

The Lord Is My Shepherd

by the Rev. Patrick A. Rose

*“He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.” (Psalm 23:2)*

The Twenty-third Psalm, our first reading from the Word, is very beautiful. It begins by saying these wonderful words: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

The Lord is said to be a shepherd. A shepherd is someone who looks after sheep. And, just as a shepherd looks after and watches over his flock, so the Lord looks after and watches over His people. The Lord takes care of you, just as a shepherd takes care of his sheep.

In the land of Canaan, in the days when the Old Testament was written, being a shepherd wasn't an easy job. There were wild animals who would come and try to catch and eat the sheep. There were lions, and bears and wolves. If the shepherd wasn't careful—if he didn't watch carefully, one of these animals could come and catch and eat one of his sheep. And so a shepherd had to stay outside, watching over his flock. During the daytime it could be very hot and dry. At nighttime, as the frost came, it could get very cold. Often a shepherd would get very little sleep. Jacob, who was a shepherd, described how hard it was by saying, “There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes” (Genesis 31:40). When a wild animal tried to come close, the shepherd would have to chase the animal away. He would take his sling and throw stones at the animal to scare it away. And if that didn't work, he might even have to fight the animal. When King David was a boy, he was a shepherd. And when a lion or a bear would come along and capture a little lamb, David would go up against the big animal, and fight to rescue the lamb (I Samuel 17:34-35).

And so a shepherd watches over his sheep and his lambs very carefully all the time, making sure they are safe. And if they are in danger, he fights to protect them. This is how the Lord looks after you. He watches over you during the day. And He watches over you at nighttime as well. He looks after you, so that if something dangerous comes close, He can protect you, just like a shepherd protects his flock.

But a shepherd also does something else for his sheep. He has to make sure they get enough food. When the sheep have eaten all the grass where they are grazing, he will lead them somewhere else—to another place where there is more grass to eat, and more water to drink. A shepherd always has to make sure that there is food for his sheep. This is the most important part of his job. If he accidentally lets a wild animal attack, one or two of the sheep might die. But if they run out of food, the whole flock will die of hunger. And so a shepherd is continually leading his flock from one place to another—from one field or meadow to another—always making sure that they have food to eat.

Now, just as a shepherd feeds his flock, so too the Lord feeds you. The food you eat is given to you by the Lord, isn't it? Of course, very often you might eat your food without thinking that it is the Lord who is feeding you. It is easy to forget that every time you eat something, the food you eat is from the Lord. It is something that He has given you. It is also something that He has

made, for it is the Lord who makes food grow in the fields. And so it is really the Lord who feeds you. It is the Lord who makes sure that you have food to eat, the food you need to give you energy and to help you grow big and strong and healthy. The Lord is your shepherd. Just as a shepherd would lead his sheep to food, so too, the Lord feeds you. This is why we say a blessing before meals. It is a way of thanking the Lord for being our Shepherd—for giving us food, for watching over us, and for protecting us.

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The teaching that the Lord is our Shepherd is a powerful one, and a comforting one. The relationship between the sheep and their shepherd involves a sense of trust and security. A sheep, as long as it follows the shepherd, has little to worry about. The shepherd himself takes care of things the sheep is unaware of, and things that the sheep could not take care of by itself. So too with us. There are myriads of things in the Lord's hands, things He does for us, things we are unaware of and things that are beyond our own power. He watches over us day and night. He protects us. And He provides us with food, food for our bodies and also food for our souls.

It is the pasturing or feeding of the soul or spirit that is spoken of in the Twenty-third Psalm: "He will make me to lie down in pastures of herb; He will lead me to the waters of rest; He will restore my soul." The pastures of herb and the waters of rest, in this literal translation, stand for knowledges and truths from the Word. These things are food, food for the soul, to which natural food corresponds. This is not mere metaphor. These things are not simply *like* food; they *are* food. To learn from and receive truth from the Word actually does nourish our spirits. Just because we cannot see our spirits with our natural eyes, and just because we cannot hold spiritual food in our natural hands, does not mean that this food is any less real.

It might seem as if the need for spiritual food is not as great or as urgent as the need for natural food. Our natural bodies would soon die without food. On the other hand, if we go for a long time without reading the Word or without learning any spiritual truth, life still seems to go on as usual. Our spirits don't appear to have died. Why not?

The answer to this lies partly in the fact that a person's spirit is immortal. It cannot die, even if it is starved for truth from the Word. Also, even without the Word, a person's spirit still receives some food. Everybody is always learning something, even if it is only worldly facts. Even worldly knowledge is, in one sense, food—food which helps the spirit survive. But it does not keep the spirit healthy. To acquire natural knowledge, without at the same time learning and absorbing spiritual truth, is not a healthy diet. Unknown to the person himself, his spirit is pining away. It is sickly and weak (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 6078).

The obvious remedy is for a person to make sure that he does nourish himself with the spiritual food which the Lord has provided. Somebody who does not regularly read the Word, and so does not regularly nourish his spirit, should know that he is indeed hurting himself. He is allowing his spirit to become sick and unhealthy. Such a person needs to take steps to correct this, and he can do so by making an effort to read and learn from the Word on a regular basis. We are all quite capable of doing this—if we want to. The Lord provides us with bountiful harvests of both natural and spiritual food. Neither of these harvests can benefit us, though, unless we eat.

Still, this is only part of the answer. Food from the Word is necessary for the health of our spirits. We should eat of this food. But the benefit of this food is limited if we have no appetite for it and if we find it indigestible. As we read in the Heavenly Doctrines, "...in order that memory-knowledges may yield healthful nourishment to the soul, *there must be in them life from the goods of truth*. If there is no life from this source, the memory-knowledges do indeed sustain the man's interior life, but only his natural life, and not his spiritual life" (*Arcana Coelestia* 6078:1, *emphasis added*).

Life from the goods of truth! This is what increases our appetite for the food in the Word—for truth and for doctrine. This is what increases the benefit we receive from reading and studying the Word. The good of truth is nothing other than the good that we come into when we obey the truths in the Word. This good flows in from the Lord and causes our souls to open up to receive the benefits of the spiritual harvest from the Word of God. If we receive this good by living a life according to the Lord's teachings, then the Lord can truly feed us. The words of the Twenty-third Psalm will be fulfilled in our very own lives. The Lord will restore our souls. Our deepest needs—the needs of our spirits—will be fulfilled: we shall not want, we will lie down in peace, and our souls will be at rest. To quote once more a literal translation of the Psalm, "Jehovah is my shepherd; I shall not want; He will make me to lie down in pastures of herb; He will lead me to the waters of rest; He will restore my soul."

Within the Word—the Word that we are to read, think about, and then obey—is all the nourishment that our spirits could ever need. This nourishment satisfies the deepest longings of the human heart, the deepest yearnings of the human spirit. When we lift up our hearts in thanks to the Lord for the harvest of the earth, we must also give thanks for the harvest of the spirit—the harvest of heaven—the truths of the Word and the Divine goodness that is within them.

We thank the Lord, our Shepherd, for watching over us, for protecting us, and for blessing us with the bountiful riches of His Holy Word.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 23; John 10:14-18, 24-30; *Arcana Coelestia* 6078:4-5

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