Restoring the Soul

"He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."
—Psalm 23: 3

IN THIS SCRIPTURE, THE true meaning of David's poetic words, 'He restoreth my soul,' is that "He saves my spiritual life." The soul is a living being and in the case of the New Creature in Christ, it is the new, spiritual life—the New Creature—that is preserved by our Lord Jesus, the true Shepherd. Paul explains, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."—II Cor. 5:17

As followers of the Good Shepherd, we are all members of the fallen and dying race, and it is through faith in the atoning blood of Christ Jesus that we receive justification to life. Upon this basis, we may be acceptable sacrifices to God. The apostle wrote, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."—Rom. 12:1

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

We may rejoice in this provision which was made available for us through our Lord; for without it we could not be led as sheep. Restoration of the soul, which David speaks of in our featured text, is a provision of Divine grace by which we are blessed after becoming followers of the Good Shepherd. As New Creatures in Christ Jesus, we have various enemies—the world, the flesh, and the Devil—which are ever on the alert to do us harm and to separate us from our Shepherd. By listening carefully for the Shepherd's voice, and following him closely at all times, we are protected from these enemies, and, if we fall into their clutches, he rescues us and restores our consecrated life.

As a shepherd boy in the rugged country of Judea, David was well acquainted with the dangers that threatened the sheep which were under his care. He knew that the sheep's enemies were lurking around, ready to rush in to destroy and devour the sheep. He knew that at times some of the sheep were overwhelmed by these enemies, and, but for his watchfulness and skill as a shepherd, they would be devoured. It was with feeling that he could write of God's providential and tender care, He restoreth my soul.

Dangerous enemies of the sheep in David's experience were the wild animals which roamed the country. David encountered these in his experience as a shepherd, and on one occasion killed a lion which had attempted to make away with a sheep. (I Sam. 17:34-36) In addition to reflecting on the background of his experience, David spoke prophetically of the manner in which the Good Shepherd

cares for his sheep during this present Gospel Age. In a warning to us, the Apostle Peter also wrote, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."—I Pet. 5:8

ENEMIES OF THE SHEEP

Our adversary Satan, the Devil, is indeed a formidable foe and one with whom we would be utterly unable to cope without the help of our Shepherd. Peter encourages us to look to the Shepherd, saying, "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you." (I Pet. 5:7) How heart-cheering is the assurance, 'he careth for you.' We would surely be devoured by the Adversary were it not for the Good Shepherd's care, and we can surely trust him to do for us all that we cannot do for ourselves.

We should all follow the leadings of our Shepherd. The apostle says, 'Be sober, be vigilant.' Failure to be sober and vigilant will leave us exposed to danger, a ready prey for the roaring lion going about to devour the Lord's sheep. In the Scriptures, spiritual soberness is contrasted with spiritual drunkenness and intoxication. As New Creatures, there are various ways in which we can become intoxicated, and thus expose ourselves needlessly to the attacks of the Adversary.

We may become intoxicated with false doctrines concerning the plan of God and its proper place in our lives. Intoxication of this kind means that we no longer properly recognize the Shepherd's voice. We hear other voices which lead us in strange paths and away from the flock which is protected by the Shepherd. In this separation, we are exposed to

danger, and the more so because with this condition goes a measure of pride. We may imagine that we have something better than some of the other sheep. We may look at the flock and think of them as being in bondage. We might congratulate ourselves that we are free to roam where we want and to follow any voices which may appeal to us. In this state of spiritual drunkenness we may not sense the danger to which we are exposed, until suddenly we realize that we have been overtaken by the Adversary. If our hearts are right, our Shepherd will restore our spiritual lives when we cry to him for help, but we should not think that Divine mercy gives us freedom to wander in dangerous paths.

ALERTNESS

If we are not on the alert, we may become intoxicated with pleasure, with the spirit of the world, or with the cares of this life. Self-complacency is also a form of intoxication—a false sense of security. We may presume ourselves on God's grace without doing our best to hearken to the Shepherd's voice and faithfully follow his leadings. Let us then endeavor to be sober, exercising the spirit of a sound mind by listening carefully to the Shepherd's voice, which is the voice of Truth.

Peter also says that we should be vigilant. This means that we are to be watchful and on the alert that we may recognize the Adversary's attacks and be ready to resist him, steadfast in the faith. A sheep is a defenseless animal and at first it may not seem in keeping with this illustration that the apostle says we should resist our great Adversary who goes about as a roaring lion to devour us. As

we have seen, while sheep are helpless when once in the clutches of a lion, they can help protect themselves by keeping close to the shepherd and following closely the sound of his voice. It may be this that the apostle evidently had in mind when he said, "Whom resist steadfast in the faith."—I Pet. 5:9

If we are following faithfully the voice of Truth, we will find ourselves associated with the rest of God's flock. This in itself is a protection. If we are on the alert, vigilant in giving heed to the Good Shepherd's voice of Truth, we will not be led into the ways of danger by other voices. Thus we may resist the Adversary by refusing to give heed to the various ways by which he would lead us from the Good Shepherd's care.

