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The

Story

of

GOD'S

PEOPLE



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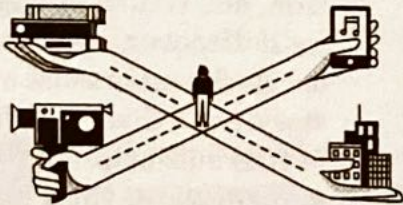
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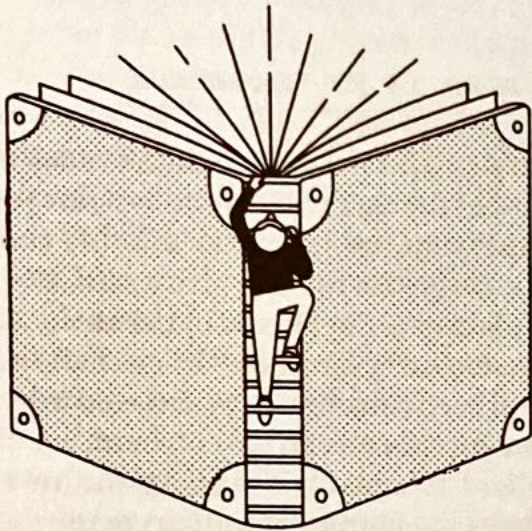
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A Psalm for Pilgrims

by Nicholas Davis

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he Christian life is a journey, not an instantaneous arrival—we are pilgrims, traveling on the way to Zion, looking for the heavenly city that is to come. The book of

Hebrews compares the Christian life to those Israelites who wandered through the wilderness, often wondering how much longer it would be before they arrived at the Promised Land. Peter describes the Christian life in the opening of his first Epistle when he calls the elect “exiles.” We are no longer in the glory days of Solomon’s temple, we are not yet in the new heavens and new earth, but we are living in a time of exile, a period of waiting.

It is on this long journey to a land still far away that Psalm 23 comforts us and uplifts

us. The Lord is our Shepherd, and we hear his voice speaking to us, as the psalm reveals our Lord Jesus as both the Good Shepherd of his sheep and the only sheep to never stray from the Shepherd.

THE LORD IS MY PROVIDER

In times of prosperity and ease, we can easily fall into a kind of spiritual complacency where we forget our need for God. It’s easier to think we have everything together when we aren’t struggling, suffering, or in need of something. But we’re not to be satisfied with wealth or possessions. We’re to delight in the Lord and to evaluate all things in light of his good character.

If God is my shepherd and he is the one leading me, then “I shall not want” (v. 1).

The Good Shepherd provides for his sheep by giving them food and drink. The psalmist uses imagery of luscious *green pastures* for sheep to graze on and *still waters* for sheep to drink from. The thought recalls God’s provision to Israel when she was wandering in the wilderness. After God had delivered her from the mighty hand of Pharaoh, the people of Israel began to grumble and moan, crying, “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exod. 16:3). Their complaint showed them to be a stiff-necked people, giving no thought to God’s delivering them from slavery, and overcome by their current difficulty. The Shepherd who had rescued them from oppression would also save them from hunger by providing them with manna. He would spread out a table in the wilderness for them to eat and be nourished until the end.

The psalmist, David, continues by saying that this Shepherd “makes me lie down in green pastures” (v. 2). God is a shepherd who gives his sheep exactly what they need for body and soul. The same God who dropped food from the sky for his wandering people also gives us bread to eat and wine to drink when we gather in holy assembly to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. He cares for our souls by the gift of eternal rest through the Lord Jesus Christ—we no longer have to try to earn our salvation, for Christ has done that for us. Through his righteous life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection, he has earned salvation for us—giving us an eternal Sabbath rest from our works and all forms of self-justification.

“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (v. 3). The Lord works in us through the Holy Spirit each day to give us rest from our evil works and to begin that eternal Sabbath rest that Jesus has started but not yet finished (Heidelberg Catechism Q/A. 103). Every

Sunday, we press the pause button on the weekly buzz and *lie down* in God’s green pastures of word and sacrament, confident that “the Lord is [our] shepherd, [we] shall not want.” But now the psalm turns away from the green pastures, and we enter into the valley of the shadow of death.

THE LORD IS MY PROTECTOR

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (v. 4). With a rod and with a staff, God protects his sheep. Shepherds in the ancient Near East would carry a long crook or a shaft to steer and reel back straying sheep, and a rod to beat off wolves. Just like an earthly shepherd, our divine Shepherd uses his staff to discipline his straying sheep and his rod to keep our enemies at bay.

Sheep are wayward, and they need a watchful Shepherd. In our sin we are prone to wander, grasping after what we want and blind to what we need. As Isaiah the prophet said, “All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned, everyone, to his own way.” That is who we are by nature. Even as those who are gifted with the new birth from above, we tend to still wander about. We desperately need for God to protect us from ourselves!

Sin seems good for a season, but it always leads to death. So God protects us by giving us under-shepherds—pastors and elders—to take us in when we are hungry, to feed us until we are full, and to keep us from wandering from the fold. The Good Shepherd, as he tells us in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, goes after all of his sheep who stray. When the one leaves the ninety-nine, a good shepherd goes after that one. He wants to see the sheep return to the fold and eagerly waits for the sinner to repent and come home.

