



# REFLECTIONS ON PSALM 23

# INTRODUCTION

We all have images of God, ways we picture and think about Him. The Bible itself uses many roles to say something about who God is to us: father, warrior, friend, savior, king, even a nursing mother. All of these are metaphors. Although God is at His very essence infinite Spirit, He makes Himself known and understood to us finite, limited, flesh-and-blood creatures by relating in human terms. None of these images of God on their own can give us a complete picture of who He is, yet each role illuminates a unique aspect of His nature. If we think, imagine, and meditate on Him in these human roles, they can bring amazing glimpses into the heart of God and how he desires to relate to us. Without them, much of who God is would be veiled to us.

Psalm 23 reveals God as a shepherd. This Psalm was penned by David who was himself a shepherd before being raised up by God to become the second and greatest king of Israel. David was well acquainted with the work and heart of a shepherd, and how he related to his sheep. It is clear from this Psalm that he came to understand God more deeply by considering his own role of shepherd to his dependent flock. It was intimate and personal for him. The role of a good shepherd was something that David began to attribute to God.

Psalm 23 is part poem, part prayer. It begins by referring to God in the third person: *He leads me... he restores...* Then in verse three there is a shift — the pronoun changes from “he” to “you.” He moves from describing God to talking to God. I doubt this was thought out in advance. When he reflects on God as his shepherd, his heart is moved, he forgets about his “audience” who might read the poem, and he addresses God directly: *You are with me... you prepare a table...*

The images of God, the reality of His nature, and how He longs to relate to us come through powerfully in these eight verses. Taking our time with David’s observations about God has the power to impact our own understanding of **Him**. That’s what this journal is about taking our time, using our imagination, opening our hearts and minds to come to understand and benefit from the embrace of our Shepherd.

Jesus used the same metaphor describing Himself as shepherd and His followers as sheep belonging to Him (John 10). These words show the desire God has for each of us to live a life of following Him with absolute trust and abandon, receiving from Him all that we need in life. Some of the teachings of Jesus as shepherd will be integrated into these pages along with Psalm 23. David and Jesus both set the record straight — as sheep, our job isn’t complicated: keep your eyes on the shepherd who is good. He will lead you. He will provide for you. He will protect you. He loves you. Follow Him!

For some time, I have been making an annual trip to Gethsemani Abbey for a silent retreat. There are miles of trails in those rolling bluegrass hills of northern Kentucky, and along the way there are sculptures tucked in the forest and meadows. Like the beauty of God’s creation around them, these sculptures can draw our minds

and hearts to the beauty of God Himself. On one such trip, I came across a sculpture of a shepherd kneeling beside a lamb. Since I had nothing but time on my hands, I stopped, rolled out a blanket on the forest floor, and began to simply look at the statue. It was a time of great stress and agitation in my life, and I was in Kentucky desperately needing God's help and to hear from Him. As I lay there under the canopy of trees, leaves rustling in the gentle wind, looking at the shepherd and his tenderness toward the lamb, Jesus, my Shepherd began to speak to my heart.

I believe He said a lot to me, and later I wrote a great deal about the "conversation" in my journal, but this is the primary thing I want to share you begin this journey: He asked me to examine the image. To see the posture, the demeanor, and especially the size of the Shepherd. And then to look closely at the lamb. To see the posture, the demeanor, and especially the size of the lamb. After sitting for a couple of hours, clarity came to me. He was asking me to stop trying to be the shepherd. To see myself as the lamb who deeply trusted and felt safe with the shepherd. "Craig, can you just be the lamb, and let me lead you?" was what I heard him asking me that day.

As I gathered up my blanket, I snapped a picture, which is on the title page. That began a new journey of my life as a **lamb under the care of my Shepherd**. The picture is taped in the front of every journal I have used since then. I begin every single day looking at the picture, meditating on what it communicates, and then reflecting on Psalm 23 line by line. This helps me embrace the perspective anew about who God is and who I am in relationship to Him. It has truly been life-changing. The thoughts, questions, and meditations in this devotional have largely come out of those quiet mornings with my Shepherd.

My hope for you is that you will invest the time, not just to read the Scripture and reflection, but that you would have a daily appointment with the Shepherd who longs to lead you moment by moment every day. I would encourage you to use the picture to activate your imagination, to memorize the Psalm, and to sit quietly and listen. I believe He has a lot to say to you that you are going to want to hear from Him.

**Craig Mayes**

*Lead Pastor*

Kensington Church

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*All Scripture is taken from  
the New International Version,  
English Standard Version,  
& New King James Version.*

Part One:

# PRESENCE & PROVISION

(Psalm 23:1-3)



*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (NIV)*

## Day 1

# THE LORD...

## Psalm 23:1a

David begins Psalm 23 by making a declaration about God: *"The LORD is..."*. Notice that the word LORD is written in all capital letters. When you see this in English translations of the Bible it is done for a very specific reason. In Hebrew, the original language of what we call the Old Testament, the most common reference to God was the Hebrew word, Elohim, translated into English as "God." We encounter this immediately in the first verse of Genesis: *In the beginning, Elohim created the heavens and the earth.* Psalm 23 begins with a different Hebrew word for God, one translated alternately as Yahweh or Jehovah, and commonly written in our English Bible as LORD — in all capitals. Not wanting to weigh down with too much history but recognizing the significance of David's word choice, let's go just a bit deeper.

The name "Yahweh," given by God Himself, was first revealed to Moses. When God asked Moses to go to Egypt to lead His people out of slavery, Moses was reluctant to go and asked God a simple question. *"What is your name? Whom shall I tell Pharaoh has sent me?"* There were many gods and names for god at that time in Egypt and in other ancient civilizations. Moses wanted a name! On whose authority am I being sent? In Exodus 3:14, God replies: *"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"* From this verse we get the name Yahweh. "I am" is a Hebrew word made up of four consonants: (יהוה) Yod (Y), Heh (H), Waw (W), and Heh(H), or put together, YHWH, which is known as the tetragrammaton. Its literal meaning is simply "to be" — thus the translation, "I AM" which God gives to Moses as His name.

In the ancient Hebrew language vowels were not written out, so it is not certain how YHWH was pronounced. In time, Yahweh became the favored pronunciation and when the Old Testament was translated into Latin, Yahweh became "Jehovah." Whenever you see LORD in all caps, the Hebrew word for God being used is Yahweh. Jewish people came to believe that the name YHWH was too holy to be spoken out loud, and after the 6th century BC, we see the use of Elohim or Adonai being used most of the time in the Scriptures. So, when reading the Old Testament in most of our English translations, LORD is Yahweh, God is Elohim, and Lord is Adonai.

Why does this matter? David chooses the most sacred name for God as he begins his Psalm. He says *"The LORD is..."*. What might possibly follow? Yahweh is... Creator. Ruler. Master. King. Almighty. Other. Powerful. Frightening. All of these words might legitimately come to mind when we think about God. But that is not where David goes. What follows in the next two words and the entire Psalm is unexpected. David

states that the LORD is his shepherd. God Almighty is his shepherd! At first glance this image seems incongruent with the idea of the LORD. The six verses of Psalm 23 paint a picture of God as shepherd. How we think about God is so vitally important to how we live our lives in the world. Our understanding of God's essential nature, His character and His posture toward us shapes how we think about ourselves — our past, present and future.

In beautiful, descriptive, and poetic words inspired by David's personal experience with God, we are invited into an unimaginable intimacy with the great **I AM**. It is hard to believe this could be true! When Moses, the first human being to hear this name for God, obeyed the **I AM** and went to confront the most powerful ruler in the world with signs and wonders, little did he know that in time: *The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend* (Exodus 33:11).

The LORD is my friend! Psalm 23 is a journey into a deepening friendship with God. This One who is indeed above all — creator, ruler, king, — has a desire for each of us; a desire for friendship. How amazing and life-changing could a friendship with God — with the LORD, with the **I AM** — be? The Psalm promises, line by line, that Yahweh will take away our anxiety, will bring us peace, will restore our souls, will lead us down the right path, will walk with us in the darkest times, will give us abundance even when we are surrounded by opposition, will pour out goodness and mercy every day of our lives, and will one day take us to be with Him forever. This is who God is for you!

## MEDITATE

We all have a picture or two in our minds of who God is. These images and ideas are shaped by many things: our first introduction to God, perhaps as a child; our life experiences with parents or other authority figures; our reading of the Bible, which can often lead us to seemingly conflicting ideas about God — is He full of wrath or the God of love? Take some time to quiet your mind and reflect on the following. Answer honestly, not with what you think is **supposed** to be true.

Anthony de Mello suggests that you **“Behold God beholding you... and smiling.”** Use your imagination now and see God looking at you. Your eyes meet. What do you see? What does His facial expression tell you? Can you hear Him greet you “friend,” with a big smile on His face?

## Day 2

# THE LORD IS MY...

## Psalm 23:1a

David begins his poem by writing, The LORD is **my**... The word “my” or “mine” most often denotes possession. *I can give you a ride in **my** car; it’s raining and I forgot to bring **my** umbrella.* It can also communicate selfishness, as when a toddler disrupts the peace with an ear-splitting declaration of “**mine**” in a battle to possess the favorite toy.

There is another use of the word **my** which conveys not so much ownership or possession, and certainly not selfishness, but rather connectedness, joy and even tenderness. *This is **my** oldest daughter; I am so excited for you to meet **my** grandpa; here is **my** new puppy.* All of these use the word **my** in a way that shows a meaningful personal attachment.

In our current culture, the words “God” and “my” are frequently put together as an expression of surprise, delight, or anger. Three words, now reduced to three letters, can be seen in endless social posts and text messages: **OMG**. Most people using this are not actually thinking about God. It’s just an expression. Many years ago, my grandmother used another shortened version, “Oh my!” Perhaps we should start a movement of reducing **OMG** to **OM** in all texts and social media, **out of respect for God!**

Back to David. The LORD is **my**..., he writes. David may be a king, but next to the LORD, he is pretty small — as we all are. Small enough to be unnoticed and inconsequential to God. But that is not the case. Right out of the gate, we should stop at this two-letter word which David applies to God and sit in wonder. In this tiny word we get a hint of where David is going in this Psalm. Not the way of religion. Not the way of abstract ideas and theology. This is personal. The LORD is **my**... David is saying. I know Him, and I am known.

