

REFLECTIONS ON THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM

What do you think David had in mind when he wrote the Twenty-Third Psalm, the psalm for Good Shepherd Sunday? Can you even imagine having such a gift with language and such a close relationship with God so that you could write something like that? Later in life, when David was reflecting back on what he had written, what kinds of thoughts and feelings do you think might and must have been going through his mind? Maybe something like this –

“The Lord is my shepherd”

In David’s day, as well as at the time of the birth of Jesus, being a shepherd was an occupation that was looked down on. When Samuel, who had come to Bethlehem to anoint one of the sons of Jesse to be king, asked whether all the sons were present, Jesse replied, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” (1 Samuel 16: 11) Later, when David went to visit his older brothers who were in the army, his oldest brother Eliab asked him, “Why have you come here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness?” (1 Samuel 17: 28)

David took an occupation that was looked down on and gave it dignity and value by using that image to describe his relationship with God. Reminds me of when the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “So whatever you do, do everything to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10: 31)

“He restores my soul”

There were many reasons why David’s soul needed to be restored. After his sin with Bathsheba the prophet Nathan told him, “The sword shall never depart from your house” (2 Samuel 12: 10), which turned out to be painfully true. Son Amnon raped daughter Tamar, whereupon son Absalom murdered Amnon. After stealing the hearts of the people, Absalom stole the kingdom from his father, whom he publicly humiliated, and then eventually met his death after his short-lived rebellion.

David experienced unimaginable sorrow, as the prophet Nathan told him he would. But still God called him a man after God’s own heart. (1 Samuel 13: 14) His soul was also restored in the birth by Bathsheba of Solomon, who would build the Temple that David had wanted to build and would be the ancestor of Joseph, the legal father of Jesus.

“Your rod and your staff – they comfort me”

David was confronted by a wise woman from Tekoa for refusing to reconcile with his son Absalom. He was also confronted by the prophet Nathan regarding his sin with Bathsheba. “You are the man!” Nathan had said. (2 Samuel 12: 7) Realizing the greatness of his sin, David experienced the greatness of God’s mercy and wrote a most powerful psalm of repentance. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.” (Psalm 51: 1)

“You spread a table before me in the presence of my enemies”

David spent many of his younger years fleeing from Saul, who, because he saw David as a threat to the throne, wanted to kill him. Whatever was happening in David’s life when he wrote Psalm 22 also shows how many enemies he had. This is a psalm that Jesus prayed from the cross, beginning with the lament, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (verse 1) Verses such as “All who see me mock me” (verse 7), “They stare and gloat over me” (verse 17), and “They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots” (verse 18) also show the remarkably close parallels between the experiences of David and Jesus.

“My cup overflows”

David had wanted to buy from Araunah the Jebusite a threshing floor where he would erect an altar to the Lord, but Araunah wanted to give it him at no cost. David replied, “I will not offer to the Lord my God sacrifices that cost me nothing.” (2 Samuel 24: 24) First Chronicles 29 records the enormity of David’s gift towards the project of building the Temple. How much David must have rejoiced over the resources God had given him so that he would be able to make such a large contribution and in doing so also inspire other leaders of Israel to give significantly. The Bible tells us that the people rejoiced over the generosity of the king.

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life”

The prophet Nathan, who later would confront David over his great sin, earlier in David’s life comforted David with the promise that after his death, his son would build the Temple that David had wanted to build, and his house, kingdom, and throne would be established forever. (2 Samuel 7: 16) It would not all end with David.

“And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”

For days David had prayed that God would spare the life of the child that was born out of his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, but on the seventh day the child died. At that point David rose from the ground, washed himself, changed his clothes, went into the house of the Lord and worshipped, and then went home and went on with his life. When asked why he had responded in that way David replied, “Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” (2 Samuel 12: 23) People go through death only in one direction. David was saying, “Someday I too will die and will go to where my son is. But he will never return to where I am.”

The Twenty-Third Psalm has given comfort, strength, encouragement, and hope to millions of people for three thousand years. I believe it also did the same for the one who wrote it – the shepherd who became king. Could he have written a psalm of such depth, insight, and beauty if it did not also speak so powerfully to his own life?