



# The Best Psalm of All

by Desmond Ford

[Transcribed by Daisy Stanley]

*Psalm 23 is the best-loved psalm of all. But do we always trust its promises of justification, sanctification, and glorification?*

**L**et me draw your attention to the most read passage of Scripture, and the least believed—Psalm 23.

- <sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
- <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
he leads me beside still waters;
- <sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.
- <sup>4</sup> Even though I walk  
through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil;  
for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff,  
they comfort me.

- <sup>5</sup> Thou preparest a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil,  
my cup overflows.
- <sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall  
follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the  
LORD  
forever.

(Psalm 23 RSV)

I have felt very ashamed this week as I have contemplated the heights and depths, lengths and breadths of this psalm. It pictures a much higher religious experience than I, for one, have ever attained. I feel challenged as well as humiliated by that fact.

## Wants

What is there here that people don't believe? Well, it says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The fact is our lives are bundles of wants, and most of us are continuously and recurringly afraid the Lord will deny us something we need. We're all afraid the Lord is going to hold something back from us—health, the well-being of our children, a job, material prosperity, reputation. There are very few Christians who believe with all their heart that they will not lack any good thing.

## Fear

Then it says, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." One of the things that characterizes humanity is fear. Fear,



anxiety, and worry. Most of us recurrently go through a cycle of anxiety, relaxation, new anxiety, new relaxation, another new anxiety, *ad infinitum*. The world, even the Christian world, does not really believe it need fear no evil.

### Goodness and Mercy

Then we read, "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." We're inclined to think, "Well, goodness and mercy didn't happen that day when I lost all that money. And goodness and mercy certainly won't happen in the future when some other disaster strikes." This is the most read passage of Scripture and the least believed.

### A Comprehensive Psalm

Let's try to find what Psalm 23 is really saying. We can find a challenge here to live better, holier, happier, and more useful lives.

It's a comprehensive psalm. If it were about platypuses, most of the world couldn't understand it. You've heard of the Australian platypus. It's a real conundrum to evolutionists. It seems to be a patchwork of about twenty different animals as though some mad scientist had carved up a variety of species and sewn all the pieces together. It's the most amazing animal in the world. But most people have never seen one. If this psalm had been about platypuses, it would not have been a universal psalm.

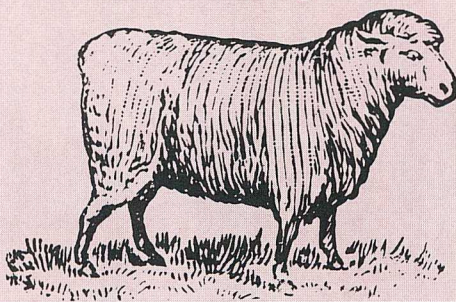
This psalm is about sheep. Almost everyone has heard about sheep. All the elements of the psalm are universal. The first verse talks about rest and activity. Here are the themes of the remainder of the psalm: God and us, time and eternity, pain and pleasure, fear and salvation, food and drink, cares and necessities, outdoors and indoors. (We begin in the outdoors, resting by the oasis with quiet waters and green pastures. We end inside the house of the Lord forever.)

There is the temporal and the eternal. The psalm closes with eternity: "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." It is filled with temporal needs: food, drink, rest, and restoration.

So this is a psalm that is everybody's: young, old, black, white, Americans, Australians, rich and poor.

All essential elements of life are found here: exhilaration, depression, kaleidoscopic scenes, yet stability. It deals with microscopic things such as green blades of grass and with majestic things such as the deity of our Good Shepherd. It is a comprehensive and universal psalm.

*This psalm becomes richer  
and richer as we sense  
that we—like typical  
sheep—are dependent,  
prone to wander,  
defenseless unless God  
be our Helper.*



### Thinking About Sheep

Psalm 23 is best appreciated when we think about sheep. Sheep are stupid. They can never find their way home. Sheep can see fifteen yards clearly, not beyond.

*Reader's Digest* published a story about a cat taken from New York and dropped off in Los Angeles. That cat got back to New York in fifteen months. No sheep could ever do that. Some explorers in Australia during the last century died while traveling from one state to another. Years later, when new explorers went that way they found the horses of the doomed expedition. Horses can look after themselves. Let a horse loose and it will survive. Oxen can survive.

Sheep can't survive. Sheep are very dependent. They have no defensive weapons. They have no venom like snakes or horns like deer. They don't have an elephant's trunk to threaten

you with. Sheep are very dependent, very defenseless, very foolish, very blind.

### We the Sheep

The only person who can really appreciate Psalm 23 is the one who can say, "Hey! That's me!" Until a person realizes his life would be a mess if success depended upon his own wisdom, until a person realizes that, he has no hope. We are all messes. In spiritual things we are all fools—and spiritual things are the most important.

A boy went to school. At the end of the first year, his father said, "Well, son, do you know a lot more now?" "Yes, Dad," answered the boy. At the end of the second year the father asked, "Well, son, do you know a lot more now?" "No, Dad," answered the boy. At the end of the third year the father asked, "Well, son, do you know a lot more now?" The boy answered, "Dad, I know less than when I started." "Ah, son," said the father, "you're really making progress."

