

Our Heavenly Shepherd

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

Psalms 23:1

OUR ALL-WISE AND LOVING Heavenly Father is the author of salvation and is the great Heavenly Shepherd over his sheep. “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32) During this present Gospel Age, our Lord Jesus is the shepherd to the little flock of his faithful followers. The significance of the special relationship between the Father and his Son is addressed by the Prophet Micah. He wrote, “He shall stand and feed in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God; and they shall abide: for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth.”—Mic. 5:4

A SHEPHERD’S WORK

Shepherds were known to tend their flocks of both sheep and goats since the early days of human creation. For example, we learn from the scriptural account that Adam’s son, Abel, was a shepherd. (Gen. 4:2) Oftentimes, several shepherds would pen their animals together in one sheepfold to give

them protection for the night, while a doorkeeper watched over them. When morning came, the shepherds would call to their flocks, and only their own sheep would respond to them. The shepherd would then lead his particular flock to pasture. He not only pointed the way for his sheep to follow him, but also to make sure that it was practicable and safe. He thus taught them not to stray away. Occasionally, however, it was necessary to remind them of his presence with them.

DAVID IS ANOINTED

The name David means ‘beloved’ and occurs hundreds of times in the Scriptures. In each case, the reference points to but one individual, the second king of Israel. We are first introduced to him while he was tending his father’s sheep in a field near Bethlehem. Samuel had been sent by God to the home of Jesse to anoint one of his sons to be the future king.

From the scriptural record, we read, “Jesse made seven of his sons to pass before Samuel. And Samuel said unto Jesse, The LORD hath not chosen these. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest, and, behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Send and fetch him: for we will not sit down till he come hither. And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to. And the LORD said, Arise, anoint him: for this is he. Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward.”—I Sam. 16:10-13

THE ANTITYPICAL DAVID

Many centuries later our attention is again drawn to a field near Bethlehem and the events surrounding the birth of our Lord Jesus—the antitypical David. “There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”—Luke 2:8-14

David thus serves as a type, or illustration, of our Lord Jesus, the son of David. (Matt. 1:1) The shepherd boy was also a musician, poet, prophet, and king. As a soldier he was known for his great courage and endurance, and yet was humble enough to acknowledge his mistakes and repent of his sins. He was a man capable of tender compassion and mercy, and a lover of truth and righteousness. He had great trust, confidence, and love for the Heavenly Father.

DAVID'S PSALM

The psalmist spent his early years as a shepherd, and this had prepared him for the great tasks that

lay ahead as he endeavored to know and serve God. He would be forced to deal with the terrible wrath of King Saul, and to bring an end to the reproaches of Goliath whom he slew with a pebble thrown by his sling shot.

As the author of this beautiful psalm, we are provided with much evidence that he was truly a devout man of God, and was assured of the Heavenly Father's loving care on his behalf, even as a shepherd. He used various symbols to illustrate his thoughts, and the words of this inspiring psalm have been a source of blessing to many of the Lord's faithful people throughout the ages. We will consider some of the highlights of the psalm.

He wrote, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 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."—Ps. 23:2-6

I SHALL NOT WANT

In our featured text (Ps. 23:1), David said 'I shall not want.' In his own experience as a servant of God, and in his observation of the manner in which divine care had been manifested toward others, he realized that God has never failed to carry out that which he had promised.

What was true in the life of David is equally true in our experience today. The symbols and lessons of this psalm aptly apply to the Heavenly Father's 'little flock' during this present Gospel Age. God's goodness in providing all the needs of his people during this time is manifest more particularly along spiritual lines, and to those who are living by faith. They have set their affections on things above rather than on the things of the earth, and can verify God's care as a shepherd. Having thus affirmed God's goodness and mercy, David then begins to point out some of the many and various ways in which the Lord's care is manifest.

THE REST OF FAITH

In this psalm (vs. 2), David says that God has invited him to 'lie down in green pastures.' This suggests a special rest of faith that the Lord's consecrated people during this present Gospel Age enjoy. Our attention is thus drawn to the spiritual food and refreshment which they receive from our Lord's abundant providence. We have been bountifully blessed with the 'still waters [waters of quietness, *Marginal Translation*].' These 'waters of quietness' flow in a deep and inexhaustible stream of refreshment, and provide water we can drink with ease and without measure. They are readily available for all who have ears to hear and recognize the shepherd's voice calling them to follow him.

This represents the deep Truths that have been made available to us by our returned Lord and Savior during the closing decades of this age of sacrifice. These waters have been cleared of the muddy traditions and ignorance of the past. The pastures of

Truth are lush and green for all those who are faithful in following the shepherd whithersoever he leads.

One of the special blessings of the Truth that we share is the knowledge that the present time of trouble and distress of nations is under control of the mighty hand of our Heavenly Father. We can trust his wisdom and truly ‘lie down’ in these green pastures with peace of heart and mind. We thus rest as we partake of the nourishing spiritual food which our heavenly shepherd has provided for us.

OUR SOUL IS RESTORED

The psalmist’s expression (vs. 3)—‘he restoreth my soul’—points to the saving provisions of God’s marvelous grace on our behalf. The robe of righteousness now covers our sins, and we have been justified. We are led in the paths of righteousness because we are the Lord’s people and we abide in the merit of Jesus’ blood.

Because of our inherited imperfections of the flesh, we may fail at times to give proper attention to the shepherd’s voice and therefore expose ourselves to danger. However, we are promised that divine mercy will restore us to safety if we listen for his voice and follow him. We need divine wisdom in order to walk in the right way. James explains, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.”—James 1:5-7

We must be willing to obtain divine wisdom through our Heavenly Father's appointed method which is his inspired Word. It is through the Word of Truth that the great shepherd leads us, and it is through the Word that we hear his voice calling us to follow him.

PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The heavenly shepherd leads his people 'in the paths of righteousness.' However, the path of the righteous is often rugged and very difficult. It is the narrow way of sacrifice. If we faithfully walk in this narrow way to the end of our consecrated life in Christ Jesus, we will receive the promised great reward. The revelator recorded our Lord's wonderful promise. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."—Rev. 2:10

The faithful will have the privilege of living and reigning as 'The Christ' in his glorious future heavenly kingdom. We are strengthened by the Apostle Paul, who wrote, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."—Rom. 8:16-18

IN THE VALLEY OF DEATH

When David spoke of walking 'through the valley of the shadow of death' (vs. 4), we are reminded of the valley of sin and death and the reality of our journey through life as members of the fallen and sin-sick human family. The psalmist also said that

he would fear no evil because our heavenly shepherd is always with us.

He cites an extreme condition of danger and hardship through which a shepherd sometimes finds it necessary to lead his sheep. This illustrates similar difficulties in the lives of the consecrated people of God. However, they need not fear evil because the good shepherd has promised to be with them.

THE ROD AND STAFF

In the psalmist's day, a rod oftentimes represented a mark of prestige and authority. A rod, or staff, was used for many purposes including security, protection, support, or punishment. In the shepherd's case, the 'rod and staff' served an important function in his everyday life and role as a shepherd to the little flock. They were very useful to him as he led and directed his sheep on their way to pasture. They could be used for protection, and if one of his little ones fell into a hole or crevice he could use the crook of his staff to pull it to safety. Later, when they were grazing, he no doubt found comfort when leaning on his staff to watch over them.

In this psalm, David said he feared no evil, and spoke specifically of the rod and staff. He said they were a special comfort to him as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death. The rod and staff are also significant of our Heavenly Father's care and divine providence in caring for the little flock of his people during this present Gospel Age. The rod suggests his loving discipline and correction to keep us in the right path so that we do not stray. This is necessary for our development as New Creatures in Christ Jesus. The staff represents his

providential care and consolation. He promises to continually guide, protect, and comfort us during our walk in newness of life.

SPIRITUAL FOOD

The ‘table’ to which the psalmist refers (vs.5), points to spiritual food. The bountiful meat in due season has especially blessed the Lord’s people who have lived during the closing years of this present Gospel Age. This special nourishment coincides with our Lord’s promised Second Presence. He said, “Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.” (Luke 12:37) The revelator also recorded the Master’s promise, in which he said, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”—Rev. 3:20

This table of spiritual food has been set before the Lord’s people ‘in the presence of his enemies’—Satan the devil, the great enemy of the Christ. Yet, we continue to receive the Holy Spirit of Truth. The psalmist said, Thou anointest my head with oil, and my ‘cup runneth over.’

GOODNESS AND MERCY

David reminds us (vs.6) that God has promised his little flock that his ‘goodness and mercy’ would follow them throughout their consecrated walk. These two principles of our loving Father’s grace are closely related although their operation may be carried out along different lines. In the use of these

two expressions in the last verse of the psalm, he has successfully summed up all of the many ways that our Heavenly Shepherd has manifested his goodness and mercy to his little flock of sheep that are portrayed throughout this inspiring psalm.

Our greatest desire and hope is to be faithful to our heavenly calling. In doing so, we may dwell in the heavenly house of the Lord forever. He has promised to be our shepherd until the end of our consecrated walk. David also wrote, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand. I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.”—Ps. 37:23-25

THE SHEPHERD COMES TO EARTH

When our Lord came to earth to save mankind he knew the sheep were scattered. “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.”—Matt. 9:35,36

During his ministry, he taught special lessons in connection with the shepherd and his sheep. In one of his parables, he addressed this relationship, and said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd

of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers.”—John 10:1-5

The Master then proceeded to explain the deeper meaning and significance of his lesson. From the scriptural record, we again read, “This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them. Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.”—vss. 6-11

ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE

In his letter to the brethren at Rome, the Apostle Paul also gives assurance of divine care in the lives of the consecrated people of God. He said, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn

among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?"—Rom. 8:28-31

THE ALL THINGS

No one who has responded to the heavenly calling in Christ Jesus has been more faithful in following the heavenly shepherd than was the Apostle Paul. He acknowledges, "I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."—Phil. 4:12,13

This reference indicates that the apostle did not always have sufficient food and raiment, and in some cases he did not always have a proper place to lay his head. From this standpoint Paul's experiences were more like those of Jesus, but as a New Creature in Christ Jesus he could affirm that all of his spiritual needs were supplied. The apostle believed this was consistent with the terms of his consecration, and could say, "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."—II Cor. 4:16-18

THE OUTWARD AND INNER MAN

The outward man of flesh is destined to perish and end in the grave. However, Paul was glad to share in the suffering of the Christ. He understood that the inward man was a New Creature and was begotten in Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit and through the Word of God. This inward man was being renewed, nourished, and built up by the spiritual food that was always abundantly supplied to him by the Heavenly Shepherd. "If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister; Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church."—Col. 1:23,24

THE SHEPHERD GATHERS THE SHEEP

During his earthly ministry, Jesus taught his faithful followers the mystery of the church's heavenly calling and prepared them for the long centuries that would intervene before he would return to gather them together at the end of this present Gospel Age.

The Apostle Paul concludes by saying, "Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."—Heb. 13:20,21 ■