

THE SHEPHERD'S PSALM

Sermons on the 23rd Psalm

By D. E. Hill

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"The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths
of righteousness for His name's sake.
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. Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest
my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life: and I will dwell
in the house of the Lord forever."

Psalm 23:1-6

INTRODUCTION

The 23rd Psalm is a jewel among jewels-an oasis in a wilderness journey. In this Psalm we find that the redeemed can experience God's abundance in the many needs of life. As the Holy Spirit reveals this Psalm to our hearts, we find a sure and positive remedy for every situation we may face in life. What contentment can be ours as we learn to nestle to God's loving and all-powerful heart. The Holy Spirit takes this Psalm and speaks to all who will hear and trust, reaching the depth of the heart, inspiring the brooding spirit, and bringing encouragement and comfort in every time of need. It is a light to our pathway and a lamp to our feet, driving away doubt and confusion and enabling us to see and know God as the gracious, loving, merciful, and tender Shepherd that He is.

Even after reading and studying this Psalm many times, it is always new and fresh. One man told how he had quoted the 23rd Psalm daily for over twenty years yet didn't understand the half of it. He said, "I am but grasping its infinite meaning. Death will come to me with the task unfinished." Even a young child can learn to recite the 23rd Psalm, but the longest lifetime will never exhaust its depths.

The 23rd Psalm has been referred to as the "nightingale of the Psalms." The nightingale sits in the dark and shadowy places and sings. The song of the Lord is like that. It is in the darkest and most difficult times of our lives that the sweetest songs come forth. Circumstances do not necessarily have to be promising. The most precious, comforting, and joy-filled statements of the Bible resulted from circumstances that the majority of God's people today want nothing to do with.

Unbelief puts circumstances between the soul and God, while faith puts God between the soul and circumstances. When the twelve spies went over into the land of Canaan, two came back magnifying God while the others came back magnifying the giants. What do we see? What is shining on the retina of our hearts and lives? Is it God's ability or our circumstances? We talk about the fenced cities, the rugged, deep pathways and the dark valleys when, we should concentrate on and speak of the love, mercy, grace, wisdom and purpose of God. We will never know what God can be to us until our lives have gone deeply into the shadows, for that is where we find Him. Loved ones, friends, and experiences can comfort most people but we will come to times, if we go with God, where only He can comfort us. And it will be the sweetest of experiences when it comes.

What a precious and comforting portion of the Bible this Psalm is for the needy soul. To truly embrace it will take fret and confusion from the heart, because here is absolute security. Its repose is an unutterable thing, and to this day all who have fully sought its Shepherd have found encouragement and a resourcefulness that has filled them with power and strengthened them in life.

Since man's existence the Lord has comforted grief-stricken people, erasing doubts, putting His rainbow on clouds of tears, and pouring balm into the wounds of the human race as they came to Him. Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever." He doesn't need to change because He is already everything that eternity can produce - He is God. This Psalm has been presented to millions of

hearts and for 3000 years it has been the same to every nation and people. It reveals an ever-living and ever-present Shepherd who keeps His sheep through all the changing and trying roads and experiences that come their way. How safe and blessed are they who allow the Lord to be their Shepherd and know Him as more than just their Saviour.

Some have thought that the 23rd Psalm was written in David's youth, but the strength, maturity and depth of it are not compatible with youth. It reveals a life of spiritual maturity - one whose varied experiences in life fully tested the Shepherd's grace, love, mercy and power. It expresses the gratitude of the redeemed child of God who has learned the meaning of God to his life. If ever a man tested God in life, it was David. What kind of a God did he find? David had embraced deep sufferings and tasted many bitter cups, yet as he blended such things with a life full of the grace of God, it produced a song that will glorify the Shepherd of the Bible forever.

There is a story of a poor Persian shepherd boy who rose to be the supreme ruler of his nation. Wealth and power came to him, but lest he become exalted with his current position in his great castle, he had a room built exactly like the little dirt-floored hut in which he was raised. He put the same kind of furnishings in it and often he would go there to sit and meditate upon who he was. David had a chamber in his heart where he often visited. He never forgot the pit from which God had taken him. He never forgot that God had raised him from the sheepfold to make him king of Israel. That chamber in David's heart was where he retired to remember and seek and worship God who had brought him from such a lowly place and given him the best that there was.

One of the special things about this Psalm is its power to heal and bring peace and joy. It dwells so little on man and so much on God. Every verse describes who and what Christ is, what He does and what He wants to be to His people. Here are everlasting principles for human thought and conduct. Here are promises rich and more than sufficient for life, whatever its needs and longings-promises that are abundantly more than enough to enable us to abide in Him as the Shepherd here and the Bridegroom yonder.

ASSURANCE

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Ps. 23:1

The heart of this first verse is assurance. In examining the thought of assurance we find it is essential to any venture. Even in the natural, men and women must have assurance in order to succeed. One of the devil's biggest tricks is to undermine our confidence in God. Most preaching done today concentrates on putting confidence in our own abilities, but God told us to cease from man whose breath is in his nostrils - that means us.

One approach to success says we must do it ourselves. That is like telling a man who is stuck up to his neck in a mud hole to grab himself by the bootstraps and lift himself out - it is an impossibility.

It doesn't matter who we are or what we do or don't do. Micah 6:6 says, "Wherefore shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God?" To be the child God wants us to be, by faith we must take from Him the Christ that He offers us - the Christ who has been made to us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. (I Cor. 1:30) This is what pleases Him.

Anyone who thinks they can succeed without God is bound for failure. If we try to come another way, who can say when we have prayed enough, wept enough, done or not done enough or sacrificed enough to gain God's pity and earn His gifts - such never brings assurance.

The second approach to success is the one of the Apostle Paul. Naturally speaking, Paul had everything - every aristocracy of the flesh, everything that most men aspire to and long to have.

But when it came to winning Christ, he said, "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." (Phil. 3:8-9) God enables His people to approach life from a perfect base. Paul not only was persuaded that the good work God had begun in us, He would perform, but that the humble and firm sense of present and future acceptance with God in His Son Jesus Christ, is necessary if we are to accomplish what God would have us accomplish.

The truth on which the Bible bases success is that God is for us, with us and in us. This describes our salvation. The Bible explains the motive, meaning and doctrine of salvation. The motive of the Bible is that with God being for us, all things have to work together for our good. (Rom. 8:28) The meaning is that God being with us, His providence is ever ready to lead us to the right place. Psalm 107:4-7 says, "They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty their soul

fainted in them. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. And He led them forth by the right way." He never leads us the wrong way. The doctrine of salvation is that the indwelling God is our salvation; thus we have God's favor, His presence and His indwelling.

The Old Testament is God for us; the Gospels show God with us; the Epistles show God in us.

From Adam's fall to Christ's prophecy, God's presence kept the truth of the living God in the hearts of men and women. As to what the precise nature of the intercourse was between God and Adam before the fall nobody can say. Adam heard a voice but did he see a form? How did Noah receive the instructions to build the ark that kept him and his family safe in the flood waters? How did Abram hear the instructions to get up and leave his father's house and go into a land that God would show him? How did God speak and talk to Moses in the burning bush? Was there a form or not? Hebrews tells us of God in sundry times speaking to the prophets in visions and dreams. Moses and Aaron, we read, saw the God of Israel. "And there was under his feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in its clearness." (Ex. 24:10) When Israel came out of Egypt a cloud guided them by day and a pillar of fire by night.

"My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." (Ex. 33:14) What a marvel! How could they do it? How could they go through the Red Sea and overthrow the tyrant Pharaoh and his hosts? How could they survive the wilderness? How could they go through the flooding Jordan? How could they cast down cities and defeat giants? "My presence shall go with thee." God took care of them because they were His charge and possession - they belonged to Him. He purchased us, created us and redeemed us. Do we realize how valuable we are to God? He loved us so much that on the cross He gave everything He had for us - the very life of His only son. After all that, He wants our success and our best. He wants us to rule and reign with His Son and He is sworn to be our Shepherd if we will only trust Him.

The one promise by which God ever strengthened His people, whether it was the patriarchs or the prophets, the kings or just the ordinary person, was His distinct and divine presence. To Isaac He said, "I will be with thee"; to Jacob, "Behold, I am with thee"; to Moses, "Certainly I will be with thee." He said to Jeremiah, "I am with thee to deliver thee." And it was David's boast that "...when I awake I am still with thee." If we don't know God's presence it is because we don't choose to know His presence. If we ignore Him, we may think He isn't there, but He never leaves nor forsakes us. "What shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:35) We will never know the sweet goodness of God and the fellowship of heaven until our heart of hearts embraces His love. The truth of the Gospel is this - He is mine.

When Christ came for that brief period of time and lived among men, He was God manifest in the flesh. By His words before His resurrection and His acts after His resurrection, He prepared the church for His absence. John 14:27 says, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." And John 14:16 says, "And, I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever." Jesus was telling His disciples that He must go away so the Holy Spirit could come. He said His going away would be their gain and through the Holy Spirit He would still be with them. If we want Jesus Christ to show us what He wants to be to our lives, we must draw nigh to Him.

What is God's relationship to man? What does He want to be to man? Light is fully shed on this relationship throughout the Bible. Paul said, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given ..." (Eph. 3:8). There is never a limit to anything God can do. When Paul set forth that glorious panorama of God's purpose in our lives, he said, "Now unto Him that is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, above all we ask or think of Him according to the power that worketh within us." (Eph. 3:20)

As glorious as all this is, it can be summed up in two short phrases: God is reconciled for man is redeemed; and, be reconciled. God is reconciled to us whether we are reconciled to Him or not.

When Jesus died, His death was not just for some sins and some people, but He, by the grace of God, tasted death for every man. God is not willing that any should perish but all must come to repentance. We must come God's way and take Him as He is. Thus, man is redeemed and in that redemption he can be reconciled because his sin has been expiated at an infinite cost. That is the only way God can free us. It is not because we are good or because of baptism, good prayers, citizenship, alms, etc. He can only set us free because His Son Jesus Christ died for us.

We must recognize, however, that there is a barrier between God and man, but not on God's part. While God cannot look on sin with the least degree of allowance, His longing is to pardon it. His purpose is to put it away and He will. He proclaims by every means possible that He loves us and has made a way for us. We can come to Him, but only in the name of Jesus. We are accepted in The Beloved. There is only one redemption for our lives - Jesus Christ. It is finished, and that is the base with which we have to start with God. We will never go very far with Him until we have that complete assurance that He is for us, that He has dedicated Himself to us and to our lives, and that He wants to see the fruit of our lives more than we do.

Until we accept this, we can never really know the Shepherd.

