mockers, how accurately they were fulfilling their own Psalm? They said, "He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him" (Mt 27:43). They laughed Him to scorn and shook their heads, pouting with their lips as they taunted Him. These were gestures of contempt and of ridicule. They laughed in their derision of Him, ignorant of the truth of what they were saying, that Jehovah delighted in Him. They derided Him in whom Jehovah delighted. O the perversity of man!

But the holy sufferer continues to trust. His had ever been a life of dependence and trust and His trust would not be shaken now by the tauntings of wicked men. He had trusted (<H1556>) His God since infancy. He had rolled Himself in dependence upon Jehovah all His life long, and though men might scoff and deride, still He would trust in the God who had taken Him out of the womb and caused Him to hope (<H982>) since that day of His entry into the world.

In v. 11 there is a plaintive appeal which is repeated in v. 19. "Be not far from me". To the plea of v. 11 is added the sad lament, "There is none to help", and to that of v. 19 is added the call, "Haste thee to help me". Between these two verses lies that description of the sufferings of the Crucified, so accurate in the details as to appear more like a record of the past than a prediction of the future. Here is inspiration indeed, for it must always be remembered that death by crucifixion was a Roman invention, not Jewish. "Trouble is near", the sufferer cries. Why should Jehovah remain distant when trouble is near?

The tormentors are described as bulls and dogs, fiercely encompassing their victim. "Strong bulls of Bashan" encircle Him. Bashan was a most fertile country east of Jordan, famous for its rich pastureland and therefore for its superior flocks and herds. The rams of Bashan are mentioned as early as Deuteronomy 32:14. In Amos 4:1 the cattle of Bashan are used symbolically of the leaders of the nation, and doubtless the same symbolism is employed here. The proud and arrogant scribes and Pharisees, with the priests and the doctors of the law, surrounded the lone sufferer in the palace of the High Priest on that dark night of His unjust trial. Caiaphas was a Sadducee, but Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians were united on that night in their opposition to the Blessed One. They gaped upon Him as they beset Him around. They raged upon Him like a ravening roaring lion in their ferocity, until He felt like water poured out, drained with the suffering and the strain of a long night. His heart, like wax in the intense heat, was melted within Him as He was taken from prison and from judgment to the place of execution (Isa 53:8).

The cruel extending of the arms in crucifixion, and the fixing of the hands and feet with nails, caused dislocation of the bones. The hours of pain upon the cross brought great physical weakness. The strength of the Crucified was dried up. He likens it to a potsherd (<H2789>), a broken piece of earthenware, lying on the floor of the oven, in the unremitting heat of the furnace, until every drop of moisture has been drained from it. If, and when, it might be touched, it would crumble to dust. So did He feel in His weakness, brought into the dust of death. It was such an One who cried, "I thirst" (Jn 19:28), His tongue cleaving to His jaws.

When the bulls of Bashan, the leaders of the nation, had finished with Him in that early morning hour, after the night of mockery and derision, they had handed Him over to the Gentiles. The dogs of Rome had then compassed Him in Pilate's judgment hall. There they had scourged Him, and spat on Him, stripping Him of His garments, and crowning Him with a wreath of thorns. Like a pack of dogs they had surrounded Him on the way to Golgotha. How lonely He must have been in that congregation of wicked men which enclosed Him as they pierced His hands and His feet. Bereft of His garments, His bones were exposed to their gaze. Heartlessly, callously, shamelessly, they stared upon Him, and wantonly gambled for His clothing at the foot of His cross. Four gambling soldiers divided His outer garments among them, then cast lots for the seamless inner robe which must not be spoiled by rending. The heart of man was truly revealed in the shades of Calvary.

Thus ends, in the Psalm, the story of the physical sufferings of the Messiah, with the renewed plea, "Be not thou far from me, O Lord: O my strength, haste thee to help me". He lifts His eyes away from His tormentors. He looks to heaven and to His God. "Help me! Save me! Deliver my soul!" He appeals for deliverance from the paw of the dog, from the mouth of the lion, and from the horns of the unicorns (<H7214>). In such symbolic language He describes His enemies. The unicorn was probably the wild buffalo, the aurochs, to the

antlers of which the victim was sometimes bound, to be left at the mercy of a stampeding herd. So had the herd, the multitude, been stampeded into clamouring for His death. "Crucify him! Crucify him!", they had cried in the early morning. Bulls and dogs had encompassed Him. The lion had raged upon Him. Even the common people had been against Him. But Jehovah will hear Him now, and deliver His only One from them all. "It is finished". "Thou hast heard me". The sob has ceased. "'Tis past, the dark and dreary night". The suffering must now be followed by the glory.

