

PSALM 23

Many of David's psalms are full of complaints, but this is full of comforts, and the expressions of delight in God's great goodness and dependence upon him. It is a psalm which has been sung by good Christians, and will be while the world stands, with a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction.

- I.** The psalmist here claims relation to God, as his shepherd (v. 1).
- II.** He recounts his experience of the kind things God had done for him as his shepherd (v. 2, 3, 5).
- III.** Hence he infers that he should want no good (v. 1), that he needed to fear no evil (v. 4), that God would never leave nor forsake him in a way of mercy; and therefore he resolves never to leave nor forsake God in a way of duty (v. 6). In this he had certainly an eye, not only to the blessings of God's providence, which made his outward condition prosperous, but to the communications of God's grace, received by a lively faith, and returned in a warm devotion, which filled his soul with joy unspeakable. And, as in the foregoing psalm he represented Christ dying for his sheep, so here he represents Christians receiving the benefit of all the care and tenderness of that great and good shepherd.

⌘ PSALM 23:1-6

THE DIVINE SHEPHERD

A psalm of David.

From three very comfortable premises David, in this psalm, draws three very comfortable conclusions, and teaches us to do so too. We are saved by hope, and that hope will not make us ashamed, because it is well grounded. It is the duty of Christians to encourage themselves in the Lord their God; and we are here directed to take that encouragement both from the relation wherein he stands to us and from the experience we have had of his goodness according to that relation.

I. From God's being his shepherd he infers that he shall not want anything that is good for him, v. 1. See here,

1. The great care that God takes of believers. He is their shepherd, and they may call him so. Time was when David was himself a shepherd; he was taken from following the ewes great with young (~~180~~ Psalm 78:70, 71), and so he knew by experience the cares and tender affections of a good shepherd towards his flock. He remembered what need they had of a shepherd, and what a kindness it was to them to have one that was skilful and faithful; he once ventured his life to rescue a lamb. By this therefore he illustrates God's care of his people; and to this our Saviour seems to refer when he says, *I am the shepherd of the sheep; the good shepherd,* ~~401~~ John 10:11. He that is the shepherd of Israel, of the whole church in general (~~801~~ Psalm 80:1), is the shepherd of every particular believer; the meanest is not below his cognizance, ~~2411~~ Isaiah 40:11. He takes them into his fold, and then takes care of them, protects them, and provides for them, with more care and constancy than a shepherd can, that makes it his business to keep the flock. If God be as a shepherd to us, we must be as sheep, inoffensive, meek, and quiet, silent before the shearers, nay, and before the butcher too, useful and sociable; we must know the shepherd's voice, and follow him.

2. The great confidence which believers have in God: "If the Lord is my shepherd, my feeder, I may conclude I shall not want any thing that is really necessary and good for me." If David penned this psalm before his coming to the crown, though destined to it, he had as much reason to fear wanting as any man. Once he sent his men a begging for him to Nabal, and another time went himself a begging to Ahimelech; and yet, when he considers that God is his shepherd, he can boldly say, *I shall not want.* Let not those fear starving that are at God's finding and have him for their feeder. More is implied than is expressed, not only, *I shall not want,* but, "I shall be supplied with whatever I need; and, if I have not every thing I desire, I may conclude it is either not fit for me or not good for me or I shall have it in due time."

II. From his performing the office of a good shepherd to him he infers that he needs not fear any evil in the greatest dangers and difficulties he could be in, v. 2-4. He experiences the benefit of God's presence with him and care of him now, and therefore expects the benefit of them when he most needs it. See here,

1. The comforts of a living saint. God is his shepherd and his God — a God all-sufficient to all intents and purposes. David found him so, and so have we. See the happiness of the saints as the sheep of God's pasture.

(1.) They are well placed, well laid: *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.* We have the supports and comforts of this life from God's good hand, our daily bread from him as our Father. The greatest abundance is but a dry pasture to a wicked man, who relishes that only in it which pleases the senses; but to a godly man, who tastes the goodness of God in all his enjoyments, and by faith relishes that, though he has but little of the world, it is a green pasture, ^{<1376}Psalm 37:16; ^{<2156}Proverbs 15:16, 17. God's ordinances are the green pastures in which food is provided for all believers; the word of life is the nourishment of the new man. It is milk for babes, pasture for sheep, never barren, never eaten bare, never parched, but always a green pasture for faith to feed in. God makes his saints to lie down; he gives them quiet and contentment in their own minds, what ever their lot is; their souls dwell at ease in him, and that makes every pasture green. Are we blessed with the green pastures of the ordinances? Let us not think it enough to pass through them, but let us lie down in them, abide in them; this is my rest for ever. It is by a constancy of the means of grace that the soul is fed.

