

The Lord, the Good Shepherd

by the Rev. Daniel W. Heinrichs

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake” (Psalm 23:1-3).

The twenty-third Psalm, in the celestial sense, is about the Lord while He was on earth. It is prophetic of the states which He would undergo here. The Divine Itself, called “the Father” in the New Testament, is represented in our text by the shepherd; and the assumed human is represented as a sheep of the flock.

The Lord, while in the world, was instructed in knowledges of good and truth from the Word. As He was instructed in the ordinary way, from without, He also received revelation from the Divine from within. This gave Him a full perception of the truth of the Word on every plane, even to the inmost. Because of this dual mode of learning, He had an inmost perception that He was led, and spiritually fed, by the Divine within. This is what is signified by feeding in green pastures and being led beside still waters.

He was also subjected to temptations from the hells—temptations of such severity and bitterness that the human mind cannot begin to conceive of them. He truly walked through the valley of the shadow of death. Though He fought alone in these temptations, the knowledge of His Divinity being temporarily obscured, yet he was sustained by Divine power. This is what is meant by the words: “Your rod and your staff, they comfort Me.” His final state of glorification, when the Human and the Divine were united into one, is expressed in the final words of the Psalm: “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

In the spiritual sense, our text treats of the New Heaven and the New Church which the Lord established at His Second Coming. The interior states of tranquility, confidence, protection and peace, which are to characterize the New Church and the New Heaven, are correspondentially pictured before our minds as a contented and trusting flock being led by their shepherd into peaceful meadows where there is an abundance of nourishing food and drink.

The picture which this psalm evokes in our minds is one of inmost tranquility—a state of being free from discord, fear and evil. This is the state into which the Lord, as the Good Shepherd, is seeking to lead his flock—His church on earth.

The Lord, in the gospel of John, declared Himself to be the Good Shepherd (10:11, 14). He represents Himself as a shepherd because He does for His church and those who constitute it, what a shepherd does for his flock. The people of the church are represented by sheep because of the nature of these animals, and because of the way they respond to their shepherd.

Sheep, by nature, are among the gentlest of animals. More than other animals, they require protection and guidance. No other animal is less prone to strife. They are animals which subordinate their individuality in order to harmonize together as one flock. When once they

know their shepherd, they completely trust in him and follow him willingly. In this representation we are able to see the qualities which those have who are interiorly of the Lord's church. Those who are truly of the church are patient, gentle and charitable in their relations with one another. They try not to give offense, and they do not easily take offense. They are not combative, but strive to eliminate those personality traits which cause disharmony and friction. They are willing to subordinate personal desires and private interests in order that they may become part of one harmonious whole. Lastly, they have a realization of their need for spiritual guidance and protection. They are, therefore, willing to be led by the Lord—the Good Shepherd of the flock.

In our text it is said of the shepherd: "He makes me to lie down in green pastures." We are told in the Heavenly Doctrine that when feeding and pasturing are spoken of in the Word, it signifies to be instructed in doctrine from the Word. For "when instruction or doctrine from the Word is spoken of in heaven, then in the world of spirits, where spiritual things appear naturally, there are represented to the sight meadows with green grass, herbs and flowers, with flocks therein" (AC 5201:4).

The shepherd's pasturing the flock in green meadows and leading beside still waters means that the Lord "teaches and leads to the truths and goods of heaven and the church" (PP). As sheep are nourished and sustained by feeding in green meadows, so our spiritual life is nourished and sustained by truths of doctrine from the Word and the goods of life they produce. The shepherd leads his flock to the pasture and guards and protects them while they graze. So the Lord provides His flock with spiritual nourishment. But the people of the church must, as of themselves, appropriate the goods and truths of the Word to themselves.

They must feed in the green pastures into which the Lord has led them, and while they are so doing, the Divine Shepherd will guard and protect them against attacks from the hells. While people read the Word, receive instruction from it, and are in the sphere of worship, they are protected by the Lord from infestations from the hells—the wild beasts which would scatter the flock and devour the sheep.

"He leads me beside still waters." Water, in general, corresponds to truth. But water is to be found in different conditions. The bitter waters of Marah, which the Israelites came upon in the wilderness, stand for truth which is undelightful—it is undelightful because there is no good in the person to receive it and respond to it. So when a branch of a tree—wood—was thrown in, it became sweet: when there is good in the heart, truth is received with delight.

There are raging waters, as in the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee, which threatened the disciples and their ship with disaster. Raging and turbulent water corresponds to truths perverted or falsified, which threaten to engulf the mind of a person undergoing temptation. These falsities can be dispersed and brought under control only by Divine power. So it was the Lord who calmed the storm.

There are stagnant waters which provide a breeding place for various kinds of pests, such as mosquitoes. These waters, again, are falsities—falsities which hatch forth evils of life.

But the Lord, as our Shepherd, leads us beside still waters. These waters correspond to the states of peace into which one comes on applying the truths of doctrine to the uses of life. When we live a life of charity and use according to principles of doctrine, then we enter into a state of serenity and peace, represented by deep, still waters.