### **Verses 22-31: The Song**

There is now a most marked transition from the sob to the song, from gloom to glory, from the storm to the calm. Messiah speaks of "my brethren". How early after His resurrection did He announce this holy relationship. "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (Jn 20:17). Observe that the Saviour does not say directly, either here or elsewhere, "Our Father". His personal relationship with the Father is unique, but nevertheless a new relationship has now been established for those who are associated with Him. "He is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Heb 2:11). It has been dearly bought, this relationship, by the sufferings earlier described in the Psalm. Now, in the midst of His brethren, He will declare Jehovah's name and lead the praise of His saints. He who had been encompassed by the assembly of the wicked is now surrounded by a great congregation of those who love Him, and He is their preceptor as they unite in praise of Jehovah. He is no longer alone. The great company of the redeemed gather around Him in His glory. He is preeminent, supreme, declaring the heart and character of Jehovah to them, and delighting in their song of praise. Once before He had joined in song with those who loved Him, but then it was a small remnant company in the quiet privacy of the Upper Room (Mt 26:30). Now the company is vast, if not innumerable, and He glorious in the midst.

Four times in five verses ([22-26](#)) the word "praise" is repeated. There is an almost universal summons for others to join in the praise. The God of Jacob is the God of grace. The God of Israel is the God of salvation and of glory. Let the seed of Jacob therefore, and the seed of Israel, praise Him. Doubtless there is always a remnant within, in true and loyal devotion to Jehovah; let these that fear the Lord praise Him. Some, however, will see this expression, "Ye that fear the Lord", as being rather an extended call to include all who feared Jehovah, whether Israelites or not. Many there must have been who, although Gentile, feared God and were known as "God-fearers", as Cornelius in Acts 10:1-2. Thus the term may not be descriptive just of an inner circle or remnant of the faithful in Israel, but may look beyond the favoured nation, and wider. There is good reason for this call to praise. Jehovah has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted One. Jehovah may indeed, in His holiness, have hidden His face for a while from the holy Sin-Bearer, but the

Saviour's cry has been heard and the face of Jehovah now shines on Him in resurrection. With strong crying and tears He had called unto Him who was able to save Him out of death, and He was heard for His piety (Heb 5:7). God has raised Him out from among the dead, and the great congregation must praise. Jehovah is not only the object of that praise but the very source of it also. "My praise shall be from thee". Or, as in the RV, "Of thee cometh my praise". It is, as Paul writes in Romans 11:36, "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever". He is the source, the channel, and the object, of the praises of His people. He gives them not only the reason for praise but also the very ability to praise.

In vv. 25-26 there is, as others have observed, a reference to the peace offering of Leviticus 3. That offering was a thank-offering which accompanied vows. This may of course be the personal exercise of the Psalmist himself, and yet it is Messianic. The peace offering was shared by many. Jehovah had His portion on the altar. The priests had their portion. The offerer enjoyed his portion also, and it was eaten with his family and friends in the enjoyment and fellowship of the thanksgiving which had been rendered or the vow which had been made. The flesh of the sacrifice of a peace offering which accompanied a vow was eaten on the same day on which it was offered, or on the morrow. (Lev 7:16). There was an immediate fellowship in the joy of the occasion. So it is with Christ. He will hasten to share with His people the fruits of Calvary. Today and tomorrow they shall feast upon the provision made by His offering of Himself. The meek shall eat and be satisfied. In such sacred matters there is no room for pride. It is the meek (<H6035>), the humble, who enjoy with the Saviour that which has been accomplished in His sacrifice, and those who seek Him shall share with Him. As F. W. Grant so beautifully comments, "Messiah's vows furnish forth, indeed, a royal banquet upon which, in communion, the humble feed to fullest satisfaction. 'Your heart shall live for aye' becomes thus an assurance full of blessing". If however, the RV, RSV, or JPS renderings are accepted, then this phrase may be a benediction or a blessing, "May your heart live forever". It is a desire for an undying affection and devotion, and an endless energy in praise.

The Psalmist now looks beyond. He anticipates a future age when not only Israel but all the kindreds of the nations will unite in the worship of Jehovah. The remotest parts of the earth will recall the triumph of the Messiah; they will remember His person and His work and bow to His claims, praising accordingly. It envisages that day promised to Messiah in the second Psalm, "Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession". It is the word of Revelation 11:15, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ". This is millennial glory, and, glorious though it is, it is but the antechamber to that eternal state when God shall be all in all and be the theme and the object of universal adoration and

homage. There will be a recognition by all of Jehovah's sovereignty in the universe. He will be the governor, the ruler, supreme and unchallenged.

