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THE GREAT SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP

"The Lord is my Shepherd." – Psalm 23:1

THROUGHOUT the Old Testament the word rendered Lord is in the Hebrew Jehovah, and therefore applies to the Heavenly Father and not to the Heavenly Son. The thought presented in our text – as in other Scriptures – is that the great Over-Shepherd appointed His Son to be the Under-Shepherd of the Sheep, even as the Son has appointed under-shepherds in the Church subject to Him. The work of shepherding is not exercised toward the world. The great Under-Shepherd does not shepherd goats or wolves. The only ones who are shepherded are the sheep; and special care is taken of the Flock of God. The great Over-Shepherd looks out for the interests of His sheep, provides for them, leads them into green pastures, as the Psalmist tells us. He also protects them from wolves and other ravenous beasts.

If we would inquire, Who are these sheep? we find that the Scriptures give us good evidence that originally the Jewish nation constituted this flock, and that King David recognized himself as one of the sheep. Israel was not chosen by the Lord because they were better than the rest of mankind; but God made an exception of that people on account of Father Abraham, for whose sake He became the "Shepherd of Israel." Because of Abraham's great faith in God and his implicit obedience under the most crucial tests, the Lord promised to make of his seed a peculiar people above all the peoples of the earth. He promised to bless them, to assume a particular care over their affairs, and eventually to use them in blessing all other nations. So God made the Hebrews His chosen people. In proportion as they were obedient to His commands, He blessed them; and whenever they went astray, He chastised them and brought them back again under His care. [R5490 : page 199]

But Abraham was to have another Seed, a spiritual Seed, who were to reign over the natural seed, and to bless all nations and kindreds through the natural seed. The special application of this text, then, we understand to be to Spiritual Israel, just as all the chiefest of God's promises are to Spiritual Israel. Natural Israel were the children of Abraham according to the flesh; but the spiritual children of Abraham are those begotten of the Holy Spirit to a new nature – the spiritual nature. So while the Lord had a care over the affairs of Natural Israel, and still has a care, He has a still more particular care over the affairs of Spiritual Israel.

Hence, we understand that the speaker of this text, viewed from the prophetic standpoint, is primarily the Lord Jesus; and that all His consecrated followers throughout this Gospel Age, all the members of His Body, are also represented in the speaker. All these are likewise privileged to use these words: "Jehovah 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."

BEWARE OF WOLVES

In this 23d Psalm there is a distinction implied between *sheep* and *wolves*. The world likes to be considered strong and well able to defend themselves and their rights. On their escutcheons we never see a sheep portrayed. We see lions; we see the eagle, with its outspread wings and its sharp claws and beak; we see dragons and bears and serpents – everything to indicate ferocity, rapacity, cunning, desire for conquest. The Lord passes by all these strong, fierce nations – the lion, the eagle, the bear, etc., and has called out a new nation, altogether distinct from any of these.

God has chosen for the members of this nation those – few in number – who are sheeplike in disposition and who desire to come into His Fold. For these He has provided a particular way in which

to enter this Fold. He does not have bears in His Fold, nor tigers nor wolves nor birds of prey. God does not recognize such; they are not to be fed and cared for as He cares for His sheep. He is the Shepherd only of the sheep.

If, therefore, we would claim the promise of this beautiful Psalm, we must make sure that we are of sheeplike disposition and desirous of being led of the True Shepherd. We are to be careful to note that there is only one Shepherd who is able to care for our interests and who can be safely entrusted with them. A strange shepherd would lead the sheep astray, would lead them into difficulties, dangers and disaster. For this reason we do not trust everybody who wears the garb of a shepherd. There is but one Shepherd that we can trust.

THE TENDER SHEPHERD'S CARE

The great Over-Shepherd is willing to receive all the straying sheep that long to come back to the Fold. He has appointed as the Under-Shepherd the One who died for us, that He might fully deliver all the sheep from the Evil One – the roaring lion who walketh about seeking whom he may devour. Our gracious Savior left the Courts of Glory and came down to earth, and for thirty-three years He traversed with weary feet this vale of tears. He mingled with the poor and lowly; He wept with the sorrowing and the sinful; He had no place to lay His head. He bore the griefs and sicknesses of those about Him. He suffered and sorrowed; He bore shame and ignominy – and all this even unto death! And why? It was that He might save the "lost sheep." His blessed fellowship with the shining hosts of Heaven was all relinquished during these years of earthly pilgrimage, that the wandering sheep might be found and brought back to the Fold of God.