(2.) They are well guided, well led. The shepherd of Israel guides Joseph like a flock; and every believer is under the same guidance: *He leadeth me beside the still waters.* Those that feed on God's goodness must follow his direction; he leads them by his providence, by his word, by his Spirit, disposes of their affairs for the best, according to his counsel, disposes their affections and actions according to his command, directs their eye, their way, and their heart, into his love. The still waters by which he leads them yield them, not only a pleasant prospect, but many a cooling draught, many a reviving cordial, when they are thirsty and weary. God provides for his people not only food and rest, but refreshment also and pleasure. The consolations of God, the joys of the Holy Ghost, are these still waters, by which the saints are led, streams which flow from the fountain of living waters and make glad the city of our God. God leads his people, not to the standing waters which corrupt and gather filth, not to the troubled sea, nor to the rapid rolling floods, but to the silent purling waters; for the still but running waters agree best with those spirits that flow out towards God and yet do it silently. The divine guidance they are under is stripped of its metaphor (v. 3): *He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness,* in the way of

my duty; in that he instructs me by his word and directs me by conscience and providence. These are the paths in which all the saints desire to be led and kept, and never to turn aside out of them. And those only are led by the still waters of comfort that walk in the paths of righteousness. The way of duty is the truly pleasant way. It is the work of righteousness that is peace. In these paths we cannot walk unless God both lead us into them and lead us in them.

(3.) They are well helped when any thing ails them: *He restoreth my soul.*

[1.] “He restores me when I wander.” No creature will lose itself sooner than a sheep, so apt is it to go astray, and then so unapt to find the way back. The best saints are sensible of their proneness to *go astray like lost sheep* (¹³⁷Psalm 119:176); they miss their way, and turn aside into by-paths; but when God shows them their error, gives them repentance, and brings them back to their duty again, he restores the soul; and, if he did not do so, they would wander endlessly and be undone. When, after one sin, David's heart smote him, and, after another, Nathan was sent to tell him, *Thou art the man*, God restored his soul. Though God may suffer his people to fall into sin, he will not suffer them to lie still in it.

[2.] “He recovers me when I am sick, and revives me when I am faint, and so restores the soul which was ready to depart.” He is the Lord our God that heals us, (¹⁵⁶Exodus 15:26. Many a time we should have fainted unless we had believed; and it was the good shepherd that kept us from fainting.

2. See here the courage of a dying saint (v. 4): “Having had such experience of God's goodness to me all my days, in six troubles and in seven, I will never distrust him, no, not in the last extremity; the rather because all he has done for me hitherto was not for any merit or desert of mine, but purely for his name's sake, in pursuance of his word, in performance of his promise, and for the glory of his own attributes and relations to his people. That name therefore shall still be my strong tower, and shall assure me that he who has led me, and fed me, all my life long, will not leave me at last.” Here is,

(1.) Imminent danger supposed: “*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*, that is, though I am in peril of death, though in the midst of dangers, deep as a valley, dark as a shadow, and dreadful as death itself,” or rather, “though I am under the arrests of death, have received the sentence of death within myself, and have all the reason in the world to

look upon myself as a dying man, yet I am easy.” Those that are sick, those that are old, have reason to look upon themselves as in the valley of the shadow of death. Here is one word indeed which sounds terrible; it is *death*, which we must all count upon; *there is no discharge in that war*. But, even in the supposition of the distress, there are four words which lessen the terror: — It is death indeed that is before us; but,

[1.] It is but the *shadow* of death; there is no substantial evil in it; the shadow of a serpent will not sting nor the shadow of a sword kill.

[2.] It is the *valley* of the shadow, deep indeed, and dark, and dirty; but the valleys are fruitful, and so is death itself fruitful of comforts to God's people.

[3.] It is but a *walk* in this valley, a gentle pleasant walk. The wicked are chased out of the world, and their souls are required; but the saints take a walk to another world as cheerfully as they take their leave of this.

[4.] It is a walk *through* it; they shall not be lost in this valley, but get safely to the mountain of spices on the other side of it.

(2.) This danger made light of, and triumphed over, upon good grounds. Death is a king of terrors, but not to the sheep of Christ; they tremble at it no more than sheep do that are appointed for the slaughter. “Even in *the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil. None of these things move me.*” Note, A child of God may meet the messengers of death, and receive its summons with a holy security and serenity of mind. The sucking child may play upon the hole of this asp; and the weaned child, that, through grace, is weaned from this world, may put his hand upon this cockatrice's den, bidding a holy defiance to death, as Paul, *O death! where is thy sting?* And there is ground enough for this confidence,

[1.] Because there is no evil in it to a child of God; death cannot separate us from the love of God, and therefore it can do us no real harm; it kills the body, but cannot touch the soul. Why should it be dreadful when there is nothing in it hurtful?