The closing verses of the Psalm are difficult, and have been variously interpreted. "They that be fat upon earth", and, "They that go down to the dust", are obviously to be contrasted in some way. There may be a contrast between rich and poor, between those who are nourished and prosperous and those who are in the dust in material poverty. There may also be a contrast between the proud and the humble, the selfsufficient and the dependent. Kirkpatrick has the following note, "Others suppose that the contrast intended is not between rich and poor, but between the living and the dead. 'Earth's fat ones' are those in the full vigour of life: *all they that have gone down into the dust* are the dead. Quick and dead bow in homage before the universal sovereign. (Compare Phil 2:10)". But whatever the difficulty and whatever interpretation be accepted, the problems must not rob the reader of the basic premise. There is no doubt that a contrast of some sort is intended to indicate that all men will one day acknowledge the rule of Jehovah and His Anointed. The living and the dying, the mighty and the meek, the rich and the poor, the great and the small, shall all bow before Him and worship. All are mortal. All are going down to the dust. What are any apart from Him? No man can keep alive his own soul.

In the prophecy of Daniel it was predicted that Messiah would be cut off and would have nothing (Dan 9:26, JND). In Isaiah's prophecy it was similarly predicted that He would be cut off out of the land of the living (Isa 53:8). Who then can point to the generation of a Messiah so cut off? But Isaiah continues, "He shall see his seed". So does this Psalm confirm, "A seed shall serve him". There will be a generation for His glory. Indeed there is a generation even now which will declare His righteousness unto a generation yet to be born. From generation to generation, through an age of grace into a day of millennial glory, and into the Day of God, the praises will reverberate, never dying, never ceasing, and all because "He hath done this". It is finished! The work is done, and done perfectly. All is accomplished by Him who cried at the beginning of the Psalm, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?". Who can know the depths of His suffering? Who can tell the height of His glory? The purpose of God is fulfilled in Him, the Messiah, the Anointed, and the Man of Sorrows is now the Man in the Glory.

To quote Kirkpatrick again, "The song of praise, begun by the Psalmist, is taken up by Israel; all the nations of the earth swell the chorus; and the strain echoes on through all the ages. So gloriously ends the Psalm which began in the darkest sorrow. It is the history of the individual, of Israel, of the Church, of the world".

## **PSALM 23**

### **Introduction**

It has been said of Psalm 23 that "the world could spare many a large book better than this sunny little Psalm. It has dried many tears and supplied the mould into which many hearts have poured their peaceful faith. In a pastoral community such as Israel was, a faithful shepherd was the personification of tender care and unwearying watchfulness, and men gratefully applied the term to God as the Provider and Protector of His flock" (A. Cohen).

It is often pointed out that, in the preceding Psalm 22, the Messiah is seen as the good shepherd, giving His life for the sheep. Here, in Psalm 23, He is the great shepherd of the sheep, brought again from the dead by the God of peace (Heb 13:20). This little shepherd song has been translated and paraphrased and arranged for singing in a myriad of languages. It is a Psalm so full of comfort and assurance, and provision and promise, that for some three thousand years saints of every age have been singing it on every occasion. In days of prosperity believers read this Psalm, but in days of adversity they sing it too. Whether mourning or rejoicing, whether sick or sad, in delight or in depression, in joy or in sorrow, in triumph or in tragedy, it seems that there is always something in the Psalm for every vicissitude of life. Whether in green pastures of tender grass, or beside the waters of quietness, or in the dark valley of the shadow of death, the believer is assured of shepherd care. This is the pearl of Psalms, with a lustre all its own. It has been likened to the nightingale among birds, small, plain, and homely, but soaring high and singing sweetly (Spurgeon).

It is a Psalm of David. There is no title, nor any link with any one particular event in David's life, but it is easy to picture the shepherd boy in the fields of Bethlehem in the midst of the flock, watching, caring, tending the sheep and lambs. In his own care for his sheep David sees reflected the care of Jehovah for His flock, and in this way the Psalm is written out of personal experience.

Like the first Psalm, Psalm 23 has but six verses, and these are readily and naturally divided into two equal sections with three verses in each. Verses 1-3 sing of the tender and gentle care of the Divine Shepherd for His sheep. Verses 4-6 look forward with assurance and see that care and comfort continuing through the valley of the shadow of death into the everlasting joy of the house of the Lord. Some have imagined a change of metaphor after v. 4, from sheep and pasture to guests at a banquet, where the shepherd now becomes a host, but it is not necessary to see such a change, as will be shown in the commentary.

