

PSALM 23

INTRODUCTION

A Psalm is an expression of worship (think of a song or poem). The book of Psalms in the Bible is a collection of these expressions written by different people at different times. King David, the second king of Israel who is included in the genealogy of Jesus, wrote many of these Psalms, including Psalm 23.

We don't know exactly when David wrote this Psalm. Some scholars say it was later in his life when he was the established King of Israel, possibly during one of the many trials he faced during his life.

Psalm 23 is a reminder of who God is. This is a reminder we all need. Whether you are in a trial, coming out of one, or unknowingly being prepared to enter into one, the hope is that this Psalm speaks to you wherever you may be and that you will have a better understanding of who God is.

DAY 1

PSALM 23:1

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD; I SHALL NOT WANT

*Repeat this verse at least 3 times
and these words sink into your soul.*

When going through trials, often it is our assumptions of who God is that are in question. Who is this God that is allowing this to happen? David starts Psalm 23 with a statement, "The Lord is my Shepherd." David doesn't say "The Lord is a Shepherd", he says, "The Lord is my Shepherd". Jesus says that his sheep know his voice and follow him. Have you ever admired someone else's faith, how they handle certain situations, or the joy they seem to have no matter the circumstance? Have you recognized that they are following God -that God is their shepherd?

You can acknowledge that God is a shepherd, but that's different from saying he's your shepherd. Is God's voice the voice you are listening to? Is he the one you are following?

If he's not your shepherd, then the rest of Psalm 23 is meaningless because David is going to tell us where God is leading him, but in order to go, we must follow..

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When God is our Shepherd, we don't have to want anything. A better translation of want, is "need" or "lacking".

Wants are different from needs. We want a lot of things that we don't need. Our wants and desires have a way of dominating our thoughts and fool us into thinking that they are needs. Is what you want an actual need? Think about the thing that you are desperately hoping for. Is that a want or need? If it's a need, then you're in luck, because when you follow God, you shall lack nothing.

When David was a shepherd boy, he fought off lions and bears, risking his life to save theirs. He was constantly protecting them and looking for dangers before his sheep even knew danger was present. He looked for food and water for his flock before their current food supply ran out. God, like a shepherd, stays ahead of our needs. However, there is a disclaimer. David writes from a spiritual place and uses the physical as an example. Sickness, hardships, and even death still exist and are not avoidable, but when you follow God as your shepherd, even in the midst of those things, your soul is taken care of. If we truly believe that God is our shepherd, then there is nothing to fear and there is nothing we lack.

Reflection

1. Is the Lord your Shepherd?
2. What is it that you lack? Bring it to the good Shepherd.

DAY 2

PSALM 23:2

**HE MAKES ME LIE DOWN IN
GREEN PASTURES. HE LEADS
ME BESIDE STILL WATERS.**

*Repeat this verse at least 3 times
and these words sink into your soul.*

Life was not meant to feel as busy as most of us feel. We feel guilty being still because there is always something that needs our attention. Busyness is a feeling, not a full schedule. You can have a lot going on and still maintain a "green pasture, still water feeling". Imagine asking someone how they were doing and they responded, "I feel like I'm lying down in a green pasture or next to still waters." Our culture has glorified business, telling us the lie that if you aren't busy, then you aren't doing enough.

Busyness has its cost. It leads to stress, anxiety, and an overall feeling of being overwhelmed. The enemy is constantly trying to distract us with more while God is trying to give us less. We read about God's command to take a sabbath, a whole day off once a week, and we laugh.

It's not that we don't want a sabbath, but we think it's impossible. There's just too much to do, too many things to address. We overvalue ourselves and undervalue God.

We don't even attempt to rest because we are afraid of what will happen. In doing so we are showing God that we don't trust him. We are showing him that he is not our Shepherd. Many think: "It must be nice to lie down in a green pasture or to sit next to still waters. But me? I have things to do and stuff to worry about." But this is what God offers us. This is where God wants to lead us into. The question is, are you willing to follow him?

Isn't there something so peaceful about what David is describing in this verse "green pastures" and "still waters"? David spent a lot of his childhood outside as a shepherd boy, and he most likely had some great memories of lying in a green pasture or being next to a stream. Maybe you have similar memories of rivers, parks or a small babbling brook. Stop and place yourself in that moment. Imagine sitting next to a river, hearing the water cascading, the birds chirping, and the sun gently warming your face. This feeling of peace is the picture David is painting. As king, he was dealing with a lot: enemies, managing a country and his staff, parenting, and much more. When you follow God, no matter what the circumstances are around you, God can lead you to the "green pasture and still water" feeling when you recognize his presence.

