

# **The 23rd Psalm: An Exposition on Its Meaning and Prophecies**

Hosia Lee Henley Sr. and Garnett Lee Henley

The 23rd Psalm is a great hymn of the faithfulness of God to provide, to protect, and to save those who call on God's name. Believers see the text not only as being a personal testimony of David (because he refers to himself in the first person throughout the psalm), but also as a prayer of comfort to be whispered during times of great peril. But it is much more than that. There are prophecies embedded in some phrases that could have been inspired only by the spirit of the Living God. Because of the uniqueness of the prophetic words that were used, those who heard the psalm in Hebrew probably understood the divine nature of what David was proclaiming. If this analysis is so, then those who were close to David probably knew that he was someone very special to God and that the throne of David was destined to stand forever.

The writing approach used in this analysis is somewhat different from traditional approaches. Our intent is to stimulate discussion and to further research by those studying the material. We try to open doors to scriptural rooms without attempting to firmly close them after we have entered. This approach should allow believers to re-read sections and to flow with the Holy Spirit to explanations and truths elsewhere in scripture.

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup>He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters.

<sup>3</sup>He restores my soul.<sup>1</sup>

David called the Lord his “shepherd” and by doing so defined a relationship in which he was totally dependent on the God of Israel for all of his needs. Sheep are some of the most helpless animals that God created. They can’t protect themselves from any predator, and they lack the mental abilities to find food and shelter on their own. A shepherd must do everything for them, or they will surely perish. So David declared, “I shall not want” as a testimony to the faithfulness of God as a “provider” shepherd. David meant, “I have no wants” because God was able to sustain him from failure and was able to supply all of his physical and spiritual needs.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep” (John 10:14–15).

The expression “He makes me to lie down in green pastures” describes how the unequalled might of the Father gives his sheep peace in times of uncertainty. Pastures used regularly by shepherds had a sheep stand where the animals could be herded when it was time to rest. A sheep stand was a fortified structure that had high walls and a large doorway where the shepherd would stand watch (John 10:1–5). However, such protection was not available when the sheep were taken afar to feed in green pastures. Therefore, the shepherd had to bring them together and make them lie down in a strange place. The sheep trusted that the shepherd would protect them while they slept. He often spoke softly to them or played softly on an instrument to put them at rest. The shepherd was faithful to risk his life to protect his sheep (John 10:11–14).

David knew this fact quite well, for he had shepherded his father’s flocks during most of his youth. As a boy, he had killed a lion and a bear to protect his sheep (1 Sam. 17:34–37). David also knew from reading the Pentateuch that shepherds were ferocious fighters. Indeed, the Egyptians despised all shepherds (Gen. 46:34), probably because one group of nomadic shepherds, the Hyksos, or Asian shepherd princes, conquered Egypt and ruled until the time of the Exodus. Some scholars believe that the Pharaoh “which knew not Joseph” (Exod. 1:8) was probably a post-Hyksos era king.

The metaphor “He leads me beside the still waters” alludes to how God takes us to places of peace where we can be refreshed. The process of getting to still waters involves trust. Sheep can smell the refreshing vapors of the water, but they also hear the torrent of the fast currents as the spring winds through the meadow.

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1 All biblical quotes are from the *New King James Version (NKJV)* unless otherwise noted.

There is hope and anticipation of being refreshed, but there is also fear of the unknown. David's application of this great truth came from his knowledge that sheep have absorbent wool coats and cannot swim. Therefore, they will not try to drink from fast-moving water out of fear of drowning. Yet, they must have water because the wool causes them to dehydrate quickly on warm days.

Thus, it is out of trust that the sheep follow the shepherd and are led to a shallow place where they can be refreshed. Sometimes our still waters can be found while reading Scripture, or while listening to a song that proclaims the love of the Lord, or while listening to others share the working of God's truths in their lives. Still waters are inspired by the Holy Spirit and always comfort and have foundations that are based on Scripture. They manifest the quieting of anxieties and concerns of the day, despite the turmoil and chaos of the world that seeps into our peace. Still waters cause it to be well with our soul, so that God's sheep can rest and refresh themselves in God's grace.

