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**BIBLICAL TOPICS FOR STUDY – PSALM 23**

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Psalm 23 teaches us about the work of a shepherd. How is the sheepfold? Receive the explanation of each verse of this wonderful psalm of David. He knew who his Shepherd was.

**Psalm 23 (NRSV):**

<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 right paths for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley [NIV: the valley of the shadow of death], I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint 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 my whole life long [NIV: I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever].

**Psalm authorship and information:**

Psalm 23 is of David's authorship. In the Old Testament, the word 'shepherd' (In Hebrew: רועה, transliterated: rō·'eh or rō·'î or ra'ah – Strong #7462; in Greek: ποιμήν, transliterated: poimēn or poimén – Strong # g4166) was used figuratively to indicate a leadership position, such as the king, the priest or the prophet (Zech. 11: 8). Both in David's day and in Jesus' time, the shepherd office was one of the most humble and inferior positions in that society. According to some theologians, the entire psalm reflects the comparison between a shepherd's relationship with his sheep and God's relationship with His children. Others make a separation between the verses, saying that in verses 1-4 the psalmist refers to God as the personal Shepherd, and in verses 5-6 God is compared to a good host who receives an honored guest. In any case, God is always kind to us. Here, again, God shows that whoever wants to become great must be servant (Lk. 22: 26-27; Mk. 10: 42-45; Matt. 20: 25-28), for He works for us to be cared for in every way and also teaches us to serve the people He places under our responsibility. The important thing is to understand this psalm from the perspective of a humble

shepherd, like David, that is, what life was like at that time; so we can better understand what this psalm means to us today.

Although currently in some regions of the Earth there are different conditions for tending sheep, with slightly different climates than Judea and with different financial and technological conditions, the ‘spirit of a shepherd’ remains the same. His care and constant vigilance for the sheep remain intact, leading them to worry about the basic needs of the animals, removing fear of danger from them, providing rest and refreshment for them after a long walk or crossing narrow gorges, no matter if through hot deserts or cold places, before the snow starts to fall fully in winter. The Hebrew word used for sheep in the bible is צֹן or tson (צֹן – Strong #6629; Gen. 29: 2). In Greek it is probaton (πρόβατον – Strong #g4263), a word often used for ‘small cattle’ (Jn. 10: 4).



### **How is the work of a shepherd?**

He takes the sheep out of the sheepfold at 4:00 am, leads them through difficult grounds until they reach the pastures, and while they graze they are always moving, never stop. Around 10:00 am, with the sun already hot, the sheep start to feel hot and become tired and thirsty and the shepherd knows that they cannot drink water with a stomach full of undigested grass. So he takes them to a cool and quiet place of those green pastures, and makes them lie down there. At rest, without grazing, the sheep begin to ruminate. After they have digested the food, then he leads them to the streams of water to drink. The sheep are afraid of strong streams because they know that wool does not allow them to swim; on the contrary, it absorbs all the water and the weight would make them sink. The shepherd does not mock the fears of the sheep or try to force them to do what they do not want; he guides them through mountains and valleys in search of calm waters to quench their thirst there. Besides not knowing how to swim, the sheep do not have good eyesight. They can see at most eight to ten meters in front of them. That is why the shepherd guides them. Sometimes the trails are narrow and end at the edge of a cliff, where the unsuspecting sheep might fall and die. Sometimes the trail

leads to dead ends and other times to green pastures and still waters. The shepherd goes ahead and does not push the sheep (“When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” – Jn. 10: 4). ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’ can refer to ‘valleys where life is constantly at risk’ or to the deep gorges or valleys that exist along the mountains of Judea on the western side of the Dead Sea. Or else, a valley or ravine in which predatory animals hide in the mountains is a dangerous place for sheep. Some scholars say that in Palestine, between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea there is a narrow and dangerous trail that cuts through the mountains and is therefore called the ‘valley of the shadow of death.’ The expression “of the shadow of death,” in Hebrew, means ‘shade of death’, ‘deep darkness’, ‘deep shadow’ or ‘the darkest shadow’, ‘darkness.’ Thus, the verse can be translated as: “‘When it is deeply dark’ or ‘when I pass through a valley of dense darkness’, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” The sheep pass one after the other through the dangerous path with the shepherd singing or playing an instrument.