If I were to ask you to name ten celebrities or famous athletes, artists, or politicians, you could rattle off ten in ten seconds. You know them. Or rather, you know **about** them. You could describe what they look like and what they have done that has made them famous. If you are a real fan, you could probably share a lot of obscure information about them and bore us in the process! Now if you handed the list to me, and I could track them down and have a conversation with them, how many of them would know who you are when I mention your name? What could they tell me about you? The point is this: it’s a one-way street. Famous people are well known by people who remain unknown. That’s the way the world is. That is not the way of God.



And if I were to have a conversation with God about you? He would know you — exactly, precisely, personally. There is nothing I could say about you that He doesn't know, and He would be able to correct all the human errors in my observations of you. He knows you really well. We are told this repeatedly throughout the Bible, but Psalm 139, also written by David, states it emphatically in its 24 verses. Here is a sampling of David's declarations about God knowing him:

- *For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*
- *You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.*
- *You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.*
- *You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.*
- *Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.*
- *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful. I know that full well.*

God is not in some far-off place disconnected and uninterested in you. You belong to the LORD, who knows you, and in a sense, He belongs to you, as amazing as that is to consider. Like David, we need to know and understand that the LORD is mine. I think nothing would delight God more than if we could say, know, and feel that this is the nature of our relationship with Him.

## MEDITATE

Does God really see, know, and love you? Do you believe this? Do you know this to be true in your everyday experience as you move and breathe? And then, do you believe and understand that He wants you to know Him, to know Him so intimately that when speaking of Him, as David does in Psalm 23, you would be comfortable to address Him with the word "my"? The LORD is my...

David spent many years tending sheep in the wilderness. That is where his relationship with God took root, where God went from the abstract to the real, where God became known to him. What are you doing or what can you begin to do, to grow in knowing God, not information about Him but to know Him so that He becomes yours? God longs for this for you more than anything else.

Before you move into your day, take some time to meditate on these words spoken by God to the prophet Isaiah. Put your name in the sentences. They are as true of you today as they were for Isaiah. "*Fear not, for I have redeemed \_\_\_\_\_; I have called \_\_\_\_\_ by name; \_\_\_\_\_, you are mine*" (Isaiah 43:1).

## Day 3

# THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD (PART 1)

## Psalm 23:1a

Today we consider what might be behind David choosing the image of the LORD as a *shepherd*, as *his shepherd*.

The first man chosen to serve as king of Israel, Saul, is described as *handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else* (1 Samuel 9:2). If GQ magazine existed, it sounds like he certainly would have been featured on the cover. But before long Saul chose to go his own way and to not **follow** (key word we'll return to soon) God's leading. When it came time to choose the next king, God said to the prophet Samuel (see 1 Samuel 16 for the full account), *"Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."* In the selection of Saul's successor, God instructed Samuel to have a man by the name of Jesse gather his sons together. When he had done so, Samuel looked them over and God told him that the one He had selected was not present. Samuel asks Jesse, *"Are these all the sons you have?"* Jesse replies, *"There is still the youngest. He is tending the sheep."* David is called to the gathering, and when he arrives, God says, *"Rise and anoint him; this is the one"* (1 Samuel 16: 11a, 12b)

David didn't even get invited to the line-up! He was overlooked, the youngest, and likely the smallest — the 'runt' of the litter. In choosing the next leader of Israel, God did not choose the warrior type. He chose a man who had spent years of his young life as a shepherd, leading and caring for a flock of sheep. His was the heart God wanted in a king.

We get a glimpse of what God saw in this young shepherd when David later steps forward, volunteering to fight Goliath. He was laughed at and ridiculed for his plans to 'take on' the giant. Saul looked David in the eyes, sizing him up, and said, *"You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth."* Not to be dissuaded, David shares a bit of his resume, *"Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine"* (1 Samuel 17).

Take notice! After telling this incredible story of victorious hand-to-hand combat with a lion and a bear, David says he knows he can take down Goliath because **it was the LORD who rescued him from the paws of the bear and the lion**. David was boasting not in himself, but in the LORD.

Notice also: David, the runt of the litter, made the personal choice to go after the lion and get back his sheep. Can you picture him running after the lion with his sheep in its jaws? He knew and loved this sheep so he charged with a shepherd's rod and most certainly prayer. **God help me!**

Of course, God knew all of this about David when he handpicked him to be king. He had been right there with David, the lion, and the bear. He heard and answered his prayers and gave him victory. I imagine as God saw David, perhaps bloodied from the battle, hoist his rescued sheep onto his shoulders and tenderly carry him back to his flock, He knew this was a man who could lead the flock of Israel. One thousand years later, Jesus, who is referred to as *the Son of David*, would say: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep* (John 10:11). David was that kind of shepherd and leader.

Saul did not follow God. David did, though not perfectly. As a shepherd himself, David knew how important it was for the sheep to follow the shepherd. Perhaps the sheep ended up in the mouth of the lion because he had wandered away from David. When David picks up his pen to write this poem, and his thoughts go to God, what comes to mind? Line by line, David is painting a beautiful picture of what God is like. He is a shepherd who will chase after a lion to rescue a sheep He loves — even if the sheep's own foolishness is what put him into danger — and carry him on his shoulders back to safety. For David, this is now a role reversal. David is the sheep, and God is his shepherd. His job? To follow.

## MEDITATE

It has become common today for Christians to refer to themselves as followers of Jesus. After all, Jesus' initial words of invitation to his disciples were, **"follow me."** Later on, we will spend time in John 10 where Jesus speaks a great deal about our relationship with Him as that of a shepherd and sheep. For today, just five words into Psalm 23, can you see with clarity that the **LORD** (big God!) is **your** (personal, intimate) **shepherd**? If you could think of God, relate to Him in this way, what would that mean?

Take some time to picture yourself, God's precious sheep, maybe even a tiny lamb, in the grip of a lion, whatever that might represent in your current situation. Can you see God full-on running to you, because you are His, you belong to Him, and there is no way He is going to let you go.

## Day 4

# THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD (PART 2)

## Psalm 23:1a

What difference might it make if, when thinking about God, the word **shepherd** came to mind?

Every person, whether or not conscious of it, is living life in the context of a story. This is a grand narrative which addresses the most fundamental questions of life and what it means to be a human being: *what is life's meaning?; how is life to be lived?; where is this all heading?* One's individual story, vocation, relationships, aspirations, successes and failures, what one worries and stresses about, what brings joy and fulfillment, ultimately all find their meaning in the context of the larger narrative. For many, an essential and defining part of this narrative is answering: *Who is God and who am I in relation to Him?"*

So again, what difference might it make if in our story we understood God as our shepherd? David's belief in God and how he thought about **Him** provided perspective to navigate the good, the bad, and the ugly of life. David understood his story within the larger story of God — a beautiful and grand story that transcends what we might experience as the daily grind. This is one of the most powerful and potentially liberating things we discover in Psalm 23, the very real invitation to live under the care and provision of God our Shepherd.

If David regarded the LORD as his shepherd, that means that he regarded himself as a sheep. Beyond his identity and role as a man, a husband, a father, and a king, David was a sheep belonging to the LORD his shepherd. As others have noted: *your image of God creates you.*

As I have spent time meditating on this Psalm, I have come to see the great value in taking time daily to reflect on the image of sheep and shepherd in order to "right size" my understanding of myself and the challenges I face. Looking at the image of the shepherd stretching out his large hand to lay on the lamb's little head, there is an immediate sense of this reality: ***I am small and He is big!*** I am dependent, He is sustaining. I am vulnerable, He is my protector. I am uncertain, He is confident. I am anxious, He is peace. All of this provides a critical perspective as I step into my day and what it requires of me. I don't have to figure it all out. I just have to think of myself as His sheep and act like His sheep — following the Shepherd like sheep do. It's when I lose this perspective, when the shepherd is absent from the picture, that my perspective gets off and life can overwhelm me. I know from personal experience. I have wandered off on my own more times than I can count.

It has been said that sheep are among the dumbest animals. Turns out, this is a myth. However, sheep are easily frightened. They are in the category of “prey animals,” meaning they are an easy target for carnivores with sharp teeth and claws. They have no natural defenses. They are not fast. They are easily startled by unexpected or loud noises, fearful of dark or shadowed spaces, and anything that resembles a predator or threat. Because of this, they tend to stick together, and most importantly, keep their eyes on their shepherd. Utter trust and dependency on their shepherd are among the defining characteristics of sheep. As you read, reflect on what this suggests about the nature of our relationship with God as our shepherd. In revealing Himself as shepherd and us as sheep, is God not saying that what He wants most is for us to stay close with our eyes on him, letting him lead and care for us? Jesus said that we should stay close to Him because “...*apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5).

In the year 2000, I took my first trip to India. Of the many things I saw, I was fascinated by the presence of animals intermingled on the roads with pedestrians, bikes, rickshaws, cars and trucks. More than once we were held up by a flock of sheep following their shepherd. At one point, my host pointed out the contrast between herds of goats and flocks of sheep. With the goats, the goat herder walked behind and alongside the goats who seemed to want to go in all directions. He had to yell and strike them with sticks to keep the goats on the path. By contrast, the shepherd stayed in front of the sheep who just followed him. If a sheep began to wander off, only a quiet word from the shepherd got him back on the path. The sheep followed the shepherd.

David knew all about shepherding. Now he writes from the point of view of the sheep. Dependence on and trust in the shepherd is what makes life work for sheep. It is what works for us. Walking down life’s paths, eyes fixed on the LORD our Shepherd, ears trained to listen to His voice and follow Him, this ‘right-sizes’ life: ***big God, little me.***

# MEDITATE

Like sheep, fear is a very present reality for us. The sharp teeth and claws we fear come in the form of health issues, work challenges, finances, relationships, and much more.

Take some time today to 'right-size' your perspective. Keep in mind David's opening words in Psalm 23 and look at the picture. Study it. See yourself as the lamb. See the shepherd. Look at how He is looking at the lamb. Notice His hand reaching out to affectionately touch him. Think about the safety and security the lamb must feel in close proximity to the shepherd. Feel small like the lamb. See God as big as He cares for you. Do you imagine in this moment that there is any fear residing in the lamb? Could this be the image you carry in your mind of you and God? Imagine that He pulls you close and whispers in your ear a truth that is found over and over again in Scripture:

*So do not fear, for I am with you;  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you and help you;  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)*

Walk into your day under the care of your Shepherd.

## Day 5

# THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT WANT <sup>(PART 1)</sup>

## Psalm 23:1b

After stating that the LORD is his shepherd, David makes the declaration, "I don't want anything!"