The only thing keeping anyone from the Lord is their refusal to accept His pardon. He has nothing but good will toward us. Two things bring us to a refusal. First, the inability to accept Christ's pardon exactly as He describes it. God's forgiveness is such a marvelous thing in history and so universal in its application. It is unspeakable in its blessedness and so utterly unlike and beyond anything man can imagine or invent, that many denounce it as an insult to divine holiness as the Pharisees did. Secondly, others think it a presumptuous thing and too good to be true.

Thus, some refuse to accept salvation as a free and unmerited gift. They are unwilling to be redeemed so cheaply, believing they have to do or be something for God to save them. Others refuse God's salvation because they feel unworthy. Yes, we all are unworthy, yet Jesus died for the human race and His forgiveness is to whosoever will.

How wonderful to think that we are accepted by God in the person of His dear son. This is a doctrine feared and hated even by many of God's precious people and yet it is so essential to our standing with God and our relationship to Him. It is the basis of true happiness and holiness as well as usefulness. Many things are being done religiously today that are nothing but wood, hay and stubble. (I Cor. 3:12) "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it." (Ps. 127:1) We need God's word as the foundation of our lives. We may regard such with contempt and dislike, with timidity and thankfulness, or we may simply ignore it as folly and denounce it as fanaticism. However, no one can be completely honest and not recognize and acknowledge the countless passages of scripture which both express and imply the absolute security of the believer. The legalist says that forgiveness cannot be so cheaply given and that Christians must walk all the days of their lives in the shadow of the cross - possibly at the end they might receive mercy.

It isn't our idea of what God ought to be, but His own account of what He says He is that matters.

Our alienation and distrust only saddens and weakens our souls, while confidence and esteem brace and enable us. Those who unhesitatingly and joyfully accept the Word of God as a fact find it to be the mainspring of obedience and service. It doesn't matter how strong we are or what day we keep or what food we eat or how we dress. Good deeds are not the basis of our security, but rather what God says He is willing to be to us. He states and we listen; He promises and we believe.

Abraham could have had Isaac long before he did if he would have believed God. He was just like us though, and it took years for God to strip him down. Abraham and Sarah were getting old, and since Sarah was obviously unfruitful and Abraham's ability to be fruitful would soon be gone, they decided to take matters into their own hands, and Abraham took Hagar to wife. That union only produced trouble and it still exists today as we see the Mediterranean and what is going on in that area. It is Abraham's offspring - one Isaac and one Ishmael; one Jacob and one Esau.

Only after frustration and disappointment did Abraham finally come to the end of himself and he was circumcised - God had to cut away his strength. Imagine circumcising a 99-year-old man.

How much of a battle could he have fought the next day? While Abraham rested in his tent in the heat of the day, God came to him concerning His promise of a son. When Sarah heard that she would bear a son, she laughed. The Lord asked, "Is anything hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14) It was God's strength and not Abraham's that made it possible for Isaac to be born.

The 23rd Psalm is the Old Testament doctrine on the subject of assurance. The New Testament speaks of three kinds of assurance: The full assurance of understanding, the full assurance of faith, and the full assurance of hope. In the full assurance of understanding we find the soul's discovery of God. The full assurance of faith is the understanding of God's personal relationship to us. The full assurance of understanding is brought about by the full assurance of faith which gives us the full assurance of hope to the end.

THE SHEPHERD

The Bible is filled with the thought of our shepherd. Jacob on his deathbed blessed Joseph saying, "Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well whose branches run over the wall. The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him; but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob; from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel." (Gen. 49:22-24) In Psalm 80:1, Asaph said, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel." In Hebrews, Paul said God was the Great Shepherd. Peter called Him the Chief Shepherd and the Bishop and the Shepherd of the Soul.

Men have many different conceptions of God. Some seek Him through Hinduism, and some Buddhism, as well as many other religions which do not represent Him in any way whatsoever. So many of God's people

have the wrong impression of Him. They see God as the great big eye following them around in judgment, rather than seeing Him as the Shepherd of Love. It was God's love that brought us to salvation, not His power. "The Lord is my Shepherd" and so much more, but if we see Him only as a judge, then there is no hope for us."

To think of a shepherd is to think of knowledge and protection and provision. In our country sheep are ruled by fear rather than love as the shepherd drives them. The Oriental shepherd, however, leads his sheep and shows the way. When the shepherd protects his sheep it is often at a great risk to himself. Unlike the hireling, the shepherd knows and protects his sheep not merely because they are valuable to Him, but because He loves them. Isaiah said, "He shall 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." (Isa. 40:11) We can never fully know how God loves us. To know the Oriental shepherd is to realize a bond is formed with his sheep as they learn that all of their needs are met by him. Paul said, "But my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:19)

The Shepherd protects His sheep, not by isolating them from danger, but by keeping them through the fires and the floods. God kept Daniel in the lions' den and He kept the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. God will never be able to reveal Himself to us until He puts us in pressure places. He doesn't raise His children in a hothouse. He protects them, not by hiding them away from temptation and danger, but by personally making them secure in the changes and the chances of life. To keep us from the discipline of trial and sorrow by which we are trained for the throne would rob us of His purpose in our lives and the glory that He wants to share with us.

The Shepherd loves His sheep with all the strength of the Godhead yet with all the sympathy of man. He knows our frame because He lived in one for thirty-three years. He slept, He wept, His heart broke, they pierced His body and crowned His head with thorns, just like they might do to our bodies, but Jesus was conceived without sin. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." (II Cor. 5:21) Just as surely as God made Him to be sin for us, He in turn took that righteousness of Christ and put it on the believer. Man needed mercy and power and forgiveness and God was all of those things.

There was a great gulf between God and man and only one thing could bridge it - God so loved. His love reached out and out and out until the bridge and the chasm were crossed. Now He can be longsuffering, gentle and good to us. He can take a beggar from the dunghill and set him on the throne of a prince. He told Paul that His strength was made perfect in Paul's weakness.

Several times throughout the Bible we are told to be strong and of good courage, but even that strength comes from the Lord.

I SHALL NOT WANT

God loved us so much that He gave us His only son and in so doing, gave everything He had. We are complete in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Him. (Col. 2:9) If we knew we had a mine which contained the mother lode, we would be foolish not to work it. Romans 8:17 states, "if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together with him."

Paul said, "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

(Phil. 4:19) In his letter to the Ephesians he said, "The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints." (Eph. 1:18) The inheritance of the saints - think of the exceeding greatness of His power to us. He said all things were ours, and it is our duty to believe it. The Bible says that without faith it is impossible to please God. No money can buy His favor, no suffering can merit it, no repentance can ever procure it and no holiness can produce it. The only thing we can ever do, and this too has to be done by the grace of God, is to enlarge the receptive faculty of our souls to receive His salvation.

A believer can know what God is in Himself, but we also need to know what He is and what He can be in our own personal lives. We need to apply all that God is to our problems and take Him for our righteousness and wisdom. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and up-braideth not; and it shall be given him." (James 1:5) Instead of listening to others tell us that taking God is not enough, we need to be like Job who said, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee." (Job 42:5) Job saw God for himself. He repented in dust and ashes and knew that without God he was nothing. Christ is the vine and we are the branches. We can bear nothing by ourselves but with Him we can bear anything. The Psalmist said, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me? I

will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord." (Ps. 116:13) The only way we can glorify the Lord is to take more and more of Him.

It is no wonder David followed "The Lord is my shepherd", with "I shall not want." It didn't matter what came to him because the Lord was his Shepherd. Nothing could keep David from what God wanted him to have. When we determine to have something other than God's will in our lives, it will only bring leanness to our souls.

When God gave us Jesus He gave us everything. "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made." (John 1:3) Christ is the sum and substance of everything. Paul, understanding this, said "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32) It is the grace of God which allows us to accept His love and lay hold of the provision, "He is able to make all grace abound towards you that ye always having all sufficiency may abound to every good work." (II Cor. 11:9) Whatever the need, God can and will fulfill it, for He is the almighty God. We need to be willing to receive, just as He is willing to give. The only thing He really wants from us is our hearts for that is what He died for. To allow the Lord to possess our hearts is to let Him fill us with the fullness of God. Only then will we know the love of God that passes understanding - that is what motivates the child of God.

Christ is the Shepherd to all who want Him, and He is the only one who can meet every need of life. The angel's message on that night long ago in Bethlehem was "...behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11-12) The angel didn't announce the Ten Commandments or a set of rules to follow, but a warm, human, loving and tender Jesus - the Saviour. In that Saviour is everything God had and everything we are or can be or ever will be. Everything God has is in His son.

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." Ps. 23:2

What is meant by divine providence? Is it foresight? Is it government? Is it the interruption of order or is it a part of the order that it is supposed to interrupt? Where does providence begin?

Where does it end? What does it include and what does it exclude? Is it for individuals or just nations? Does it work on us irresistibly or are we free to go our way if we so choose? While many questions may be considered when thinking about divine providence, the underlying question is: What is God willing to be in our daily lives? Is He really interested in our downsettings, our uprisings and our thoughts afar? If we take the wings of the morning and fly to the uttermost parts of the earth, will He be there? Divine providence is simply the acting out of God's divine will.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters." Here we find the fountain of divine providence. It is not blind fate but a living and personal Shepherd who holds our world together. He is the king of everything and everything is in His control.

To look on divine providence in the light of divine sovereignty is to know God as He is instead of being afraid of Him, yet many believers are afraid of His sovereignty and draw back. If they don't want God to have His way, it is because of an ignorance of His nature and His purpose for their lives.

Time after time people determine never to forgive God when tragedy comes. It is a pitiful thing to see all those precious babies dying over in Africa, but God is being merciful. He is a saviour whose sovereignty is simply the exercise of His mercy. If those babies were raised to be Communists, God would have to kill them forever. We need to look beneath what God allows.

Psalm 25:10 says, "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies." To keep God's covenant is to have faith in what He says.

God is going to have His way. He does not consult with man about how things should be done. He didn't do that with Moses or David or Paul. In fact, when Paul sought Him three times about his affliction, God told him that He had a purpose in Paul's life and knew what was best. God easily could have removed Paul's thorn in the flesh, but He knew it was needful to accomplish His purpose in Paul's life. It is in our weakness that God's strength is made perfect. However, this in no way limits our freedom of choice. If this were true, it would take away any responsibility that is ours. This will is the mainspring of all Godly zeal - His will. To have a will without character can be a terrible thing. Stalin and Hitler each had a will and millions suffered and died. Our Shepherd, however, is not willing that any should perish. His will is backed by love and gentleness - He is love. He would have all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. The choice is ours - we can choose not to be saved and we can choose not to know the truth. But, in order to receive that joint inheritance with Christ, we must learn to receive and trust God's will, to love it, to do it, and if

necessary, to suffer with it.

