

THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM

Rev. David R. Simons

Lessons: Psalm 23, Heaven and Hell 280

David, who wrote the Psalms, was a shepherd boy. Later, he was wonderfully led by the Lord to become a great king. The twenty-third Psalm is his acknowledgment that the Lord guided his life and was his Shepherd.

David knew well the green pastures and still waters around Bethlehem where he tended his father's sheep. He also knew the dangers a shepherd must face. When he moved the sheep from one pasture to another, he often had to go through deep valleys between mountain passes. It was there—in the shadows—that lions, bears and other wild animals hid, waiting to devour their prey. It was a shepherd's duty to lead and protect his flock. This is why David practiced slinging stones and why he carried a rod and a staff. One time he killed a lion and a bear with his bare hands, that is, without any weapon, not even a rod. David was also a skilled musician. He played the harp and sang while his sheep grazed.

Now Saul, who was the first king of Israel, disobeyed the Lord and became evil. So the Lord told Samuel, the high priest, to take a horn of holy oil from the tabernacle and go to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem to anoint one of his sons to be king in place of Saul. Seven of Jesse's sons passed before Samuel, but the Lord told Samuel that He had not chosen any of them. Then Jesse sent for David, his youngest son, who was only a boy and who was tending the sheep. When David came, the Lord said to Samuel, "Arise, anoint him; for this is the one!" Then we are told that "the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward" (I Samuel 16:12-13).

Not long after this Saul, who was now troubled by an evil spirit, sent for David, for he had been told that David was a very skillful player on the harp. Music delighted Saul and made the evil spirit go away from him.

David feared no evil, for he knew that the rod and staff of the Lord would protect him. So when the Philistine giant, Goliath, challenged the men of Israel to send a champion to fight him, David volunteered to go. Without sword or shield or armor or spear, armed only with his staff and his sling and five smooth stones out of the brook, trusting in the Lord's help, David fought that huge giant and killed him with a stone. For this deed, David became famous in Israel. Later he fought many battles for Israel against the Philistines and became a great warrior. Then the people sang of him, "Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

Because David was so popular, Saul became jealous of him. Several times while David was playing on the harp, Saul tried to kill him with a javelin. But each time the Lord protected David. Finally, however, David had to flee from Saul and hide. Then for many years Saul sought David so that he might kill him, but throughout all those years the Lord protected David.

At last Saul died, and David became king. He was a very great warrior king and conquered most of Israel's enemies. He took the stronghold of Jerusalem from the Jebusites, and it was called the city of David. He set up the Tabernacle in Jerusalem and brought the ark there. He also built a house for himself in Jerusalem and made the city the capital of his kingdom. But one of the things that David loved to do best was to compose songs or psalms to the Lord. He was therefore called the "sweet psalmist of Israel."

The Heavenly Doctrines for the New Church tell us a very remarkable thing about these Psalms. They tell us that David did not speak or write the least word of them, but the Lord spoke and wrote them *through* him. And because they are the Lord speaking, they are a part of the Word of the Lord.

From this we can see that although the twenty-third Psalm is about David's life and although the Lord was *his* Shepherd—who led him through the valley of the shadow of death many times, anointed his head so that he became king, and made his cup of success run over—still this Psalm is not only about David. It is about every one of us. And it is especially about the Lord Himself when He was a Man on earth.

When we make the Lord our Shepherd by following the truths of His Word, then He can restore our souls. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death—that is, when we are discouraged and downhearted, or when we feel there is no place for us in the world, or when we become self-conscious and feel like we have few friends or do poor work in school or are not as good as others in sports—then the truth that every one of us was created to perform some particular use can become our rod and staff to comfort us. When we do our duty, when we obey what we know to be right, and when we turn our thoughts about what we *cannot* do into thoughts about what we *need* to do, then the Lord can anoint us with happiness and satisfaction. Then, even on this earth, we can come to dwell in the house of the Lord, which is heaven, for heaven is the happiness of work well done, the joy of contributing something to others, the delight of accomplishment. So when we learn to follow the Lord as our Shepherd in a life of usefulness, it can be said of us: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." *Amen.*