When David said, "He restores my soul," he meant that God causes him to "turn back and retreat" from wrongful behavior. This repentance then allows God to forgive sin. Nothing tears the soul like sin and in the process quenches the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Jesus said that sheep that *believe* in him *cannot* lose their soul.

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. (John 10:27–28)

Sheep can and do, however, stray. The shepherd loves each and every one of his sheep, and therefore goes to great hardship to find a lost sheep. As Jesus said:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!" I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:4–7)

Unrestored souls are sheep that have been deceived by Satan to choose to live away from the flock for lengthy periods of time. With time, the Father will hand them over to their debased longings because they desire habitual sin more than they desire God (Rom. 1:28–30). God has not deserted them; they have deserted him. The Holy Spirit continues to petition the believer to repentance, but pride and the enjoyment of worldly pleasures are stronger influences, which cause the

Holy Spirit to grieve (Eph. 4:30). Eventually, the hard times and terrible consequences of Satan's lies become evident, and the sheep crave to be back in the flock (Luke 15:11–31). So once again, the sheep hear the voice of the shepherd and answer his call. They humble themselves through repentance and come back to be restored to God's grace.

He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake.

The Hebrew word used for "paths" in the phrase is *מעגל* (Strong's H4570), which means "circular rampart or trench." It suggests that the paths of righteousness are clearly etched tracks in scripture that a believer can discern and follow. Not only that, but also God leads the believer while he or she is on the track. The Hebrew word used for "leads" is *בהל* (Strong's H5095), which means "to flow and to sustain." The psalmist is saying that God is showing him the way and is leading and sustaining him as he walks in the way of the Lord. David clarifies in the 25th Psalm:

<sup>4</sup>Show me Your ways, O LORD;  
Teach me Your paths.  
<sup>5</sup>Lead me in Your truth and teach me,  
For You are the God of my salvation;  
On You I wait all the day.

David understood that only God was righteous; if he was going to walk upright before the Lord, he needed to be shown the way. David also knew that because he waited (or trusted) on the Lord that the Lord would be faithful to sustain him. Samuel, the prophet who anointed David as king, explains:

<sup>29</sup>For You are my lamp, O LORD;  
The LORD shall enlighten my darkness.  
<sup>30</sup>For by You I can run against a troop;  
By my God I can leap over a wall.  
<sup>31</sup>As for God, His way is perfect;  
The word of the LORD is proven;  
He is a shield to all who trust in Him. (2 Sam. 22:29–31)

And David adds:

<sup>20</sup>Keep my soul, and deliver me;  
Let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in You. (Ps. 25:20)

So God kept David for "his name's sake." The word used for "name" is *שם* (Strong's H8034), which implies "honor, authority, and character." God forgives

sin and teaches righteous living so that he can glorify himself. David understood that because he was chosen by God for God's purpose (Ps. 22:9–11), his sins were a reproach to the righteousness and integrity of all that God is. Because no man can see God face to face, God invests the tenants of his faithfulness in the power and authority of his name (Ps. 148:13, Prov. 18:10). It is through God's name that prayers are answered, praise is accepted, and sins are commuted unto righteousness. Therefore, God is faithful to guide and to sustain because his name is "Righteousness" and it is "Salvation." It is the light that keeps all of creation from falling into darkness.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

The image of walking through a valley or low place that rests in the shadow of death addresses those secret fears that we all have. The words "death" and "shadow" both come from the Hebrew word *צלמור* (Strong's H6757), which means "grave." Death is possible because its shadow comes from an evil presence. But David does not speak of fear of dying; he says that because the Lord was with him, he would not fear the evil that lurked to kill him. He could not see his way in this deep, dark canyon of uncertainty because there was no light (that is, it was hard to trust the Lord), but he knew that God was faithful and would always be with him.

David also knew that the God of his youth was not a defenseless or fearful God. He had a rod that Moses had used to perform diverse signs before Pharaoh, including the parting of the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21). This rod could punish and defeat any attacker. To David, the rod was a symbol of the awesome might of the Lord. Whereas the "Sword of the Spirit" is a spiritual weapon that evokes physical change through spiritual means, the "rod" is the strong hand of God and is physically resolving a spiritual or physical situation.