This brings us to the divine result of divine providence: green pastures and still waters. In England it is amazing how green the fields are in the wintertime. One can see sheep out in luscious green pastures where they can eat their fill and browse close by deep pools of refreshing water. This pictures the abundance of God. Sometimes, however, the paths will lead to barren rocks and searing sands. This was true in Joseph's life. The purpose of God did not fail because of Joseph's imprisonments, but God had to put Joseph through a few lessons before He could put him on the throne. If God had exalted Joseph the day after his brothers threw him in the cistern, he would probably have had them thrown in a dungeon when they came to him. After years of training, however, he said, "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good." (Gen. 50:20) God is getting us ready for a throne to rule and reign with Christ. If we miss out, it is nobody's fault but our own.

Our greatest victory is to stay within divine boundaries and trust our Shepherd in the land, moving only when He says move. "And they shall eat up thine harvest, and thy bread ... they shall eat up thy flocks and thine herds ... Nevertheless in those days, saith the Lord, I will not make a full end with you." (Jer. 5:17-18) His love will not lead us where His grace cannot keep us. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28)

We can walk away from God anytime we choose, if that is our will - He has no prison walls around us. But to leave the House of Bread, as Naomi did, will bring bitterness. We must realize the soul has its appointed seasons. If we go with God, we must understand that the pastures won't always be green and the waters won't always be deep pools, but God is still there. For forty years God was sufficient and kept the children of Israel in the wilderness. Our salvation is new every morning, even when God moves us out of the green pastures. So, although visible things may be exhausted, the Shepherd hasn't failed us. Looking back at hard times, we can realize what enriching experiences were ours, even though we murmured when they overtook us.

Divine providence is simply to have our lives arranged by an omniscient Shepherd. Job said, "But he knoweth the way that I take." (Job 23:10) God knows where the pebbles and pitfalls are. Why then does He let us get into certain situations? It is so we will better know how to trust Him. He arranges the dark side as well as the bright side - sickness as well as health; death as well as life; loss as well as gain; peril as well as safety. Regardless of what we think, if we say, "Your will be done", it will all work for our good.

To be a joint heir of God's eternal glory is to have the resources of the divine treasury backing us and the love of God as our possession. The outward features of our lives may not be what we would choose. We may wish for things that can never come to us and we might wish away some things that simply won't go away, but it is faith that overcomes the world, not a sense of enjoyment. The end of life is not personal happiness, but the image and glory of God. The love that richly gives us what is good for us is the same love that denies us what is not good for us.

Many times God teaches His children through sufferings and privations. This is not a punishment, but part of our training, for we must suffer with Him if we are going to reign with Him. Paul's life was doubtless the most noble and successful life apart from Jesus Christ that this world has ever seen, yet we read his record and find it was one of the most unpleasant. "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeying often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness." (II Cor. 11:24-27) And after all this he said, "If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities." (II Cor. 11:30) Where was the Shepherd? He was right there all the time, working out His glorious purpose in Paul's life.

It is God's thought for us to make up the Bride of Christ - to be spiritually wed to Him and rule and reign with Him throughout the ages of eternity. Paul told Timothy that if he denied God the right to lead him into the path that He had ordained for him, God would have to deny Timothy the right to rule and reign with Christ. If we decide to go in our own strength to scale the mountains, we must not hold God responsible for the mistakes that we make on our way. Divine Providence guides all who wish to be guided by it. We can find out, like David, "By thee I have run through a troop, by my God have I leaped over a wall. He maketh my feet like hinds' feet: and setteth me upon my high places." (II Sam. 22:30, 34) Isaiah 40:31 says, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles." The fourth and fifth chapters of Revelation show the people that have six wings. We all have wings, but we must use them or they will wither.

When God lets something dry up where we are, it is because He wants to lead us to something better. God can and will enable His people to do anything and everything He asks of them. Some look on the Christian life as being difficult, but it is the way of the transgressor that is hard. The reason we come up against dry pools and empty fields is because God wants us to learn to trust Him. God has a plan for us, but that plan will never be fulfilled apart from our cooperation. The pasture may fail, but the Shepherd never fails. The pasture can be depleted, but the Shepherd can never be depleted. God didn't need fine pastures to feed the millions of Israelites and their Children in the wilderness; He fed them for forty years without any visible means. When the pastures fail, the outward features of life may not be to our liking. We will face troubles, distress and perplexity, but we should never despair - God can take care of us.

"He maketh me." God never compels, but He persuades. He is not going to make us take what He has for us. If He did that, He would be a respecter of persons. He doesn't drive His sheep but rather He leads them. The words, "He maketh" may sound like compulsion, yet they describe the purpose of divine providence. God will not make us do anything - He will just make us wish we had. It is His plan to bring His purpose to pass in our lives. God rules in providence the same as He does in grace. By any and all means He will draw us and yet He will never force us.

"He leadeth me." No one is compelled to follow a guide. When Israel came to Kadesh-barnea, it was God's purpose and plan for them to go in. He had told them what it was going to be like - there were seven nations greater and mightier than they, but He would take care of them. They started thinking it over and began to doubt that God had told them the truth, and here, at Kadesh-barnea, Israel refused the goodness of God. The judges and the seers and the prophets told Israel of God's will for them many times through supernatural means, but they would not believe.

God would have kept His word. Israel's failure to enter into the land did not cause God to fail in His purpose - they just failed to accept God's purpose. It was the plea of Jesus to Israel, "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matt. 23:37) The purpose of God is that none should perish but that all should come to a knowledge of the truth.

What have we contributed to our present position? What is our attainment? How have we used our opportunities? How have we improved our talents? Is there any feeling of regret or loss?

Have we always consulted with our Shepherd? How many times have we followed our feelings and emotions? Do we sometimes feel we might have been more useful? In some things we aren't the makers of our own history. Our birth, our parentage, our natural talent, our bodily shape, and in some ways, our character were determined apart from our personal decision. But certainly, God has given us a choice as to accepting or rejecting His will for our lives. So providence maps the way and "Promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the the south. But God is the judge; he putteth down one, and setteth up another." (Ps. 75:6) God sets the path and "we run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb. 12:1-2) Paul's path led through prisons, whippings, hunger, nakedness, perils, the hatred of his countrymen and the rejection of those that should have loved him. Yet he was able to say in II Tim. 4:7-8, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness ..." Job despaired again and again. He wanted to die and speaks of death about 700 times - he never speaks of life. The end of our life is death and loss. But God told Job He was going to bring him out and give him twice as much as he had before. Even Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, said, "Let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt. 26:39) Which was best? The glory He had with the Father before the worlds were, or the glory that He is going to have when multiplied millions come to worship Him? Which will be best for us? We want to come to that inevitable day with the best God has to offer our lives.

No doctrine so exalts God and dignifies man as that of divine providence. It sets forth God's power and goodness and it dignifies man by giving each redeemed person his or her own personal and inalienable position before God. The king and the beggar; the great and the common slave; the powerful and the penniless widow; the five-star general and the buck private are all on the same level before Him with whom there is no respect of persons. By God's power He can help us and by His will He wants to help us. Man has a soul and a spirit that cries out for God. Man's life is too vast and too solemn to be spent alone. God made him that way because He wants the fellowship of man. He wants man to understand Him. He wants someone to understand how good and loving and tender He is. He wants someone to know how longsuffering and forgiving He is. We can never exhaust God - we can only refuse Him. We dishonor God

by doubting His full, loving sympathy toward His child. There is no limit to His infinite power, nor is there a limit to His infinite love.

The microscope and the telescope were invented at virtually the same time. The same skill and the same mighty Creator that spoke the galaxies into existence created a single drop of water.

Nothing is hard for the Lord. God is omnipotent, and there are no degrees of power with omnipotence. Nothing is big or little to Him. We may be nothing in the eyes of man, but in the light of eternity Jesus is preparing us to rule and reign with Him. "He maketh me" and "He leadeth me." Not us, but ME. David isn't describing God's care for the entire flock, although there is no question as to his understanding that God cares for all of His children. While God makes provisions for all of His sheep, it is ME that is emphasized here. He makes ME. So many are interested in Him making YOU. We should be more interested in our own lives before God than someone else's.

God has a plan for the eternities and His purpose will carry that plan out. It will run on schedule; it will not be a split second late; it is going to come to pass! He also has an individual plan just for ME. He has placed us in the body as it pleased Him and He is with us to enable us. God is always the same. He is always righteous by night and by day, in the quiet times and in the troubled times when we are not conscious of it as well as when He is purposing our good and contriving our happiness and enabling us to win the prize of the high calling of God. All who believe in God must believe in His power and that that power is for them. Certainly He who knows the number of hairs in our head has time for us personally. God gives ME His undivided attention because He is God. He entertains us all in the same moment.

If divine providence rules, we may ask, why should we have to pray? Prayer does not move God from His plans. Prayer prevails in those needs that do not go beyond the plans of God. Prayer can bring miracles to pass in our lives and we can expect answers to prayers. Miracles are never against nature, but simply above nature. Nature told Abraham that he was finished, but God had promised him a son. When God stopped the sun for Joshua, He didn't change His plans, He just worked a miracle. James said, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." (James 4:5) God arranged providence to provide an answer to prayer. John said that if we ask anything according to God's will, He heareth us. Thus, many prayers go unanswered because they are not for our good or according to the will of God. When we pray in the spirit and the will of God, however, we receive.

To leave the path that God puts us on is to deny that His wisdom will justify itself in the end.

Divine providence is for all, it rules all, it provides for all, and it blesses all to the proportion they are willing to receive. There isn't anyone that could not have God's best. His sun shines and His rain falls equally on all. He stands with His arms outstretched saying, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28) Before we loved God or had any thought of Him, He showed us grace and protected us even in our foolishness. He waits and pleads and continues to be gracious and keeps knocking and waiting. The years that we put God off did not quench His love or make Him less willing to save us. Whether a sinner or a Christian, there is providence for all. As for our past mistakes, our folly, our blunders and disasters, we are to forget the things which are behind and reach forth to those things that are before us. We also need to beware of becoming fretful and anxious and trust in Him who has never failed. God will turn even our failures and mistakes to His glory and our good if we allow Him to.

So, as we follow the Good Shepherd through life's journey where the pastures may fail and the pools may dry up, we may say with Job, "He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold." As Israel traveled toward the promised land, they could see the faint blue hills in the distance where milk and honey flowed, a land where they wouldn't have to build houses or dig wells or plant vineyards. We are traveling the pilgrim road now, but we know that in the not too distant future Jesus is waiting for us.