### **Verses 1-3: Provision and Protection**

The Psalm opens with an exclamation rather than with a statement. "Jehovah—my shepherd!" Note that "is" has been supplied in italics in our English translation. The remaining verses of the Psalm are then but an exposition or amplification of this exclamation. Jehovah is often spoken of as a shepherd, perhaps the earliest such references

being those of Jacob in Genesis 48:15 and 49:24. Jacob speaks of "the God which fed me all my life long". Literally, and beautifully, it is "the God who shepherded me". In Psalm 80:1 Jehovah is called "The Shepherd of Israel", and in Psalm 74:1 His people are called the sheep of His pasture, which figure is often used in the Psalms. Israel is His flock and He is their shepherd, leading and guiding them in their varied national experiences. Not only David and Asaph and the Psalmists, but the prophets too use the same lovely imagery. Isaiah says, "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" (Isa 40:11), with which can be compared Micah 7:14. Then, in John 10, the Saviour speaks of Himself as "the shepherd of the sheep" and "the good shepherd" (\_\_\_Jn 10\_\_\_vv. 2, 11, 14). But for many saints the great word in Psalm 23:1 is that little pronoun "my". This makes Jehovah's shepherd ministry so very personal. To be able to say "my Shepherd", and to hear Him respond and say "My sheep" (Jn 10:27), is very precious. "I am His", said another, "and He is mine" (Song 6:3). There is a link so tender and yet so strong.

The "I shall not want" of v. 1 has suggested to many readers the great title Jehovah Jireh, first used by Abraham in Genesis 22:14. This may mean "The Lord will see", or, "The Lord will provide", but, on comparing \_\_\_Gen 22\_\_\_vv. 8 and 14 of Genesis 22, perhaps there is, in the title, a combination of both of these thoughts. Jehovah Jireh both sees and provides. So it was with Abraham on that day, and so it was with the nation of Israel in their journeyings. Compare those lovely testimonies with Jehovah's care for them in Deuteronomy 2:7; 8:7-10. The personal pronoun "I" makes this gracious provision so very individual. He who sees and knows the varied needs of His people will always suitably provide just what will meet their need at any time, whether collectively or personally.

The Psalmist now recognises two particular aspects of the need of saints in every age—food and rest, pasture and quietness. Jehovah sees His flock, oftentimes weary, thirsty, hungry, and He leads the sheep to tender grass and quiet waters. When the heat of the sun is oppressive He makes His flock to rest at noon in the cool meadows (Song 1:7). "Still waters" must not, of course, be thought of as placid or stagnant waters. These are waters of restfulness where the sheep may be refreshed in quietness. Observe, too, that the Eastern shepherd "leads" his flock. There is no harsh driving of the sheep, as is common in other cultures. "He leadeth me", says David. When it is remembered that this was a land greatly parched, with but two rainy seasons in the year, a thirsty land where green pastures were not found in abundance, this is pleasant indeed. So does the believer find himself in the wilderness of a world where there is nothing for his soul unless Jehovah leads.

The theme of "leading" recurs in v. 3, but the two words, which are each translated "leadeth" in the AV, are different. In the first, in v. 2, "leadeth" (<H5095>) has the thought of guiding towards a particular goal. This goal, of course, is the peaceful scene depicted by the pastures of tender grass and the waters of quietness. In v. 3, "leadeth" (<H5148>) may

rather convey the thought of guidance along the way, leading in the straight paths of righteous living. Jehovah would have His people walk in righteousness. He guides along that way, and, if one should stray, He graciously restores the wanderer. "He restoreth (<H7725>) my soul", the Psalmist sings. He restores, revives, refreshes, recovers, the erring one, and this for His name's sake. The honour of His name is paramount and must be upheld in the godly lives of His people walking in straight paths, and so does He lead and guide and restore them along the way. It is for His glory.