Thus, the shepherd takes along with him a hard and heavy rod about two to three feet long, whose function is to protect the flock from attacks by wild animals. He also carries a staff of nearly ten feet long, whose tip is bent to form a hook. Its function is to fit it in the chest of the sheep that falls in some ravine to hoist it up, back to the right track.

When sheep graze, they sometimes cut their snouts on some sharp stones hidden in the grass or hurt themselves with thorns. Therefore, at the end of the day, when they reach the sheepfold, the shepherd stands at the entrance and examines each sheep and, if there is any injury, applies balsamic oil that helps to heal it and prevents infection. He also counts them again. In addition, he carries a clay jar that keeps the water always fresh, and at night, after inspecting the sheep, he gives them to drink.

The interesting thing is that the sheep knows their shepherd and obeys only his voice. She becomes so dependent on him that if he leaves for any reason, the sheep

misses him, gets depressed and even refuses to eat. Therefore, shepherds generally do not go alone. They take one or two shepherds with them.

### Jesus, the Good Shepherd



Jesus identified Himself several times with the figure of the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10: 1-5; 7; 9; Jn. 10: 11-16; Jn. 10: 27-29; Heb. 13: 20; 1 Pet. 2: 25; 1 Pet. 5: 4), who gives his life for the sheep and to whom the sheep obey because they hear His voice:

- “When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers” (Jn. 10: 4-5)

- “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (Jn. 10: 11-16)

- “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.” (Jn. 10: 27-29)

The interesting thing is Ezekiel’s prophecy (Ezek. 34: 11-31) about Jesus as the Good Shepherd who will come to feed His sheep. Verses 12-16 say:

“As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

### **The sheepfold**

Jesus spoke in a language that was understandable to people at that time. He said (Jn. 10: 1-5; 7; 9): “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers... So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep... I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.’”



Above: Sheepfold in the Middle East at the time of Jesus – Ain Karem (In Hebrew: Ein Kerem or Ain Karem = ‘spring of the Vineyard’; in Arabic: ‘Ein Kārem’ or ‘Ayn Karim’= ‘generous spring’), southwest of Jerusalem – source: ‘Nos Dias de Jesus II’ – Evidências III (Rodrigo Silva), video on YouTube.

When He talks about the gate of the sheepfold, He was actually talking about an entrance through which the sheep passed. The shepherd himself served as gate. There he stood and there he counted the sheep before leaving and counted again before sleeping. The sheep miss the shepherd very much and if he is absent, even for a short time, they begin to bleat, which attracts the presence of predators, such as wolves, especially in the dry season, because without rain there is no harvest, and without harvest famine comes. Without other food, the wolves come close to the sheepfolds to devour the sheep that are unprotected. That is why, in the time of the NT, the shepherd placed branches with thorns on the fence of the sheepfold to prevent devouring animals from jumping on it and catching some sheep; or else he put dry tree branches outside the fence and set them on fire so that the smoke would scare away predatory animals. In case of need or when these two strategies did not work, the shepherd himself lay down at the entrance of the fold to defend his sheep and prevent anyone from passing by; it served as gate to them. That is why Jesus said that He was the gate for the sheep and if whoever entered by Him would come in and go out and would find pasture.

Sometimes the sheepfold was built with stones and stood in front of the shepherd's house, like the figure above, but for nomadic shepherds, who move the flocks over long paths and do not bring their sheep back to the sheepfold on the same day, the sheepfolds can be in rocks, which may be cold and refreshing during the summer, and warm and cozy during the winter.