When life feels overwhelming, he makes us lie down in green pastures. David writes it as if we don't have a choice: "He makes us." Like sheep following a shepherd, the shepherd will stop for his sheep to rest, even though they may want to keep going. God knows that our worries, fears and anxiety will overtake us if we don't take the time to recognize that he is present. So, take a breath and hear the voice of your loving Father saying, "Slow down. I'm in this and I'm in control. You don't need to worry."

Reflection

1. What prevents you from following God to green pastures and still waters?
2. Where might God be inviting you to rest on a daily or weekly basis? What could a Sabbath (a full day of rest) look like for you in this season?

DAY 3

PSALM 23:3

**HE RESTORES MY SOUL. HE
LEADS ME IN PATHS OF
RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR HIS
NAME'S SAKE.**

*Repeat this verse at least 3 times
and these words sink into your soul.*

The previous verse, "lying in green pastures" and being led "beside still waters" is meant to restore our soul. It's like drinking a cold glass of water on a hot day after being in the sun. Or it's that moment when you get home from a long day and get to sit down and take your shoes off. This is the feeling that God invites us into. For David to say that God restores his soul, is implying that his soul was in need of restoration. St. John of the cross calls it "The Dark Night of the Soul". This is when God purposefully withdraws the felt sense of his presence from us in order to teach us. This is his loving discipline/training -not a harsh, angry punishment.

By submitting to the sovereign work of God and trusting him through these dark nights, our love for God matures beyond seeking pleasure from him. The Dark Night of the Soul is temporary and can be caused by a life circumstance, a period of doubt, or a difficult season of life. It feels as if our souls are being damaged. The encouraging thing is that God doesn't leave us there. He brings us out of it, and our souls can be restored if we follow Him.

Maybe you are not in a dark night of the soul, but you are just weary. Is your everyday life feeling like a lot? Is it making your soul feel empty? God is restoring your soul when you follow him to these metaphorical green pastures and still waters, to this place where you can find peace in knowing God is in control.

When our souls are restored, it's meant to give us a new and greater perspective that takes us on the path of righteousness. God doesn't restore our souls so that we will live more for us. He does it so we will live more for him. When we live for us, it takes us down a path that goes in circles or leads to dead ends, and eventually that path leads to death. A restored soul is meant to walk on the path of righteousness for His name's sake -not ours.

Reflection

1. Is your soul in need of restoration?
2. What path are your steps leading you down? Is it one that leads to his name's sake, or your name's sake?

DAY 4

PSALM 23:4

**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.**

*Repeat this verse at least 3 times
and these words sink into your soul.*

Remember how David starts the Psalm out with, "The Lord is my shepherd", which means God is the one we are following? When we think of following God, we assume that he will only take us to green pastures and still waters. Doesn't a good God want us to avoid bad things happening to us? This thinking can cause us to look for another shepherd to follow -a shepherd that will only think about our desires and happiness. The reality is that we live in a broken world and no matter how hard you try, you can't avoid the brokenness of the world. God said that in this world you will have trouble, but he also says don't be troubled. Why? Because He is with us.

The phrase, "valley of the shadow of death" is in other parts of the Old Testament. One is said by the prophet Jeremiah, and the other is in the book of Job. Both are describing their most difficult days. We have all walked through this valley at points in our lives. These are times when we have felt scared, abandoned, and uncomfortable.

David went through several valleys like this during his lifetime: When he was running and hiding in the desert from King Saul who was trying to kill him, the feeling of guilt from having an affair and then murdering the husband, losing his best friend, Jonathan, in battle, losing several of his children to death (one as a baby, one murdered by his other son, and one in battle). But what I think was probably David's deepest valley was when his son, Absalom, tried to overthrow Him as king. David walked through many valleys of the shadow of death, but he reminds himself who God is by saying, "Even though...I will fear no evil." Why? Because the Lord is with him.

David doesn't praise God for the avoidance of the valley of shadow of death, but he acknowledges his presence in it. Sheep need to be led through dangerous valleys in order to get to green pastures. During these times, the shepherd was on high alert with his staff and rod in hand ready to protect the flock. This is the posture God takes when we walk through these dark valleys. A valley is dark because the mountains are blocking the sun. This is true about the valleys of life. The troubles in this world have a way of blocking our view of Jesus. It's not that Jesus isn't there. It may be hard to see Him, but that doesn't mean he's not present. Have faith that Jesus is with you in the valley of the shadow of death that you have all walked through, or maybe you are walking through right now. Have faith that he has not abandoned you, he has not led you astray, and he will protect you from the evil one who is trying to block your view of Him.