Nearly every page in the Bible is luminous with the doctrine of divine providence. Each scripture alone and all of them put together state the superintendence of God in all things, at all times, for all needs, under all difficulties, in all temporal and spiritual matters. Paul said it like this, "God is able to make all grace abound toward you; always having all sufficiency in all things may abound to every good work." (II Cor. 9:8) It is one thing to be infallibly assured of God's love and power, but it all is of no avail unless we believe it is for ME.

CHASTISEMENT

"He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." PS. 23:3

The 23rd Psalm is the record of that man who was just like us, yet was called the man after God's own heart - a man of like passions as we. But when David made a mistake he never took off in the other direction; he

got up and continued on toward the city. Assurance and divine providence are the two basics for a successful Christian life. Until we have an assurance that the God who loves us is never going to stop loving us and the God who will never stop loving us will never fail us or forsake us, we will never begin to make a steady pace toward the things that are forever.

And until we recognize divine providence, we will not realize that God has something special for each of us that no one else has. Our God never made two snowflakes or two leaves or two fingerprints alike. We fill a place that no one else can fill.

The third verse of this Psalm deals with chastisement. It is possible to trace David's life and history in the 23rd Psalm, and at this time it is possible to trace what his thinking is. Although David understood something of the meaning of his Shepherd and what He had for him, only one who has tasted of the green pastures can really know Him. It isn't enough to know that someone else has tasted - we must learn the meaning of the green pasture and the still waters for ourselves. Only as we understand such things can we realize the joy of Christianity. Being a Christian is not simply something to be endured - it is the most satisfying and joyous experience there can ever be. The joy of the Lord, which was his strength, enabled Paul to write the joy book of the Bible (Philippians) from a filthy and despicable dungeon. It is God's will and purpose to fill us with a joy that is unspeakable and full of glory.

David's heart is thrilled with his Shepherd. As his heart trembles with the thought of the experiences in the pastures and by the still waters, his memory is stirred. He seems to sigh as if he were talking to us. "But, the grass was not always green and the pools were not always the deep, livid pools from which I drank." "Why?" we would ask, and David might reply, "Well, there is more than one reason." We would ask if the Shepherd had failed him some time or if there had been a time when the Shepherd couldn't provide a pasture. "Oh, no," David would say, "it was nothing like that! Sometimes I was like the sheep who didn't want the Shepherd's leadership and I took off on my own. I was like the sheep that bolted when the pastures became barren, not believing that the Shepherd was leading me to a better place. I saw something I thought would satisfy me and I took off for that little clump only to find myself in desperate straits. The pasture wasn't green when I wept over the death of Bathsheba's son. No one will ever know how I lay and pleaded with God to not take my boy. And as I stumbled half blind down the steps crying, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would to God I had died for thee,' the pasture wasn't green and the waters were not cool. Then God let me live under the power of my enemy. He allowed enemies to ride over my head. But this was all my fault." David never even considered that his Shepherd had failed him. He knew God was always there. From the time when he looked at the heavens and said, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained, What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor." (Ps. 8:3-5) David knew his Shepherd had never deserted him or failed him, but sometimes he wanted his own way and did not want to wait on God.

Nothing can so test the devotion and the understanding of God as chastisement. This is not an indication that God does not love us - it is just the opposite. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth." (Heb. 12:6) When Jesus spoke of the vine and the branches He said that if a branch does not bear fruit, His Father purges it and takes it away. But, He also said that if it does bear fruit, He will purge it so that it will bring forth more fruit. God wants fruit in our lives and there is only one way He can do that. He has to trim us, which can be the most loving of processes.

Sometimes God must deal severely with us to get our attention. He loves us and wants to make us rich, joint heirs with His son. So, He is going to have to allow certain situations in our lives so that we will get our eyes on Him. We must not interpret God in the wrong way. He does not punish us out of anger, but chastises us out of love.

Carnal saints are prone to say that when God chastens them it is an unkind and unaccountable interference with their happiness and only an evidence that God is powerful and can do what He wants to do. It is just the opposite though - it is an evidence of His goodness. This type of saint is proud and they refuse to bow humbly before God. They may seem to succeed for a while, but sooner or later, the bottom falls out from under them. For these people chastening just seems to harden them, and instead of yielding as a penitent child, they only wander farther from God. But David accepted chastisement in a different spirit. He looked upon it as a showing of God's goodness and bringing about the purpose of God and justifying God's character. To love God is to humbly bow before the rod and recognize that it is there to save us from tremendous hurt and can bring healing and comfort and joy.

There are two aspects in which chastisement becomes profitable. The first one is as God restores us to Himself, and secondly, as He brings holiness into our lives by leading us in the paths of righteousness.

Restoration as we think of it implies a wandering or getting out of fellowship. This is possible in two ways. First, that desperate departure from God like that of David and the prodigal son. Both of these men could tell us how rough the road back to God could be after a deliberate departure from Him. It was smooth when they left, but when the prodigal straggled down that road on his way back to the father's house; it must have been a horrible sight. Only the person who has been to a far country can know the ragged, hungry, dirty and sore condition he was in. And yet his father did not reject him but took him in his arms and kissed him. It is the love of God that brings us to repentance. When the man after God's own heart was restored, it was like a man who had virtually been brought back to life with the struggles that would inevitably come to him.

Then there are those who just grow cold in their souls. It is those men and women who are really out of tune with God, yet we couldn't bring a charge against them. They are the kind that pray but not from their hearts; they read the Bible but never to nourish their souls; they give but never sacrifice; their zeal is for a place for themselves instead of God. These people have no real concern for others.

What is the end of chastisement? It is to educate and prepare us for life. He who knows the future would have us ready for that time that is coming. God wants us to rule and reign and we must learn to obey Him. Before Joseph could rule and reign he had to learn to obey. While it isn't always easy, this is what brings us nearer to God. It is impossible to overstate God's love for us and to our shame few of us willingly do what He wants us to do. We give self and the world so much and God so little. We think we have so much time and can put God first later. The Bible says, "Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (II Cor. 6:2) We learn to go with God when the opportunity comes. We love our children even when they go astray or fail to take advantage of something we offer them, even though it hurts. The love we have for our children is not a drop in the ocean compared to the way God loves us. He wants all of His children to have His best. We are the only ones who can accept what He is trying to give us. We will not be able to say someone else had more of an opportunity - they didn't, and yet we can get occupied with a house or children or a job and neglect the thing that is best for us - God. Often health, money, friends, advancement, society, knowledge and business are the gods we worship. We rely on such and never know our folly until it is too late. One day we will find the things we put between God and ourselves were all broken cisterns - they could hold no water and they did not profit us.

Of course, God turns to bless us and we turn away. His hands are full and we don't even care that they are. His heart is big and gracious but we don't want Him unless we can have Him on our own terms. Our attitude is that life with its burdens and its anxieties is such a blessed thing - its ties, its pursuits, its objects, its possessions can be so nice and fascinating. Friends can be so kind and the home so happy and knowledge so noble that we do not see this world as the evil wilderness that it is where days are few and full of trouble. The love of life is not a sin. God wants us to love life, but only when we love it less than Him. The love for this world has far more power over the best of us than we dare to recognize. Only when health is gone and the waters are rising will some open their eyes and turn toward heaven. God can be put off until it is too late. To love God more than life is the greatest treasure we can ever have.

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

"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." Ps. 23:4

One of the many subjects the fourth verse encompasses is the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Death is perhaps the most common, human, reasonable and most fearsome foe that man ever meets. We may try to put death off, but one day we will meet death apart from the rapture. As David stated though, the presence of Christ is sufficient for that too. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me..." The expression 'shadow of death' is found eleven times in the Bible. Job mentioned it five times, Jeremiah one time, Amos once, and it is mentioned four times in the Psalms. Yes, the fear of death is reasonable because the love of life is a divinely ordered law. God does not want us to set our affections on life to the extent that it takes away from eternal things, but He does want us to love life.

Many Christians today sit under a prosperity message, but this cannot sustain them in the storm- swept valleys which inevitably come to every life, especially the life that wants God's best. God's people joyfully enter the green pastures where the deep pools abound, but sometimes do not understand that the gentle Jesus would deliberately lead them over rough and barren country.

God will deliberately put us in situations to make us realize our need of Him. We don't have to call on Him, however, but His purpose in the matter will not be accomplished if we don't. Even though Jesus knew the disciples were struggling on the rough sea, it wasn't until they called to Him that He came. He does not pour us into a mold; rather we are His individual masterpieces. Just as a lump of gold was gradually hammered

into a candlestick and the Ark of the Covenant, it will take the constant dealing of the Holy Spirit to give us God's best. The Lord will train us to get us ready for glories that "... Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." (1 Cor. 2:9)

Nothing so proves our understanding and trust in God as the way we interpret our trials. In every trial we need the Shepherd's presence and we need to be able to understand what His presence means to us. Christ's presence in us is personal but the presence of Christ also speaks of His omnipresence - God is present in all places at all times. To understand this truth may be as much a thought of terror as of consolation. God is watching us! However, we can be comfortable in God's presence. Equally, God's omnipresence affects the inanimate with the animate, the irrational with the rational, bad people with good people, hell with heaven, etc. While God cannot dwell within us without blessing us with His presence, to have Him in us is to have Him with us. And thus, in Him we have everything we will need for our pilgrimage. Provision and safety are infallibly guaranteed for believers. When the sun is behind the clouds it is not the same in its quickening and, fertilizing power to the wet and chilled earth as when it shines in all its glory. Likewise, the child of God needs to yield to the presence of God if he or she is to go on and be everything that God wants them to be. To know God's presence is what gives us peace. We can have peace in any and every situation when we know His presence is with us. The presence of the Lord is symbolized in this verse by the rod and the staff, two things we must learn to value if we want God's best. These show both the sympathy of Christ and His almighty and all-sufficient aid for His people. His sympathy is more than love. It is a love that is perfected by experience. It is impossible to sympathize with something we do not fully understand. Some things can only be understood by personal endurance. If we are never ill we can never fully relate to illness. The rich may be kind to the poor but to know the need of daily bread one must have suffered hunger.

Christ's sympathy manifested itself as He so pitied us that He was willing to lay aside His glory and come to a world where He had no place to lay His head. Finally, He gave His own life on the cross that we might have life. As our high priest Jesus is touched with the feeling of our infirmities for He was tried in all points, sin apart. Only Christ can truly sympathize with us. Jesus said, "I am the vine, ye are the branches." When a grapevine is pruned, the sap will run out and heal over the cuts. The whole grapevine will shake and shudder as though bleeding for the excessive unfruitful growth that was cut away. He understands what we suffer, for we are one with Him in His sufferings.