### **Verses 4-6: Divine Care and Companionship**

In the lives of the saints there may indeed be quiet waters and green pastures, but there is also the valley of the shadow. The Bedouin shepherd of the East is familiar with the fierce gorges, the ravines and wadis so deep that the sun never shines into their dark depths. David as a shepherd boy would have been thoroughly acquainted with such valleys as he led the sheep from pasture to pasture. But what, to the believer today, is the valley of the shadow of death? Is it the actual experience of dying? Many think so, and it has been a comfort to many a saint in the final weakness, to know the presence of the Lord in those last hours. It is a consolation also to know that it is not just "in" the valley, but "through" the valley, that the good Shepherd is with His sheep, and that the valley eventually opens into the light of a better life. It may be however, that the valley of the shadow of death is not just dying. All saints have their dark days and gloomy valley experiences. The very world through which we walk daily is a veritable valley constantly shaded by death and dying. Maybe it is in living, not dying, that we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But as Plumer writes, "Why may we not unite these views? Paul says he was *in deaths oft*, because he suffered things which commonly lead to death. The darkness in our way through life is often a fit emblem of the gloom of a dying hour. It is probable that by *shadow of death* we are to understand all that is dark in life and in death". Whichever be the thought, there is comfort in this assurance, "Thou art with me", says the Psalmist. "Lo, I am with you alway", is the promise of the good Shepherd to His flock. (Mt 28:20).

David takes comfort from the rod and the staff of his Shepherd. He was familiar with these. The rod was for the defence of the sheep from marauding predators. The staff was for guidance and for support. Thy rod (<H7626>) and Thy staff (<H4938>). The words are different, but this may simply be a dual way of describing the single shepherd's crook, which as a rod defended the sheep from attackers, but could also support the animal by being passed under its body to stay it in slippery places in the slopes of the valley. Some commentators feel, though, that these were separate items, the customary shepherd staff and the shorter rod or club for defence. The chief comfort, however, is that He is there with rod and staff to care for His flock, and, that being so, the believer may safely say, "I will fear no evil" (<H7451>). No mischief or wickedness can hurt the sheep while the Shepherd is

there. The valley may be deep and dark and dangerous, and the journey through may be difficult, but the comfort of His presence, who is the Shepherd of His sheep, will stay His flock in every trying hour until the valley is passed and the better brighter land has been attained.

As mentioned in the introduction, many expositors feel that here in v. 5, with the prepared table, the anointing oil, and the cup running over, the imagery changes. To quote Plumer again, "With the fourth verse the figure of a shepherd is dropped. Then that of a kind and rich host, exercising a large hospitality, is introduced. The imagery is drawn from the customs of oriental nations". If this view is accepted then the figure of shepherd and sheep and pasture land is exchanged for that of host and guests and banqueting house. But such an abrupt change in the imagery of this little shepherd song may be unnatural and unnecessary, as A. G. Clarke and Phillip Keller point out. Keller, a shepherd himself, writes, "In thinking about this statement it is well to bear in mind that the sheep are approaching the high mountain country of the summer ranges. These are known as *aplands* or *tablelands* so much sought after by sheepmen. In some of the finest sheep country of the world ... the high plateaux of the sheep ranges are always referred to as *mesas*—the Spanish word for *tables*". Clarke, commenting on v. 5, is worth quoting in full; "To find a good and safe feeding-place for the sheep often calls for the highest skill and heroism on the part of the shepherd. He must study the nature of the grass, note the presence or absence of poisonous plants and reptiles, search out the lairs of predatory animals, stopping up their dens with stones, and if necessary, attacking and destroying the animals themselves. At the close of the day the shepherd stands at the door of the fold 'rodding the sheep', i.e. controlling them with his rod, and not only counting them as they pass in, but closely examining the condition of each sheep. Using olive oil and cedar tar, he anoints wounds, scratches, and bruises, and refreshes the worn and weary by making them drink out of a large two-handled cup, brimming with water from cisterns provided for the purpose". It is easy to see here God's abundant provision for His people. The gracious ministry of His Spirit, so often symbolised by the anointing oil, the refreshment of His Word, symbolised by the water, and all this in overflowing measure, and in the very presence of enemies in an adverse and hostile world.

There is great assurance and confidence as David exclaims, "Surely!". This is like the NT "Verily". The believer may rest safely on Jehovah's promise and provision and protection. Some versions, as well as the Newberry Bible margin, prefer "only" goodness and mercy, instead of "surely" goodness and mercy. But both are true. There is a certainty about this, that only lovingkindness, grace, mercy, favour, and divine tenderness, only goodness and mercy will follow the saint all through life. David knew that enemies had followed him, and were probably still following him, but, with the divine presence, he would safely reach Jehovah's dwelling place and abide there continually and for ever.

So does this little Psalm trace the pathway of the sheep and the care of the good Shepherd. Green pastures, still waters, straight paths, the dark valley, rod and staff, the prepared table, the anointed head, the overflowing cup, goodness and mercy, and the house of the Lord for ever. How sweet to be able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd"!