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The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF THE PSALMS.

PSALM XXIII. 1.

'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.'

THIS little song, written in the loftiest strain of devout poetry, breathes the spirit of a simple dependence upon and a perfect trust in God. It is a Psalm of hopefulness, a glad burst of grateful praise, the outflow of a heart thrilled with an elevating, ennobling, strengthening inspiration. That it was the composition of David few will care to deny. Although we have no positive proof of authorship, there is much in the structure of the Psalm, and more in its spirit, that would lead us to the conclusion that it was written by the king of Israel, who in early life had been a shepherd-lad among the lonely hills of Bethlehem. It seems an echo of the serene and quiet days of the old life. For in this short sweet song the Psalmist recalls his own experience, thinks of the many wanderings of early life with his father's flock, of the care and watchfulness, of the hard and constant toil for the sheep, of the perils encountered, of the deadly foes by which he was often assailed in the prosecution of his duties, and of all the incessant solicitude attendant upon a pastoral life.

This twenty-third Psalm has done incalculable good. It has helped many a heart and changed many a sorrow to joy. All through these centuries it has sung itself into our homes, and never once without awakening in the soul an echo responsive to its own faith and trust. When you are in a far country, and you see fluttering in the breeze the folds of your own dear flag; or, when among strangers, you listen to the martial strains of music with which you are familiar; or when, in tough-fibred manhood, in a moment of lull and rest between the hard work of every day, you catch the echo of some favourite song of your childhood, how every pulse thrills within you, and how cheerfully and gratefully, and yet sadly, you are borne back to the olden times, or carried across an invisible bridge that spans the ocean to your home once more! So when we are far from God and Christ, when we have wandered from the strait and narrow way which leads to the mountain-top of heaven, when we are revelling in our own appetites, and in the midst of our own caprice and impenitence, or when our hearts are bowed down in sorrow, and everything is dark before us, and uncertain, the old refrain of David's harp arouses the memories of our faith once more—kindles within the soul a new, unusual enthusiasm, and through our tears we look up to God, and from the midst of our darkness we reach up our hand to Him who was never yet unmindful of our sorrows and our joys, but who is the Shepherd of His whole human flock.

There came a critical moment in my life when I was sadly in need of comfort, but could see none anywhere. I could not at the moment lay my hands on my Bible, and I cast about in my mind for some passage of Scripture that would help me. Immediately there flashed into my mind the words, 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.' At first I turned from it almost with scorn. 'Such a common text as that,' I said to myself, 'is not likely to do me any good'; and I tried hard to think of a more *recherché* one; but none would come, and at last it almost seemed as if there was no other text in the whole Bible. And finally I was reduced to saying, 'Well, if I cannot think of any other text, I must try to get what little good I can out of this one,' and I began to repeat to myself over and over, 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.' Suddenly, as I did so, the words were illuminated, and there poured out upon me such floods of comfort that I felt as if I could never have a trouble again.[1]

I.

THE LORD.

1. In endeavouring to apprehend the truths and experiences of the Psalm, let us think first of that name, 'the LORD.' It is printed in large letters, to tell that it stands for *Jehovah*. It was the sacred name of God. He was not known by this name to the patriarchs, but by a name (*Elohim* or *El Shaddai*) indicating His sovereign power as the Creator and Governor of the world. When the Jews came to this name in reading the Scriptures, they would not pronounce it, but used some other word, 'Lord' or 'God,' in its stead. In referring to it they were in the habit of calling it '*The Name*.' According to some of their traditions, it was pronounced only once in the year, by the high priest on the great day of atonement, when he went into the holy of holies.

[1] Mrs. Pearsall Smith, *The God of All Comfort*, 45.

The giving of the name, through Moses, marks a new epoch in Divine revelation—a new and fuller disclosure of Himself. To judge from its derivation, it describes God as *The Being*; 'who is, and who was, and who is to come'; who 'has life in himself'; who 'is from everlasting to everlasting,' who 'inhabiteth eternity.' What an immensity of life surrounds us, in earth, and air, and sea! Even in its lowest form, as it exists in a worm or a fly, it is a mystery and a marvel to us; and the mystery and marvel broaden, deepen, become more intense, as we rise upward and upward, through one order of being after another, till we come to the flaming archangel before the throne, who looks upon the face of God and adores. All that life, so inconceivably vast in its sum, is created; it began to be; it is dependent; it was kindled by the breath of God, and continues just so long as He pleases; it might never have been, and He would not be diminished though it were to cease: He is Himself, He is alone, THE LIVING ONE.

