

PSALM 23 FOR MATURE ADULTS ONLY

It's a shame what has happened to the 23rd psalm, the one which begins "The Lord is my shepherd..." People get ideas about fluffy little lambs skipping about a pretty green meadow while a shepherd-lad tootles his flute on the banks of a nearby stream.

The result is that Psalm 23 becomes a nice little piece of poesy for calming Aunt Tillie's nerve when she gets upset about Uncle Elmer's drinking.

But that's not what this psalm is all about. It's about the men who herded sheep in the skimpy pastures of the Palestinian uplands. Sheep herders weren't boys; they were men, armed with long staves and three-foot billy clubs.

They could knock the teeth out of a lamb-stealing wolf if they had to, and they could knock a straying ewe back into line again.

Shepherders had to be tough, probably because sheep are some of the dumbest, most helpless animal around. When the psalmist said, "The Lord is my shepherd," he was admitting that he could not make it through life by himself, that he needed the stubborn strength of his God to survive.

In order to appreciate Psalm 23 you have to picture a man in one of the courts of the temple at Jerusalem, surrounded by his family and friends. Imagine that they had just offered a thanksgiving sacrifice and were sitting down to enjoy their roast beef banquet.

As the festivities get underway, the man turns to his group. In the first three verses of this psalm he explains why he is so thankful. "The Lord has been like a shepherd to me," he suggests, "keeping me on the right trails to and from the pastures and watering holes."

Obviously the man has gone through some hard times. But he is convinced that his God has taken pretty good care of him.

In verse 4 the man starts talking directly to God. "Lord," he says, "you've knocked me back into line when I started to go in the wrong direction. And when I was as good as dead, you kept me safe and snug."

Then abruptly the worshiper quits that shepherd-and-sheep language and talks directly about the sacrificial meal he is celebrating with his friends. "You're the host at this meal, Lord," he says in verse 5. "You've spread this banquet, and poured oil on my head, and filled my cup to the brim. So thank you!"

Things hadn't always gone too well for our man. In fact, he made some enemies along the way, and they were after him. But here in the temple he can worship and celebrate without being bothered by their skeptical glances, as they scowl at him from behind a pillar.

So finally in verse 6 the man turns back to his family, "I'm having such a good time," he confesses, "that I would like to stay here in the temple courts as long as I live."

Maybe on the outside his enemies have been hounding him, but here in the temple he sees things in a different light. He sees that the Lord's goodness will dog his heels until the day he dies.

Obviously this kind of psalm is not for everybody. It certainly isn't for people who have a namby-pamby picture of God. Nor is it for timid neurotics.

On the contrary, it pictures the Lord as strong and reliable. As a result, it was meant to be prayed by men and women who are gutsy enough to face up to their own mistakes and admit their need for a strong shepherd.

In a nutshell, Psalm 23 isn't for children. It's for adults who are mature enough to admit that they can't make it in life by themselves, that they've tried and failed, and that they welcome the help of as strong Shepherd Lord.

[FILE 31]