Although Psalm 23 highlights the importance of being protected from ourselves, we also need protection from our enemies. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Why? For the Shepherd is with

me. The Lord is my protector. We live in a cursed world full of sin and death. The “valley” is a dangerous place, and we see that God’s people are not immune to suffering. Even though God is our Shepherd, harm can and will befall us. We can be comforted, however, by the knowledge that God is with us in our wilderness as we wander through the plains of this present evil age. He has not left us, and we can truly fear no evil.

Ultimately we fear no evil because God has given us the ultimate protection from our enemies in Jesus Christ. Jesus comforts us with these words in John 10, saying, “I am the Good Shepherd, and the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” Jesus came to be the Lamb slain for us so we would have the forgiveness of sins! He was beaten with the Father’s rod of judgment, so that we would be given the protection of the Father’s *staff* as the sheep of his pasture. By his blood, we are spared from God’s judgment on his enemies, and we are delivered from our slavery to Satan. Unlike us sheep who have fallen away and wandered off, Jesus never strayed from the Shepherd! He perfectly obeyed all that the Father commanded him. He walked through the valley of the shadow of death in order to bring us new life, saying, “Come, all of you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” We fear no evil, because Jesus has subjected all of our enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil—under his feet. Finally, the psalm shifts from shepherding imagery to that of a host and a house.

THE LORD IS MY PORTION

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil: my cup overflows” (v. 5). The psalmist pictures for us a festive banquet, with the host entertaining his guests with a table abundantly laden with food and drink. His enemies, however, look on helplessly, shut out from the celebration, unable to harm him or steal his gifts.

In Psalm 73, the psalmist struggles to understand something so common in this life. Why is

it that so often the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? Why is there such injustice in the world? Those who want to live a life pleasing to God are the poorest, while those who scorn and hate God are the wealthiest. God’s people often don’t have their “best lives now.”

As the psalmist navigates his way through this question, he concludes that although the wicked may prosper in this life, God has placed all evildoers on a slippery slope that ends in destruction. Life may look good now, but time is running out. Seeing past the folly of earthly life, all of God’s people look ahead to the joy that is to come. It is news of this triumphant victory that allows us to embrace the temporary suffering and tribulation for a little while longer.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Ps. 73:25–26)

Life is not fair; but this life is not the only life we will ever know. We are still pilgrims on the way to Zion, to that great heavenly city beyond the world we see and know now. We have an inheritance—a portion—that is greater than all of the wealth and riches of Wall Street.

And so Psalm 23 ends with certainty and assurance: “Surely goodness and love will follow

**“Psalm 23 ends with
certainty and assurance:
‘Surely goodness and love will
follow me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of
the Lord forever.’”**

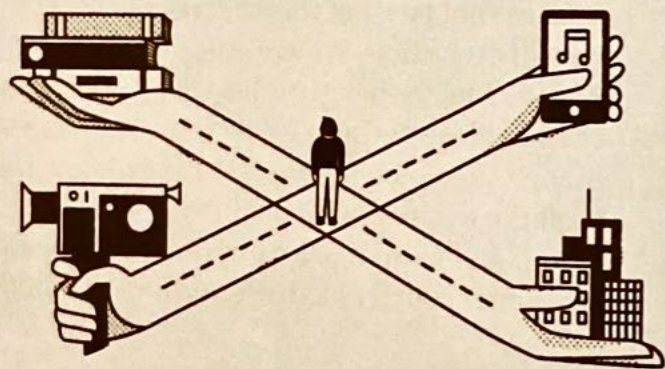
me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (v. 6). For all who believe in Jesus, the Good Shepherd who gave his life for you, you will dwell in God's house forever. The great host has prepared an eternal meal and an eternal home for you to dwell in forever! David only had a glimpse of this reality; we see it in its completion! He knew God was his Shepherd, but we have heard him through his Word and seen his body and blood in the Supper. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus provides for

and protects us. He is our portion and lasting inheritance. Jesus is not just "God with us"—he went through the valley of the shadow of death himself! He was forsaken by God on the cross, so that we would never be left nor forsaken, but accepted and adopted as heirs in the city that is to come. **MR**

NICHOLAS DAVIS is assistant pastor at Christ Church Presbyterian in Irvine, California, and assistant producer for *White Horse Inn*.

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CHRIST & CULTURE



The Christ of the Cinema

by Anthony Parisi

In his book on director Martin Scorsese, the late film critic Roger Ebert described the ominous context in which he previewed *The*

Last Temptation of Christ (1988). Prior to its release, he was invited to a private screening and watched the film alone. "This was not a perk," he writes. "It was a security measure." Ebert was

December 21st, 2015

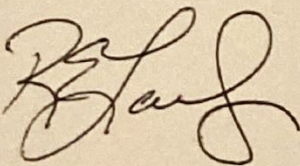
Rev. Nicholas Davis

Dear Rev. Davis,

Thank you for your essay 'A Psalm For Pilgrims' in the January/February 2016 issue of *Modern Reformation*. Glad to see something soaked into that carefully-tended coiffure during your time at seminary. Enclosed are your honorarium check, a copy of the magazine and a form for you to list three colleagues to whom you would like us to send three complimentary trial issues of *Modern Reformation*.

Thanks again for your valuable contribution. If you need to contact me, you may reach me at eric.landry@modernreformation.org.

In Christ,



Eric Landry
Executive Editor

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