'The Lord.' I do not like this word 'Lord.' It expresses an idea altogether alien to the term it represents. 'The Lord' translates here the name we so often use as Jehovah without knowing what it means, but to the men that used it it was a most significant name. It said, God is, He alone is, all others seem to be. It further said, He is a Person; for we use a name that describes Him as 'He who is'—a living, conscious, personal will. But it said more: He is One who stands by His word, who abides by His promise. Why did Israel come to be? God had chosen him. Why had God chosen him? For His own ends, not for those of Israel. To name God, therefore, 'He who stands by His promise,' was to say, What God purposed He will perform. He can never be false to Himself, and this is the highest of all standards of faithfulness and truth. The name Jehovah, then, ought not to be translated by a term merely expressive of dominion—ownership on the one side, and bondage on the other; still less, as a distinguished critic recommended, by 'the Eternal'; for 'the Eternal' is but an abstract phrase, denotive of duration, but giving no character, ascribing no moral quality to what endures. Jehovah is a covenant name, expresses the love and care of Him who makes the covenant for those on whose behalf it is made; and they, when they use it, confess their love of Him and abiding faith in His faithfulness.[1]

2. As we pass from the ages of the Old Testament dispensation, and step on to the threshold of the New, lo, on these very hills of Bethlehem, where David proclaimed in song this great truth, a meek and lowly Man appears, on whom the shadow of the Cross is already falling; and addressing His disciples in the well-known words, He applies them to Himself, saying, 'I am the good shepherd.' Now, take and unite these two—the Old Testament name of our God, *Jehovah*, and the New Testament name of our Lord, *Jesus*—and what an All-sufficient, All-satisfying God we have. As Jehovah, the Everlasting Father; and as Jesus, the Prince of Peace. As Jehovah, the Sovereign Lord of all; and as Jesus, the Gracious Saviour of all. As Jehovah, full of Power; and as Jesus, full of Sympathy. As Jehovah, our Creator and Preserver; and as Jesus, the Good Shepherd, ever going before His sheep, and ever living to make intercession for us.

[1] A. M. Fairbairn, *Christ in the Centuries*, 83.

II.

SHEPHERD.

We have even greater difficulty in understanding the word 'shepherd' than 'Jehovah.' We are too modern to realize what it means. We understand the successful merchant—the man that makes his fortune, that builds his barns and fills them to bursting. We understand the successful legislator—the man who by eloquence persuades the people, and through the people works his will. We understand the successful soldier—the man who can, out of a multitude of men, make one vast machine which he can, as it were, hurl at an enemy and break him into pieces. We understand the city and its ways; the author and his works. But the shepherd lies away far behind us, or out in phases of society so simple as to be alien to us and to our modes of thought and life. But think what 'shepherd' meant to the ancient Hebrews. Abraham was a shepherd, and had watched his flocks by his tent door at Mamre. Isaac was a shepherd, who walked in quiet meditation through his fields and amid his herds in the still eventide. Jacob was a shepherd, whose pastoral life was a strange blending of idyllic beauty and lust of gain. Moses was a shepherd, and was tending the flocks of Jethro his father-in-law when he saw the bush that burned yet was not consumed, and was called to be the deliverer and lawgiver of his people. David was a shepherd, and was taken from the sheepfold, where he had tended the flocks great with young, to be the lord and the king of Israel. And so the fondest and most ideal memories of the Hebrew men were pastoral and steeped in pastoral associations.

