

Sabbath School Lesson #1 – The Shepherd’s Crucible – 25 June-1 July 2022

Christ would have us learn lessons from Psalm 23. Our memory text: “He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3). It is a great help to know and remember, in repeating these familiar words, that the word there rendered “Shepherd” in Psalm 23 is rendered from a word meaning to feed. A sheep, above all other domestic animals, requires gentle treatment; brusque, harsh usage disconcerts it. It cannot be driven but must be led; and only the one who feeds and cares for it can lead it. From the fact that the two greatest rulers in Israel – Moses and David – were shepherds, and that the King of the universe is the “Great Shepherd,” we may know the Lord’s idea of royal authority, of fitness to rule. For the Lord, to rule is not to domineer, but to use power in service. Our Shepherd combines infinite power and infinite tenderness. He feeds the flock with His own body, and thus demonstrates His right to rule His flock.

Sunday: A Guide for the Journey: The Shepherd – “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1). How can we lack, when all things come of Him and are in Him, and He gives us Himself! But everything depends on a proper understanding of what it is to be in want and not to want. The one who is content in whatever state he is, never knows want; while the discontented person is always suffering from want. “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters” (verse 2). Two things are suggested by this verse: abundance of provision, and nothing to mar. An old shepherd was once asked when his sheep lay down, and he replied: ‘When they have eaten and have nothing to frighten them.’ Those who dwell in the house of the Lord, as this psalm indicates, “shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness” of it (Psalm 36:8); and though the devil as a roaring lion goes about seeking to devour the flock, the knowledge that they are inside and he outside, precludes all fear. Thus, “in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15). We read of those who serve the Lord day and night in His temple, that “they all hunger no more, neither thirst any more;” “for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters” (Revelation 7:16, 17); for “there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams” (Isaiah 33:21). Israel’s experience in the desert (compare Exodus 17:1-7 with 1 Corinthians 10:4) shows that we may have this experience in this world as well as in that which is to come. The Lord is our Shepherd now as surely as He will ever be; and living waters of rest are our portion now as truly as they will be then with the eyes of our spiritual bodies we see the Lord’s face and the crystal river flowing from His throne. Jesus speaks of the church as the flock, and of Himself as the Shepherd of the sheep. He says, “I am the good Shepherd” (John 10:11). David uses the same figure: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters.” O that might know Christ, the literal Son of God, “the chiefest among ten thousand ... He is altogether lovely” (Song of Solomon 5:10, 16). To Him we aspire for consolation; all the desires of the heart centre in Him and His. We read in the Song of Solomon: “Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companion?” (Song of Solomon 1:7). If we can find His flock, if we can be where His flock is resting from noontide heat, where His sheep find the cool gushing spring, the fountain of refreshing waters, we will certainly find the Shepherd there, and then, O what rivers of joy, of peace, flow on! Yes, there is peace, there is pure and solid bliss. No other companionship will satisfy a Christian’s longing desire; he must view his Saviour’s face; no other will do. Long years of darkness and gloom have obscured our lovely Christ, and almost vainly has the burning desire, the ardent longing to find the Shepherd, been put forth. O that we may know Christ as our Shepherd!

Monday: Locations on the Journey – “He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalms 23:3). To restore is to bring back; so when we have wandered out of the way, the Lord kindly brings us back, even at the expense of His own life. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him [hath taken on himself] the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). This bringing back is our restoration to life – our deliverance from sin and all its consequences.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits; who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:1-5). Still "He leadeth me." The paths of righteousness lie beside the still waters. It is not in warfare and strife that righteousness is gained. "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). This does not mean that we should become hermits or go into cloisters, but that in the midst of the strife of tongues we, walking with Jesus Christ, should be kept "secretly in a pavilion" (Psalm 31:20). Christ was unmoved by false accusation and clamour of the multitude for His life. His own righteousness and peace He give us for His name's sake. He Himself is glorified by His own gifts. This is our safeguard against discouragement in view of our own unworthiness.

Tuesday: Unexpected Detour 1: The Valley – "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" (Psalm 23:4). While it is certainly true that the Lord is with the trusting ones who go down into the grave, for they sleep in Him, it is no less certain that this verse especially contemplates the Lord's presence with us in the valley of the shadow of death, in order that we may pass through it alive. His presence with us means life to us; "for He is thy life, and the length of thy days." He is "alive forevermore," and He says, "Because I live, ye shall live also." "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined" (Isaiah 9:2); and that light is "the light of life" (John 8:2). Have you seen the light? According to your faith, be it unto you.

Wednesday: Unexpected Detour 2: The Surrounded Table – "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over" (Psalm 23:5). What could be more expressive of perfect security than this statement? Enemies are raging round us, yet in the face of their threatened attack we quietly sit down to the table which the Lord prepares for us. They come upon us to eat our flesh, and we in safety eat the good things of the Lord's house. When the wicked surround the New Jerusalem, intending to capture it and to destroy its inhabitants (Revelation 20:7-9), those who are inside will be no safer than those are now who put their trust in God. He serves them now, even as He will then (see Luke 12:37). What a wonder! The King of glory not only catering for His subjects, but Himself waiting upon them at table! What more could He do? Notice the verse also says, "thou anointest my head with oil." This oil is "the oil of gladness," the "joy in the Holy Ghost," which constitutes the kingdom of God. Notice, Christ is anointed to give "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Isaiah 61:3.). Those who are thus anointed are kings, reigning in life with Christ. The cheerful person is king, indeed; if his cheerfulness comes from trust in God, nothing is impossible for him. He has enough and to spare; his cup overflows to others, because the Lord, in whom is all fulness, is the portion of his inheritance and of his cup (Psalm 16:5).

Thursday: A Certain Promise for the Journey – "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" (Psalm 23:6). The Hebrew warrants the rendering given in some versions: "Only goodness and mercy shall follow me." How can it be otherwise, when "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28)? And this goodness and mercy that follow us are God's own self (Exodus 34:6). Wherever we go, His goodness and mercy pursue us – run after us. "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me" (Psalm 139:7-10). "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." In whatever desert place we are, and however stony our bed, the Lord is in that place, whether we know it or not, and therefore it is His house. His presence makes "the dry land springs of water" (Isaiah 41:18), and so even in the barren land we walk beside the still waters, and lie down in green pastures. For "ye are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God" (Hebrews 12:22). It is a good place to dwell; for "those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age they shall be fat and flourishing" (Psalm 92:13-14). May we flourish in God's courts!