Reflection

1. Is your soul in need of restoration?
2. What path are your steps leading you down? Is it one that leads to his name's sake, or your name's sake?

DAY 5

PSALM 23:5

**YOU PREPARE A TABLE
BEFORE ME IN THE
PRESENCE OF MY ENEMIES,
YOU ANOINT MY HEAD WITH
OIL; MY CUP OVERFLOWS**

*Repeat this verse at least 3 times
and these words sink into your soul.*

A shepherd takes his sheep to pastures to eat, but that doesn't mean they are safe from the snakes, lions, and flies. The shepherd stands watch protecting his flock as they graze. David was surrounded by enemies. Israel, the nation David was the king of, was surrounded by nations that they were constantly at war with, so David could never keep his guard down. David paints this obscure picture of a table being set in the presence of battle. It's as if David is picturing a nice dinner with God, just the two of them, while arrows are being shot at them.

Do you feel surrounded by the enemy? Is life beating down on you? Is there someone or something in particular that is trying to pick a battle with you? We often feel that the battle needs to be over before we can sit at the table to eat. How can we enjoy a meal or the presence of our God when we are in fighting mode? David says that this meal exists in the presence of our enemies -not in the absence of his enemies. The table is set for you. Will you sit down and eat with Jesus even though you are in battle?

"You anoint my head with oil". Lions and wolves are obviously a danger to sheep, but the flies can be almost as dangerous. Flies can crawl into the nostrils of sheep and cause them to go insane and start banging their heads against rocks. These little flies can become deadly.

Are there thoughts crawling into your mind that are causing you distress? Thoughts of worry, doubt, fear, or anger? A good shepherd anoints the sheep's nose with oil as a fly repellent. Likewise, God as our shepherd anoints us with his Spirit. His Spirit keeps these thoughts from entering our minds. But for a sheep to be anointed with oil, it must come to the shepherd and submit to it by bowing down so the shepherd can place oil on its nose. If the sheep runs away or fights, they won't get the anointing of oil and their insect problem will increase. Likewise, to receive the Spirit, we are called to come to the Lord and submit to him, bowing before him, recognizing that he is our Lord, our Shepherd. When we do that, the thoughts that enter our minds that cause damage can be repelled. Then, and only then, will our cups overflow.

Reflection

1. What enemy are you battling with right now?
2. What does it look like to submit to the Lord?

DAY 6

PSALM 23:6

**SURELY GOODNESS AND
MERCY WILL FOLLOW ME
ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE,
AND I SHALL DWELL IN THE
HOUSE OF THE LORD
FOREVER.**

*Repeat this verse at least 3 times
and these words sink into your soul.*

In the last verse of Psalm 23, David tells us what we receive when we follow God as our good shepherd. What we receive now is "goodness and mercy". What we will receive forever is "dwelling in the house of The Lord". David doesn't say "chase goodness and mercy", he says "goodness and mercy shall follow". As he follows God, goodness and mercy follow him. We often live life backwards from this. We follow goodness and mercy hoping that God will follow us. We want the kingdom without the king. We want to lie down in green pastures and sit by still waters. We want to be protected by our enemies. We want all of these results, but we don't want to follow God. And then we get frustrated that we don't have goodness and mercy, and we blame God.

When you are home with a crying baby, God is holding your hand. When you are feeling all alone, God is there next to you. God is with you all the days of your life. Sometimes, God may move the obstacles and trials in your life, giving you a glimpse of heaven. And sometimes (or oftentimes) the trial remains, but that's when he gives us the strength needed and peace of His presence.

There is a difference between this world and the next. This world is broken and the next is whole. In the next world, there is no more pain, no more tears, and no more suffering. It will be the world that God had originally created before sin entered. We will be with our loving Father. Furthermore, here's some great news! We don't have to wait to experience God's presence. We can live with Him now. Jesus' last words to his disciples were, "I will be with you always to the end of age." He's with us as we journey through this broken world. He is guiding us, protecting us, strengthening us, and giving us goodness and mercy.

Max Lucado says "For some this journey has been long. You've had many hurts, difficulties, and burdens that very few have had to shoulder. But He's the Father of forward-motion. The trials of the trip will be lost in the joys of the feast." God may not do everything we want him to do, but he will do everything that he feels is best and is good. But we look in the rearview mirror and instead of seeing goodness and mercy following us, we see hurt and disappointment. This is why David ends with a bigger picture -an eternal picture. David knows that the hardships of this world are just temporary and don't compare to Heaven, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17: "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." God is leading us home to His house for us to dwell in forever. Will you follow him there?

Reflection

1. Take time to think about the good things in your life?
2. What are you longing for that will one day be fulfilled in heaven?