A Syrian or an Arabian pasture is very different from the narrow meadows and fenced hillsides with which we are

familiar. It is vast, and often virtually boundless. By far the greater part of it is desert—that is, land not absolutely barren, but refreshed by rain for only a few months, and through the rest of the year abandoned to the pitiless sun that sucks all life from the soil. The landscape is nearly all glare; monotonous levels or low ranges of hillocks, with as little character upon them as the waves of the sea, and shimmering in mirage under a cloudless heaven. On such a wilderness, it is evident that the person and character of the shepherd must mean a great deal more to the sheep than they can possibly mean in this country. With us, sheep left to themselves may be seen any day—in a field or on a hillside with a far-travelling fence to keep them from straying. But I do not remember ever to have seen in the East a flock of sheep without a shepherd. On such a landscape as I have described he is obviously indispensable. When you meet him there, 'alone of all his reasoning kind,' armed, weather-beaten, and looking out with eyes of care upon his scattered flock, their sole provision and defence, your heart leaps up to ask: Is there in all the world so dear a sacrament of life and peace as he?[1]

III.

My Shepherd.

There is a little word in the verse that we must not overlook—the word '*my*.' It is the word of faith—'appropriating faith,' as our fathers were wont to call it. The warrant for using it lies in His free grace. We should lose a great deal if the word were missed out—the verse would be emptied of trust, gratitude, joy, love, assurance. We may not merely say, The Lord is *a* Shepherd, a Good Shepherd, the Shepherd of the holy angels, the Shepherd of the universe, but He is *my* Shepherd.

'A child is dying,' said a stranger, passing by the house of Jairus. '*My* child is dying,' said another voice; 'Lord, *my* little daughter lieth at the point of death!' Oh, the difference between the feeling of the speakers!

Some years ago I tried to get one of my children to commit the twenty-third Psalm to memory; and as she was too young to read for herself, I had to repeat it to her until she got hold of the words. I said, 'Now, repeat after me, "The Lord is my shepherd."' She said, 'The Lord is *your* shepherd.' 'No, I did not say that, and I want you to say to me the words I say to you. Now then, "The Lord is *my* shepherd."' Again she said, 'The Lord is *your* shepherd.' It was only after much effort I could get her to repeat the exact words. The child's mistake was in some sense natural, but many of riper years have made the same blunder, saying by acts, if not by words, 'The Lord is yours, but I have no experience of His shepherdly care and protection.'

A little boy lay very sick. His minister came to see him, but, finding him weak, said but a few words. Before departing, however, he gave the child a verse of five words as a motto, a word for each finger of one hand. The sick boy counted over the words on his pale fingers. Yes; there they were, five only, and one for each knuckle. *The—Lord—is—my—shepherd.* 'And *my* is the best of the five,' he said. A few days later another visit was paid to that same home. At the door the sorrowing mother met the minister. 'It is all over,' she said; 'my little son is dead. But come and see him.' And she led the way to the darkened room. Very thin and white was the little face, very sweet and peaceful the countenance of the little sleeper. Then the mother drew down the coverlet, and turning to the minister, said, 'That's the best.' The little hands were crossed, and on the fourth knuckle of the left hand rested still a finger of the other hand. In silence the life had sped with the hands clasped to utter, 'The Lord is *my* shepherd.'[2]

IV.

The Lord is my Shepherd.

The verse recognizes a most real, and present, and energetic and effectual care of the living God, reaching to all His people, and to all that concerns them; not a mere general goodness expressed in the constitution of the world, but shepherd care—care that secures the real well-being of its objects. Unbelief removes the energy of God far back to the creation, or far off into the distance of immensity; faith brings Him near, and trusts in Him as a very present help.

Of all the relations in which men stand to the brute creation, none perhaps has appealed more to the common heart and imagination than that of the shepherd to his sheep. And in wild, rude districts, the care of a flock is often no despicable education for a man. It brings him into close contact with nature in her varying moods. It throws him back often upon his own thoughts. It evokes his self-denial, patience, tenderness, and courage. It shuts him up to the simplicities of life. It saves him, to a large extent, from the dwarfing and cramping influence of artificial estimates and conventional opinions. David had been in his youth a keeper of sheep; and now, when he was writing this Psalm, he was probably a shepherd of men. We can well believe that his early occupation had exercised an abiding influence in the moulding of his character. He could tell how he had snatched a lamb from the jaws of a lion; and it was the courage which had been nurtured by many a night-watch on the hillsides of Judah that sent him forth to meet the Philistine who came to devour the flock of Israel. His piety had been deepened under the silent heavens, as he

[1] G. A. Smith, *Four Psalms*, 4.