When talking about walking on the moon, one of our astronauts said, "Any of a thousand malfunctions in a space suit or the limb could condemn an astronaut to swift death. Yet we have a quiet confidence in our abilities and a boundless faith in the engineers and technicians who have fashioned the ingenious devices that transport and sustain us in space. Often in the cause of my stay on the moon I recall the words of the poet, Edwin Marcon, "There is a testing which makes us brothers - none goes his way alone." Think of the faith and the confidence these astronauts had in the skills of the engineers that produced the suit that enabled them to walk on the moon. Could we dare say that would even come close to the genius of the Christ who could keep three Hebrew boys from burning in a fiery furnace. That same power is ours. Man may get into situations where he is beyond his own sufficiency, but Christ is ALL sufficient.

If someone who had been sentenced to the gas chamber would come to us we would feel badly, but we would not really be able to sympathize or do anything to help them. We can go to Christ with our problems and He not only sympathizes but He can help us. "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:6) This is the Shepherd that is with every child of God. He is with us as though we were the only person He was looking after.

David learned of his Shepherd's tenderness as well as His power. The presence of Christ is the sympathy of a true friend and the help of an all-sufficient friend. He rejoices with us when we rejoice and weeps with us when we weep. He can cover our heads in the day of battle. When pain is sharp, when illness is tedious, when hopes are blowing like a candle flickering in a wind tunnel and when temptation is strong, remember nothing is hard for the Lord. He can and He will help us. Nothing exerts the Creator who holds the winds in His fist. The hearts of kings and rulers are in His hand and He turns them like rivers wherever He desires. God is the supreme one - not the rulers. Pilot told Jesus as he stood before him, that HE had the power to crucify Him, but Jesus reminded him that he couldn't do anything that God the Father didn't allow him to do. The nations are like dust in the balance before God. He puts up whom He will and puts down whom He will. He has us here for His purpose.

Jesus is not on earth to speak to us face to face but by the Holy Spirit. Only those who are filled with and led by the Holy Spirit can know the joy, liberty, revelation, power and the unselfishness that can be the believing

Christian's. Sometimes our hearts are so filled with earthly cares and possessions that we have no room for Him.

God's presence is always blessed: for the still times and the noisy times, when we are at work or at play, when we are grieved or when everything is rosy. Yet there are those times when we need His presence in a special way, such as when we are fearful. The Bible says much about fear and warns against it defeating us. Although fear is as original an element of our nature as anger or pride, the Bible says much fear dishonors God and robs the soul of the rich reward that it might otherwise have. It can hinder our fellowship with the Lord as we go along if we are afraid of where He may lead us. The greatest of men feared. David said, "One day I will die by the hand of Saul." Moses feared and fled from Pharaoh. After Elijah's great triumph, he fled from Jezebel. One night in a Roman jail the Lord came to Paul and told him to fear not. Although we may not always feel like it, faith says that Jesus is always with us, and if so, then why should we be afraid? If it wasn't for the fear of death more people would enter its mysterious darkness unsaved. Most think they are separated from death by their youth or vigor and go on ignoring death as though it doesn't exist for them. No one knows when death will strike. The Bible says there is but a step between me and death. (1 Sam. 20:3) Only when the sentence of death is pronounced and it can't be postponed does man begin to think soberly about it.

Human nature cannot easily lay itself down but one day we will enter the dark valley whether we want to or not. It is there that we will find ghastly shadows flitting about and a real enemy that we must conquer before he conquers us. There are those who scoff and say life ends at the grave, and yet springtime certainly proves it to be otherwise as seeds that appeared dead in the winter bring forth life once again.

Although Paul hoped and longed for death to come and welcomed it, it is safer for most of us to wait quietly until it comes for us. One day God is going to say it is time for the spirit and soul to return to its Maker and death will come upon us. Regardless of what we heap around ourselves and who we bring to our assistance, we will find that we must turn from man whose breath is in his nostrils for all his help is vain. The presence of Christ has been with us since the day we were saved and when death knocks, His presence alone will be all that we need or can have.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death is sometimes distinct from the act of dying. That is, it is possible to face death and not die as Hezekiah did. Although he set his house in order, prepared to die and even contended with the terrors of death, he lived for several more years. The Valley of the Shadow of Death may sometimes be a real chapter in our lives that we come to more than once.

Nevada is a dry, parched, death-valley area, but as one comes to the California boarder a lush, green, garden-like area can be seen from the top of the mountains that separate the two states. It is impossible to describe the wonders and the joys of heaven. Paul went there once and when he came back said that there was no way to describe it because it was unlawful for a man to utter. Regardless of what man thinks, he will either step into the unspeakable glories of heaven or the untold horrors of hell, after passing through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

While we must agree that death in a sense is loss, it is gain to those who love the Lord. To die, Paul wrote, is gain. But naturally speaking it is the loss of all we know and possess and enjoy and love. The blue sky, the sweet flowers, the songbirds, the rolling sea, the purple mountains, the painted desert, the exciting activities of life and its secrets, the joys of travel, music and reading, of quiet evenings by the fireside with those we love, friends, companions, the freshness of spring, the growth of summer, the harvest of fall - these and many more can be so meaningful in this life if we know how to live. Sooner or later though, when the dreams of youth become the solid possessions of maturity and the tide of life is at its full, the enemy who has been as a shadow over us from the day of our birth comes and we must go.

In death there is a solitude which exists in no other sorrow. Since we only die once, no friend or loved one, no matter how close, can know by experience what dying means. Some have told of leaving their bodies and then returning, but their journey was not complete so they cannot tell us what it is like to die. Death is one journey we take alone. If a husband and wife who love each other greatly and cannot bear to be separated both take a gun to their heads and pull the trigger at the same time, they each go alone. There is never a time in all of our lives when we are more helpless than in the moment when we watch death take someone we love. As far as human help, we enter this valley alone, yet how wonderful to know "Thou art with me." God will never leave or forsake us.

Who can know solitude like Jesus, who was "despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." (Is. 53:3) Christ trod the winepress alone and tasted solitude to its most bitter dregs. But when has He ever forsaken or failed one of His own? Friends may forsake us, we may be financially broke, we may become a nobody in the sight of everybody, but Christ will always be there. He shares all we

permit Him to share with us and He surely will fill them solitude of death with His loving presence. He knows all because He tasted it all, and He who took our sin in its unspeakable punishment will never leave us.

When we meet death our one claim will be Jesus. Many religions practice torture as a means of making themselves worthy of God. No suffering of our own in all the universe can make us safe when we die and no righteousness of our own can protect us at that time. The best education in the world or all the money in the world will not help us. When death comes our only help is Jesus.

He said, "I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) Death is retribution. Because many Christians do not know the Word of God and do not believe what they read, they think God is going to get even with them some day. God doesn't want to get even with anybody; He loved us so much that He gave His only Son to die for us. If all we ever do is give a cold cup of water in the name of a prophet, He will reward us for it in that day when we meet Him. Judgment is not for believers. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1) We are before the judgment seat of Christ right now. In II Timothy 4:8 Paul said, "There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day." How did Paul know he had a crown waiting for him? Judgment must have been over. Jesus said He would come quickly and His reward would be with Him. There are those who go through life without a conscience and seem bold as they face death saying things such as "I'll join my friends in hell." Unpenitent and unforgiven souls go helplessly to their doom from which they can never escape, but those who have cast their sins on Christ now find rest and peace through the Shepherd's blood. While there may be regrets on our part for neglected opportunities, wasted times, the self-will that took us the wrong way and for so little done for Christ, still God is faithful to us in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. His divine presence has never left us from the day we took Him as a Saviour and will not leave us when we enter that valley.

"Thou art with me." This was David's surety, and we have the more sure word of prophecy that David, in a sense, didn't have - we have the New Testament. "Forasmuch, then, as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same, that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil." (Heb. 2:14) That hadn't happened yet in David's day. The church age has seen Christ triumph. We do not look forward to a redeemer; He already came and accomplished everything He set out to do. Death is not loss for the believer. When our earthly life is ended we will go to spend eternity with the Lord forever.

Death will unite us with the best friends we ever had - our brothers and sisters in Christ. We will go from wreckage to that which can never rust, tarnish or wrinkle, from sin to sinlessness, from weakness to perfect strength, from turmoil to perfect peace and rest, and from faith to sight. When we come to this we can begin to understand what Paul meant when he said, "to die is gain."

THE TABLE OF GOD

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." Ps. 23:5

God furnishes a table that sustains people forever. It holds the richest, the best, the greatest and the most satisfying food there is - there are not words to tell the meaning of this table. Some Christians search for excitement everywhere but this table. Here is a feast that is personally prepared by God who loves us like we could never imagine. He is the chef of all chefs - the one who put the honey in the honeysuckle for the hummingbird. He is the one who prepared the moss-covered cups in the beautiful cool stream to slake the thirst of the panting stag. And He is the one who has prepared for our souls the very sweetest meal that there can ever be. There is nothing that can keep us from enjoying the fatness of this table except our unbelief. There are no requirements for coming to this table - it is for whosoever will. Most of the 'brilliant' minds in this world know nothing about this table because this knowledge comes by revelation, not by education.

There are two views of life available to the Christian and each of them is consistent with the Bible and with human experience. Regardless of what we say, each of us has from time to time alternately swayed to each of these views. The reality of our vision, our faith and our trust in the Bible has a great deal to do with forming our choice as to which view we will take. Why did Abraham leave Ur of the Chaldees? "He looked for a city which had foundations whose builder and maker was God." (Heb. 11:10)

One view is of this world, simply living life without the purpose of God. It is when temporal values have control and God's plan is not number one. This kind of life can be lived in the mansion on the hill with a fatted calf or it may be lived in a hut in the desert with a crust of bread. But when life is over, the value is the same - it was lived without the plan of God, just like Esau who traded his birthright for a mess of pottage. To

put emphasis on this life and carelessly value the truth will prove sad, vain and burdensome before it is over. One day it will prove to be vanity and vexation of spirit. It will be a mitigated misfortune and a pressing evil from which the wise, if they could grow wings, would flee. It is a conflict with the flesh that cries more, more, more. It is a struggle with calamity from which we can't escape without lasting scars. It is a pursuit after duty, a race we can't win. Death always closes out the books no matter what they look like. And so, regardless of what we make of it, this life adds up to the prodigal's far country or any place that we try to live without the will of God.