In Palestine, at the time of Jesus' birth, herds usually left for the fields in March and came back in early November. The Jewish month of Kislev, corresponding nearly to the second half of November and first half of December was a cold and rainy month. The next month is Tevet, when the coldest temperatures of the year occur, with occasional snow in the highlands, making it impossible for someone to stand outside of a house due to the low temperature. Therefore, what is written in Lk. 2: 8 ("In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.") makes us think that the shepherds who visited Jesus lived outdoors and kept watch over their flocks at night near the place where Jesus was born. As these facts would be impossible for a period of harsh winter, it is likely that Jesus could not have been born on the day that Christmas is celebrated, in winter (around December), but in the spring or summer (March-April to August-September).

### **Explanation of the psalm verse by verse:**

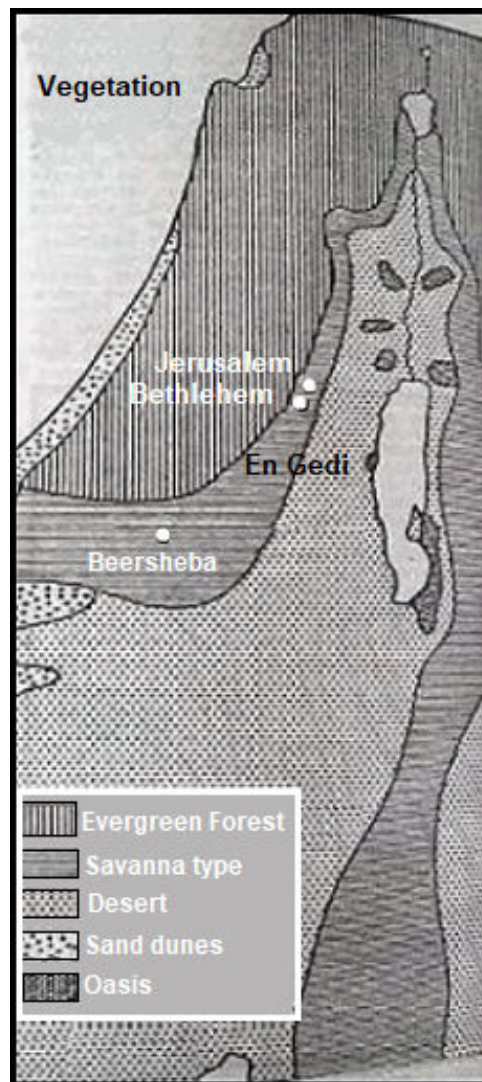
- **Verse 1:** "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." In Hebrew, the phrase 'I shall not want' (NIV, 'I shall not be in want') can be better translated as: 'I will miss nothing', that is, 'I will not miss anything indispensable; what I have will be enough.'

David begins the psalm with a great certainty that he is a sheep in the hands of God; therefore, he says: The Lord is my shepherd. His sheep trusted him fully, as he trusted God as his Shepherd. David boldly protected his sheep from a lion and a bear (1 Sam. 17: 34-36).

And if we read the next verses, we can see that the phrase 'I shall not want' (NIV, 'I shall not be in want') is not just about food, but about rest ('He makes me lie down in green pastures'), calm waters close to where we can lie down and 'digest' and understand the experiences ('he leads me beside still waters'), refreshment ('he restores my soul'), guidance to walk the correct path ('He leads me in right paths for his name's sake'), of protection and security when everything seems uncertain ('Even though I walk through the darkest valley [NIV: the valley of the shadow of death], I fear no evil; for you are with me'), of correction and comfort ('your rod and your staff, they comfort

me’), honor, care and healing of wounds (‘You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows’) and, finally, blessings and nearness to the Shepherd (‘Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long’).

If we think about the arid conditions of the land of Judea, where David probably tended his sheep (quite differently from the humid and fruitful regions of Galilee) we can understand that the food was not so abundant. The sheep’s food was provided day by day, wherever the shepherd took it. Just as the sheep instinctively trusts the shepherd for the next day’s needs, we also walk with the Lord, confident that each day He will provide what we need.