[2] A. A. Cooper, *God's Forget-me-not*, 60.

considered 'the moon and stars which God had ordained.' And now, as he looked back to the days when he had watched his flock with a tender regard which had often roused him to self-denial for their welfare, he cheers his heart with the simple yet magnificent conception that all the care he had shown for those feeble creatures was an emblem of God's tender concern and loving care for *him*. 'The Lord is *my* shepherd; *I* shall not want.'

The most attractive of all applications of shepherd life to God's care is that employed by our Lord in Jn 10, 'I am the good shepherd.' Most of the details of pastoral care are introduced into that most striking parable of His own grace. The apostles seem to have been peculiarly fascinated by this presentation of Himself by our Lord, for Peter writes of Him as 'the shepherd and bishop (overseer) of souls,' and elsewhere as 'the chief shepherd.' In the benediction attached to the Epistle to the Hebrews He is spoken of as 'that great shepherd of the sheep,' and John in Patmos describes the company around the throne as 'shepherded' by 'the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne.'

In the churchyard (cemetery) of the small village Dellsvig in Westphalia there are near the church four small graves, each adorned with a little cross of white marble. On the first cross stands Ps 23[1], 'The Lord is my shepherd,' etc., and on each of the following another verse of the same Psalm. The crosses mark the graves of the children of the village pastor, who lost them all in the space of two weeks. A more striking example of the comforting power of this Psalm will scarcely be found. The pastor of that village and the father of these children became afterwards the widely known benefactor of the suffering classes, Fr. v. Bodelschwingh, in Bielefeld. It may be added, that for the heart of German parents and children Ps 23 speaks the more, because it reminds them of a favourite children's hymn, based on this Psalm, by Louise Henriette v. Hayn (1724–1782), beginning:

'Weil ich Jesu Schäflein bin,
Freu ich mich nur immerhin
Über meinen guten Hirten,' etc.

(Perhaps it has been rendered into English.)[1]

1. First of all we may gather from it the thought of *God's intimate acquaintance* with us. The Eastern shepherds know the members of their flock individually. A special name is given to each one, and to that name the sheep responds. The whole connexion of a Syrian shepherd with his flock is one of close relationship. Constantly with them he learns their varied habits, their differing characters, and the little ailments with which they are often troubled. Christ touches this special aspect of the metaphor when He says of the shepherd of the sheep, 'he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out,' and gives it a very distinct and particular application when He adds, 'I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.'

2. Another mark of the shepherd character is *intense practical sympathy*. Sheep are strangely helpless and dependent. Apart from the shepherd's care their life would be sadly precarious. In the East, beneath the scorching sun or amid the winter cold, there are times when the sheep cannot gather food for themselves. With ceaseless devotion, the shepherd himself must seek the necessary supply. Then along the rocky roads, and during the searching for grass and water, the little lambs have now and then to be carried, and those of the flock with young guarded from over-fatigue. Woe to the burdened sheep when the hireling shepherd has no thought or care for his charge. With this in mind, how significant the symbol of the Psalmist becomes in unfolding the higher thought of God as love, intimacy, gentleness, sweetness! He is, indeed, touched with a feeling of our infirmities. What bonds of sympathy, of tender attachment, bind Him to us! As our Shepherd we think of Him bearing our griefs and sorrows on His tenderest feeling every hour.

3. The faithful shepherd has yet another characteristic—*disinterestedness*. Jesus said, 'The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.' He may be called to this in many ways. The endurance of great hardship, of constant danger, of personal jeopardy for the sake of the sheep, is the sure lot of the Syrian shepherd. Some have been known to shed their blood in defence of the flock. If, therefore, this generous self-sacrifice were not found in the character of the Divine Shepherd, the noblest attribute would be looked for in vain. Lacking it is not. The history of Jesus is sufficient evidence of this. His whole life was a wonderful self-forgetting. If labours of love, and words of generous counsel, and deeds of unrivalled self-foregoing and self-giving, have any speech, they eloquently proclaim Him the true Shepherd of His flock. Not to be ministered unto, but to minister, came the Son of God.

