

PSALM 23

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 23

A Psalm of David

This psalm was written by David, either when he was in distressed circumstances, being persecuted by Saul, and was in the forest of Hareth, (^{<0215>}1 Samuel 22:5); as some think ^{f362}; wherefore he comforts himself with the Lord's being his shepherd, so that he should not want; nor would he fear, was he in worse circumstances than he at present was; or rather, when he was settled upon the throne of Israel, and in the most prosperous and flourishing state of his reign, as the latter part of the psalm shows; he speaks not in his own person only, but in the name of all believers; for Christ, who is the shepherd spoken of, is a common shepherd to all the saints, who are all the sheep of his pasture, as well as David; and the prophet here makes use of similes very familiar with him; he having been a shepherd himself, and knew what it was to do all the parts of that office, which are herein expressed; and very pertinently does this psalm follow the former; for as there Christ is prophesied of as laying down his life for the sheep, as the good shepherd does; and of his being brought again from the dead, as the great shepherd of the sheep, as Christ has been; so here of his performing his office as such, in all its parts, to the great comfort, refreshment, and safety of his people.

Ver. 1. *The Lord [is] my shepherd*, etc.] This is to be understood not of Jehovah the Father, and of his feeding the people of Israel in the wilderness, as the Targum paraphrases it, though the character of a shepherd is sometimes given to him, (^{<1972>}Psalm 77:20 80:1); but of Jehovah the Son, to whom it is most frequently ascribed, (^{<0424>}Genesis 49:24 ^{<3401>}Isaiah 40:11) (^{<3523>}Ezekiel 34:23 37:24 ^{<3837>}Zechariah 13:7 ^{<4301>}John 10:11,14 ^{<0125>}1 Peter 2:25 5:4). This office he was called and appointed to by his Father, and which through his condescending grace he undertook to execute, and for which he is abundantly qualified; being omniscient, and so knows all his sheep and their maladies, where to find them, what is their case, and what is to be done for them; and being omnipotent, he can do everything proper for them; and having all power in heaven and in earth,

can protect, defend, and save them; and all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge being in him, he can guide and direct them in the best manner; wherefore he is called the great shepherd, and the chief shepherd, and the good shepherd. David calls him “my shepherd”; Christ having a right unto him, as he has to all the sheep of God, by virtue of his Father’s gift, his own purchase, and the power of his grace; and as owning him as such, and yielding subjection to him, following him as the sheep of Christ do wheresoever he goes; and also as expressing his faith of interest in him, affection for him, and joy because of him: and from thence comfortably concludes,

I shall not want; not anything, as the Targum and Aben Ezra interpret it; not any temporal good thing, as none of Christ’s sheep do, that he in his wisdom sees proper and convenient for them; nor any spiritual good things, since a fulness of them is in him, out of which all their wants are supplied; they cannot want food, for by him they go in and out and find pasture; in him their bread is given them, where they have enough and to spare, and their waters are sure unto them; nor clothing, for he is the Lord their righteousness, and they are clothed with the robe of his righteousness; nor rest, for he is their resting place, in whom they find rest for their souls, and are by him led to waters of rest, as in (⁴⁹²⁰Psalm 23:2): the words may be rendered, “I shall not fail”, or “come short”, ^{f363}; that is, of eternal glory and happiness; for Christ’s sheep are in his hands, out of which none can pluck them, and therefore shall not perish, but have everlasting life, (⁴³¹⁷John 10:27-29).

Ver. 2. *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures*, etc.] Or “pastures of tender grass” ^{f364}; this is one part of the shepherd’s work, and which is performed by Christ, (²³⁴⁴Ezekiel 34:14 ⁴³⁰⁹John 10:9); by these “green pastures” may be meant the covenant of grace, its blessings and promises, where there is delicious feeding; likewise the fulness of grace in Christ, from whence grace for grace is received; also the flesh and blood, righteousness and sacrifice, of Christ, which faith is led unto and lives upon, and is refreshed and invigorated by; to which may be added the doctrines of the Gospel, with which Christ’s under-shepherds feed his lambs and sheep, there being in them milk for babes and meat for strong men; and likewise the ordinances of the Gospel, the goodness and fatness of the Lord’s house, the feast of fat things, and breasts of consolation: here Christ’s sheep are made to “lie down”, denoting their satiety and fulness; they having in these green pastures what is satisfying and replenishing; as