Israel’s geography is diversified, with desert conditions in the south and snow-capped mountains in the north. The northern region from the border of Lebanon to more or less the Gaza region (central coastal plain) is a region with numerous small and fertile valleys, including the mountains and hills of Upper and Lower Galilee and the Samaritan hills. Slightly inland, in the Judean Hills, south of Jerusalem, and up to the lower limit of the Gaza Strip, where the biblical city of Beersheba (known as the ‘capital of the Negev’) is located, the vegetation is savanna type, namely, low

vegetation, such as grasses and small shrubs, and with a number of small trees scattered. From there downwards, the desert region of the Negev begins, with little annual rainfall and characterized by impermeable soil, allowing minimum water penetration. To the east of the central plateau is the Jordan Valley, basically a desert region with some oasis, with the exception of the northern region of Israel, south of the Sea of Galilee, where some vegetation can be seen.



The images above show the Judean Desert. In the second, there is likely an oasis region in the background.

In the image below, you can see En-Gedi National Park (founded in 1972), one of the most important nature reserves in Israel – [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/En-Gedi_National_Park).



• **Verse 2:** “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.” In the original Hebrew ‘green pastures’ it can be translated as ‘pastures of tender grass’, no longer referring to food, but refreshing resting places. The sheep never lie down until they are satisfied. As I explained earlier in relation to the sheep’s behavior, around 10:00 am, with the sun already hot, the sheep start to feel hot and become tired and thirsty and the shepherd knows that they cannot drink water with a stomach full of undigested grass. So he takes them to a cool and quiet place of those green pastures, and makes them lie down there. At rest, without grazing, the sheep begin to ruminate.



The Hebrew word for desert (or wilderness – Num. 1: 1) is *midhbār*, indicating pastures full of grass (Ps. 65: 12 – ‘The pastures of the wilderness overflow’ or ‘grasslands’; Jl 2: 22 – ‘the pastures of the wilderness are green’ or ‘open pastures are

becoming green’) that could give sustenance to the sheep. (Ex. 3: 1), but which were sometimes burned by summer droughts (Jer. 23: 10; Jl. 1: 19-20), and also denoted desolate places of rock and sand (Deut. 32: 10; Job 38: 26). In Greek, in the NT, the word used is: *érēmos* – ἔρημος – Strong #g2048 (Matt. 14: 15, ‘a deserted place’), but that land was not short of ‘a great deal of grass.’ (Jn. 6: 10 – NRSV). NIV says, ‘there was plenty of grass.’ In other words: although the type of vegetation for us in western countries does not speak in favor of a totally green field, there was a type of tender grass, where the sheep could lie down to rest and ruminate the food, like the people could also sit down to hear Jesus’ words. Some researchers say there were large grassy pastures in the vicinity of many cities in ancient Israel. The importance of grasses in a shepherds’ village is of great importance. The lack of it brings drought, suffering and hunger.

After they have digested the food, then he leads them to the streams of water to drink. The sheep are afraid of strong streams because they know that wool does not allow them to swim; on the contrary, it absorbs all the water and the weight would make them sink. The shepherd does not mock the fears of the sheep or try to force them to do what they do not want; he guides them through mountains and valleys in search of calm waters to satiate their thirst there. Besides not knowing how to swim, the sheep do not have good eyesight. They can see at most eight to ten meters in front of them. That is why the shepherd guides them. It is important to note the use of the verb ‘to lead’, hinting that the shepherd does not push or impel his sheep, he always guides them. He goes some distance ahead of them and they follow him and, as we said before, he goes singing or playing an instrument, like the flute, for example. David used a harp.

The idea of provision for the needs of the flock continues. While the main shepherd went ahead of the flock, the auxiliary shepherd walked alongside or behind, watching the animals and directing them along the trail.



“He leads me beside still waters” means waters with a gentle and silent flow, inviting you to rest. In a place like this the sheep can drink without haste or without being frightened. In Israel, the shepherd had to guide his flock to a pond or stream. But it was often difficult to find water in the dry season.