To all of us, perhaps, there are a thousand blessed associations and treasured memories that hang about this Psalm. As I read these words, I recall a scene amongst the Alps. I

[1] Eb. Nestle.

was coming along a deep ravine, shut in by great overhanging rocks that made it gloomy on the brightest day; the bare sides went stretching up to the very heavens. But to-day it was plunged into darkness, as with the shades of evening there gathered a storm. Already there was the mutter of the thunder rumbling in the distant hills. Every now and then came fierce gusts of wind, sweeping clouds of dust. Then it was that I heard the tinkle of the sheep-bell, and presently there came along his way the shepherd leading his flock, they pushing close behind him, as if finding their safety in his presence. The sky grew rapidly darker, and the storm came nearer, until the lightnings blazed incessant and the thunder burst as if right overhead, and then went booming in all the hollow places of the hills. On hastened the shepherd until he reached the long village street, and there he stopped to open the great doors of a covered yard and led his flock within. Then burst the furious rains, and the wild storm swept forth in all its fury, but the happy flock lay within, safe sheltered from all ill.[1]

V.

I SHALL NOT WANT.

There is the most comprehensive trust: 'I shall not want'—neither now nor at any future period, whether as to body or soul, in time or in eternity.

The assurance is most positive, but the expectation most modest. It is not, 'I shall have wealth or abundance; God will make this the best of all possible worlds for me'; but simply, 'I shall not want.' Yet it is large. 'Not to want' is to be wholly satisfied, and this surely is the wealthiest state. Many a rich man has had a devouring sense of poverty, because devoid of the only good that can satisfy. Leanness of flesh may bring the truest blessing, just as the most awful famine God can send is fatness of flesh and leanness of soul.

Yet it would be difficult to imagine a greater word than this. It seems to be the consummate flower of trust, the richest and ripest fruit of confidence. Man's wants are really so august, so out-topping human comprehension, that to have found the ground of their deepest and permanent satisfaction is a spiritual achievement of the very highest order. It is true that he wants the perishable things of these few transitory hours. And he must have them. Bread and water, clothes and house, are real needs of his life. But these seem quite small beside those high imperious hungers of his higher life. There is the deep inquisitive passion of his mind for truth. There is the eternal hunger of his heart for beauty. There is the quenchless desire of his soul for good. The narrow limit of these fugitive years does but mock the large capacities of his life. The intimate fellowships of to-day do but whet his appetite for a fellowship which fills every part of his life. He hungers for the eternal; he thirsts for God. He is conscious of capacities, tastes, powers which are built on the scale of the infinite. And all his wants are proportioned to his powers. To measure the greatness of the spirit of man, its infinite hungers and thirsts, and to say, 'I shall not want,' is the very heroism of life, the final and consummate expression of trust.

Do you remember that little story of the chamois-hunter of Switzerland? Wandering one day over the Alps, he made a mis-step, and fell more than a hundred feet to the very bottom of one of those horrid crevices in the ice. It was impossible for him to get up; the sides were too slippery; there were no means of climbing. He cried out ever so loud, but no human ear could hear. There was nothing but absolute starvation—death before him. What could he do? The water came pouring down in an everlasting flood. He followed the stream until he entered a large cavern, high-arched, ice-ribbed. There the water gurgled and boiled and disappeared. He could see no exit. There was evidently one somewhere, for that living stream found its way out. There was but one thing for him to do. He looked up at the blue sky, commended himself to God's protection, and then, with a strong effort, threw himself bodily into that boiling, gurgling stream, and disappeared. A moment after the struggle he found himself on the outside, thrown on the green grass of the valley of Chamouni, the noonday sun shining above his head, and the blooming flowers of the mountain about him. When I read the story I thought it an exact type of man's life heavenward. Often, when walking over the ice-fields of our own experience, we make a mis-step which precipitates us into the deep crevice of great misfortune, bereavement, or death. It is impossible to get back to the old position, but the river of love rolls its everlasting flood through the craggy mountain-top of frozen life. Follow it. The struggle may be a hard one, but throw yourself in and trust implicitly to God.[2]

A little girl once made a slip as she began to quote the twenty-third Psalm. She said, 'The Lord is my shepherd, *that's all* I want.'

[1] M. G. Pearse, *Parables and Pictures*, 66.

[2] G. H. Hepworth, in *Christian Age*, liii. 4.