Is it actually possible to be free of "wanting"? To want something we don't have is to be human. Something is nearly always lacking or missing. This constant wanting is what drives us to take action to change our circumstances. Most of our choices and behaviors are directed at altering our current reality to line up with legitimate wants or desires. I'm hungry. I want food. I head to the kitchen and eat. My reality has changed. I'm filled and satisfied. I'm tired. I take a nap. I wake up and my reality has changed. I'm rested. So, when David writes of not *wanting*, what is he talking about? We want things all the time.

It seems certain that David is not declaring that he was free of normal human desires. Most likely he is referring to another all-too-common human experience: the agitation and anxiety we feel about having little or no control in our lives. We are creatures who worry. "What if" is the language of worry, imagining unpleasant scenarios of what might happen. These excursions into a hypothetical and unpleasant future — whether focused on the next hour, the next day, or next year — rob us of the ability to be fully present, engaged and connected to what is going on in the here and now. Research has demonstrated the toll that anxiety takes on our emotional and physical wellbeing. We were not made to carry the weight of possible future difficulties. In the wisdom of Jesus: *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own* (Matthew 6:34). Easier said than done! Worrying about tomorrow comes natural to us. The question before us is **how** do we let go of this propensity to worry?

To bring clarity, it might be helpful to add the word **because** at the beginning of Psalm 23. It is **because** the LORD is David's shepherd that he does not engage in unhelpful, unhealthy and harmful wanting. There is a cause-effect here. David does not try to not worry. Have you ever tried that? Try playing the song "Don't Worry Be Happy" and through sheer force of will, just stop worrying. It doesn't work! But if we see God as our shepherd, as David did, and ourselves as His sheep, then worry can give way to something very powerful: **trust**.

Take a moment to consider the sheep standing before the shepherd (use the picture to help your imagination). The shepherd knows what is coming next — into which field or valley he will lead his flock. He knows where they will find food and water, and where they will rest when the sun goes down. That is the job of the shepherd: to plan, to provide, to protect, and to lead. Do you think any of those thoughts are bouncing around in the little head of the sheep? Do you think he is ruminating on a fearful and unknown future? To do so would be to take on the role of the shepherd and this is where debilitating wanting shows up. We forget who we are and who God is.

What I see when I consider the sheep is one who knows he is under the care of the shepherd, the one who knows him by name. I see trust. There is no room for the mind-racing, playing out the multitude of possible bad endings. The shepherd is here now, with him, taking care of matters as he has always done. That is the defining reality for the sheep, and that is the defining reality for David.

It is not certain when David wrote this Psalm. What we do know is that there were plenty of challenges and reasons for stress in David's life. After being anointed as the new king, he spent seven years fleeing from Saul who was trying to kill him. Once on the throne, he carried the weight of the nation of Israel and the threats of conquest from neighboring nations. And yet, he drew from his early years as a shepherd, saw himself as a sheep and chose to follow and trust God his shepherd. Because of this, he could say emphatically, "I shall not want."

## MEDITATE

What are your wants? What are the things which are producing worry and anxious thoughts and are stealing your peace at the present moment? Take time with this. Take inventory and speak them to God, or if you journal, write them out. Then look at the picture, see yourself as the sheep and God as your shepherd. Can you imagine His love and care for you? Can you imagine His commitment to be with you now, five minutes from now, tomorrow, next year? He isn't going anywhere. You belong to Him. You are His. He has laid down His life for you. You are the one Jesus had in mind when He spoke of leaving 99 sheep to go after the one who is in trouble: *What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off...? In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish* (Matthew 18:12; 14). Can you find rest and solace in just being the sheep, just following and living under the direction of your Shepherd?

Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, penned these words in the 1st century: *Cast all your anxiety (wants) on Him because He cares for you* (1 Peter 5:7). Lay hold of your anxious thoughts and then cast them on the Shepherd who cares for you. Let your racing mind slow down as you embrace the rest that is found in trust.



## Day 6

# THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT WANT (PART 2)

## Psalm 23:1b

There is a story told by Jesus about two sisters who had very different personalities. This family was very close to Jesus. One day, He was in their home teaching those who had gathered. One sister, Martha, busied herself getting food ready for their guests, while the other, Mary, sat at Jesus' feet listening to Him. Martha eventually became annoyed with Mary, interrupted Jesus and demanded that He send Mary to the kitchen to help out. Jesus' response to Martha has always felt like the precise thing Jesus would say to me as He observes how I tend to go about life. Replacing my name for Martha's: *Craig, Craig, you are worried and upset about many things...* (Luke 10:41).

So many things! That's me. And like Martha, when I succumb mentally to all these things, I miss Jesus who is right here with me. I have long had a desire to be more like Mary, but it's been a battle.

It is true that life is complex, and there are indeed many things to consider, many things demanding our attention and problem-solving energies. At the same time, there is a God who is much more adept at managing it all. He promised that He would be with us always, but if we're honest, we are not always with Him. The benefit of having a shepherd to care for us in all of the challenges and difficulties of life is negated when we wander off into the wilderness, taking things into our own hands. This is where the wants of life can incapacitate us.

David's reminder that we are sheep, that God is our shepherd, and we don't have to want is an invitation to simplify our lives. Simplicity has become a buzzword in our day, being the subject of countless articles, blogs and books. It is hitting a raw nerve. The rat race, the pace of life, the demands we experience, the complexity of our day and age overwhelm us. In contrast to this, David paints with words a scene of a little sheep nuzzling against the shepherd who promises, "I am with you, I've got this, let me take care of you, stay close, follow me, trust me."

Life can be simplified when we give up control and are willing to surrender. We need to get out of the kitchen and sit with Jesus. Yes, the food has to be prepared eventually, but this is a matter of setting priorities. Jesus said: *But seek first His [God's] kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things [like preparing food!] will be given to you as well* (Matthew 6:33).

I think sheep are pretty easily satisfied. As we work our way through Psalm 23, we will discover the things provided by the shepherd that really matter. It's a short uncomplicated list. What is complicated is keeping the list of "wants" short! When I consider the image of the sheep and the shepherd, I see contentment. She has enough. She is satisfied.

When I reflect on Psalm 23 each morning and pause to bring to the surface my wants and anxious thoughts, I am challenged by Paul's words written to Timothy in the 1st century. (I think the Shepherd is whispering these into my ears) : *But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.* (1 Timothy 6:8). It always brings me up short. Food? Check. Clothing? Check. Contentment? God help me! Every day this becomes an invitation to release all the rest, all the cares, to Him.

Over time, I have developed a growing desire to reframe my perception of self to be like that of the sheep without a care in the world. His belly is filled. His thirst is quenched. He is well rested. This is the case because his shepherd has led him to these necessary things. He is content. I know that our lives are far more complex. A sheep will never be fired from his job, have expensive car repair bills, or lose his health insurance. I have had all of these. More than once. Sometimes all at once. And yet, are these not the times to lean into the care of the Shepherd, to say with David, "God, you are my shepherd, and **I will not want!**" Later on in Psalm 23 we will encounter these realities as David speaks of walking in the valley of the shadow of death and being in the presence of his enemies. Psalm 23 is not about the denial of the difficulties of life. It is about framing our experiences in the context of what is absolutely true and unchangeable. We are loved, and we are led. In the dark moments, we hold on to the reality that we are loved, and we are led.

There is another thing we can do. We can simplify our lives by shedding the ambitions and pursuits that pile on worries. There is great value in being easily satisfied. When we are, it is much harder to live in a state of "wanting."

## MEDITATE

The prophet Isaiah used these words to describe our relationship with God:

*He tends His flock like a shepherd:*

*He gathers the lambs in His arms*

*and carries them close to His heart;*

*He gently leads those that have young* (Isaiah 40: 11).

If you are weighed down today, if the wants are piling up, picture yourself as a lamb who is in trouble. God, the shepherd, gathers you up in His arms. He carries you close to his heart. While you live with unresolved issues, pressures, loss and grief, God is holding you close to His heart. Allow yourself to be held in His embrace, and to experience His love, tenderness and deep care for you. Picture it!

## Day 7

# HE MAKES ME LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES (PART 1)

## Psalm 23:2a

Today, let's unpack something that is badly needed in our modern day. More and more people have moved into busy, even chaotic urban settings. At the time David penned these words, he was in the midst of a great deal of chaos and on his way to the throne in Jerusalem where he would reign as king for 40 years. Yet he held tightly to his years spent as a shepherd in rural settings as a way of thinking about his relationship with God, and how to maintain the health of his soul. Almost everything in our modern world conspires against what we are discovering here. Can we really find green pastures and still waters? Do we even want to find them?

You probably don't need to be convinced that we live in a time when too much is vying for our attention. Cell phones, laptops, social media, email, texts beeping and vibrating all day long. The world is literally at our fingertips and multitudes are addicted to this constant access to and barrage of noise, information, and interruptions. It is actually reforming the physical structure of our brains. Neural pathways now demand stimulation and cannot tolerate boredom.

Contrast this with the picture of *lying down in green pastures*. Who has the time for that? And if we have the time, how long could we endure being still and quiet? Thankfully, David chose a particular word that conveys that choosing to lie down in green pastures may not come naturally. He writes that his Shepherd makes him lie down in green pastures. He **makes** him. This may not be done against the will of the sheep with force and flexing of muscle, but rather, it is at the initiative and invitation of the shepherd that the sheep enters the pasture. The verb tense indicates that this is not the sheep's idea, but the shepherd's. We might imagine sheep running around, staying active, becoming tired in the heat of the day, not having the sense to take a break. The shepherd knows that for the good of his sheep it is time to slow down. We often don't know what is good for us.

When I moved to NYC many years ago, the change was shocking from a quiet country setting to the tangled noise and activity of the city that never sleeps. When we rented our first apartment, we failed to notice that we were across the street from two hospitals with emergency rooms. Sirens became a way of life. We had moved from a spacious house in a quiet neighborhood to a small two-bedroom apartment in a noisy city. One morning, I went on a search for green pastures. I took the subway

to Washington Square Park. It was quiet that time of day, and I sat with my Bible and journal in a shaded corner, excited for some peace and quiet and to listen for God's voice. Moments later I was joined by a man who sat a few benches away, happy to find a quiet place to... practice his trombone! I imagine he had been sent to the park by his roommates. Not to be deterred, I found another quiet place. Within minutes, a man obviously struggling with mental illness showed up, talking and yelling to himself, and occasionally at me. I moved again. Quiet...until someone sat near me talking loudly on his cell phone. I gave up and went home, preferring the noise of the ambulances to what I found in the park.

I share this to illustrate that seeking the quiet of green pastures may not be easy. I have also discovered that even if I find a quiet place, it is not always easy to quiet my mind. It generates enough noise of its own. Such are the times we live in.