Life, of course, is God's ordinance so we have to submit to it. Yet it can be an unspeakable privilege and an opportunity where He gives the talents and the wisdom to invest those talents wisely. Jesus lived this life and being tried in all points as we, is a high priest who can be touched with the feelings of our infirmities. (Heb. 4:15) He is by us and we have His loving sympathy and omnipotent backing. This life is the schoolroom - the learning time for eternity. Leaving this life will not change what we are, but we are choosing now what we will be in eternity. "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is holy, let him be holy still." (Rev. 22:11) So many Christians give up because of the mistakes that vex them, the cares that distract them, the duties that tire them, the necessities that engross them, the infirmities that humble them, and so often, the disappointments that make them bitter.

The other view of life for the Christian is more free and elevating. It is noble and gives glory to God. It comforts the believer with the unsearchable wealth it deposits daily in life. This view traces through life the unfailing thread of God's eternal purpose, explaining it in the most afflicted times. Such a life understands the meaning of divine providence and it knows that life is a gracious gift and yet more than a gift. We are the sons of the living God and heirs to all things: blessings in which to rejoice, and trust to be most zealously guarded. Thus, the mature view of life is that view which justifies God and creation, explaining redemption and magnifying God's goodness. Seen in all of the Shepherd's readings and His all-wise plan for our everlasting good, we see that our disappointments are His appointments. His loving and merciful visitations remove the traps in our lives and replace them with treasures.

He is ever giving us that which is safe for us and this view enables us to walk rugged pathways in the full assurance of faith, feasting at the table which He has set before us. Then when God places us in green pastures we won't spend our time looking for rattlesnakes in the rich clumps of grass, but we will feast and learn to trust Him as He sees fit to let the lines fall to us in pleasant places. "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage." (Ps. 16:6) We can see in the fifth verse of this 23rd Psalm the certainty of divine supply and the abundance and richness of it under any circumstance. God can just as easily put gold chains on our necks as He can put iron chains around our ankles. It all depends upon what is good for us.

We may think David's case is an individual and special one, but David's life was one of risings and failings and dangers and deliverances, of chastisements and blessings, of noble acts and terrible inconsistencies. So if at the close of life David could write of the table prepared before him in the presence of his enemies, every other child of God can do the same. The difference between one life and another outwardly may be a great thing, but they both add up to the same. When life is over the real difference is going to be this - how have we responded to God's call on our lives? He can enable us to run through a troop and jump over a wall. He can enable us to rise up with hinds' feet and take the high places. He can enable us to go through the seas and survive fires. He can enable us to do anything He ever enabled anyone to do and more.

Finally, these words reveal the bountiful hospitality of the Lord under any and every circumstance.

Circumstances cannot keep us from God's table and David proved it as he was in exile. Fleeing from Saul he was fed on holy bread. Israel in the wilderness ate angels' food and meat to the full.

Elijah, fleeing from Jezebel, awoke with a meal and a cruse of water at his head for forty days and nights, and he lived in the power of it. Jesus, after His forty days of horror with the devil was ministered to by the angels. And Paul, in prison, wrote, "But I have all, and abound." (Phil. 4:18)

We will never know the Shepherd at His best until we realize the abundance of His provision, and we can never be cut off by the enemy regardless of the circumstances. God is the master of every situation. Paul wrote, "For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ." (II Cor. 1:5)

"He prepareth a table before me." Notice that this table is prepared before ME - it is personal. Will we take the steps to that table? Of course, between us and the table might be a furnace. Between us and that table might be some lions. Between us and that table could be a lot of things, but if God says this is the way and we take the steps, we will be eating the feast. He will not mock us with food when we are starving nor will

He leave us stranded. Here we have a mansion, a harp, and a crown, and all of those wonderful, beautiful, unspeakable things which eye has not seen nor ear heard - the things we cannot, even at our best, imagine. Long ago there was an unwritten custom and law in the desert concerning fugitives and their avengers. If a man killed a person, the brother of the deceased was responsible for bringing the murderer to justice. The murderer, however, was provided a sanctuary until proven guilty of deliberate or accidental murder and had to flee to what the Bible called cities of refuge. As a fugitive would flee, he would become exhausted as he searched the horizon for a place of refuge. Finally, the faint outline of a desert encampment would appear in the distance. The energy would seem to surge at that time as the weary and aching muscles would take on new strength because of the hope that would light up in the fleeing individual. With the hot breath of the avenger almost upon him, he would stumble and fall forward catching hold of the tent peg of the desert encampment. At that moment, the desert chieftain of that particular camp and all of his resources would come immediately to the rescue of the fleeing fugitive. The chieftain owed him the hospitality of his home and everything that was in it. He would bring him in and bathe him and set a feast before him and his enemies could do no more than stand outside the tent and grimace and threaten. That is an example of how He prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. It is also said that the desert chieftains would light fires in the night lest there be a fleeing fugitive somewhere trying to find a place of refuge. How wonderful it is that the Lord Jesus Christ has made available His great resources to every fugitive of the human race (and we all are whether we recognize it or not). Some of us will one day be proven guilty of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and some of us will be declared innocent because we believed on Him.

The Bible speaks a great deal about David's enemies and, knowing the history of his life, we find he had many. Some were made through his private wrongdoings and he was almost constantly fighting his country's enemies. He was, in God's own words, a man of war shedding much blood. Absalom was advised, "Thy father is a man of war ..." (II Sam. 17:8). But in the song of David he makes this wonderful and enlightening statement, which is a comfort: "He teacheth my hands to war." (Ps. 18:34) God taught this great warrior how to fight and enabled him with His strength. It is simply the nature of divine providence that those who go with God will have enemies. There are people who hate a preacher of the gospel simply for the position he is in. They don't hate the person who listens to the preacher although that person believes the same thing. To make a public stand for Christ will bring many enemies as well as separation.

Many saints ignorant of God's purpose may boast that they have no enemies, but those who go with God know this to be otherwise. Even some Christians will hate us and will be our enemies without a cause, just as Christ was hated without a cause. We may have personal enemies that would harm us if they could and might even wish us dead, while others may hate us out of envy or jealousy for the Gospel's sake. And then, some enemies are made through faults of our own.

Imagined or real, we ought to do our best to bridge the gap. Most, if not all of us, know individuals we prefer not to meet, and if we do meet them, don't know quite how to act or what to say lest they twist the meaning of our words or our intentions - they simply don't like us. He who sticks closer than a brother invites us to cast all of our burdens upon Him.

But lest we become involved with hating and fighting our brother, let us consider Paul's passionate words in the book of Ephesians. He said, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Eph. 6:12) It takes the devil to put the treasure in our lives forever. We must consider our enemies from a spiritual viewpoint. With the figure of the table spread before me in the presence of mine enemies, the plentiful provision of grace and power is never needed or appreciated like it is until we are pursued by the enemy. The more we took on the world and the more we ponder our own history, the more we must be aware of a personal spiritual enemy, ever striving to defeat us and trying to keep us from embracing God's everlasting plan for our lives. And it doesn't matter how he does it. A person with high moral standards can waste their life every bit as much as a bum on the street corner. Just to neglect the things of God is to waste a life. Just drift, and the devil will take care of the rest.

Temptation is a condition of human life. To try to avoid it in one way is to face it in another. Every period of life, every class in society, every calling and occupation, duties as well as pleasures, work as well as play, turmoil as well as peace, all contain within them the elements of temptation. It is our folly to ignore this fact, and yet it can be our glory to come to grips with it and overcome it, because on God's table, and God's table only, is everything we need to strengthen us to succeed in life.

It is not a sin to be tempted. The Bible tells us our Lord was tempted in all points as we, yet without sin. (Heb. 4:15) We are tempted and there is a nature of sin within us that can respond to it. When Satan tempted Jesus there was nothing in Him to respond to the temptations. He was tried, not to see if He would

break, but to prove He was a man that could not be broken. There had to be a man that could not be broken to take care of the smashed wreckage of our lives.

If we are not tried we will not go to the table. Our trials are necessary and when temptation overtakes us, we can know the meaning of the table; for if the devil is there, the great Chief Shepherd of the desert is there also. When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard before him. When Israel was out in the waste-howling wilderness, it was the Shepherd who took care of them. It was necessary for Israel to go through the wilderness to come into possession of the land of Canaan, and we too will find that the things God takes us through are absolutely necessary for our lives if we are to have the best He has for us.

Jesus compared himself to the Good Samaritan who went to great extremes to care for a dying man who had no hope, no strength and no one to stand for him. Even the Pharisee and the priest had passed him by, but the Good Samaritan had compassion and helped him. Jesus will take care of us also; He wants us to put our confidence and trust in Him.

It is not as difficult for the believer to grasp the sufficiency of the table as it is to grasp the abundance and richness of the table. So few of God's children embrace abundant life. Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (John 10:10) Abundant life is found at this table in the wilderness - the table that He Himself prepares for us. By God's grace we may prosper and be in health, but if we aren't that doesn't mean there isn't a table spread before us. In order to know God, we will sometimes have to get in the ring with the enemy - that is where we will find the table that is spread. Nothing can keep us from God's best if that is what we really want. All we have to do is go to the table.

David said, "Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." Anointing in the Bible represents honor and power with God, while the overflowing cup represents plentiful abundance.

We don't have to let the devil walk on us. The power of God in us makes us more than conquerors through Christ who loved us and we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ. (Eph. 1:3) The Apostle Paul said, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." (Eph. 3:8) In all of eternity we could not exhaust the unsearchable riches of Christ, and yet millions of Christians live and die in a state of obscurity and an ignorance of spiritual values - a life of spiritual poverty.

Mephibosheth's crippled condition was hidden when he sat at David's table and ate. Our imperfections are hidden as well, as we feast at the table of God. God is love and He sees us as perfect under the blood of His son. Paul said, "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32) It is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. If we have children we want them to succeed, but how much more, God wants His children to succeed.

When God gave His son, He gave us everything He had to give - Jesus in the manger, Jesus on the cross, Jesus in the grave and Jesus resurrected. All of this is sufficient proof that He is for us, and if He be for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31) God is able to make all grace abound toward us and to supply our every need as He lives within us. Paul said, "..... Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." (Gal. 2:20) That is the sufficiency. Our lives can be filled with far more than we desire for ourselves. God never intended for any of His children to have second best - He wants every one of us to have the best.

The value of this table must not be measured by its material and temporal abundance, but by its spiritual abundance. Some sit at a rich table but they are spiritually starving to death. Some are poor in this world yet rich in faith, and they are growing up in Christ like stall-fed calves. "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over."

The only prerequisite for coming to the table of God is that we must have a need. It makes no difference who we are because in God's eyes one soul is potentially as valuable as another. His workings in lives may be different but the quality of each life can be equally rich. God will provide exactly what we need in our lives as we live by faith.

