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Psalm 23 v 1-6

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When we are faced with hard battles, or when life overwhelms us, we never have to run away in fear because “the Lord is my shepherd” and “I will fear no evil” (Psalm 23:1, 4). 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. 4 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. 5 Thou preparatest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 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. Learn How Jesus Can Strengthen You Free Bible Study “I love the Holy Bible. I love reading in the New Testament about Jesus Christ and His earthly ministry.” Psalm 23 A Psalm of David.1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;he leads me beside still waters;3 He restores my soul.He leads me in right pathsfor his name’s sake.4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,I fear no evil;for you are with me;your rod and your staff—they comfort me.5 You prepare a table before mein the presence of my enemies;you anoint my head with oilymy cup overflows.6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow meall the days of my life,and I shall dwell in the house of the Lordmy whole life long. Of all of the biblical psalms, perhaps Psalm 23 is the most familiar. I memorized this psalm as a child of approximately three years of age. Its words now move upon my lips with a sort of muscle memory born of much silent repetition, recalling me to the truth of God’s loving providential concern for me. Words that are so deeply sedimented in our consciousness are easily dulled to us on account of such familiarity, yet these words can still stir, revealing surprising truths that had hitherto crossed the threshold of our mouths unrecognized. John Goldingay suggests the possibility that the opening line of the psalm, rather than being principally a statement about YHWH, is a claim that the psalmist is making about himself: ‘My shepherd is YHWH.’[1] Read in such a manner, the psalm comes into sharper relief as a powerful declaration of the speaker’s own confidence and trust in YHWH—it responds to the implicit question ‘who is your shepherd?’ In contrast to the various other gods, rulers, or resources that other people may trust to shepherd them through life’s dangerous times, the psalmist’s trust is in YHWH. Within the contemporary English culture to which I belong, shepherding typically summons peaceful and bucolic scenes of rolling hills, dry stone walls, and beautiful Lakeland countryside to our minds. Such cultural impressions of shepherding sharply contrast with scriptural representations of it. In Scripture, the shepherd is a figure who is associated with authority and violence, and the task of shepherding is one beset by dangers on every side. The shepherd must drive away or kill predators, bandits, thieves, and navigate hostile terrain. The Good Shepherd suffers violent death for the sake of his flock. Shepherding was often strongly associated with rulers and the gods. As Goldingay observes: ‘The shepherd is the sovereign lord, the sheep is the vassal; it is not a cozy image.’[2] The picture of YHWH that the psalm suggests is one of ‘fierce tenderness,’ a God who powerfully protects us from assaults and provides for us in our dependency.[3] Within the opening verses the psalmist speaks of YHWH’s rich and bountiful provision, painting an idyllic scene of verdant pasturage and restful waters. The psalmist is revived through YHWH’s care. He is led in ‘faithful paths’, by a divine shepherd whose complete commitment to the psalmist’s well-being is grounded in his very word and character—‘for his name’s sake.’[4] As the psalm moves away from the peaceful scenes with which it opens, the psalmist speaks of his absolute assurance of safety even in a valley overshadowed by death, a place where destruction and the grave are close at hand. YHWH’s presence with him saves him from fear. In particular, the psalmist’s comfort is drawn from the shepherd’s rod for subduing or driving away his flock’s enemies and the shepherd’s staff, which the shepherd would both lean upon and use as a means for keeping the sheep in line. Once again, these images should not be sentimentalized. The psalmist is not speaking merely of an emotionally registered nearness, but of his comfort in knowing that YHWH is actively present in his situation, guiding him and frustrating all of the threats of those who seek his destruction. The concluding verses of the psalm return to the theme of YHWH’s provision, albeit now with the psalmist’s enemies included within the scene. YHWH affords rich succor to the psalmist in his extremities. Even when he is surrounded on all sides by his enemies in battle, YHWH ‘arrays’ a feasting table for the psalmist. Anointed with oil and having wine poured into his cup until it runs over, the psalmist enjoys the bounty, prosperity, enlargement, and rest associated with peace even in the midst of war. Rather than being pursued by his enemies, it will be YHWH’s goodness and mercy that never cease to follow hot on his heels. YHWH’s temple and presence will be the place he knows as his home, as an honoured recipient of YHWH’s hospitality, liberality, and protection. The image of shepherding plays an important role in Israel’s history and sense of identity. The patriarchs were shepherds. Israel was led like a flock through the wilderness in the Exodus, with the shepherd Moses striking their enemies with the rod (cf. Isaiah 63:11-13). The great king David, the psalmist to whom this psalm is attributed, was called from looking after sheep to become the leader of YHWH’s people (1 Chronicles 17:7). And here we encounter another dimension of the psalm that is often neglected: this is a psalm attributed to the anointed leader of YHWH’s people. While we are (rightly) accustomed to singing or praying this psalm as a private expression of God’s goodness and our trust in him as individuals, there is a political dimension to it that should not be missed. The psalmist to whom the psalm is attributed is not a private individual, but the representative of his people, blessed with a kingdom by YHWH, yet assaulted by enemy forces seeking his destruction. 2 Chronicles 7:6 refers to David giving praise by the hand of the Levites, singing, as it were, the ‘King’s Song.’[5] In the Old Testament, the ruler of the people often led the nation in its worship on important occasions. In psalms associated with the king, the people are invited to join in the worship of the representative in whom they are summed up, to locate themselves within the life of their leader, and to find his experience resonating with their own. The fact that the king, himself regarded as the shepherd of his people, would look to YHWH in his fraught military and political situation as a weak sheep looks to its shepherd is a striking image of dependency. Comparing this with our own political leaders, who typically project a public image of confident assurance in their own sufficiency before the struggles and dangers facing our nations, the contrast is noteworthy. Although some might be inclined to restrict the applicability of a theology of God as the shepherd of a nation and its rulers to the sui generis situation of Israel under the old covenant, this theological image is taken up in the New Testament and applied more broadly. In Matthew 25:32, Jesus gathers and divides the nations like a shepherd separating sheep from goats. In Revelation 2:26-27, Christ promises his faithful people that they will be given to share in his role of shepherding the nations with a rod of iron. Appropriately leery though we may be of Constantinian excesses, it seems to me that, provided that necessary caution were taken, the New Testament writers would have regarded it as amply fitting for Gentile rulers to utter the words of such a psalm as the representatives of their peoples. Such public and political affirmations of rulers’ reliance upon and submission to the shepherding hand of God would have been the appropriate response to the Lordship of Christ, and of their understanding of their passing role relative to his eternal kingdom. As Oliver O’Donovan observes, such obedience of the nations can be a sign that God has blessed the Church’s mission.[6] Whether or not our rulers or nations publicly acknowledge or submit to the rule of Christ, this psalm offers us an enlightening perspective upon them, alerting us to their vulnerability and weakness, as sheep in need of a shepherd. Our very halls of power should be recognized as sites of radical dependency. When we pray for our nations and rulers, we are often insufficiently alert to this. We can pray for them as powerful agents, while failing to reflect upon their profound vulnerability and reliance upon divine providence and protection. [1] John Goldingay, Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006) 348.[2] Ibid.[3] Ibid. 354[4] Ibid. 350[5] Peter Leithart, From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003) 112.[6] Oliver O’Donovan, The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 195.

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