We progress to the extent that we realize our dependence upon God. This psalm becomes richer and richer as we sense that we—like typical sheep—are dependent, prone to wander, defenseless unless God be our Helper.

### The Lord Is

"The Lord is my shepherd." Just take those three words, "The Lord is." Most problems in life are solved if that is true. If you can be sure of God, everything else will take its place.

God matters tremendously or he does not matter at all! God is the one great circumstance. Everything else is secondary. If we give God his place, everything else will work out. Nothing will work out if we don't give God his place.

Jesus said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33). He was echoing Psalm 23, which begins with the fact the Lord is.

The name here for "Lord" in the original text is Yahweh, or Jehovah. This is the name for God used six thousand times in the Old Testament and always refers to God's faithfulness to his creature, man.

There are two paramount names



for God in the Old Testament. One is "Elohim," which is found in Genesis chapter one, and refers to God as creator. "God said" is a phrase used over and over in Genesis one—that's "Elohim." But as soon as God created Adam in chapter two we read, "The Lord [Yahweh] God [Elohim] caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man" (Gen 2:21). Yahweh identifies God in his relationship to humanity as creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

"The Lord is my shepherd" is saying "the redeemer is my shepherd," "the preserver is my shepherd," "the faithful one is my shepherd."

### I Shall Not Want

"I shall not want." We find that hard to take. We all have lots of wants.

We're a bit like the girl who, when mother asked, "Why don't you make up your mind, honey?" answered, "Mother, if you had as many minds as I have, you would find it difficult to make them up."

We have so many wants. The psalm does not say, "You will have no fancied wants." It is dealing with real wants—and notice how few they are. In the New Testament our real wants are mentioned: food, clothing, and shelter. Let us therewith be content.

You don't have many really essential wants. The fact is we have such active imaginations we can fill our minds with fancied wants. God would need all his omnipotence to deal with all our fancied wants. God is not dealing with those. He's dealing with our real needs.

### Rest in Green Pastures

"He makes me lie down in green pastures." Isn't it interesting God makes us rest before he makes us work? Psalm 23 deals with rest, work, and suffering, but begins with rest. It also ends with rest. "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

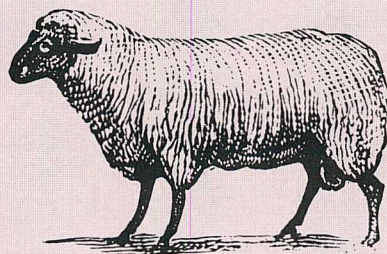
The gospel is found in this lesson of rest. In the beginning Adam and Eve spent their first day in rest before they worked. In the area where I live, a fine Christian woman held a Bible study and declared the Sabbath is now abolished. Dear friends, if the Sabbath was for the first representative man and woman, then it is for all men and

women. We can't abolish the Sabbath. The Sabbath is God's way of saying, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Adam and Eve spent their first whole day in rest.

### Justification

"He makes me lie down." We don't have enough sense to rest when we ought, especially spiritual rest, rest in God. In this psalm, physical rest from activity also represents spiritual rest. Rest before work symbolizes justification.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures" is where we begin as a Christian. You don't work up to it: "When I have overcome all my vices, when I have defeated all my bad habits, when I have developed all my virtues, then I can rest." Dear friends, if you are waiting for rest until then, you will never rest. If someone said, "You will never laugh until you are happy," you may never laugh.



*However gifted we are,  
we need to be restored  
and be saved. And "he  
restores my soul" for his  
name's sake, never  
because of our goodness.*

If you are waiting until you have all inner enemies overcome and all outward problems solved before you rest, you will never rest. You have to take God's rest as a gift. "Come to me ... and I will give you rest" is a gift. And it is from that gift of rest that we work. We

don't work to the cross; we work from the cross.

### Sanctification and Glorification

"He leads me in paths of righteousness." There, now, is the work.

At the end of the psalm you have glorification. After goodness and mercy have followed us all the days of our lives, we will be equipped to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Thus, you have justification—he makes me rest. You have sanctification—he leads me in paths of service. Then you have glorification—when you are at home with the Lord.

In 1 John 3:2 we read, "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." We won't be altogether like him until we see him. That's glorification at the return of the Lord.

### Restoration

Before "he leads me in paths of righteousness" we read "he restores my soul." We are indeed wandering sheep. We need to be restored.

Remember Luke 15? It begins with the story of a lost sheep, which is followed by a story of a lost coin, then a lost son. All were lost. All were valuable. Sheep are usually characterized by a mass mind, but at least this lost sheep had some individual drive, and got lost!

Even our virtues can lead us astray, into vice. However gifted we are, we need to be restored and be saved. And "he restores my soul" for his name's sake, never because of our goodness. We are so built that if something good happens to us we sort of feel uneasy because we feel we did not deserve it. When something very bad happens we ask, "Why did I deserve this?"

Neither thinking is correct. The gifts of God do not come because of what we are. They come because of what God is. "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

*[Excerpted from a transcription of Tape of the Month TM90-4. The complete tape is available from GNU, 11710 Education Street, Auburn, CA 95603-2499 for a donation of \$3.50. A complete printed transcription is available free.]*