The same thing happens to us, when we need time in silence, drinking calmly from the word of God, until we can ‘digest’ and understand the experiences we live in, until we grasp the right learning with them or accept them for our growth. And the living water of the word of God helps us to understand situations and to have a revelation of what that means. So, we can make the right decisions.

In Ezek. 34: 14-15 we can see the promise of the Good Shepherd’s care for His people: “I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.”

• **Verse 3:** “he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.”

In addition to the calm waters bringing refreshment to sheep tired of walking in the hot sun, they also renew their strength to continue their journey. The word of God (His living waters) gives us refreshment in moments of tiredness, when we no longer have the will to continue with something. His word renews in us the hope and faith in His promise. It brings us the joy of His company and the certainty that we are not alone. He is watching us, paying attention to our work and our attitudes, to our fidelity. Although we are powerless to change certain situations, His word gives us the assurance that He can; with Him, nothing is impossible.

Refreshment or renewal is a very present subject in the NT:

• Rom. 12: 2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

• 2 Cor. 4: 16: “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”

• 2 Cor. 5: 17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

• Eph. 4: 23: “and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.”

• Col. 3: 10: “and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”

• Rev. 21: 5: “And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’” With Jesus, all things are made new.

“He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.” Once again, the psalmist shows us that it is the shepherd who guides the sheep wherever he wants. And here ‘right paths’ means ‘paths of righteousness’, that is, Jesus guides us along the right paths of His word (2 Tim. 3: 16-17; Rom. 15: 4), even though they seem to human eyes to be crooked paths, dangerous or narrow, as we saw in the picture of the trail at the beginning of the text, where the sheep pass. This reminds us of the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 30: 21): “And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’” Shortly before, the prophet speaks of the rebellious people who no longer want to hear the prophetic exhortation, like straying sheep, and they say to these prophets (Isa. 30: 11): “leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”

The psalmist goes on to say that the Shepherd guides him on the paths of righteousness for the sake of His name (“He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake”), for His name is holy (Ps. 111: 9; Matt. 6: 9), God is holy and watches over His holiness. He also wants us to be holy (Lev. 11: 44-45; Lev. 19: 2; Lev. 20: 26; 1 Pet. 1: 15-16; 1 Pet. 2: 9). In the book of Ezekiel, the Lord says several times that the drastic

measures He took against that rebellious people who left Egypt was for the sake of His name, lest it be desecrated among the wicked:

- Ezek. 20: 9; 14; 22; 44:

<sup>9</sup> But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt.

<sup>14</sup> But I acted for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out.

<sup>22</sup> But I withheld my hand, and acted for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out.

<sup>44</sup> And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, or corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, says the Lord God.

- Ezek. 36: 20-22:

<sup>20</sup> But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, 'These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land.'

<sup>21</sup> But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.

<sup>22</sup> Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: 'It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.'

- Ezek. 39: 7: "My holy name I will make known among my people Israel; and I will not let my holy name be profaned any more; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, the Holy One in Israel."

Isaiah speaks almost the same thing:

- Isa. 48: 9-11: "For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, so that I may not cut you off [*He spoke to His people*]. See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for why should my name be profaned? [NIV: defamed] My glory I will not give to another (cf. Isa. 42: 8)."

- Isa. 52: 5: "Now therefore what am I doing here, says the Lord, seeing that my people are taken away without cause? Their rulers howl, says the Lord, and continually, all day long, my name is despised [NIV: 'And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed']."

The captivity of God's people because of their idolatry and, consequently, the victory of their enemies over them profaned the name of the Lord among the wicked. Therefore, we have the responsibility to glorify His name through our actions. Our lack of reverence and fear profanes His name. Sin and misbehavior of a child of God stains His name before the unbelievers. When He avenged His people from enemies, He was protecting His holiness (Ezek. 38: 23). He delivers us from evil not only because He loves us and wants our good, but so that His name may be glorified by those who do not yet know Him. When Jesus raised Lazarus, He said to His disciples (Jn. 11: 4): "But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.'" And when He healed the blind man from birth, He said that the cure would be for the glory of God to manifest in

that blind man: “Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’” (Jn. 9: 3), which complements what Jesus Himself said about us being the light of the world (Matt. 5: 14-16): “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”