Goliath, the bear, and the lion all fell before the rod of the Lord. The jawbone in Sampson's hand was a rod (Judg. 15:15), as was the angel who bound the mouths of the lions that were in the pit with Daniel (Dan. 6:22). David knew not to fear evil because it had no power or control over the God who was his protector.

In contemporary times, dark valleys are often referred to as "dry spells." Believers worship and go about life in a prayerful manner during "dry spells," but they feel as if the Lord just isn't as near as usual. They aren't living in habitual sin, but they just don't feel the presence and comfort of the Holy Spirit as usual. These are times when feelings of loneliness and vulnerability plant seeds of doubt and worry in the mind of the believer. The truths that Jesus spoke in Matthew 28:20

and in Hebrews 13:5 seem distant, and there is a deep need to “hear a new word” from the Lord—to be reminded that God is there and has not forgotten that we are his own. So with dry spells come tests and temptations from the evil one who delights when a believer doubts the faithfulness of God.

In addition to the rod, David also knew that God had a staff. The shepherd’s staff, or “crook,” had a gentle hook at the top that allowed the shepherd to reach into distant and tight places and to lift out lost sheep. To David, the staff was an extension of God reaching out to humans. David knew that he could never get so lost or far away that God could not bring him back into the fold. David mentioned this belief when he said, “Though he [the good man] fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand” (Ps. 37:24).<sup>2</sup> The staff was also a physical and spiritual burden bearer that a weary soul could lean on and rest when tired. The spiritual relief of having a staff allowed David to rest on the promises of the Lord and to petition the Lord for help when besieged by enemies (Ps. 6:3, 13:1).

To the believer, Jesus is that great staff who desires that we cast all burdens on him (Matt. 11:28–30). Of the rod and the staff, David said, “They comfort me.” The Hebrew word for “comfort” is *בָּחַם* (Strong’s H5162), which means “to sigh, be sorry, pity, protect, or chastise.” The implication is that the same rod and staff that defended and reached out to David in great comfort was also used to bring him back into the fold when he was disobedient. It is also an expression of repentance by the Lord (God changing his mind about an issue) when God looked at the habitual sin of humans in Genesis 6:6–7:

<sup>6</sup>And the LORD was sorry [*בָּחַם*] that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. <sup>7</sup>So the LORD said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry [*בָּחַם*] that I have made them.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
 You anoint my head with oil;  
 My cup runs over.  
<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
 All the days of my life;  
 And I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
 Forever.

2 *King James Version (KJV).*

While enemies looked on, Jehovah Jireh (God who is Provider) blessed David. Here, “table” is a metaphor for having sufficiency and excess. The Hebrew word used for “presence” is the word *בגד* (Strong’s H5048), which means “part opposite” or “over against.” David probably felt under siege. His enemies abounded and were always near, expecting that he would not be able to sustain himself. Cities that came under siege had to ration everything, especially food and water, or enemies who were camped around them would starve the inhabitants into surrender. But David said that the Lord was his shepherd and that David would not want. He was not trusting in himself but in God to be a faithful provider. To the horror and frustration of David’s enemies, God did not despise David for his many sins but showed that he had found mercy, resources, and honor from the Most High. David did nothing to deserve this favor. It was a reward out of the mercies of God to souls that were restored and were being led down paths of righteousness.

Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.<sup>3</sup>

The anointing of David with oil by Samuel (1 Sam. 16) is a reality and a prophecy. The Hebrew word that describes this anointing in Psalm 23:5 is *שׂוּף* (Strong’s H1878), which is the same word that describes the holiness of the ashes from sacrifices that were consumed on the altar. The sacrifice was offered on the altar, it was totally consumed, and the ashes were evidence that God did not reject the sacrifice. The ashes of the altar (Exod. 27:3, Num. 4:13) and the importance of the ashes (Ps. 20:3) mean “spiritual richness or atonement.” Examples include Proverbs 13:4, which says, “The soul of the sluggard desireth, and *hath* nothing; but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat”<sup>4</sup> (*שׂוּף*) and Proverbs 28:25, which says, “He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife: but he that putteth his trust in the LORD shall be made fat”<sup>5</sup> (*שׂוּף*).