Before we press into what happens when we are with the Shepherd in green pastures, we must understand the necessity of going there. Whether it's your bedroom or study, a park or a beach, a library or an actual field, our souls were made for what the green pastures, in the company of the Shepherd, have to offer us. When Jesus was with His disciples, He also found it necessary to "make them lie down in green pastures." This is how Mark describes one event: *...because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."* So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place (Mark 6:31-32). Sound familiar? Notice that Jesus did not say, "we have completed all of our work, so let's rest." In the midst of so many and so much, He called a time out. Time to head to green pastures.

## MEDITATE

Take time to sit alone with your Shepherd and consider the pace of your life. Is your mind restless? Bored? Anxious? Does it seem that there is no end to the coming and going, and the demands placed on you? Is there just too much to do? Tell Him. Release it to Him.

See if you can sit still, quietly, for just ten minutes. Don't pray. Don't think. Take slow, deep breaths. Hear Jesus invite you, *come with me to a quiet place and get some rest*. Hold in your mind the best picture of a beautiful green pasture you can imagine. See yourself there, lying down in the grass, the warmth of the sun on your skin. Feel the soft warm breeze. He is with you. He has brought you here because He loves you, and He knows you need this time.

## Day 8

# HE MAKES ME LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES (PART 2)

## Psalm 23:2a

In David's day, one of the most important and challenging responsibilities a shepherd had was to find places where his flock could eat. The geography of Israel was arid, so green pastures where the sheep could graze were not in abundance. All living creatures must eat to live. Day after day, for years, David led and moved his flock to places of nourishment. The sheep trusted him to not leave their bellies empty — to lead them out of the danger of hunger. David's responsibility was to lead, theirs was to follow and to eat.

What might David have had in mind when he imagined God leading him to green pastures? Besides physical food, what is it that he needed, that we need, from God in order to thrive? In the previous reading we looked at how challenging it is to get there during busy and noisy lives. But if we make the commitment, if we allow ourselves to be led there by our Shepherd, what is it that will be provided for us in this green pasture? Two things I think: rest and nourishment for our souls.

Can you see the sheep enter the pasture with joy? Their journey is over! After traversing many miles through rugged terrain, stretched out before them is a beautiful sight: green pastures! They are tired. They are hungry. Here they will rest, and they will eat. They have expended much energy. Now is the time to replenish. I imagine the shepherd's joy as well. He sees those he cares for, those who are his, whose names he knows, those for whom he has labored, and now he eagerly watches them lie down to rest after the wearying journey.

This is a beautiful picture of God's desire for you. The journey is long. You grow tired. There is within you a deep hunger. He leads you to this place, He makes you lie down so that He can care for you and give you what your soul needs. Your soul's greatest need is the need for God Himself. To be with Him. To be filled up and satisfied.

You were made for this. For Him. To experience Him, and to experience being deeply loved by Him. It brings to mind the timeless words of Augustine: *"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."* We have restless hearts, and the Shepherd of our souls knows this. His desire is to lead us to green pasture — a place where our restless hearts can discover God over and over again and we can find true rest.

It does not matter where you find your green pasture. It's not about geography. It is a mental space. It is where you slow down, stop moving, stop the mental chatter and agitation, and meet with God. I can picture so many places over the years of my life that have been green pasture. Different houses and apartments, backyards, special chairs in my study. As I see them in my mind's eye, they represent the extraordinary invitation by God to come and be with Him. They represent so many moments of feeling the embrace of God when I needed to badly. Had I not come and into the quiet of the pasture, I would have missed what my Shepherd had for me.

While the particular place does not matter, what all green pastures have in common is freedom from distraction where God can be noticed, heard, experienced. In addition, the green pasture cannot be a spiritual version of drive-through fast food. Too often what is referred to as "devotions" or our "quiet time" is dictated by a clock with an alarm. When I imagine the scene painted by David's words, I see the sheep lie down and stay there for as long as they need to be refreshed. This is not a power nap. I don't believe we can be refreshed by God in a hurry. He has time for us. As much as we need. Making time for God is the only way, I have learned, for my restless heart to find rest in Him. My restless heart, my racing mind, my hurried and anxious state of being cannot be quickly quieted.

What about frequency? If we could ask David, expert shepherd, how often he would lead his sheep to green pastures, he would likely be puzzled by the question. Every day, of course! You cannot borrow yesterday's nourishment and rest for today. In an earlier Psalm, David wrote: *I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With Him at my right hand, I will not be shaken* (Psalm 16:8). To receive from God, our Shepherd, it is best to be led by Him to the quiet place where we can be *filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (Ephesians 3:19).

## MEDITATE

Jesus our Shepherd extends this invitation: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light* (Matthew 11:28-30).

Do you hear Him inviting you? By name? Will you join Him today in a green pasture? This invitation is every day. Can you take some time today? And tomorrow? Can you close your eyes, lie down in the soft meadow, feel the grass on your skin, the warmth of the sun, the gentle breeze, and the hand of your Shepherd gently on your head? It is quiet and still. Can you give your wants to Him, and hear His voice speaking words of care and assurance that He is with you?

A familiar children's song, Jesus Loves Me, sings: *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, they are weak but He is strong. Be little. Let Him be big. Be weak. Let Him be strong. Jesus loves you.*

## Day 9

# HE LEADS ME BESIDE STILL WATERS

## Psalm 23:2b

The shepherd now leads his sheep from the green pastures to the still waters. These two images of green pastures and still waters together convey places of rest, refreshment, and renewal. God, who made you, knows the needs of your soul and you cannot *really live* in the full sense of the word without them. For sheep living in an arid place, these still waters satisfy thirst with cool fresh water.

There is nothing quite as intense as being really thirsty with no way to satisfy it. As time passes the thirst grows and becomes more intense. I know this from experience. Some time ago I was visiting a friend in Arizona, and we decided to take a short hike up a small mountain. It was a hot day and we each had a bottle of water for the trip. Plenty for the planned hike. When we reached the summit and had rested a bit, I suggested that rather than going back down the same way we take a "shortcut" off-trail down the backside of the mountain. It turned out to be a really bad idea. We encountered dead ends, steep cliffs, thick cactus-like brush we could not get through, and eventually we were lost. We had consumed all of our water as we wandered around in the heat of the day. We finally made it out hours later and were very dehydrated. I can honestly say that I do not think I have ever enjoyed anything quite as much as that first glass of water. When you are really thirsty, only water satisfies.

There are many references to God as the source of that satisfies the deep thirst of our soul. *You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water* (Psalm 63:1). *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God* (Psalm 42:1). When the soul is thirsty, only God satisfies.

Can you picture deer or sheep out in the wilderness, parched from the heat, and longing for water? Suddenly before them is a stream. With whatever strength they have they bolt toward the water and drink deeply until they are satisfied. Is it possible that we could experience a real and deep thirst for God, and that he would provide the "water" for which we long?

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah both refer to our thirst for God and the foolishness of trying to quench that thirst with other things that do not satisfy:

*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money,*

*come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare (Isaiah 55:1-3).*

*My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13).*

And then we have Jesus' words linking our spiritual thirst with His ability as living water to satisfy: *Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:13-14).*

*On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:37-38).*

God's desire for us is that we would be led by Him to the still waters. Here we can be with Him, and drink deeply — finding in Him what we most need. Life itself, all that we experience and navigate creates the thirst of our souls, exposing the longing to come to the still waters. Too often, we try to take the edge off our thirst with other things. These are the broken cisterns (wells) Jeremiah spoke of.

The Shepherd cares for us deeply as and He invites us to green pastures and still waters where we can encounter the living God.



# MEDITATE

If you have the opportunity, there is immense value in having these images — of still water and green pastures — come alive by actually spending time there. To lay down and rest in a meadow, or to sit beside waters so still they look like a mirror, and just be alone and quiet with God can open you up to the real presence of God. Go there intent to be with Him, asking for Him to reveal Himself to you. Short of that, use your imagination to see yourself in such a place — and to see the Shepherd there with you. Think about the broken wells where you go in your thirst; confess this to God and release them.

Let your heart be open to the promise of these words.  
Say them as a prayer of affirmation of what God has promised to you.

*The LORD will guide **me** always;  
He will satisfy **my** needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen **my** frame.  
I will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail. (Isaiah 58:11)*

## Day 10

# HE RESTORES MY SOUL

## Psalm 23:3a

Let's review where David has taken us so far. He is free of being consumed by anxious thoughts. He has been led by His LORD to the rest and nourishment of green pastures. And he has drunk deeply of the life-giving still waters. At this point I can hear him take a deep breath and let out a long sigh. It's a sigh of contentment and peace. It is the sound of a restored soul.

What is the soul? Over the centuries, theologians and Biblical scholars have discussed and debated about the various "parts" that make up the human being. When I was in seminary, the prevalent view was trichotomy, meaning three parts: body, soul and spirit. Hebrews 4:12 points to this understanding: *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* At that time, I had a little bit of contrarian in me, so I wrote a paper arguing for dichotomy — two parts — material and immaterial. As evidence, I argued from the creation account in Genesis where we find these words regarding God's creative act in making a human being: *Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being* (Genesis 2:7). The word translated "being" is the Hebrew word translated "soul." The physical body was formed from the earth and then God created a living soul — two parts: body and soul.

The Bible also uses the words heart and mind to describe us — not the physical organs but metaphors to refer to who we are in our inner, spiritual life. Since those seminary years long ago, I have set aside being dogmatic about which view is right. What I do believe is that the soul represents the part of us that bears the image of God. It is who we most truly are, our true identity. It is the soul that relates to God. It is the soul that has been broken and fractured. It is the soul that God heals as He reconciles us to Himself. It is the soul that will live forever. It is who we are.

I have found it helpful to think of the soul as the executive center, or the Chief Executive Officer of our lives. We live from our souls, and the condition of our souls determines the kind and quality of life that we have. When Solomon wrote these words about the heart, I believe he had our executive center in mind: *Above all else, guard your heart, for **everything you do** flows from it* (Proverbs 4:23). Jesus as well refers to the heart in this way: *A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of* (Luke 6:45).

While theologians continue to try to sort it all out, the important thing is for us to embrace the truth that our heart or soul is the center from which we live. Everything we do flows from it. The work of God is to restore our souls. It is the most valuable and precious thing, to us and to God. The condition of our soul means everything. Note that David writes that God, our Shepherd, restores our soul. This begs the question: if restoration of our soul is God's work, then what is our part? The first two verses of Psalm 23 point us to the answer.