“He restores my soul.” These words describe the state of a person who has been spiritually nourished with the truths of doctrine which have been applied to the uses of life. We, in our natural state, are inclined to think of truths as mere abstract teachings or statements, but in fact they are, spiritually, living and substantial. They are living forms of love, or good, which is the only real substance in creation. When a person receives them into the will and applies them to life, they are appropriated by the person they become part of one’s spiritual organism; they restore one’s soul, giving increased spiritual vigor and vitality.

In this state of increased spiritual life and vitality, we need have no fear of the hells, for the Lord is with us—His love is in our will and His truth forms our understanding. Thus protected, we can walk safely through the valley of the shadow of death. We may face spiritual temptations—temptations which every regenerating person must undergo in order to be purified from the lusts of evil. We may face these temptations secure in the knowledge that the Lord will sustain us and conquer for us by His Divine power. He will do this provided we trust in Him and remain firm in our principles. His rod and His staff, they comfort us.

While we live in this world, the state represented in our text is not a permanent one - not even with a person who is well along in the process of regeneration. One who is of the church may experience these states of security, peace and unanimity in states of worship, at assemblies of the church where all are united in a common sphere of ‘worship and dedication, when partaking of the Holy Supper, or after states of temptation in which the person has conquered. In these states one who is of the church is given a foretaste of the state of life into which the person is being led by the Lord. As one steadfastly follows the Good Shepherd in paths of righteousness, these heavenly states become more frequent and of longer duration.

There is one quality above all others which we must have if we wish to be spiritually one of the flock. That quality is innocence. Innocence, as defined in the Writings, is a willingness to be led by the Lord and not by self. Sheep are correspondential forms of innocence, for they, above all other animals, are willing to be led. They have implicit trust in their shepherd. So do they of the spiritual fold have complete trust in the Divine Shepherd. They dwell secure in the knowledge that if they follow implicitly the leading of His Divine providence, all will be well.

It is this quality of innocence that introduces a spirit of unanimity into the church. As every one individually strives to forsake his own selfish interests and follow the Shepherd, the flock is brought into a sphere of unanimity, for there is one guiding will which they all seek to follow.

While the Lord is the Shepherd in the supreme sense, this term also applies to the function of the priesthood. We are told that a shepherd is one who teaches truth and thereby leads to the good of life (see AC 343, 3787, 6044). In recognition of this relationship between a priest and his congregation, people have applied the term “pastor,” which is the Latin word for shepherd, to a priest who ministers to a congregation.

The Lord, as the supreme Pastor, has adjoined His office of salvation of souls to men who are called priests, or pastors. The use is not in the person but is adjoined to him. Therefore it is the use of the priesthood or pastors which is to be honored, and the man on account of the use which is adjoined to him, and which he serves.

It is the pastor's use, or office, to teach people truth from the Word so that they may be led by it to the good of life. The pastor leads his flock in his instruction by indicating the uses which are to be done and the obstacles which are to be shunned. The perfection of those uses depends on the willingness and unanimity with which the members of the church follow the leading of their pastors.

The pastors are not to compel or coerce the flock, but lead, gently but firmly. It is for the flock to follow. Those who receive instruction and are led by it to good are of the flock, we are told. But one who does not learn and is not led is not of the flock (see AC 3453). We see from this that the well-being of each member, and the strength and integrity of the whole, depend on the willingness of every member of the flock to feed in the green pastures of doctrine and be led by their pastors to the still waters.

As we individually follow the leading of our Divine Pastor—the Good Shepherd—we will come into the unanimity and harmony of a true flock. We will be drawn together by the love of a common purpose and united by the bonds of mutual love, which is charity. Then shall the Lord “feed His flock like a shepherd.” “He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40: 11). In that day “there shall be one fold, and one Shepherd” (John 10: 16). *Amen.*

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11, John 10:1-16; *Arcana Coelestia* 343

Arcana Coelestia 343

That a “shepherd of the flock” is one who exercises the good of charity must be obvious to everyone, for this is a familiar figure in the Word of both the Old and New Testaments. He who leads and teaches is called a “shepherd,” and those who are led and taught are called the “flock.” He who does not lead to the good of charity and teach it is not a true shepherd; and he who is not led to good, and does not learn what is good, is not of the flock. It is scarcely necessary to confirm this signification of “shepherd” and “flock” by quotations from the Word, but the following passages may be cited:

In Isaiah: “The Lord shall give the rain of thy seed, wherewith thou sowest the ground, and bread of the increase of the ground; in that day shall He feed thy cattle in a broad meadow” (30:23), where “bread of the increase of the ground” denotes charity.

Again: “The Lord Jehovih shall feed His flock like a shepherd; He shall gather the lambs into His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40:11).

In David: “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; Thou that sittest on the cherubim, shine forth” (Psalm 80:1).

In Jeremiah: “I have likened the daughter of Zion to a comely and delicate woman; the shepherds and their flocks shall come unto her, they shall pitch tents near her round about, they shall feed every one his own space” (6:2, 3).

In Ezekiel: “Thus saith the Lord Jehovih, I will multiply them as a flock of man, a hallowed flock, as the flock of Jerusalem in her appointed times; so shall the waste cities be filled with the flock of man” (34:37, 38).

In Isaiah: “All the flocks of Arabia shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister unto thee” (60:7).

They who lead the flock to the good of charity are they who “gather the flock”; but they who do not lead them to the good of charity “scatter the flock”; for all gathering together and union are of charity, and all dispersion and disunion are from want of charity.