

THE
LORD IS
MY SHEPHERD

*“HEALING WISDOM OF
THE TWENTY-THIRD
CENTURY”*

BY
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CHAPTER ONE

A Psalm of David

Can fifteen beautiful lines from a single page of the Bible change your life? I believe they can, if you are willing to open your heart to their magic. Listen closely to them, read them with an open mind and an open heart, and you will find the answers to questions you are asking, questions about yourself, the people around you, and the world in which you and they live.

I would guess that there is one, and only one, chapter of the Bible that most people in the English-speaking world know by heart. We may remember a lot of stories about Adam and Eve, Noah, Joseph, and Moses. We may be able to recite the Ten Commandments, parts of the Sermon on the Mount, and other passages that have entered into our literature. But when it comes to an entire chapter, I suspect that the only one we remember completely is chapter twenty-three of the Book of Psalms, the

The Lord Is My Shepherd

Twenty-third Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . . .”

Even if you cannot recite the entire psalm perfectly, you know it well enough to say it along with a congregation, the way many of us sing along with “The Star-Spangled Banner” at a baseball game. We are so familiar with the Twenty-third Psalm that when a new translation of the Bible comes along, using archaeological and linguistic evidence to help us understand more accurately what the original Hebrew and Greek meant to say, we are uncomfortable with the “improvements.” We welcome the rewording of the stories, stripped of the Elizabethan vocabulary of the four-hundred-year-old King James translation (done in the time of Shakespeare). We don’t miss the use of “begat” and “wouldst” and “thee” and “thou.” But when it comes to our favorite psalm, we crave familiarity more than accuracy.

Why do we love this psalm so much, more than any of the other 149 psalms in the Bible? Why do we reach for it at moments of personal distress, cherishing its recitation at funerals and memorial services? It is a beautiful literary creation, but the anthologies are full of beautiful writings, and they don’t capture our hearts as the Twenty-third Psalm does. In just a few lines, it conveys the distilled wisdom of generations, offering us a way of seeing the world that renders it less frightening, teaching us to deal with the loss of people we love and with conflict with people

A Psalm of David

who don’t like us or who treat us badly. It shows us how to recognize the presence of God at times and in places where we might think God was absent or when we might be so distracted by our own concerns that we would overlook God’s presence. It has the power to teach us to think differently and, as a result, to act differently.

Science, Albert Einstein once said, can tell us a lot about the universe—how old it is, how vast it is, what laws of physics control it. But he went on to say that science is powerless to answer the most important question of all: Is the universe a friendly place, supportive of human hopes and aspirations?

The Twenty-third Psalm, with its image of the Lord as our shepherd, responds to that concern. It gives us an answer, not in theological language but in beautifully crafted words and skillfully chosen images, and we respond to its honesty and optimism as much as to the beauty of its language. It comforts us with its familiar words and images, but its message goes well beyond comfort. It does not simply offer us the prospect of a better, safer world beyond this one. It teaches us to look at the world we live in clearly and without illusions, but at the same time to see it as a world in which we can live courageously, doing good for ourselves and others. Our world may not be a perfect world, but it is God’s world, and that makes all the difference. Yes, the world may be dangerous, it admits, but God is there to take care of us,

to help us, even as a shepherd cares for his sheep in a world of dangerous predators and threats of accident. The world may be a frightening place, but it becomes less frightening when we know that God is here with us. As one writer has put it, sometimes God calms the storm, but sometimes God lets the storm rage and calms the frightened child.

The psalm does not deny the shattering reality of death and loss, nor does it minimize how painful death and loss can be to us. It never asks us to pretend, as some religious teachings do, that death does not change things, that moving from life to death is no different than moving from New York to Chicago. It acknowledges the emotional darkness we find ourselves in when a loved one is dying or has died, the “valley of the shadow of death.” But instead of cursing a God who permits our loved ones to die, it introduces us to a God who is with us in our pain, and who leads us through the dark valley back into the light. It summons us to live bravely, to go forward with our lives in the confidence that we are not alone.

The psalm does not offer us the pious hope that, if we are good people, life will be easy, as some religious texts do. The author of the psalm has enemies. He has known failure. He has lost people he loved. In the process, he has learned that life is not easy. Life is a challenge, and he has grown stronger as, with God’s help, he met the challenges of life. He is a better person, a wiser, stronger

person than he would have been, had life not challenged him to grow.

The psalm can teach us another valuable lesson as well: Much of the time, we cannot control what happens to us. But we can always control how we respond to what happens to us. If we cannot choose to be lucky, to be talented, to be loved, we can choose to be grateful, to be content with who we are and what we have, and to act accordingly.

In a mere fifty-seven words of Hebrew and just about twice that number in English translation, the author of the Twenty-third Psalm gives us an entire theology, a more practical theology than we can find in many books. He teaches us to look at the world and see it as God would have us see it. If we are anxious, the psalm gives us courage and we overcome our fears. If we are grieving, it offers comfort and we find our way through the valley of the shadow. If our lives are embittered by unpleasant people, it teaches us how to deal with them. If the world threatens to wear us down, the psalm guides us to replenish our souls. If we are obsessed with what we lack, it teaches us gratitude for what we have. And most of all, if we feel alone and adrift in a friendless world, it offers us the priceless reassurance that “Thou art with me.”