also their rest and safety, these being sure dwellings and quiet resting places, even in the noon of temptation and persecution; (see ⁽²²⁰⁰⁷⁾Song of Solomon 1:7);

he leadeth me beside the still waters, or “waters of rest and quietness” ^{f365}; not to rapid torrents, which by reason of the noise they make, and the swiftness of their motion, the sheep are frightened, and not able to drink of them; but to still waters, pure and clear, and motionless, or that go softly, like the waters of Shiloah, (⁽²⁰⁸⁰⁶⁾Isaiah 8:6); and the “leading” to them is in a gentle way, easily, as they are able to bear it; so Jacob led his flock, (⁽⁰³³⁴⁾Genesis 33:14); and Christ leads his, (⁽²³⁰¹⁾Isaiah 40:11); by these “still waters” may be designed the everlasting love of God, which is like a river, the streams whereof make glad the hearts of his people; these are the waters of the sanctuary, which rise to the ankles, knees, and loins, and are as a broad river to swim in; the pure river of water of life Christ leads his sheep to, and gives them to drink freely of: also communion with God, which the saints pant after, as the hart pants after the water brooks, and Christ gives access unto; moreover he himself is the fountain of gardens, and well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon; and the graces of his Spirit are also as rivers of living water, all which he makes his people partakers of; to which may be added, that the Scriptures, and the truths of the Gospel, are like still, quiet, and refreshing waters to them, and are the waters to which those that are athirst are invited to come, (⁽²⁸⁰¹⁾Isaiah 55:1); and in the immortal state Christ will still be a shepherd, and will feed his people, and lead them to fountains of living water, where they shall solace themselves for ever, and shall know no more sorrow and sighing, (⁽⁶⁰⁷⁷⁾Revelation 7:17).

Ver. 3. *He restoreth my soul*, etc.] Either when backslidden, and brings it back again when led or driven away, and heals its backslidings; or rather, when fainting, swooning, and ready to die away, he fetches it back again, relieves, refreshes, and comforts with the discoveries of his love, with the promises of his word, and with the consolations of his Spirit, and such like reviving cordials, (see Gill on ⁽³⁹⁰⁷⁾Psalm 19:7”);

he leadeth, he in the paths of righteousness; in the plain paths of truth and holiness, in which men, though fools, shall not err; in right ones, though they sometimes seem rough and rugged to Christ’s sheep, yet are not crooked; there is no turning to the right hand or the left; they lead straight on to the city of habitation; and they are righteous ones, as paths of duty

are, and all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord be; moreover, Christ leads his by faith, to walk on in him and in his righteousness, looking through it, and on account of it, for eternal life; (see ^{<1183>}Proverbs 8:20); and all this he does

for his name's sake; for his own glory and the praise of his grace, and not for any merits or deserts in men.

Ver. 4. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*, etc.]

Which designs not a state of spiritual darkness and ignorance, as sitting in the shadow of death sometimes does, since the psalmist cannot be supposed to be at this time or after in such a condition; (see ^{<2302>}Isaiah 9:2 ^{<1043>}Matthew 4:13,16 ^{<1079>}Luke 1:79); nor desertion or the hidings of God's face, which is sometimes the case of the people of God, and was the case of the psalmist at times; but now he expressly says the Lord was with him; but rather, since the grave is called the land of the shadow of death, and the distresses persons are usually in, under apprehensions of immediate death, are called the terrors of the shadow of death; (see ^{<1802>}Job 10:21,22 38:17 24:17); the case supposed is, that should his soul draw nigh to the grave, and the sorrows of death compass him about, and he should be upon the brink and borders of eternity, he should be fearless of evil, and sing, "O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory?" (^{<4155>}1 Corinthians 15:55), though it seems best of all to interpret it of the most severe and terrible affliction or dark dispensation of Providence it could be thought he should ever come under, (^{<1949>}Psalms 44:19 107:10,14 ^{<2436>}Jeremiah 13:16). The Targum interprets it of captivity, and Jarchi and Kimchi of the wilderness of Ziph, in which David was when pursued by Saul; and the latter also, together with Ben Melech, of the grave, and of a place of danger and of distress, which is like unto the grave, that is, a place of darkness; and Aben Ezra of some grievous calamity, which God had decreed to bring into the world. Suidas ^{f366} interprets this phrase of danger leading to death; afflictions attend the people of God in this life; there is a continued series of them, so that they may be said to walk in them; these are the way in which they walk heaven, and through which they enter the kingdom; for though they continue long, and one affliction comes after another, yet there will be an end at last; they will walk and wade through them, and come out of great tribulations; and in the midst of such dark dispensations, comparable to a dark and gloomy valley, covered with the shadow of death, the psalmist intimates what would be the inward disposition of his mind, and what his conduct and behaviour:

I will fear no evil; neither the evil one Satan, who is the wolf that comes to the flock to kill and to destroy, and the roaring lion that seeks whom he may devour, since the Lord was his shepherd, and on his side: nor evil men, who kill the body and can do no more, (^{<1271>}Psalm 27:1-3); nor any evil thing, the worst calamity that could befall him, since everything of this kind is determined by God, and comes not without his knowledge and will, and works for good, and cannot separate from the love of Christ; (see ^{<1941>}Psalm 46:1-4);

for thou [art] with me; sheep are timorous creatures, and so are Christ's people; but when he the shepherd is them, to sympathize with them under all their afflictions, to revive and comfort them with the cordials of his love and promises of his grace, to bear them up and support them with his mighty arm of power, to teach and instruct them by every providence, and sanctify all unto them; their fears are driven away, and they pass through the dark valley, the deep waters, and fiery trials, with courage and cheerfulness; (see ^{<2310>}Isaiah 41:10 43:1,2);

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me; not the rod of afflictions and chastisements, which is the sense of some Jewish ^{f367} as well as Christian interpreters; though these are in love, and the saints have often much consolation under them; but these are designed by the valley of the shadow of death, and cannot have a place here, but rather the rod of the word, called the rod of Christ's strength, and the staff of the promises and the provisions of God's house, the whole staff and stay of bread and water, which are sure unto the saints, and refresh and comfort them. The Targum interprets the rod and staff of the word and law of God; and those interpreters who explain the rod of afflictions, yet by the staff understand the law; and Jarchi expounds it, of the mercy of God in the remission of sin, in which the psalmist trusted: the allusion is to the shepherd's crook or staff, as in other places; (see ^{<3074>}Micah 7:14 ^{<3107>}Zechariah 11:7); which was made use of for the telling and numbering of the sheep, (^{<1272>}Leviticus 27:32 ^{<4913>}Jeremiah 33:13 ^{<4107>}Ezekiel 20:37); and it is no small comfort to the sheep of Christ that they have passed under his rod, who has told them, and that they are all numbered by him; not only their persons, but the very hairs of their head; and that they are under his care and protection: the shepherd with his rod, staff, or crook, directs the sheep where to go, pushes forward those that are behind, and fetches back those that go astray; as well as drives away dogs, wolves, bears, etc. that would make a prey of the flock; and of such use is the word of God, attended with the

power of Christ and his Spirit; it points out the path of faith, truth, and holiness, the saints should walk in; it urges and stirs up those that are negligent to the discharge of their duty, and is the means of reclaiming backsliders, and of preserving the flock from the ravenous wolves of false teachers: in a word, the presence, power, and protection of Christ, in and by his Gospel and ordinances, are what are here intended, and which are the comfort and safety of his people, in the worst of times and cases.

Ver. 5. *Thou preparest a table before me*, etc.] In a providential way granting a sufficiency, and even an affluence of temporal good things; the providence of God lays and spreads a table for his people in the wilderness, and sets them down at it, and bids them welcome to it; (see ^{<1978>}Psalm 78:19); and in a way of grace, the Lord making large provisions in his house for them, called the goodness and fatness of his house, and a feast of fat things; and under the Gospel dispensation, the table of the Lord, on which are set his flesh and blood for faith to feed upon; (see ^{<3192>}Proverbs 9:2); and also in heaven, the joys of which are compared to a feast, and the enjoyment of them to sitting at a table, and which are prepared by the Lord for his people, from the foundation of the world; and of which they have some foresight and foretaste in this world; (see ^{<4223>}Luke 22:30); and all this