The work we do to develop a healthy soul is to follow our Shepherd to the green pastures and still waters. Time invested with Him is where the transformative work is done on our inner life. There is certainly a mystery to this, but it is not unlike how this works with our physical body. We cannot make our muscles grow by simply wanting it. We show up in the gym, do the work, and growth occurs over time. That is how our bodies are designed. We can't improve our cardiovascular strength so that we can run a marathon simply by wanting it to be so. We do not wake up one day and decide to run a marathon that day. We would be unable to do it. We put in the miles and over time we find that we have grown so that we can run 26.2 miles. In the same way, we don't just decide one day to have a healthy restored soul. We put in the miles. We show up regularly to the green pastures and still waters and in time, our soul is transformed by God. We show up; He changes us.

Jesus pointed to the mystery of spiritual growth by using the analogy of a farmer: *This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come* (Mark 4:26-29).

As with a garden, growth within is mysterious. Our role is to scatter seed in faith. Then wait expectantly for God to do His part.

## MEDITATE

In our daily rush to do or to be something, it is easy to neglect the health of our soul. Over time, we can find we are running on an empty tank. Our soul becomes frayed and fragile. When that is the state of our "CEO," we can expect trouble to follow.

Just as David went to the green pastures and still waters where the Shepherd restored his soul, you are invited to do the same. Can you picture Him waiting there for you, anxiously looking to see if you will come and be with Him? That is where the most important work of your life will be done.

Take some time to think about the condition of your soul. How would you describe it? Are there longings for more peace, more joy, more rest? When exhaustion is your common experience, it is helpful to remember that God is not pro-exhaustion. It is a reminder that we are passing by the green pastures and still waters available to us.

## Day 11

# HE LEADS ME IN PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

## Psalm 23:3b

Having led David to the places where he could restore his soul, God now leads him in paths of righteousness. Before considering what these paths represent, it is wise to consider the sequence that has been laid out for us by David. He is led first to places of refuge, quiet, contemplation, rest, nourishment, and most of all, just being present with God. Places where his soul has been in intimate connection with God.

Now, David is ready to be led by God down the paths He has for him. We all want wisdom and direction in life as we navigate the choices and decisions we face. At times, I have wished God would just write the answer to my prayers in the sky so I could not possibly miss it, but that has never happened. Answers have always come in more subtle ways in the quietness of my heart where I hear His voice. The ability for us to hear and recognize His voice on the path is first cultivated in the green pastures and still waters.

The initial invitation of Jesus to his disciples came in the form of two words: **follow me**. These two words succinctly sum up the nature of the life of faith. It is about following, about being led by Jesus. In the gospel of John we have a record of Jesus explanation of this life using the illustration of a shepherd and his sheep. Consider these words:

*...the sheep listen to His (shepherd's) voice. He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all His own, He goes on ahead of them, and His sheep follow Him because they know His voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from Him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice (John 10:3-5).*

Familiarity is key! The sheep listen to his voice! His sheep follow Him **because they know His voice**. They will never follow a stranger because they do not recognize a stranger's voice. Before caller ID, we only had to hear a familiar voice speak a few words before we knew who had called. There is something very distinct about someone's voice. We immediately recognize the voice of those with whom we have spent time. Jesus says that He can call His own sheep **by name** and they follow because they know it's Him!

A great benefit of this familiarity with the Shepherd is that He will lead us along the right paths. As we previously considered, we do not have to be out front making all of

life's decisions on our own. We have someone who knows us and who is committed to leading us. The remaining question is only whether or not we will listen for His voice and then follow Him.

David refers not to a single path, but multiple **paths** of righteousness. The word **righteousness** can be simplified as meaning the **right** path. As I have reflected on this over time, I have come to think of the "right path" in two ways: morality and general life choices. Let's first consider morality.

In the very first Psalm, we have a description of someone choosing the right moral path: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on His law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers* (Psalm 1:1-3).

A shepherd's job was to keep His sheep on the safe path that would be free of danger and harm. All of God's laws are for our benefit. A life of following Jesus is to believe that his ways. This is the abundant life that He has for us, his sheep. *Whatever they do prospers!*

The other paths we face are the forks in the road where we need wisdom and discernment. There are big decisions and small ones. Some have far-reaching consequences, and these are the ones with which we wrestle and can lose sleep over. As human beings, we have a challenge that actual sheep do not. Theirs is a short list: food, water, sleep and protection from predators. We are faced with decisions about work, relationships, finance, health, and so much more. In this complexity unknown to sheep, we still have the promise of Psalm 23 that we are not on our own. We can be led by the One whose voice we have come to know. We can be sure that if the decision matters to us, it matters to Him. His desire is not to be silent and keep us in the dark, but to lead us. When facing decisions I do not have certainty about, I know He has always been with me, and when necessary, He has helped me to make any needed course corrections.

God's true desire is to lead us, day by day, down the right path.

# MEDITATE

*For many years now we have had this verse posted on our refrigerator: Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it" (Isaiah 30:21).*

Consider first the moral paths you are currently on. Have you chosen paths that have taken you away from your Shepherd? Have you stopped following Him? If so, hear His voice calling you back. Turn around (repent) and come back to the good and safe place of following Him.

If you are facing critical decisions, get to quiet places and as you lay it all out to your Shepherd, listen for His voice. His desire is not to withhold anything from you. Don't hurry this. Take time and sit with the expectation that His desire is indeed to lead you down the right path.

## Day 12

# FOR HIS NAME'S SAKE

## Psalm 23:3b

David states that God leads us on the right paths for the sake of His (God's) name. The meaning of this phrase is a bit obtuse. God benefits from our following of Him on right paths because we accomplish His work. Another benefit to God is that he loves us and delights in seeing us thrive. But why the phrase for ***His name's sake?***

It may be a matter of reputation. As a child I was taught that my behavior reflected on our family, how we were perceived in the community. During my sophomore year of high school I got into some trouble and was expelled. We lived in a small town where there were no secrets. To make matters worse, my mother had just been elected to the school board. My behavior reflected badly on her and our family's "good name." Unfair or not, my behavior said something to others about the kind of mother I had.

To a considerable extent, God's reputation is derived from those who claim to believe in Him, to know and follow Him. The actions and attitudes of God's children say something about who He is as their Father. That is why the charge of "hypocrisy" is so damaging. Actions do speak louder than words. An atheist once stated that the biggest argument against Christianity were Christians. When our way of living does not reflect the nature of God, then His true nature becomes veiled, and His reputation soiled. God is either revealed or concealed by how we live.

This may or may not be what David had in mind, but the thought of God's reputation can be found throughout the Bible. The writer of Psalm 115 puts it this way: *Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness* (Psalm 115:1).

Both Moses and Joshua expressed concern for God's reputation. When Israel was on the brink of destruction at Mount Sinai due to their rebellion, Moses pleads with God: *Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?'* (Exodus 32:12). When Joshua, the leader of Israel after Moses, led them into the land promised to them, they turned away from God and were routed by their enemies. Joshua reasons with God: *The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?* (Joshua 7:9). In both cases, the destruction of God's people would have opened the door to the slander of the name of God because of His failure to love and protect his people.

Like it or not, as people of faith, how we behave or misbehave points to God Himself. Jesus noted this, stating that the validity of the gospel message was inseparably woven into the conduct of Jesus' followers: *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another* (John 13:34-35).

Let's go back to the sheep and shepherd. A shepherd who does not lead his sheep well, a shepherd who does not protect his flock from predators, who does not nourish and provide water for them would be regarded as a really bad shepherd.

Jesus contrasted a hired hand with a shepherd: *The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep* (John 10:12-13). By contrast, Jesus said: *I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father —and I lay down my life for the sheep* (John 13:14-15).

When David found himself in deep trouble, likely when Saul was in murderous pursuit of him, he cried out to God for help: *In you, LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness. Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me* (Psalm 31:1-2). And then he added: *Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me* (Psalm 31:3).

As others observe His flock being well led and cared for, God Himself is revealed and His name glorified.



# MEDITATE

Perhaps all of this is what David had in mind when using the phrase, “for his name’s sake.” When it comes to actual sheep and shepherds, the condition of the flock reveals a great deal about the character and nature of the shepherd. Let’s consider what our lives, attitudes, and behaviors might reveal to observers about our Shepherd.

As we think about the ground we have covered so far in Psalm 23, let’s ask ourselves the following questions:

- Am I content or am I full of wants?
- Am I rested or living in a state of anxious exhaustion?
- Am I experiencing quiet and stillness in my life, or constant distraction and restlessness?
- What is the condition of my soul? Wholeness or fragmentation?
- Am I walking down the right paths with eyes on the Shepherd or wandering off following my own ways?

As you take inventory, don’t allow your answers to lead you to a place of shame. Listen for the voice of your Shepherd and follow Him. Do it for yourself — this is where you will experience the greatest joy in life — and do it for His name’s sake!

Part Two:

# PROTECTION & PEACE

(Psalm 23:4-5)



*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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. (ESV)*

## Day 13

# EVEN THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, I WILL FEAR NO EVIL, FOR YOU ARE WITH ME (PART 1)

## Psalm 23:4a

As we move into this next section of Psalm 23, note the change in David's use of personal pronouns with reference to God. In the first three verses, David referred to the LORD his Shepherd in the third person: *He/Him*. He now addresses Him directly in the second person: *you*. David goes from talking about God to talking to Him.

It is critical to realize that how we manage our times in the *valley of the shadow of death* is directly related to the time invested with our Shepherd in the green pastures and still waters. This is where our hearts are aligned with God, our souls are restored, and we are made able to face life's difficulties. We all know that life is not lived exclusively in green pastures and by still waters. But these experiences of intimate contact with God prepare us for the hard things. In a sense, we bring the green pastures and still waters with us into the valleys.

The opening words of the book, *The Road Less Traveled* by Dr. M. Scott Peck, are as profound as they are simple: ***Life is Difficult***. It is. We know this through our own experiences and from watching the experiences of others. David addresses this inevitability by saying plainly, *even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*. Not "if" or "perhaps." He knows this because he has walked there and may have written this psalm from such a place. For David, the "shadow of death" wasn't an abstract concept or image, but rather he was literally fleeing from death.

Remember, after David was anointed king, Saul (the king he was replacing) pursued David with the intent to kill him — the heir to the throne. For seven long years, David traveled through rough terrain, living in caves and valleys: *After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the Desert of En Gedi." So Saul took three thousand able young men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Crags of the Wild Goats (1 Samuel 24:1-2)*. David and his small group of supporters were in this place, hiding in a cave. David had to make his home in this rocky and desert-like place — a place better suited to goats. In addition to the discomfort of such a place, there was the constant threat of an enemy in pursuit.