GIVING EARNEST HEED

Paul expresses the thought of being vigilant when he writes, "We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip." (Heb. 2:1) In his letter to the Hebrews, Paul stresses this thought of giving 'earnest heed' to the Truth. He says that we should "hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering." He exhorts us not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together" for mutual helpfulness; and, immediately following this admonition, he cites the possibility of sinning willfully and of the dire consequences. (Heb. 10:22-27) The lesson is obvious. If we become careless with the Truth, neglecting even our privileges of fellowship with the brethren, tragedy may result.

All of the Lord's true followers are sheep and he is their Shepherd. These sheep, in turn, have a

responsibility toward the Shepherd and one another. Some are used by the Chief Shepherd as under shepherds, and to the extent of our ability and opportunity we should all be on the alert to help our brethren whenever the occasion may arise. The Apostle Peter writes, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock."—I Pet. 5:2,3

This admonition of special responsibility was addressed to the elders and those who serve the Lord's people. However, we are all to have a watchful interest in one another's spiritual welfare and to be ensamples to the flock. This should not be left merely to those who are elected to serve the ecclesia, but all should cooperate with the Chief Shepherd in helping to protect the flock against the attacks of the Adversary.

This mutual interest of the Lord's sheep toward one another is brought to our attention by Paul. "Brethren, if any man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."—Gal. 6:1,2

RESTORING SPIRITUAL LIFE

It is the Chief Shepherd that restores our spiritual life when we have allowed ourselves to fall by the wayside. We should remember also that our Shepherd may look to us to help in the restoration of a healthy spiritual life to the fainting ones among his sheep. "We then that are strong ought to bear the

infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification."—Rom. 15:1,2

James wrote, "He which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." (James 5:20) Here the sinner is one who has erred from the Truth and the apostle shows the blessed privilege we have of assisting that brother or sister in the Truth. If, by the Lord's grace, we may be of some help, we do so in cooperation with our Shepherd. We may assist the soul of the erring one, bringing him back safely into the fold.

Psalm 37:23 reads, "The steps of a good man are ordered of the LORD: and he delighteth in his way." Here is a reference to one who hearkens to the voice of the Good Shepherd and endeavors to follow his leadings. It is thus that his steps are ordered of the Lord, and it is walking in these steps that makes him a better Christian. It is not his own righteousness that makes him good, for "There is none righteous, no, not one." (Rom. 3:10) But he is reckoned acceptable by God because his heart is right, and because his unwilling imperfections are not imputed to him. God delights in all who are good from this standpoint, and through the Good Shepherd exercises his protective care over them.

OBTAINING MERCY IN TIME OF NEED

This care is manifested particularly in times of greatest need. Writing further of those whom the Lord looks upon as good because they are directed by his Word, David says, "Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth

him with his hand." (Ps. 37:24) The fact that one may 'fall' does not mean that he is abandoned by the Lord, for if his heart is right, and he cries unto the Good Shepherd for help, his soul will be restored. How blessed is this assurance! It is a similar thought to that expressed by the apostle when he urges us to come boldly to the "throne of grace," there to obtain mercy and help in time of need.—Heb. 4:16

When we are in need of soul restoration, we are indeed privileged to cry out to the Good Shepherd for help. If we are to be heard, it is essential that we recognize our failures and penitently seek restoration to the fold of Divine care. "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." (Ps. 51:10) It was essential that we have a 'right spirit' in order to enter the narrow way. However, through the deception of the Adversary, the allurements of the world, or by the pleasures or cares of the flesh, our spirits may not continue to be right.

THE SPIRIT OF PURITY

A right spirit is one of purity toward God, of zeal for him, for his people, for his Truth and the service of the Truth. It is the spirit of joy, peace, and love in our dealings with our brethren and with the world. It is a spirit of alertness for the doing of God's will, a spirit that seeks for opportunities to sacrifice time and strength in the service of God.