While doing my research and watching some videos on the Internet, I heard a documentary where it was said that the rebel sheep had its little leg broken by the shepherd so as not to run away and get lost from the group; then, he bandaged its leg and took care of the animal and it would be carried all the way. This makes us understand what Ezekiel wrote as a prophecy in relation to the Good Shepherd (Ezek. 34: 16-17; 20-22): “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats... Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep...” Breaking the sheep’s leg may seem cruel at first, but if we look at the situation from the shepherd’s perspective, he often prefers to do so because he loves it rather than having to hand it over to the slaughterhouse. In other words, that’s what God feels ‘forced’ to do with certain rebellious ‘sheep’ that He loves. Only then will the person understand what it is like to be protected by someone who loves her (him).

• **Verse 4:** “Even though I walk through the darkest valley [NIV: the valley of the shadow of death], I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff; they comfort me.”

Returning to the initial explanation of the sheep, sometimes the trails are narrow and end at the edge of a cliff, where the unsuspecting sheep might fall and die. Sometimes the trail leads to dead ends and other times to green pastures and still waters. The shepherd goes ahead and does not push the sheep (Jn. 10: 4). “Even though I walk through the darkest valley [NIV: the valley of the shadow of death]” may remind us of the deep gorges or valleys that exist along the mountains of Judea on the western side of the Dead Sea. Or else, a valley or ravine in which predatory animals hide in the mountains is a dangerous place for sheep. Some scholars say that in Palestine, between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea there is a narrow and dangerous trail that cuts through the mountains and is therefore called the ‘valley of the shadow of death.’

The expression “of the shadow of death,” in Hebrew: צלמות (çalmüth or tsalmaveth – Strong #6757 – Job 3: 5; Job 16: 16; Job 24: 17; Ps. 23: 4) means ‘shade of death’, ‘deep darkness’, ‘deep shadow’ or ‘the darkest shadow’, ‘darkness’, ‘the grave’ (which is a figure of calamity); figuratively: distress, extreme danger; characterizing world of the dead. The word tsalmaveth comes from two words: ‘tsel’ and ‘maveth.’ ‘Tsel’ – צל – Strong #6738 means ‘shadow.’ Maveth – מוות – Strong #4194 – means ‘death; state of death or place of death.’ Thus, the verse can be translated as: “When it is deeply dark’ or ‘when I pass through a valley of dense darkness’, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”

David knew the dangers of those lands, with enemies hidden in the rocks and ready to attack anyone; even more a shepherd alone with a flock of sheep! The bible does not mention that he shepherded with someone. Or else they were fierce wolves, lions and bears that could kill their sheep (1 Sam 17: 34-36). There were also the dangers of nature itself, with loose rocks that could suddenly fall off over them or under their feet when passing the trails, depending on the region where he was with the animals. The darkness that the bible speaks of, here in the case of David, can also refer to the darkness caused by the absence of sun while passing through a narrow canyon. But the sheep should not be afraid because their shepherd was there with them. As we said, the sheep is a fearful animal that can only see a few meters in front of it. And the shepherd who goes ahead of it is its safety.

For us who live today and know the salvation brought by Jesus, the word ‘death’ may not be as threatening as it was for people in the OT, for we are sure of eternal life and we know that we will never feel the ultimate separation from God (the true meaning of ‘death’). For them, who saw death and hell with different eyes and lived the material dispensation with more intensity, where everything was physical, not spiritual, death was something really tangible. The enemies were physical. But how important was the hope of God’s light, delivering His people from death for their sin! For this reason, they were so attached to the promise of the Messiah (Isa. 9: 2; Matt. 4: 16; Lk. 1: 78b-79). Matthew referred to Isaiah’s prophecy and applied it to Jesus Christ, saying: “the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” (Matt. 4: 16 – blinded by the darkness of their sins).