Who wrote the Twenty-third Psalm, this compact spiritual masterpiece that we love so much? Alas, that is a question we will never be able to answer. People of the

ancient world had a different understanding of what it meant to “write” a literary or liturgical work. They understood that, just as “it takes a village to raise a child,” it takes an entire culture to write a psalm. How could one person take credit for a literary creation and deny credit to his parents who raised him, his teachers who educated him, his religious leaders who inspired him, and most of all God who was the ultimate source of his inspiration? I cannot imagine Homer getting up in ancient Greece and saying, Here is a poem I wrote about the Trojan war. He is much more likely to have said, This is the story of the fall of Troy, playing down his personal role in putting it into words.

Many people hold to the tradition that King David wrote all 150 of the psalms, and indeed the Twenty-third Psalm begins, as so many do, with the words “A Psalm of David.” Many years ago, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the history of the Book of Psalms and found myself concurring with the virtually unanimous opinion of Bible scholars that King David could not have written all of the psalms. Some of them refer to historical events that happened hundreds of years after his death, such as the Babylonian Exile. Some employ Hebrew words and grammatical forms that were not in use until long after David’s time.

It may be that King David composed a few psalms (the prophet Amos, who lived only a few hundred years after the time of David, refers to him as a musician and com-

poser). If he did, the Twenty-third Psalm may have been one of them, featuring imagery that would have come naturally to this shepherd-warrior-king. It may also be that “a psalm of David” means “a psalm in the style of David” or “a psalm composed in honor of King David” or in honor of a later king, a descendant of the House of David.

But although we can never know the name of the man who wrote this masterpiece of faith and comfort, this masterful guide to how we might think and act, we learn a lot about him by reading his words. We can see the psalm as the story of a journey, one that began with his living a pleasant, comfortable life, symbolized by lush, soft grass and cool water. Then something happened to shatter that comfortable life. It may have been a life-threatening illness. It may have been betrayal or rejection by people around him. But most likely it was the death of someone about whom he cared deeply. He found himself in despair, his world grown dark. Images of gloom, of darkness, dominated his thoughts. It seemed that there was no point to his going on with his life. In his despair, he cried out to God, and a miracle happened. The miracle was not that the dead came back to life, or that the man’s health and wealth were restored. The miracle was that he found life worth living. God answered his prayer not by replacing what he had lost, but by taking him by the hand and guiding him through the “valley of the shadow of death.” To his amazement, he who no longer believed

The Lord Is My Shepherd

that the sun was shining anywhere found himself standing in the sunshine again. The past had not changed, but the future suddenly seemed more inviting. I can imagine the author writing this psalm to share with everyone who would hear it or read it what he had just learned about God and life.

I have been drawn to the Twenty-third Psalm throughout my adult life, as a student of the Bible, as a pastor, as a husband, as a father, and as a child of aging parents. I have marveled at its almost magical ability to soothe and comfort people in pain. I have found that, the closer I look, the more the psalm has to say to me. I would like to share with you the insights born of a lifetime of studying these familiar words, examining them line by line in the hope that they will enrich your life as they have enriched mine.

One grammatical note on reading the psalm in translation: In the Hebrew Bible, God is grammatically masculine, but functionally God is both masculine and feminine. That is, the psalm refers to God as "He," as does the Bible as a whole. But the psalm, and the Bible, will often show that same God in a feminine dimension, acting more like a mother than a father. Accordingly, I will refer to God as "He," both when I am quoting the psalm and when I am discussing it, not because I believe that God is a male but because the English language offers me no suitable alternative. I am not prepared to reduce God to an "It."

In the end, there is no explaining why we love a certain

A Psalm of David

piece of literature any more than we can explain why we love a certain person. But perhaps we will come to understand this most beloved of all the psalms, and in the process understand ourselves and our world a little better, and learn to live in that world with faith and courage. It is a psalm that has the power to change a person's life.

A personal translation/interpretation of psalm 23

The Lord is My Pattern by Teresa Crane

The LORD is my Pattern.

I shall not lack a direction, for I have a Good Example.

He shows me Himself, so that I might be like Him.

He leads me to the place where I can, as a well-loved child,

learn to be an imitator of Him in all His ways.

He restores my confidence.

He leads me in an understanding of His holiness for the sake of His eternal glory.

Yes, though I walk with a limp acquired from doing things my own way for so long,

I know that You will be patient with me and wait for me to follow in Your steps.

I need fear no evil, for You will never forsake me.

Your love and Your holy right arm uplift and comfort me.

You never mention my handicap,

for You only gaze into my soul where Your Love has covered every ugly thing.

You have prepared a way before me in the high places and the wilderness.

You anoint my path with joy in Your presence.

My life overflows with Your goodness.

Surely mercy and grace shall teach me--and transform me—

from glory to glory, with each passing day, and I shall dance in Your presence

and sing of Your covering of glorious grace forever!

5/17/96 Teresa Z. Crane