in the presence of my enemies; they seeing and envying the outward prosperity of the saints, whenever they enjoy it, and their liberty of worshipping God, hearing his word, and attending on his ordinances, none making them afraid; as they will see, and envy, and be distressed at a more glorious state of the church yet to come, (^{<6112>}Revelation 11:12); and even, as it should seem from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the glory and happiness of the saints in the other world will be seen, or by some way or other known, by wicked men; which will be an affliction to them, and an aggravation of their misery; though here it seems chiefly to regard the present life. Some have thought there is an allusion to princes, who, having conquered others, eat and feast at a well spread table in the presence of the conquered, and they being under it; (see ^{<5000>}Judges 1:7);

thou anointest my head with oil; giving him an abundance of good things, not only for necessity, but for pleasure and delight; especially pouring out largely upon him the oil of gladness, the Spirit of God and his graces, the anointing which teaches all things, and filling him with spiritual joy and comfort; for this refers not to the anointing of David with material oil for the kingdom, by Samuel, while Saul was living, or by the men of Judah,

and afterwards by all the tribes of Israel, when Saul was dead. The allusion is to the custom of the eastern countries, at feasts, to anoint the heads of the guests with oil; (see ^{<2007>}Ecclesiastes 9:7,8 ^{<4167>}Matthew 6:17). It was usual to anoint the head, as well as other parts of the body, on certain occasions; hence that of Propertius ^{f368}: and in the times before Homer ^{f369} it was usual both to wash and anoint before meals, and not the head only, but the feet also; which, though Pliny ^{f370} represents as luxurious, was in use in Christ's time, (^{<4078>}Luke 7:38,46); and spoken of as an ancient custom by Aristophanes ^{f371} his Scholiast for daughters to anoint the feet of their parents after they had washed them; which may serve to illustrate the passage in the Gospel; (see ^{<2008>}Ecclesiastes 9:8);

my cup runneth over; denoting an affluence of temporal good things, and especially of spiritual ones, which was David's case. Such who are blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ, to whom the grace of the Lord has been exceeding abundant, and the Lord himself is the portion of their cup, their cup may be said to run over indeed.

Ver. 6. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me*, etc.] Either the free grace, love, favour, and mercy of God in Christ, which endures continually, and is always the same from everlasting to everlasting; or the effects of it; and these either temporal good things, which flow from the goodness and mercy of God, and not the merits of men; and which are in great mercy and loving kindness bestowed on his people, and which follow them: they do not anxiously seek after them; but seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness, these are added to them, they trusting in the Lord, and he caring for them: or spiritual good things, which arise from the mere grace and mercy of God; such as the blessings of the covenant, the sure mercies of David, the discoveries and instances of the love of God, and the provisions of his house, which follow them, being undeserving of them; and even when they have backslidden from the Lord, and in times of distress, when his grace is sufficient for them; and of all this the psalmist had a comfortable assurance, depending upon the promise of God, arguing from the blessings he had already bestowed, and from the constant care he takes of his people, having in view his unchangeableness and faithfulness, the firmness of his covenant, and the irreversibility of the blessings of it: the words may be rendered "only goodness and mercy", etc. ^{f372} nothing but mere mercy and kindness; for though afflictions do attend the children of God, yet these are in mercy and love; there is no fury in the Lord against

them; there is nothing comes in wrath to them, throughout the whole course of their lives; wherefore it is added,

all the days of my life; the mercies of God are new every morning, they continue all the day long; temporal goodness abides as long as life lasts, and ends with it; and spiritual blessings are for ever, they are the gifts of God, which are without repentance;

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever; which may denote his constant attendance on the public worship of God, of which he had been deprived in time past, being driven out from it, but now he enjoyed it, and believed he ever should; or it may design his being a member of the church of God, and a pillar in the house and temple of the Lord, that should never go out; (see ⁴⁸⁸²Revelation 3:12); or it may regard the assurance he had of dwelling in the house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens, Christ's Father's house, in which are many mansions, sure dwellings, and quiet resting places for his people, and that to all eternity. The Targum interprets it of the house of the sanctuary; and Kimchi expounds the whole verse in a petitionary way, "may goodness and mercy", etc.