It is our nature to enjoy dining in beautiful and elegant surroundings, but God serves this meal in the presence of our enemies. This is so we will learn to trust Him. We may look at this table and dread what we see and draw back from it, but the distasteful thing that He has placed on the table before us is something that is given in love. The enemy can be so close, yet the Lord is our shield. He is with us from the moment we give our hearts to Him and will never leave us or forsake us. We may fail Him but He will never fail us.

Christ's fullness is for all of His people without exception and it becomes ours according to the measure we believe and appropriate. His provision for us is sufficient. We receive of His fullness, grace for grace. So the table of the believer and the life it affords is far higher and richer and more enjoyable than that of the sinner or that of the carnal saint. It is because this life is lived by faith on a higher and nobler level and for a more

lasting cause.

We don't have to be afraid of death - it is ours. "life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's." (I Cor. 3:22-23) Even though death seems to triumph as the believer yields to its cold embrace, it is actually trampled underfoot, for death is the portal of life. And while loved ones linger by the casket weeping, the believer joins the everlasting joys of heaven. What the world dreads, the believer learns to welcome.

This not only is true in the life to come but it can also be true in this life. In order to have God's best we must experience times of great pressure. We are "... heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him." (Rom. 8:17) The Bible points out again and again that the rich life of the believer is the one that comes up against obstacles and conquers them in Jesus' name. The strongest faith, however, may doubt at times and the stoutest courage may murmur. Such saints as Paul did. And David, the man after God's own heart, said, "In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God; He heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears." (Ps. 18:6)

Anyone who has gone very far with God will experience disappointment. Peter said, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you ..." (I Pet. 4:12) "That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perisheth, though it be tried in the fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." (I Pet. 1:7) Jacob was disappointed when Leah was given, to him instead of Rachel. He was defrauded of his wages and he told Laban, "Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty." (Gen. 31:42) That is the answer to everything: God with me. The purpose of God cannot be defeated by cleverness or power or floods or fires or armies. God can deliver us anytime, anywhere, in spite of everything, but it may be to our good not to be delivered. He can take us out of the fire, but he can also keep us in the fire or take us through the fire. What we want is the will of God. His wisdom and choice for our lives will make it far greater than we could ever hope to make it.

David was disappointed at not being allowed to build the temple. And Paul wrote the Roman saints, "... oftentimes I purposed to come unto you (but was prevented thus far) ..." (Rom. 1:13) Our disappointments teach us that which nothing else can teach us - humility. David said, "Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water, but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place." (Ps. 66:12) It was a comforting thing once he realized that God was doing that. There were no second causes with David. He learned that God could put the lines to him in pleasant places, and if we can ever come to realize what we really were in Adam, it will take all of that foolish, self-righteous pride out of us. Nothing so defeats us as our pride. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble." (James 4:6) Some people would be better off if they would just fall flat on their faces. They will never know humility any other way.

As we face the trials of life we can be sure that God has made provisions for all of our conflicts with our enemies. Self pride cannot prevail if we put our trust in Him.

There are three things which God gives us: a joy of faith; a patience of hope; and, a comfort of love. The joy of faith is the most elevating and ennobling of all human virtues and graces. Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust him." Habbakuk said, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." (Hab. 3:17-18) Faith strengthens us because it lays hold of the almighty - it makes us as strong as God is. God told Paul that His strength was made perfect in Paul's weakness. We have it all when we are weak. God will enable us for any task.

Because we believe we also have hope, and because we trust we wait. If we trust God, we know He is never late. He will never fail us. Hope waits. At the Red Sea, God said, "Be still and know that I am God." It is the joy of faith that enables us for the patience of hope. For no matter how barren the way may seem, we believe our Shepherd will choose wisely for us those things so much better than we could choose for ourselves if we were able to choose.

We are creatures that have a heart made to give away. People give their hearts to many things, but God wants us to give our hearts to Him. Only He can provide the true comfort of love. All of us have times when we are discontented and even morbid and fretful. So often we react like spoiled children throwing fits because they have been denied something they want. Such see little higher than man. His power, His counsel of wisdom, the unsearchable riches of His promises - God waits to fill our hearts with all this if we love Him.

From the day we took Christ as our personal Saviour throughout the history of our Christian experience, to suggest that God should love us as much as He does and yet deny us anything for our good, is utterly

impossible. And to suppose that Christ would have suffered for us as He did, yet deny the needful grace and strength to bear life's burdens, is to swear that He died in vain.

That is the table in the presence of our enemies. Are we going to eat or are we going to starve?

Are we going to say God isn't good to us or are we going to accept His generous love and grace?

ETERNAL LIFE

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." PS. 23:6

Eternal life is a treasure and a gift that most of God's own children do not even realize they have. To know it is to inspire thankfulness in the heart that is independent of everything else.

Thankfulness is one of the most attractive qualities of the Christian character. A gloomy Christian doesn't appreciate what they have, and a Christian who is always complaining, murmuring and finding some fault and reason not to go with God is a Christian who doesn't realize what they have. The Christian has everything to be grateful for. Out of his thankful heart, David said, "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand." (Ps. 139:17-18) And potentially, David didn't have as much as we have. He never had a revelation of Christ like we can have.

Thankfulness in itself is such a beneficial thing. It invigorates and animates us, it glorifies God, and it attracts and edifies those that are around us. Naturally it has much to do with sound health, sufficient means, good employment and other benefits, but in the Bible we see that David's thankfulness was completely independent of the circumstances which surrounded his life. Paul's life was another notable example of thanksgiving. Regardless of the poverty that he embraced, the illness that must have been his and the solitude that he experienced, he sat with a merry heart and wrote the joy book of the Bible, Philippians. Unlike any other natural man Paul has benefited humanity with his testimony of God's goodness and faithfulness to his life. He said the Lord had never failed him and while everybody else was against him, the Lord stood with him.

The true Christian life always has a lively sense of divine goodness which compels every departing pilgrim to look back on the way and explain in wondering gladness how good God has been to them. The one conviction of a full heart is that God has always loved us, He loves us now, and nothing will ever be able to separate us from His great love. "Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them to the end." (John 13:1)

What is it that can give one an unshakable and positive confidence which eases burdens so heavy that others are crushed by them? How can we understand God's leading when the path is hard and dark? It is the purpose of unailing love to put a steady abundant life on the past, the present and the future; it is knowing Him and believing His promises. To know what He has been in the past, to grasp what He is today, and to believe what He promises to be in the future, we can say with Paul, "He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me." (Heb. 13:5, 6) Paul also said, "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." (II Tim. 1:12) It is in that inner chamber of joy and peace that the Holy Spirit bestows the consciousness of having eternal life. That is, God's own holy, incorruptible, perfect life is our life. It is that which we cannot lose because we do not keep it; it keeps us.

The fact that we have eternal life now and can enjoy its joys, triumphs and riches now can be proved again and again in the scriptures. When Lazarus lay in the tomb Jesus' said to Mary, "And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." (John 11:26) Again, He said, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." (John 17:3) And, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one." (John 10:27-30) No great ingenuity is required to find this truth of eternal life all through the Bible and throughout this 23rd Psalm in particular.

In the first verse of this Psalm we find our personal spiritual union with the Lord: "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want." As the Shepherd leads us into the green pastures and by the still waters we acquire a keener knowledge and a fuller image of Him, and our lives become more and more enlightened as to eternal life. The matter of eternal life needs to be settled within us.

We will not find the answer in the sudden emotions that come and go - we cannot put confidence in our feelings. We need to put our confidence in what Jesus tells us. Ignorance of the Word of God can captivate

us, but there is assurance in the life that is hidden with Christ in God. Eternal life, if yielded to, will strike its roots deep and extend its exalting influence into the entire being of the believer, enabling one to appreciate and humbly receive the great mysteries of the Gospel.

This is where we learn of God's eternal purpose or blueprint. God's blueprint is not complicated - it is so plain that "wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." (Is. 35:8) Eternal life is something to be enjoyed now, as well as after we get to heaven. So many of God's people are gloomy and downcast because they have never found out that they have eternal life. It is something they hope to get someday, maybe. If a believer cannot see this basic truth how can they believe God to sit on a throne and rule and reign with Christ? Eternal life is realizing the power of the atoning blood of the Incarnate Son and the regenerating grace whereby the Holy Spirit takes God's promise, and seizing the heart strikes the heart of that incorruptible life throughout the being.

It is eternal life that purges a life from dead works to serve the living God. It gives rest and peace through the precious redemption which alone can transform us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's own dear Son. This is what subdues our will to His will - not by taking it away, nor by immersing it into God's will, but by training and educating the will into a free, complete, cheerful and intelligent obedience. We go with God because we want to - not because we are afraid to, but because of God's great love for us. He gave, and we in turn give ourselves to Him because of our love.

Eternal life is not a reward, although it has a reward. Jesus spoke of the inheritance of eternal life, but the Bible speaks just as clearly of the gift of eternal life. When we are saved we receive the gift of eternal life. But as we walk with God, the gift of eternal life develops into the knowledge of the inheritance of eternal life. They each have their place.

Eternal life produces a devotion to God in our Christian lives which inspires us and carries us down the pilgrim road. Devotion gives us the desire to want to go on. What was it that carried Paul on? He was not only willing to be bound for the Lord's sake, but he was also willing to suffer death. Devotion is what Christianity needs today rather than entertainment, excitement and fear. It is devotion that takes us on with God and devotion springs forth from a thankful heart. Who has or could do for us what Christ has done? "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich." (II Cor. 8:9) We are rich!

Devotion is simply the shedding forth of the love of God in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. David was thankful because he was absolutely certain that he would dwell in the house of the Lord forever. God's goodness didn't harden David into indifference or self-sufficiency, rather it made him feel more than ever his need of the Lord in all of his ways. He knew that the Lord alone was sufficient for the way he would take. The nearer David lived to the Lord the better he could worship him, and the more he could hear the truth and receive God's grace, the better it was with him here and certainly hereafter.

David, who knew and understood God as the first five verses of this Psalm present Him, could come to no other conclusion but that surely, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Goodness and mercy are the only things that could follow him the rest of his days, because God had shown him nothing but goodness and mercy in all of his days past. When he fought his enemies, God made his arms like strong bands of steel; God gave him hinds' feet to run through a troop and leap over a wall. When David was hunted like a partridge on the hillsides of Israel, God kept him. It was the love, grace and mercy of God that inspired deep devotion in David's life.

Christian devotion is a personal adoration and love for the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. All we can do is love Him - that is all He wants us to do. Paul defined his own devotion by saying it was the love of Christ that constrained him. That is the same love that brought Jesus down from a wealth we will never grasp, and took Him to a cross that we will never know. If we get that love in our hearts, it will take us through the flooded rivers and shipwrecks of our lives, encouraging and strengthening us on our way.