Saul and 3,000 soldiers were coming after him. Even though he finds himself in this frightening place, David writes, ***"I will fear no evil."***

David may well have written Psalm 23 when he was in the green pastures and still waters, but I like to picture him writing it in this very cave as Saul and his army set up camp nearby. This is where it matters most — when "no fear" is put to the test. This is where his confidence in God, the Shepherd who leads him in the right paths, needs to be real. The same is true for us.

Research has shown that on average we can expect to experience very difficult situations once every seven years over the span of our lives. These would include death of loved ones, loss of work and income, serious health problems, accidents, etc. This is inevitable. These represent our valley of the shadow of death experiences. No doubt even now many reading these words are in such a valley. The threat is a real and present danger. For some of us, and I have done this more than once, the first place our minds go when we find ourselves in the valley is to feel that God has abandoned us. Why did this happen? Why didn't God intervene and prevent this? Why has He allowed me to go into this valley? Even David felt this way. In Psalm 22:1-2, he cries out: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.* In Psalm 22, David accuses God of being ***so far from him.*** In the very next Psalm, he declares that in the dark valley, God is with him. Which is it? The answer is that like us, David experienced both. David has modeled for us honesty and transparency in his relationship with God. Sometimes in the valley we feel alone, abandoned by God, and other times, we are confident of His presence.

In Psalm 23 David does not fear because he says to God, *you are with me.* The presence of God, the assurance that he was not alone, was the basis for him not living crippled by fear. We will come back to this in the next reading.

# MEDITATE

God is always with us in the dark valleys, but that does not mean we always feel His presence. As David has shown in Psalms 22 and 23, the place to start with God is the truth. What is our reality? Take some time to read Psalm 22 in its entirety. David continues to share honestly with God, and as he does so he begins to ask for help. By the end of the Psalm, he finds himself in a better, more trusting place. If you are struggling in the valley of the shadow of death, meditate on these words — pray them to God:

*But you, LORD, do not be far from me.  
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.  
Deliver me from the sword,  
my precious life from the power of the dogs.  
Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;  
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.  
I will declare your name to my people;  
in the assembly I will praise you.  
You who fear the LORD, praise him!  
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!  
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!  
For he has not despised or scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
**He has not hidden His face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help** (Psalm 22:19-24).*

## Day 14

# EVEN THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, I WILL FEAR NO EVIL, FOR YOU ARE WITH ME (PART 2)

## Psalm 23:4a

***For you are with me!*** Such a gift, such an incredible reality is packed into these few words. The LORD is not observing us from a distance in some faraway place we call heaven. He is with us even, as David notes, when we find ourselves in dark and difficult places.

The promise of God's very real presence changes everything — or it *should* change everything. Can your mind even begin to grasp the reality that every moment of your life the One who formed the universe, who caused and now sustains your very existence, whispers to you, "I'm right here. I am with you." David so beautifully describes this in another Psalm: *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast* (Psalm 139:7-10).

While we may believe in our minds this to be fact, the truth is that we often find it difficult to recognize God's presence and to receive the benefit of mindfully being with God. We are such sensory-dependent creatures that what we see, touch, hear, taste and smell define our reality. God being with us easily becomes an idea, a doctrine, a verse from the Bible rather than something that shapes our lives.

In the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Brother Lawrence describes his experience of living in a monastery and trying to learn to live every waking moment mindful that God was with Him. His job within the monastery was washing pots, pans, and dishes. Brother Lawrence describes how even in that place, relatively free of distraction, it was difficult to hold in his mind that God was with Him. In fact, it was ten years before he experienced a breakthrough. If it was this difficult for a monk living in a monastery to learn to live in the presence of God, what might that say about our prospects?

Indeed, the noise, distractions, interruptions, options and activities which define our daily lives suggest that while God is always with us, it is not always easy for us to be with Him.

This bears repeating. God is always with us. We are not always with Him. It is our tendency to become more aware of our need for God when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances. These are referred to as "foxhole prayers." When the bullets are flying, bombs are falling, and life is threatened, God becomes very important. But, when life is going well, when our problems seem manageable, it is easy to crowd Him out of our awareness. This becomes a habitual way of living, even for a person of deep faith. Then, when *the valley of the shadow of death* comes, it can feel like groping in the dark to find God because He is not our known and experienced companion in life. Once again, the familiarity with God from time spent in green pastures and still waters goes with us when we are walking in the valleys. We can say with honesty, "I fear no evil, for you are with me... because I am with you."

The poet Asaph in Psalm 73 tells of his journey from despair to hope. Listen to his heart at the end of the Psalm having found his way out of despair, bitterness and agnosticism, and into trust and hope:

*Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. 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... as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds (Psalm 73:23-28).* Being with God made all the difference for Asaph.

Many Scriptures exhort us to be intentional about living mindful of God. Here are just a few: *...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2); Come near to God and he will come near to you (James 4:8); Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:2); So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18); Remain in me, as I also remain in you (John 15:4).*

At times, shepherds must lead their flocks through difficult and dangerous terrain where they are vulnerable to injury and predators. At these times, from the sheep's point of view, the presence of their shepherd who leads and protects them is absolutely critical. Their only source of comfort comes from not being alone — their good shepherd is with them — the one who was willing to lay down his life for them. As David thinks about his own journey through difficulty, he draws from his own love for his sheep, realizing that this is the heart of God for him. David's goal, our goal, is to learn to be with the One who has promised, in the words of Jesus, *And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:19).*

# MEDITATE

How well do you practice the presence of God? As God walks with you through every moment of every single day, would He be likely to say that it is often difficult to get your attention? I confess that I can go hours without a thought about God being with me. In some cases, I can go days without such thoughts. This is always to my own detriment.

What do you hear God saying to you in this moment? Can you hear his voice, not of reprimand or disappointment, but of longing and invitation? He loves you and loves spending time with you — always! Accept His invitation to be with Him.

I have taken to reciting this verse many times throughout the day and have found it helpful in learning to be with God: *You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you* (Isaiah 26:3, ESV). Perfect peace comes when our minds are stayed on God.



## Day 15

# YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF, THEY COMFORT ME (PART 1)

## Psalm 23:4b

As David imagines God as his shepherd, leading him through danger, he mentions two tools every shepherd would carry: a rod and a staff. The rod was a short, thick and heavy club-like instrument. The staff was a longer thin stick with a crook at one end. In the hands of the shepherd, these two tools are a source of comfort and well-being for the sheep — eliminating fear. Let's first consider the purpose the rod served for the shepherd and what it might represent today as we follow God, our Shepherd.

As mentioned, sheep are extremely vulnerable creatures. They have no natural means of defense against predators. They are utterly dependent on the shepherd to fend off attacking animals like the lions and bears in David's time. The rod was an instrument wielded by the shepherd when coming against such creatures. Certainly, the sheep were not actually checking to make sure that their shepherd hadn't left his club behind, but from David's point of view, the comfort and safety of the sheep rested in the fact that the shepherd was ready, willing, and armed to protect them.

Have you noticed that when children experience something frightening and threatening, they look quickly at their parents to see if everything is fine? I recall enjoying a picnic with my family as a child when a thunderstorm moved in quickly. We ran for the only shelter nearby — a small open structure with a metal roof. Lightning struck a tree about 10 yards away. Somehow the brilliant flash of light and the ear-deafening thunder knocked me on my back. Quickly, I looked for my dad who was right next to me. I knew his face would tell me if everything was ok or if the end of the world had come. I have never forgotten what I saw as I looked into his eyes. He may have been frightened, but he had a big smile on his face and started to laugh. My fear changed to comfort and even laughter because my dad was with me, and I trusted his assessment of things.

When sheep are startled, they look to the shepherd. The imagery from Psalm 23 of a shepherd who is always with us, carrying a rod, is an invitation for us to look into the face of God, particularly when we have a reason for fear. The reminder that He is not only with us, but more than able to take care of us is to be our source of comfort.

Being very dependent creatures, sheep have no choice but to rely on their shepherd for protection and help. This is not the case with us. Independence and self-reliance

have become characteristics we highly value. And while there is certainly a place for these, they do not serve us well if they lead us away from learning to trust and depend on God. When little David was running toward huge Goliath with no armor and no weapon other than a sling and some stones, he declared: *All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give all of you into our hands* (1 Samuel 17:47).

The battle is the Lord's. But is it? Am I actually living that way? My tendency is to enter the "battle" armed with my own thoughts, plans and resources, and only look to God when it's not working. Years ago, I discovered this declaration made by David: *I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory* (Psalm 44:6). I believe that David carried a bow and a sword, but his confidence was in God. Perhaps for us the bow and sword represent our intellect, abilities, and skills that we employ when navigating life's challenges, and we should put those to use. But like David, our posture should remain one of dependence on our Shepherd who is the basis for our victory.

In most cases, the valleys we face, the battles we encounter do not pose a physical threat to us. The battles reside mostly in the realm of our inner person. And here, God is present and has the weapons needed to bring victory. The apostle Paul, writing in the first century, identified the existence of weapons wielded by God suitable for these battles: *The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ* (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). When we are practicing the presence of God, when thunder strikes and knocks us flat on our back, we can look to our Shepherd and know that He carries the rod of protection on our behalf, weapons of divine power, that can demolish the strongholds we face.

# MEDITATE

There is a wonderful Psalm which expresses the certainty of a God who is with us and who provides the help we need as we look to Him. Take time to let these words, line by line, penetrate your mind and heart with comfort:

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot slip—  
He who watches over you will not slumber;  
indeed, He who watches over Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
The LORD watches over you—  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;  
the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The LORD will keep you from all harm —  
He will watch over your life;  
the LORD will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore (Psalm 121).*

## Day 16

# YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF, THEY COMFORT ME (PART 2)

## Psalm 23:4b

While sheep are generally docile, stay out of trouble, and follow their shepherd, they are not perfect. From time to time, they may be drawn away from the flock and get into trouble, particularly when they are young. In the teachings of Jesus, He speaks of sheep who get themselves in difficult spots: *If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?* (Matthew 12:11). *If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?* (Matthew 18:12). Sheep sometimes go astray; they fall into pits. In this regard, we are much like sheep, as the prophet Isaiah said: *All we like sheep have gone astray* (Isaiah 53:6).