[2.] Because the saints have God's gracious presence with them in their dying moments; he is then at their right hand, and therefore why should they be moved? The good shepherd will not only conduct, but convoy, his sheep through the valley, where they are in danger of being set upon by the beasts of prey, the ravening wolves; he will not only convoy them, but

comfort then when they most need comfort. His presence shall comfort them: *Thou art with me*. His word and Spirit shall comfort them — *his rod and staff*, alluding to the shepherd's crook, or the rod under which the sheep passed when they were counted (¹⁷⁷³Leviticus 27:32), or the staff with which the shepherds drove away the dogs that would scatter or worry the sheep. It is a comfort to the saints, when they come to die, that God takes cognizance of them (*he knows those that are his*), that he will rebuke the enemy, that he will guide them with his rod and sustain them with his staff. The gospel is called *the rod of Christ's strength* (¹⁸¹⁰Psalm 110:2), and there is enough in that to comfort the saints when they come to die, and *underneath* them are *the everlasting arms*.

III. From the good gifts of God's bounty to him now he infers the constancy and perpetuity of his mercy, v. 5, 6. Here we may observe,

1. How highly he magnifies God's gracious vouchsafements to him (v. 5): *“Thou preparest a table before me; thou hast provided for me all things pertaining both to life and godliness, all things requisite both for body and soul, for time and eternity:”* such a bountiful benefactor is God to all his people; and it becomes them abundantly to utter his great goodness, as David here, who acknowledges,

(1.) That he had food convenient, a table spread, a cup filled, meat for his hunger, drink for his thirst.

(2.) That he had it carefully and readily provided for him. His table was not spread with any thing that came next to hand, but prepared, and prepared *before him*.

(3.) That he was not stinted, was not straitened, but had abundance: *“My cup runs over, enough for myself and my friends too.”*

(4.) That he had not only for necessity, but for ornament and delight: *Thou anointest my head with oil*. Samuel anointed him king, which was a certain pledge of further favor; but this is rather an instance of the plenty with which God had blessed him, or an allusion to the extraordinary entertainment of special friends, whose heads they anointed with oil, ¹⁷⁷⁵Luke 7:46. Nay, some think he still looks upon himself as a sheep, but such a one as the *poor man's ewe-lamb* (¹⁸¹²2 Samuel 12:3), that did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom; not only thus nobly, but thus tenderly, are the children of God looked after.

Plentiful provision is made for their bodies, for their souls, for the life that now is and for that which is to come. If Providence do not bestow upon us thus plentifully for our natural life, it is our own fault if it be not made up to us in spiritual blessings.

2. How confidently he counts upon the continuance of God's favours, v. 6. He had said (v. 1), *I shall not want*; but now he speaks more positively, more comprehensively: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*. His hope rises, and his faith is strengthened, by being exercised. Observe,

(1.) What he promises himself — goodness and mercy, all the streams of mercy flowing from the fountain, pardoning mercy, protecting mercy, sustaining mercy, supplying mercy.

(2.) The manner of the conveyance of it: It shall *follow* me, as the water out of the rock followed the camp of Israel through the wilderness; it shall follow into all places and all conditions, shall be always ready.

(3.) The continuance of it: It shall follow me *all my life long*, even to the last; for whom God loves he loves to the end.

(4.) The constancy of it: *All the days of my life*, as duly as the day comes; it shall be *new every morning* (~~2~~Lamentations 3:22, 23) like the manna that was given to the Israelites daily.

(5.) The certainty of it: *Surely* it shall. It is as sure as the promise of the God of truth can make it; and we know whom we have believed.

(6.) Here is a prospect of the perfection of bliss in the future state. So some take the latter clause: “Goodness and mercy having followed me all the days of my life on this earth, when that is ended I shall remove to a better world, to *dwell in the house of the Lord for ever*, in our Father's house above, where there are many mansions. *With what I have I am pleased much; with what I hope for I am pleased more.*” All this, and heaven too! Then we serve a good Master.

3. How resolutely he determines to cleave to God and to his duty. We read the last clause as David's covenant with God: “*I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever* (as long as I live), and I will praise him while I have any being.” We must dwell in his house as servants, that desired to have their ears bored to the door-post, to serve him for ever. If God's goodness to us

be like the morning light, which shines more and more to the perfect day,
let not ours to him be like the morning cloud and the early dew that
passeth away. Those that would be satisfied with the fatness of God's
house must keep close to the duties of it.