However, what can we say about us today? We also live moments of tests where we do not know how to proceed, because we lack revelation and we feel anguish, spiritual oppression, we feel lost in the midst of unexpected situations; it seems that the Lord does not answer and that there is no way out or an end to our problems. What to do? Then, we remember that we are not alone in this journey. God is with us and is our Shepherd. He sees much further than we do. For darkness is as light to Him (Ps. 139: 12), and He gave us His promise: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28: 20).

Therefore, David's faith in his God made him write that despite all this, he was not afraid of anything because the Lord was with him. In His Presence there is strength, comfort, rest, hope, light and life.

“Your rod and your staff; they comfort me” – to free his sheep from the dangers of the journey, the shepherd takes along with him a hard and heavy rod about two or three feet long, whose function is to protect the flock from attacks by ravenous animals. He also carries a staff of nearly ten feet long, whose tip is bent to form a hook. Its function is to fit it in the chest of the sheep that falls in some ravine to hoist it up, back to the right track.



The Hebrew word for ‘rod’ is shebet or shévet (שֶׁבֶט, literally, ‘tribe’, Strong #7626) and comes from a primitive root meaning: to branch off; a scion; a descendant, a clan or tribe; (concretely): dart, rod, scepter, stick (מִוט – for punishing, writing, fighting, ruling, walking, etc.), symbol of correction.

The Hebrew word for ‘staff’ is mish’ناه or mishenah or mishteneth (מִשְׁעֵנָה, literally, ‘double, repetition’ – Strong #4938), feminine of mishen; (figuratively) sustenance or (concretely) a walking-stick. Both the rod and the staff are symbols of a shepherd’s office. Through them, he guides his sheep (the rod is used to nudge the sheep in the right direction so they don’t leave the group, that is, it has a disciplinary function). The rod and the staff are used for defense (to chase away predators, such as wolves and snakes, that is, a protective function), and to represent or indicate authority (to pull a sheep that strays to some place where it could fall and injure itself, that is, a saving function). The staff is also an object on which the shepherd relies, serving for his comfort.

It seems that current pastors in many countries in the East (Middle East, India, Caucasus) and even in Europe no longer use the staff (the stick with the curved tip); just the rod. Perhaps, it’s because of more modern techniques of sheep rescue or because they are not going alone, but with one or two companions, who help to care for the flock.

• **Verse 5:** “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

Still following the reasoning about the sheep’s behavior, when they graze, they sometimes cut their snouts on some sharp stones hidden in the grass or hurt themselves with thorns. Therefore, at the end of the day, when they reach the sheepfold, the shepherd stands at the entrance and examines each sheep and, if there is any injury, applies balsamic oil that helps to heal it and prevents infection. Medicines were mixed with oil to put on wounds (for example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan). In addition, he carries a clay jar that keeps the water always fresh, and at night, after inspecting the sheep, he gives them to drink. From the sheep’s point of view, this may mean that when it arrives at the sheepfold it feels cared for by the shepherd, for he gives it its last meal before sleep and passes balsamic oil over its scratches. There, it feels safe from predators.

But, in this excerpt there is another important factor: the psalmist changes a little his view of God as the Shepherd who cares for him like a sheep of His flock and starts to speak of Him as a good host who receives his guest with joy. In the Middle East, a person’s custom of receiving a guest in his tent was done with great pleasure and courtesy. David here compares himself to a visitor in the House of God, enjoying His warm hospitality. Just as the shepherd poured balsamic oil on the wounds of his sheep, the host poured perfumed oil on the visitor’s head to bring comfort and relief from heat and dust (Ecc. 9: 8). The oil brings relief to dry skin. The guest also received a kiss on the cheek and had his feet washed (Gen. 18: 4-8; Lk. 7: 44-46). Washing the guest’s feet was to remove dust from the roads, a sign of cleanliness, comfort and hospitality, usually done by the lowest slaves. Even though he had few possessions or the convenience that currently exists in the West, the eastern host shared the best he had with his guest as a show of honor towards him. Therefore, David expresses his confidence in God by saying that He is that good host who prepares an abundant table for him as a way of honoring him before his enemies, who cannot take part in the banquet.