The staff in the hand of the shepherd represents the loving care for a sheep that has gotten into trouble. The staff is well suited for catching hold of a sheep by placing the crook around them — neck, body or leg. Perhaps they have wandered into a bog or thick brush. Maybe they have slipped a few feet down a steep incline and are frozen in fear. Perhaps, as Jesus shared, they have fallen into a pit. The staff represents the means of rescue from the trouble they have wandered into of their own accord. At times, a rebellious sheep may have to have a bit of a poke from the staff as a reprimand. In all cases, we need to see this discipline of the shepherd as an expression of his love for his sheep, for he knows what is best for them. The same is true for us.

We saw earlier that our Shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness. We don't always follow. And when we don't follow, just like a shepherd whose sheep have wandered away, God comes after us, staff in hand.

There is a lot of speculation about what the staff represents in terms of God's correction and discipline in our lives. God can use many things to get our attention and to lead us back to the right path. Certainly, God's Word is a source of correction. In many cases the painful intrinsic consequences of our wanderings, though not caused directly by God, become the best tool in His hand for our growth. The key is to recognize God's pursuit of us into our mess. There is something very comforting about having someone who is both strong and loving with us when we have fallen into a pit. He comes with only one objective — to rescue us and to lead us to a better place.

The writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews reminds us that discipline is one of the strongest evidences of love: *My son do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because **the Lord disciplines the one He loves**, and He chastens everyone He accepts as **His son**. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as **His children**. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline —then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; **but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in His holiness**. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, **it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it** (Hebrews 12:5-11).*

I can imagine that a sheep being pulled to safety by the shepherd's staff might experience some discomfort (not pleasant at the time). Yet the outcome makes it worth it. God's discipline in our lives is for our good. It produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those **who have been trained by it**. Whatever form the staff takes, it is held in the hand of a God who loves you too much to let you just go off on your own. When Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep in Luke 15, he describes a scene of wonderful reunion when the sheep is found: *And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance* (Luke 15:5-7).

Jesus told this story in response to criticism he was receiving for hanging out with the wrong crowd. Nothing reveals the heart and nature of God more than the three stories which follow in Luke 15. The shepherd does not come with a rod to beat his sheep. He comes with a staff to rescue. In the same way, God has no interest in punishing us when we wander off the path. He comes with the staff of correction to bring us home. And when he does, there is great rejoicing! This is a cause for our own rejoicing: *Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for He is our God and we are **the people of his pasture, the flock under his care*** (Psalm 95:7).

# MEDITATE

Perhaps even now you have wandered off the path — whether a few steps or a country mile. Do you know that the shepherd is coming for you, staff in hand? His intent is good. His intent is healing. His intent is growth. His intent is restoration. Will you *submit to the staff*?

There is a benediction in the closing verses of Hebrews. Pray this prayer over your own life, inviting the **Great Shepherd** to equip you with everything good.

*Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20-21).*

## Day 17

# YOU PREPARE A TABLE BEFORE ME IN THE PRESENCE OF MY ENEMIES

## Psalm 23:5a

Generally, the word 'table' has very positive connotations. Tables are places where friends and families meet. It's a place of nourishment, laughter, joy, and intimate conversations. There is little better than sitting around a table with good friends, good food, and plenty of time on your hands.

Growing up with five siblings and two parents, some of my best memories are of the eight of us sitting around the table at dinner time. Work was done. School was done. We were all together. We had a custom-made eight-sided table with a Lazy Susan in the center laden with food, spinning as we competed to get to the best stuff. I was skilled at letting the broccoli go by as I went for extra meat and potatoes. Of course, it was not all fun and games. The inevitable conflicts and reports of bad behavior were dealt with at the table. Yet the memories, which remain vivid all these years later are mostly of laughter. With the age-span oldest to youngest of 17 years, toddlers to teenagers, there was plenty of silliness. I don't think it was ever a conscious thought at the time, but looking back, this was a safe place. I know that I took it for granted. I have learned that not everyone has had the benefit of such a table.

In the ancient near-east, hosts took seriously the responsibility to provide for the safety and comfort of their guests at all costs. At the table, hospitality was extravagant, and the guest was free of care. Perhaps these are the thoughts that came to David as he considered his circumstances. His imagination takes him from the valley of the shadow of death to a table that God has prepared for him. Even though there was a price on his head, even though he was on the run, he was confident of God's care and provision for him. Instead of living with fear and anxiety, he imagined God preparing an extravagant table with everything he needed.

David's thoughts of sitting at a table prepared by God in the presence of his enemies does not mean that the enemies are actually there with David. Saul was most certainly not standing nearby watching David eat. What David is saying **to God** is that in the middle of ongoing conflict he recognized God's goodness and provision: "Yes, I'm in the valley. Yes, enemies are right over there hunting me. But even more real is your love for me and your presence with me." There was still a very real and present danger

for David, but that did not negate his certainty of God's presence with him. He was able to receive from God blessings even while enemies lurked in the shadows.

When we think about this, likely most of us are challenged. David was not wringing his hands over his circumstances. He was not blaming God. And he did not put his life on hold while he waited for things to get better. I have done all these things while in the valley, waiting and agitating until the problem is resolved. I too easily succumb to thinking life is hard and unfair, and therefore, I struggle to experience the goodness of God. In David, we find a deep trust in God that enables him to sit and receive all the good that He has prepared and provided for him. David's words point us to a surprising response when we find ourselves in the grip of hardship. There is always more going on than the present difficulty. There is still, and always will be, a table prepared for us.

When Israel was in the wilderness before they entered the land to which God was leading them, they succumbed to the difficulties they were experiencing and began to question God. Psalm 78 captures this moment: *They forgot what He had done, the wonders He had shown them. He did miracles in the sight of their ancestors in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan. He divided the sea and led them through; He made the water stand up like a wall. He guided them with the cloud by day and with light from the fire all night. He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them water as abundant as the seas; He brought streams out of a rocky crag and made water flow down like rivers. But they continued to sin against Him, rebelling in the wilderness against the Most High. They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God; they said, "Can God really spread a table in the wilderness? True, He struck the rock, and water gushed out, streams flowed abundantly, but can He also give us bread? Can He supply meat for his people?"* (Psalm 78:11-20).

Did you catch the questions? Can God spread a **table** in the wilderness? Can he give bread and meat to His people? The answer is: yes! During their wanderings in a place where they could produce no food for themselves, God provided water, manna and quail. Yes, God can spread a table in every circumstance. The problem was **they forgot what He had done!** I wonder, as David imagined the table God had prepared for him, did he recall facing and defeating the giant warrior Goliath? Were there other memories of God's faithfulness that he carried into the valley of the shadow of death? Amnesia of God's faithfulness kills faith. Remembering allows us to sit at the banquet table in the middle of the valleys.



## MEDITATE

Recalling God's specific faithfulness in our lives is important. The opening verses of Psalm 66 invite us to come and see what God has done. The writer looks all the way back to God leading Israel through the Red Sea: Say to God, *"How awesome are your deeds. So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing the praises of your name."* Come and see what God has done, his awesome deeds for mankind! He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot— come, let us rejoice in Him (Psalm 66:1-6).

Take some time to **come and see what God has done**. Can you recall times when you were in the valley, and you experienced, without question, the faithfulness of God? Relive these experiences. Say to God **how awesome are your deeds** in my life! If you are in the valley right now, this exercise in remembering can help you to see, even in this place, the table God has prepared for you.

## Day 18

# YOU ANOINT MY HEAD WITH OIL; MY CUP OVERFLOWS

## Psalm 23:5b

David continues to speak **to** God describing his experience at the table provided for him in the presence of his enemies. He describes two things that happen at this table which had great meaning and significance in David's day but remain mysterious for us. God anoints David's head with oil, and his cup overflows.

We have already seen that in the ancient near-east, hosts took hospitality of their guests as a serious matter. Even today we see this in many places. On my trips to India, I have traveled to remote, impoverished villages and been overwhelmed by their generous hospitality. The first time I was invited into someone's tiny thatched-roof dirt floor home, I was greeted at the door with a garland of flowers for my neck. Everything they owned in the world was in this small space, and it wasn't much. No closets filled with clothes and shoes, very little furniture, no electronics and toys for their kids. It was quite a contrast to my own home. When we sat on the floor and they offered me a soda, at first, I refused. My Indian friend who was with me whispered that I needed to accept it. My hosts smiled from ear to ear as they watched me enjoying my cold drink on a 95-degree day. They had no such drink in their own hands. They watched me enjoy it. My friend told me later that soda is a luxury they could never afford for themselves. But for a guest, they would make sacrifices, they would joyfully make sacrifices. They took their role as host seriously.

The practice of anointing someone with oil in the Bible is found in a number of contexts. Prophets, priests and kings were often anointed as they entered into their respective positions. The oil represented the presence and the empowering of the Holy Spirit for the work they had been called to by God. In the New Testament, anointing oil is connected to God's healing. All of these could have been in mind as David describes the anointing of his head. But the most obvious meaning is simply an expression of God's radical hospitality that David was experiencing. Anointing with oil was a traditional practice among Jewish people to welcome someone to their home — like receiving a garland and a cold soda in India. Jesus expresses this when he honors the woman who used very expensive oil to wash Jesus' feet (emphasis added): *Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.*

**You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet** (Luke 7:44-46).

David is telling us that he is not in a state of white-knuckled endurance in this valley of the shadow of death. Rather, he is receiving direct and personal care from God. He was welcomed to the table where there was plenty. Every need has been considered and met graciously by God. To this he adds a last phrase — David's own experience: *my cup overflows*.

Perhaps you have had an experience at a restaurant where the server is so attentive it is almost ridiculous. As soon as you take a sip or two of water or coffee, he or she is right there, topping it off. It's always full. This is how attentive God is to David's needs. There is not just a little in David's cup to quench his thirst, there is a lot — too much to the point that the cup cannot contain it all — it overflows. This is over-the-top extravagant, and that is how David experiences God.

One of the names for God in the Old Testament is **Jehovah (LORD) Jireh**. It means **the God who provides**. David is declaring to all that God is not stingy in His provision. This "filling up" nature of God is found in Jesus' promise to the woman at the well who was in a dark valley. He didn't offer her a small cup of water to take the edge off her thirst: *Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life* (John 4:13-14). Jesus offers her Himself — which will be like a gushing spring of water deeply satisfying. David sits at the table God has provided with a bottomless cup filled with God Himself.

One of the most loved promises of Jesus is found in John 10:10b: *I have come that they may have life and have it to the full*. Peter, one of Jesus' disciples put it this way: *(God's) divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness* (2 Peter 1:3). God is generous to those whose arms are open to receive from Him. He gives us **everything!** There is a table He prepares for us daily, no matter our circumstances. His provision will never run out.