In contrast, the Hebrew word for anointing, as when Saul (1 Sam. 15:1), David (1 Sam. 16:12), and Solomon (1 Kgs. 1:39) were anointed king, is the verb *משח* (Strong’s H4886), which means “to rub with oil, to consecrate.” Therefore, the anointing by God that David is speaking of is prophecy—symbolic that he was the seed chosen by God for the sacrifice to come. A sign of the Messiah was that he would be of the house of David (Isa. 22:22, Luke 1:27). Jesus was that sacrifice. He was fully consumed on the cross (John 19:30), and his blood and broken body were the “ashes of the altar” that God accepted for the salvation of humans.

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3 *KJV.*

4 *KJV.*

5 *KJV.*

The “cup” referred to as running over comes from the Hebrew כוס (Strong’s H3563), which means “a sorrowful portion, of which one is to partake; as God’s judgments, His wrath, afflictions.” Much of David’s cup came from the torment of his many enemies (Pss. 6 and 7). But the meaning of and the reason for the sorrowful cup in the 23rd Psalm are partially explained in the declaration “Surely goodness and mercy shall *follow* me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever” [emphasis added]. The Hebrew word for “follow” in this passage is רָדַף (Strong’s H7291), which means “to run after with hostile intent, to chase, to put to flight.” This passage suggests that the Holy Spirit or perhaps a distressing spirit from the Lord (1 Sam. 16:14) aggressively went after David to force him back from his lapses into habitual sin. David was a man of great passions and physical desires who was not permitted to conform to the pleasures of the world. His pain can be felt in Psalm 31:9–10:

<sup>9</sup>Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I am in trouble;  
 My eye wastes away with grief,  
 Yes, my soul and my body!  
<sup>10</sup>For my life is spent with grief,  
 And my years with sighing;  
 My strength fails because of my iniquity,  
 And my bones waste away.

So David’s cup was his destiny. Just as the son of perdition was predestined to be lost because he would not accept the manner in which the Kingdom of God was to come (John 17:12), David also was predestined by God before the foundations of the earth to be the seed for the redemption of human beings. And so his cup ran over with sorrows. Jesus, “a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3), also felt the weight of his cup, but relented to do the will of the Father (Matt. 26:39).

Likewise, contemporary believers have a cup, and that cup in part commands that we be holy, just as God is holy (Eph. 1:4, 5:27; 1 Pet. 1:15) and that our lives be led by the Holy Spirit (Prov. 14:12, Rom. 8:14, Gal. 5:18). With the believer’s cup come trials and tribulations (Acts 14:22, 20:23; Rom. 5:4, 2 Cor. 6:4), but God does not send a laborer into the harvest without resources (Matt. 10:5–15). And so even today, our cup requires that we be chastened (Heb. 12:6–11) and pruned (John 15:2) for God’s glory.

“And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever” is a conclusion that is drawn from God’s faithfulness to David in the other verses of the 23rd Psalm. The word “dwell” comes from יָשַׁב (Strong’s H3427), which means not just to “sit down,” but “to *sit* down as judge, in ambush, in quiet.” The implication is that residence in the “house of the Lord” is an honored, eternal position that



bequeaths great authority to the resident. David is saying that his position in the Kingdom of God is secure. God made David judge when God made David king. It was God who heard David's plea (Ps. 6) and defeated his enemies. However, David did not sit in quiet until he went to Abraham's bosom. For even when he was old and near death did his enemies continue to try to overthrow his kingdom (1 Kgs. 1 and 2).

## Reflections

The central message of the 23rd Psalm is that the Father is ever merciful, patient, loving, and faithful to provide, to protect, and to lead his sheep in his way. It is God's great desire that none should perish, but that all should be in his grace forever. And it is to that end that the throne of David shall never be without a king. The king who was to come has come and now sits at the right hand of the Father until God's enemies are made his footstool. And in that day, there will be no dark valleys, or distant pastures, or enemies. All prophecies will have been fulfilled, and all will have been made perfect. We shall be one with God.

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