There are many precious saints who walk in fear of God and the light of their own conscience who say they are devout. Yet there are others who are devoted but have yet to come into a clear understanding of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. An example of this is Mary Magdalene. She stood at Jesus' tomb weeping over what she supposed was her defeated and lost Lord. She thought He was dead and had been stolen away. She was blind to the truth and the resurrection.

Her unbelief made her mistake Christ for the gardener, but Jesus recognized her devotion and rewarded it by the revelation of Himself. She was devoted, but she didn't know the truth. Some of us may know the truth but not be devoted.

Devotion is the fruit of a personal relationship springing from a fervent longing for the Lord Jesus Christ. True devotion delights and finds satisfaction in Christ, not so much for what He gives us but for what He is in

Himself. It values far above His gifts, His presence. The satisfaction of Christ can keep us in any circumstance, and His presence is what we need to be satisfied with.

Pleasant things can bring us happiness, for happiness is dependent upon circumstances. True joy, however, comes from Jesus alone. David thirsted for the opportunity and power to love God. He was shut away for a time and longed to go and appear before Him. David said, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God." (Ps. 84:1-2) It is that deep, unutterable adoration of the soul that throbs and burns for Christ as the heart pants for the water brook. It is that heart that would multiply itself a thousand times and pour it all on Him. That is the heart of devotion, and that is what God wants to give us.

If devotion is rare, and it is far more than it ought to be, the reason is because we love the Lord with a thin, feeble, meager and circumspect love. This is not because He denies us the right and the power to love Him, nor does He refuse to pour His love into our hearts, but it is simply because we do not realize the value and the blessing of loving the Lord. So many times people who claim to love the Lord may have to make a choice between Him and a child or a spouse, etc. Too often the Lord comes in second place. We suppress the flow of His love through us. The way that we love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen is the way we love the Lord. We are to let brotherly love continue.

Salvation is the beginning and the end for most Christians. Theirs is a natural satisfaction: if they have their temporal desires then they are satisfied. Not to be punished for sin and not to be shut out of heaven is what most have for their goal, and to such the reward of faith is to endure to the end. But in actuality this is just the beginning - the starting point, the earnest. Until we have eternal life, we can't live eternal life and every child of God should be fully assured that that is what God longs for for our lives.

It is a most blessed thing to know we are safe. To rest in security without a thirst for His glory is to fall short of our Redeemer's purpose for our lives. It is to know nothing of Paul's passionate cry, "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death." (Phil. 3:10) Many care so little for His love and glory and only want His presence when everything else has failed them. They have little or no time for Bible study and prayer and for bearing one another's burdens. These Christians will never heal the sorrows of those about them. It is unbelief that is at the root of such things. Without faith it is impossible to please God. If we really believe that the Lord, of and by and in Himself could make us happy and fill us with an unspeakable joy and peace that passes understanding, then we would be content with Him apart from His gifts.

God desires a life of sincere devotion wherein He can fulfill His purpose. Paul's sincere purpose was "that I may win Him" and He didn't care what it cost him. True devotion is inspired of God but certain conditions must first exist in our hearts. In order for God's love to burn in our souls with a steady and bright flame, we must fully surrender our hearts to Him and let them be filled with His glory. Then, there can be no truce with sin. This does not mean just those outward acts in which society seems to revel, but also those which may even be applauded. Sin is any indulgence of the Adamic nature. We find in Galatians 5:19-21 that it is just as bad to nurse covetousness, pride, vanity, envy and anger in our hearts as it is to nurse drunkenness, murder, adultery, etc. Our soul is exercised as we use it for God. If we never read our Bible, never testify to anyone, never make an effort to reach others, we are not exercising our soul. It is not essential to be great in the eyes of man. We each do what we can, like Mary and the widow with two mites. He who sees in secret will reward us openly.

It is absolutely impossible to maintain a life of devotion without constant touch with the Word of God and secret, frequent and sustained prayer. As we read the Word of God we will meditate on it. One of the marks of a devoted Christian is that they feed on the Word of God. Jesus said, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." (John 6:53) The Word of God is His flesh and blood - it is life and the food of the believer. Peter said, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby." (I Pet. 2:2)

And Paul said, "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified." (Acts 20:32) And again, Jesus said, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." (John 15:3)

As we come to the conclusion of this 23rd Psalm we see what has taken place in the life of the only man in the Bible whom God called the man after His own heart. Yet to know something of David's life is to realize that he was just as human as we are. The transformation that came to David - the triumphs, the victories, the throne that he came to sit upon - were all by the grace and enabling power of God. God has a plan and a purpose for our lives and He is offering us a throne and a rulership that is superior to that which He offered

to David. God will give us a vision and will do His best to bring us to the place that He has provided for us. God preserved lives like David's to show us that it is not the weaknesses or the failures or the battles throughout life that keep us from His best, but simply the fact that we will not put our trust in Him.

In the first verse we see how David came to know the Lord, just as we can. He didn't have all the revelation that saints today are privileged to have, but there is still only one way that anyone ever gets saved, and that is to accept Christ as their Saviour. Every person who believes in Him starts with exactly the same advantage as anyone else. Naturally, it may seem that life has thrown us a foul ball, but when we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Saviour, we become part of the family that is the true aristocracy of the eternities. Born of God, we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ if we are willing to go with Him regardless of what we may have to face. He will supply our needs just as He promised and has demonstrated again and again. This 23rd Psalm began "The Lord is my shepherd." It now ends, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." To know the Lord Jesus Christ is to know a life of assurance. God has such love and tenderness for us that He can show us nothing but goodness and mercy. We will never be what God wants us to be until we recognize that His goodness and mercy follow us everywhere. We will never enjoy eternal life or go very far with God until we recognize His relationship to our life, His attitude to our life and His determination never to leave or fail us. We look forward to that inevitable moment when eternal will be spent in heaven; however, it won't be any more eternal when we get there than it is right now. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," David said. Whether or not David really grasped heaven, he was divinely inspired to write about it. Some of the most beautiful and thrilling Psalms anticipate the blessedness of heaven and we find it in a language that we embrace today and consistently use as we talk about it.

One of the features of the Bible is that it contains depth within is the depth of divine doctrine and well within well of living waters. It is hardly possible for believers to quote these words without the glorious appearing of the Lord filling their hearts with hope.

Our dwellings in this world are described as tents, which are moveable and temporary - nothing in this world is permanent. Heaven is spoken of in this Psalm as a home - an abundant, permanent home, in which we will live forever with the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

So, eternal life in heaven is but a continuation and an enriching of eternal life which exists on this earth. It will be the same in essence of its character, the same in the motive of service, the same in the substance of its joys and the same in the nature of its glory. However, it will be different in that no mortal body will hinder its activities, no sinful nature will interrupt its progress and no devil will oppose its goals. But in perfect liberty and entire security with energies that can never be exhausted and opportunities that will never be neglected, believers will thrill and wonder as God reveals the exceeding riches of His grace. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." (I Cor. 2:9)

The character of heaven will be the perfect, unalloyed love of sinless and glorified saints dwelling in love; and thus, in the fullest sense, dwelling in God. The noblest aspiration of regenerate man will then have their full satisfactions. We will enjoy God as we have never before enjoyed Him.

Paul said, "Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity (love)." (I Cor. 13:13) Hope is anticipating an ever increasing capacity to embrace the ages. If this age is so good, what will the next age be. It can only get better and better and better. There will never come a day when we have exhausted God, nor drunk the last drop of this wonderful salvation. Regardless of our position in life, if our heart of hearts can embrace and visualize and appropriate this truth, then we are well off.

It is almost impossible to conceive loving God and one another perfectly. That is, to have every motive of service and every spring of feeling and every throb of zeal rooted and grounded in love which self shall not spoil or try to tarnish. In heaven, dwelling in a pure atmosphere of love in which each contributes and where each receives, we shall look to God who is the source from which everything comes. We can do no more than love and worship Him. God will never stop loving us and that is what will abide in heaven - His love. While there are many great blessings which we enjoy in our lives, it is faith, hope and love that will endure through the ages.

With love being the character and the very nature of heaven, it becomes clear that the service and occupation of heaven will be the outgoing and satisfying of that love in whatever we can do to please or glorify God. To be in harmony with God is to instantly and joyously do His will. God's love enables us to triumphantly leap over obstacles as He teaches us to take the high places.

God never tells us to do anything He will not enable us to do. There will be no moral hindrance, and death cannot interfere or affect our mental powers when we reach heaven.

In that day when God will gather His jewels, they won't necessarily be the saints who filled the biggest and highest places or won the applause of men, but those who stood with truth and valued the praise of God more than the praise of men; those who have delighted to do the modest duties that He has given them, and have done them as unto the Lord. The love of the truth has kept many saints simple and poor in the world's eyes, but in heaven they will have the best.

Many who are zealous of the doctrine of grace are perplexed when it comes to degrees in glory. It is simply God's unerring righteousness which recognizes and rewards the use of the grace which God has blessed us with and bestowed upon us. Paul and the penitent thief were equal sinners saved by grace and they will enter heaven on the identical terms of God's redeeming mercy.

However, each shall have the glory which is according to the fight they have fought, the course they have finished and the faith they have kept. In the deepest sense of the word, glory is the manifestation of the image of God and His character shed abroad in our hearts. We read in Corinthians that we are changed by God's spirit from glory to glory. The more we open our hearts to Him and surrender to His will here and now, the more He will glorify us in the hereafter. Paul wrote "... that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God." (Eph. 3:19) The love we resist in our lives is the very thing that will deepen and enlarge our hearts to make more room for God.

If joy is so rapturous here, if rest is such a blessed thing here, if the company of God's people is so edifying here, if the place that God gives us here can become so glorious, what will it be to have Christ visible, death gone and judgment over. This hope will strengthen us for the duties that may lie ahead of us, console us under the sorrows that may come and compensate us for the losses we may suffer.

It is but a little while we have left in which to pray, trust, suffer and labor. And when the Good Shepherd leads His ransomed flock to pastures ever green and by waters ever still on the delectable mountains of glory, there, in the promise of everything, we shall say from our hearts as none of us can quite say while we are on this side of the river, "In thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." (Ps. 16:11)

If we should find unfinished, incomplete
A single glistening, pearly drop of dew;
A single feather in the daring wings that soar
Exhultant in the distant blue;
A flake of snow upon the mountain's peak;
A fern within some hidden, cool abyss;
Then might we doubt that God's most perfect plan in our lives
Perchance might go amiss.

- Author Unknown