The head anointed with oil is a common biblical figure for abundance of joy (Isa. 61: 3; Ps. 45: 7). Likewise, the Lord relieves and consoles us with the anointing of His Spirit and with the joy of knowing that, as children of God, we always have a table of plenty and honor before those who have not yet received Him and, therefore, envy us and persecute us. Before the Lord’s Table we are restored, comforted, satiated and renewed in our joy; in the joy of belonging to Him and having His aid when necessary.

“My cup overflows” (Another possible translation: “My cup is well full”) symbolizes the abundant supply offered by the generous host. It also gives us the feeling that the drink will not be lacking in this meal, nor the friendly conversation nor laughter or words of encouragement for those who arrived tired from a long travel. This is how the Lord does with us through His word of life, which not only quenches our thirst, but makes us overflow with courage, strength and hope to continue our mission on earth. There in His tent, in His Tabernacle, we have free access and will always be welcomed when we need this refreshment (Heb. 4: 16) and spiritual strength. ‘Cup’ represents abundance or the vessel of our spirit, satiated by God’s spiritual blessings.

• **Verse 6:** “Surely goodness and mercy [NIV: love] shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.”

Goodness is one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5: 22), and it is through His goodness that men become aware of their sin and come to repentance (Rom. 2: 4: “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not

knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” – KJV). Goodness means: benevolence, indulgence, mercy, gentleness, to know how to make others happy, sweetness.

The bible also says that God is merciful and good even to the ungrateful and evil (Lk. 6: 35-36: “But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”) He has mercy on those whoever He chooses, and He hardens the heart of whomever he chooses (Rom. 9: 18), and it can be enjoyed by those who walk in His ways (Ps. 103: 17-18: “But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children; To such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them.”)

‘Mercy’ means indulgence, grace, compassion aroused by the misery of others. The Hebrew word is Hesedh or Chesedh (חסד – Strong #2617), which means mercy, loving kindness, steadfast love, grace, kindness, benevolence, beauty, favor, good deed, pity (Gen. 21: 23; Gen. 24: 12; 14; Gen. 24: 49; Ex. 20: 6; Ex. 34: 6-7; Num. 14: 18; Deut. 5: 10; Deut. 7: 9; 12; Josh. 2: 12; 14; Jdg. 8: 25; Ruth 1: 8; 1 Sam. 15: 6 etc.). Mercy is also a spiritual gift from God poured out on a person: “the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness – NRSV; “Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness” – KJV (Rom. 12: 8). Jesus said in the sermon on the mountain: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” This implies exercising mercy first to receive it from others.

David was sure that goodness and mercy would be part of his life. He received these gifts from God and, being faithful to Him, he also knew how to exercise them. So much so that he spared Saul’s life twice (1 Sam. 24: 11-12; 1 Sam. 26: 23-25), was kind to Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan (2 Sam. 9: 7) and received God’s forgiveness in the case of adultery with Bathsheba and the death of Uriah (2 Sam. 11: 4; 15; 24).

“Goodness and mercy shall follow me” reminds us of the Gospel verse in Mark 16 where Jesus said: “And these signs will accompany those who believe [KJV: ‘And these signs shall follow them that believe’]: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.” (Mk. 16: 17-18). This means that everyone who walks in the company of the Spirit of God carries His blessings with them, not only for themselves, but for those who need them.

“I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long” [NIV: I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever] – David had in mind the Tabernacle of the Lord that he knew, for the Temple had not yet been built, and that meant his desire to be in the company of God for all the days of his life and also in eternity. Even though he did not know salvation through Jesus Christ, David knew that there was a difference between the destiny of the righteous and the destiny of the wicked. Since David was sure to serve a God who was a perfect host (v. 5), “to dwell in the House of the Lord” meant having a good relationship with God as His honored guest (Ps. 15: 1-5). And he wanted to live forever by His side, in an eternal home (Jn. 14: 1-3).

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