# MEDITATE

In Paul's letter to the first-century followers of Jesus living in the city of Ephesus, there is a promise written that is widely mentioned, quoted and prayed: *Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us* (Ephesians 3:20). There is no question that in all realms of our lives God can do immeasurable more than we can ask or imagine. But if you consider the context of this promise, Paul is speaking about our ability to experience God and His love. These words precede the promise of immeasurably more: *I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge —that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (Ephesians 4:16-19). The promise is a deeper experience of God and of his love.

Think about your relationship with God. Are you being filled up with the measure of all the fullness of God? When you are, the valley can be transformed into a banquet table. Instead of an unquenchable thirst, your cup overflows. He can do immeasurably more than you ask or imagine. Ask and imagine today.

Part Three:

# PROMISE & PERSPECTIVE

(Psalm 23:6)



*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days  
of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of  
the LORD forever. (ESV)*

## Day 19

# SURELY GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE.

## Psalm 23:6a

In the last verse in Psalm 23, David switches back to speaking about God rather than to Him and uses a form of benediction or blessing. David's words pertain to both what he expects will happen while he lives, and what he knows will follow after taking his last breath.

He begins with a word that is an expression of confidence. In the Hebrew language this two-letter word "ak" translated "surely" packed a lot of punch. The word alerted the reader that what was to follow was a matter of absolute certainty. It carried the weight of some of our modern expressions like "you can count on this," "make no mistake about it," or "you can take this to the bank." David, now looking at the future and not knowing what might unfold, is still absolutely certain of the things grounded in the character and promises of God.

How we think about our future has a profound impact on how we live in the present. Anxiety stems from our human tendency to think about unpleasant and undesirable things that could happen. Most often these are things over which we have little or no control. As we spend time worrying about what might be, we are robbed of the joy of the present. David's ability to walk through the valley of the shadow of death without fear and with comfort was due to both his intimate relationship with God, fostered in green pastures and beside still waters, but as we see here, also in his certainty about what the future held for him. In Psalm 27, David acknowledges the importance of this confidence in God: *I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living* (Psalm 27:13, NKJV).

As David considers what is ahead, he begins with his confidence in the goodness of God. He is certain that goodness would follow him all the days of his life. To say that goodness would follow him means that looking back at some future point in time, he would always be able to see the presence of goodness in his life. Everywhere he went, everything he did, goodness was there, and God was the source of that goodness.

Our view of the future can be shaped by this confidence, "surely" God will be good. There is a particular custom in some communities of faith which affirms the goodness

of God. The speaker states: "God is good" and the congregation responds, "All the time." Then the speaker offers the reverse, "All the time" bringing the response, "God is good." There is something powerful in hearing this affirmation of the goodness of God stated together, out loud.

God's goodness is a major theme of the Psalms and other Scripture as well. As you read just a sample here, look at the specific ways God's goodness is experienced:

- *The LORD is good to all; He has compassion on all he has made (Psalm 145:9).*
- *Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness (Psalm 107:8-9).*
- *Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting (Psalm 100:4b-5a).*
- *Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; his love endures forever (1 Chronicles 16:34).*
- *The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him (Nahum 1:7).*

In all of life's peaks and valleys, the goodness of God is found in His compassion, His mercy, His love, and His strength. He can satisfy our deepest longings like nothing else. As we saw earlier in this study, the goodness of God is found in the very fact that God is always with us and near to us: *But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds (Psalm 73:28).*

Nothing speaks of the goodness of God more than the truth of the incarnation — the story of God becoming flesh and bone, being with us, and being for us. Paul expresses this in two rhetorical questions: *If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32).* He continues by expressing what he knows for certain about God's goodness toward us which follows us all the days of our lives: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).* This is the goodness of God following us all of the days of our lives — even in hardships!

# MEDITATE

*Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; His greatness no one can fathom. One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts. They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty—and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They tell of the power of your awesome works—and I will proclaim your great deeds. They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness (Psalm 145:3-7).*

To embrace an understanding of God's goodness, follow David's example of meditating on His wonderful works, proclaiming His great deeds, celebrating His abundant goodness, and perhaps evening singing joyfully of His righteousness.



## Day 20

# SURELY GOODNESS AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE.

## Psalm 23:6a

In addition to experiencing God's goodness, David was certain that God's *mercy* would follow him all the days of his life. The English word "mercy" is typically understood as kindness and forbearance shown toward an offender and is grounded in compassion. To receive mercy is an extraordinary experience, and to give mercy is one of the greatest expressions of love. Our hearts are moved when we encounter mercy in our lives or in the stories we read or watch.

There are several different Hebrew words in the Old Testament which are translated as "mercy." The one used in Psalm 23 is found only four times in the Old Testament and has perhaps the most expansive meaning. It is alternately translated as kindness, favor and lovingkindness. It conveys God's response to our failures and brokenness. In situations which warrant judgement and punishment, astonishingly we instead discover the mercy of God.

When David wrote these words, he was years away from his greatest failure — something for which he is perhaps better known than his defeat of Goliath or any other mighty feat as King of Israel. His sin of adultery with Bathsheba and then the killing of her husband stands out as David's colossal failure. But in the midst of this terrible failure, we are introduced to the expansive nature of God's mercy.

After being confronted about his sin by the prophet Nathan, David repents in brokenness and cries out to God for mercy. Psalm 51 records David's cry for mercy and his affirmation of the nature of God: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin* (Psalm 51:1-2). In this marvelous Psalm we find a roadmap to mercy, forgiveness and restoration. Confident in God's mercy even when we are at our worse, we begin with confession, we receive forgiveness, and we experience restoration as God changes our hearts.

**Repentance:** *For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge* (Psalm 51:3-4)

**Forgiveness:** *Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity (Psalm 51:7-9).*

**Restoration:** *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me (Psalm 51:10-12).*

There was a time when I was puzzled about David's sin against Bathsheba and Uriah and these words found in Acts 13:22: *I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.* How could this man, in light of his great moral failure, be regarded as a man after God's heart? I believe I discovered an answer to this question in Psalm 51: *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise (Psalm 51:16-17).*

David possessed a contrite heart, and that is what God looks for when He comes with mercy. The mercy of God is available to all. The only thing that can block it is our stubborn refusal to admit when we have failed, to confess and repent. When we are contrite, the floodgates of mercy pour from God's heart and bring us healing.

The primary word translated as mercy in the New Testament is often defined as **"not getting what we deserve."** According to the Law of Moses, David deserved death on two counts: adultery and murder. Instead, David is forgiven. Consider these beloved and often quoted words of David found in Psalm 103. This is the mercy of God and David was well acquainted with it: *(God) does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 51:10-12).*

God's heart of mercy is ultimately defined in the gift of his Son, Jesus. **Jesus is living mercy** — the declaration that God has come among us to bring grace, mercy and forgiveness. Jesus said to the adulterous woman brought to be stoned: *"...has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you, Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:10-11).*

This is mercy. If at some future point, we look back and take inventory of our lives, we will see plenty of failure. But right there with it, every step of the way, like David, we will see the mercy of God — which has followed us all our days.

## MEDITATE

Can you look at your past and welcome God's mercy into your failures? Often, we are the ones who continue to judge while God is offering us mercy, forgiveness and new beginnings. *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness* (Lamentations 3:22-23). We are in need of God's mercy every day. And He is faithful to extend it to us every day!

One of the most profound yet simple declarations of God's mercy poured out on us through Jesus is found in Romans. If you are struggling with guilt and regret over sin, follow David's example. Talk to God about it with a contrite heart and receive God's mercy, embracing this wonderful news: ***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).***

## Day 21

# AND I SHALL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD FOREVER.

## Psalm 23:6b

In addition to experiencing God's goodness, David was certain that God's David imagines looking back at his life and seeing that God's goodness and mercy accompanied him through all his days. As he concludes this Psalm, David looks forward — with the same level of certainty — that the best is ahead.

Certainty about a good future, a “happy ending,” has tremendous influence over how we think about and deal with the present. Perhaps you have been in an intense moment in a book or movie and have been tempted to jump ahead and see how things turn out. If you've done this and discovered that it all works out in the end, the fear and anxiety of the present is abated although you ruined the story!

David is experiencing God's goodness in the present, and believes with total certainty that God's goodness and mercy will continue to accompany him through all his days on earth and beyond. As he concludes this Psalm, David believes — with the same level of certainty — that the best is ahead.

Writing long before Jesus appeared on earth, David nevertheless grasped that this life was not all there is — that much more awaited him when this life was over — which gave him strength in the here and now. One Scripture that captures how our certainty and unshakeable hope about the future God has prepared for us can impact how we live now is found in the opening words of 1 Peter: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now **for a little while** you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials* (1 Peter 1:3-6). We can even rejoice in trials because we know about the inheritance which awaits us. Life can seem long, but against the backdrop of forever, hardships last but a little while.

Despite the struggles of life, we can fix our hope on what lies ahead. The first sermon I preached in a tiny Baptist Church in Los Angeles while I was in seminary was based on 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: *Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and*

*momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

I can see clearly my 23-year-old self preaching to a small gathering where the average age had to be 70 years old. There I stood, talking about the reality that *outwardly we are wasting away*, like I knew anything about it! Inwardly they must have been laughing, thinking "just you wait!" All these years later, as I now know firsthand a bit more about the *wasting away*, I get it. I think I owe them an apology for that sermon, but certainly by now all of them are experiencing the amazing truth of the *eternal glory that outweighs all* of the troubles we face in life.

In the midst of everything that was going wrong in his life, David was able to fix his eyes on the unseen, on the eternal rather than limiting his gaze to what he could see: the temporal and its challenges. This is not escapism. This is simply putting into action what you say you believe. If we know God will one day take us to Himself, and in the final act, restore all things, there is always cause for hope and joy. The challenge is, of course, to look beyond the things seen with our physical eyes.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews chapter 12, which focuses on faith, we find the exhortation to *fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith* (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus himself was able to endure the suffering He faced because of what He knew to be true about the future: *For the joy set before Him He endured the cross* (Hebrews 12:3). What we really believe about the future is the lens through which we interpret the now. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, the words of hope and comfort He spoke to His disciples the day before he died come to mind:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am* (John 14:1-3).  
David said "surely" he would dwell in this house forever!

# MEDITATE

As we conclude this consideration of Psalm 23 let's return to where we began. Here is what we have discovered to be true:

*Know that the LORD is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture (Psalm 100:2).*

*Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will proclaim your praise (Psalm 79:13).*

And most of all, we can live our lives in the good hands of our Shepherd, Jesus, who said: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11).*