It is possible for the right spirit which we possess to change. One of the faults Jesus found with some of his people was the fact that they had lost their first love. (Rev. 2:4) Here is a lesson which all of us may well take to heart. It is easy to lose that right spirit with which we started out in

the narrow way. A root of bitterness, a bit of discouragement, a measure of selfish ambition or of false pride, can creep over us and almost before we are aware of what is taking place the proper spirit of consecration to God, and devotion to him, may be suppressed. If we recognize what has occurred, or is threatening, we should seek the throne of grace. David expresses the proper attitude, saying to his God, "Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me."—Ps. 51:11

That right spirit which we had when we first became sheep in the Lord's pasture was one which was in tune with God's own Spirit, his Holy Spirit. In consecration, we gave ourselves to the Lord and he blessed us with an infilling of his Holy Spirit. We were thus at one with him and we felt his presence near to us. It would be tragic to lose his Holy Spirit, so when we pray for him not to remove it from us, we should cooperate with him by emptying our hearts of all self-will that his Spirit may dwell therein.

OUR FIRST LOVE FOR THE LORD

"Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation," David continues. (Ps. 51:12) If perchance some earth-born cloud has hidden us from the view of our Shepherd we should be quick to cry out to him for the restoration of his favor. If we do, we can be assured that he will restore our spiritual life, and with that restoration will come that first love for the Lord which was ours when we possessed that right spirit. All of the Lord's people who may have had in any measure the joy taken away that was theirs

when they first found the Truth should take these essential steps to have their souls restored and their joy revived.

When one has lost a measure of that right spirit which he once possessed, he is to some extent spiritually sick. He may not realize his danger, nor be inclined to take the necessary steps in order to be restored; but the watchful eye of the Good Shepherd is always on the alert to see the needs of his sheep, particularly those who may be in danger. He knows that the sick ones, and those caught by the enemy, are not able to come to him for help, so he goes to them. He seeks them out and bestows his special care upon those who need him most.

It is well to remember in this connection that the Good Shepherd carries on his work through under shepherds. He looks to all of us for cooperation and expects that we will be glad at any time, and under any circumstances, to lay down our lives for the sheep. Thus the Good Shepherd's care is an example of the interest we should have in our brethren, particularly those who may stand in need of soul restoration.

IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

There may not be much we can do for these, but we can pray. Perhaps their greatest need is that someone pray for them. If we have opportunity we can remind them, either personally, or by means of the printed message, of the joys of the Truth. By precept and example, we can admonish them to return to their first love, assuring them that their original joy will return when the right spirit which they once possessed is renewed. Thus to be interested in

the Lord's sheep is a token that we have the Lord's Spirit.

Paul wrote, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves." (Rom. 15:1) In some ways, it might be more pleasing to associate only with the strong ones among the Lord's sheep, but if we have the right spirit, the Spirit of the Good Shepherd, we will gladly help bear the infirmities of the weak. We must not expect the weak ones to come to us because they may be too weak to do so. Instead, we are to go to them, no matter how great a sacrifice may be entailed in so doing. The parable of the lost sheep illustrates the principle involved in our opportunity to help the needy ones among the Lord's sheep. In this parable, the Good Shepherd is said to leave the ninety and nine which were safely in the fold, and to go out into the wilds to seek the sheep which was lost, that it might be restored to the fold.—Matt. 18:12,13

It is evident from this that it would be wrong to suppose that we are to center our attention principally upon the sheep which are already safely in the fold of the Good Shepherd. These are not to be neglected, but we should be especially on the alert and willing to make sacrifices for the weak ones among the sheep. Those who have temporarily fallen by the wayside may have their fainting souls restored and their joy in the Lord renewed.

SELF-EXAMINATION

God's abounding grace, and his enduring mercy, are highlighted in our featured text, 'He restoreth my soul.' This text emphasizes human limitations

and weaknesses by assuring us of the Divine provision for them. The full value of the lesson is lost if it fails to impress us with the opportunity which is ours of exercising mercy toward the weaker ones, and of doing all in our power to help renew a right spirit within them. If, upon self-examination, we find that we lack this proper attitude toward the Lord's sheep, then we may consider whether we have not ourselves lost our first love. It is well in this connection that all of us remember the admonition, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."—I Cor. 10:12

To be assured that soul restoration is available for erring ones among the Lord's sheep enhances our appreciation of God's love and mercy. It does not justify us in becoming lax in our own efforts to follow the Good Shepherd faithfully. The more we know of God's love, the greater the incentive to be faithful to him. Despite our best efforts, we will daily come short of the perfect standard he has set for us. In this sense, therefore, we are daily in need of soul restoration. Daily we need to seek Divine forgiveness, and recognize our need for the Good Shepherd's care in our spiritual lives. All the Lord's consecrated followers may say of him that he is our Good Shepherd, that he is ready to restore and preserve their spiritual lives. For this we are most grateful. ■

"God raised us up with Christ . . . that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."—Ephesians 2:6,7, New International Version