"There were ninety and nine that safely lay
In the shelter of the Fold;
But one was out on the hills away,

Far off in the dark and cold –
Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the tender Shepherd's care.

* * *

"But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through,
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.
Out in the desert He heard its cry –
Sick and helpless, and ready to die.

* * *

"Then all through the mountains, thunder-riven,
And up from the rocky steep,
There arose a glad cry to the gates of Heaven,
'Rejoice! I have found My sheep!'
And the angels echoed around the Throne,
'Rejoice, for the Lord brings back His own!'"

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How grateful we should be for such a Shepherd! How can we sufficiently show forth His praise! Truly we can never know this side the veil, "how dark was the night that the Lord passed through," that He might redeem us to God. And from the time we become His sheep He tenderly cares for all our interests, shielding us from every foe and the dangerous pitfalls that lie in our path.

MANKIND THE STRAYING SHEEP

All of the race of Adam are this "lost sheep." Soon the great Heavenly Shepherd will have gathered His sheep of the present Age into the Fold beyond the veil, and then He will have another flock

– the world in general. "Other sheep I have, which are not of *this* fold; them also I must bring," said the Master. Ultimately, all who become godly indeed will be glad to be counted among the Lord's sheep. They will understand God's great Plan for the salvation of men, and will appreciate the marvelous blessing conferred upon the world by the great Over-Shepherd, in sending His Son to die for all mankind, that they through Him might live.

All who will accept the gracious arrangements and obey the rules and regulations of the Lord's Kingdom, doing their best, will be brought into the sheep-fold. In proportion as they are obedient they will be raised out of **[R5491 : page 199]** degradation up to perfection. Thus all who become sheep in the next Age will be cared for – nothing shall offend or injure them. The Lord will not permit anything to harm them. They shall feed in green pastures and drink of the pure, refreshing waters of Truth. They shall have a goodly heritage.

But the sheep of the present Age, who are to be exalted, and are to do a shepherding work for these sheep of the incoming Age, are given a distinct and peculiar training, to fit them for their future great work. From the time they are accepted to this higher plane, they are dealt with accordingly. This means that they must have certain trials and afflictions, according to the flesh. And if these sheep recognize that these difficult experiences of the way are necessary, they can well rejoice. If they have full confidence in the Shepherd, they know that He will permit them to have no needless experiences, and none which will be to their injury; but that He will over-rule all their affairs, and will cause all things to work together for their good, because they love Him, because they are the called according to God's Purpose. **[R5491 : page 200]**

These are the Little Flock, sheep of the highest order. They represent only a small portion of mankind – those who have the special qualities of earnestness, humility and love of righteousness.

Having come into this Fold of God, we have every reason for confidence in the great Shepherd, and should recognize His constant care over us, His supreme interest in our spiritual welfare. Let us be good sheep! Let us not stray from the Fold, to the right hand or to the left, nor be attracted away from the green pastures and pure waters to go browsing on the thistles and poisonous weeds of some by-path, or to drink of the muddy, polluted waters of human speculation and delusive theories of men.

THE SHEEP CHARACTERISTICS

"My sheep hear My Voice and follow Me," said the Master. If we are the Lord's true sheep, we shall know His Voice. We shall not make a mistake. A stranger will we not follow, but will flee from him; for we know not the voice of strangers. (John 10:27,5.) In designating His people "The sheep of My pasture" (Jeremiah 23:1), the Heavenly Father chose a very significant and fitting emblem of the kind of characters He is now seeking. The special characteristics of the sheep are meekness, docility, lack of self-confidence, and obedience to the shepherd in whom they fully trust. The true sheep will listen intently for the faintest sound of the shepherd's voice. It will respond quickly to his call; it will watch for his guidance. Let *us* manifest all these most desirable traits of character, and ever keep close to our Heavenly Shepherd and Guide, dwelling under His loving care and watchful eye. Those who thus abide in Christ are safe.

"Trusting Him, they cannot stray;
They can never, never lose their way."

