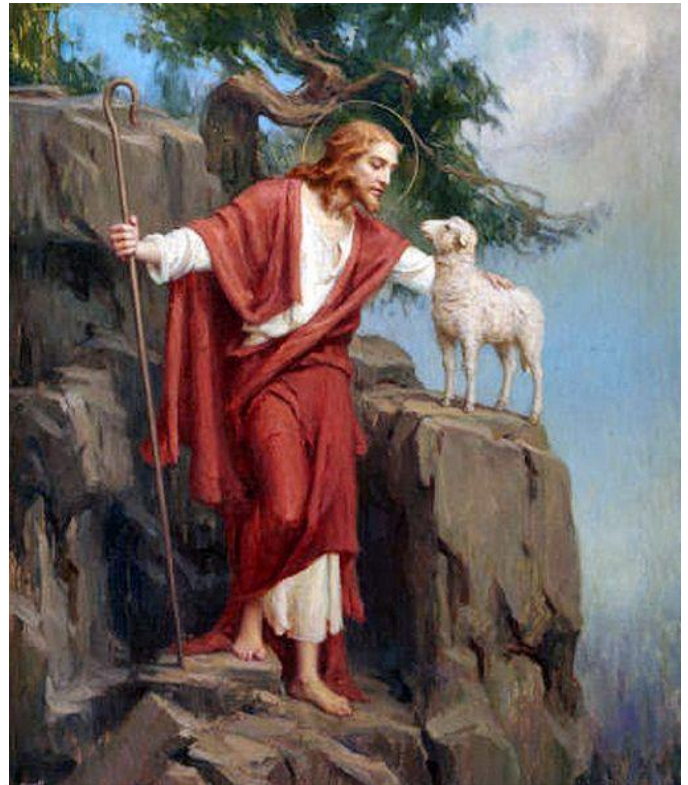


This is “Good Shepherd Sunday” when it is traditional to Read the 23rd Psalm. Let’s look at the Psalm verse by verse:

Verse 1: *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.* If the Psalms are indeed the Prayers of God as he walked among us as The Word incarnate, then for me, the first verse of Psalm 23 is so specifically tied to the very greatest of prayers, that one that Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:11, when he instructed us to pray for our daily bread. This is what it means to not want for anything. So we pray, not that we have an over-abundance of something (although we will see that this is addressed in the Psalm as well), but we pray for “that which is sufficient for the day.” And this means also acquainting ourselves with what is truly **needed** for this day. If we really do believe the authenticity of Holy Scripture, then there was a time in the history of mankind when people lived a lot longer than they do now. And the places in the world where lifespans seem to be the greatest today are not the places where people dwell in great plenty, and modern comfort.. I wonder if part of the abundant life God wants for his children has to do with reacquainting ourselves with the difference between our needs and our desires.



Christ the Good Shepherd by Charles Bosseron Chambers

First Part of Verse 2: *“He makes me lie down in green pastures.”* Thank God that He obliges us to do things for our own good. We may chant during a particular election season, “Yes we can!” But we eventually discover, “No, we can’t.” And when we in our over-competitive nature and our pride want to push things beyond what is healthy for us, we encounter moments when we are forced to take a break, or abandon an overambitious project as God “makes us lie down in green pastures.”

End v. 2/Start v. 3 together : *“He leads me beside quiet waters; He restores my soul.”* If we’ll let Him, God will indeed bring us to a place of peace. But, here’s the thing: It might not be the place what we would choose for ourselves. Oh yes, you might think you know what’s best for you. But there’s a God who is sovereign in your life who is longing to give you things which are better than you could think or even imagine (Eph. 3:20). But, that means dwelling in his will rather than yearning for your dreams. And that is such a difficult lesson to learn, particularly in today’s view of the “successful person.” There just aren’t that many highly rated universities which are likely to teach courses on “Patience 101” or “The basics of humble waiting.” But the truth is, if we can put away from us the ambitions of this world, and instead take up Elisha’s desire for “a double portion of the Spirit” (See 2Ki.2:9), then truly remarkable dreams do indeed come true.

Last Part of Verse 3: *“He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake”* We need to never forget what man’s chief aim in life is. The Westminster Shorter Catechism of the Presbyterian Church – Man’s chief aim is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. We find that when we accept our position in God’s plan, which is to praise and glorify the precious name of The Lord, when we do that, we indeed arrive at our place of joy and peace that passes all understanding. Also, living a life founded on bringing glory to God means that you and I are his adopted heirs. When Paul was writing his letters concerning our adopted son-ship in God, there was in that world something called the Pax Romana. Rome had achieved absolute peace for its empire by making absolutely sure that no Roman citizen would ever be abused by any foreign power. So, if a citizen of Rome was attacked, that was considered an attack on the whole Empire of Rome, and all the crushing force of Roman might would be brought against such a threat against one of its citizens.

We Christians carry the pedigree of none-other than Jesus himself. And though we cannot see it with mortal eyes, I have no doubt that every time one of Satan's emissaries dares to hurt one of God's children, there is quite literally Hell to pay. Because God protects those who stand beneath the banner of his holy name so that the honor, and glory, and righteousness of his name will never be tarnished. And that name has become yours and mine too.

First Part of Verse 4: *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."* And here we find the confirmation of the preceding verse that true rest is that place where man dwells with God. And of course, we see through this the prophetic voice of Psalms at work. David could not have known the particulars of the prophecies which issued from his pen.

But we do because you and I have been witnesses to The Cross. We know that we fear no evil because Christ has already conquered evil, and there will come a day when we go to dwell with Him and the Saints in the Light. So, yes indeed, even though I walk through the valley of death itself I will fear no evil.

Last Part of Verse 4: *"Your rod and your staff they comfort me."* How interesting that this is the very center of the Psalm. How interesting that one should find comfort in these things, the rod and the staff. The rod and the staff are the shepherd's marks of office. They are used to protect us from predators, from those things which would devour us. But they can also be used to discipline. And here is a strange thing, that when an adult thinks back to those trips to the woodshed, those evenings when we were grounded, that kind of loving discipline of our childhood often brings to us a strangely sweet comfort, when we realize that this discipline was just another facet of a parent's love. So yes, the rod and the staff can indeed be instruments of comfort.

First Part of Verse 5: *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."* This may seem somewhat strange to our modern ears, but the feast was normally the concluding phase of a covenant between a King and his subjects. It sealed the promise of the King's protection against all enemies.

Middle Part of Verse 5: *"You anoint my head with oil"* This was the sign of how to welcome an honored guest. David more than anyone else in the Old Testament understood what honor had been done Him.

This youngest son of a sheep farmer had been welcomed as royalty by none other than the Creator God himself. And truly, this is the same honor that awaits every child of God in his or her Baptism, to be made a royal citizen in God's Kingdom.

Final Part of Verse 5: *"My cup overflows."* Could these images of the table, the oil and the cup also be a prophetic view of God's blessings through the Sacraments that would be instituted by our Lord in the Chrism oil of Baptism and His holy table, the bread, and the common cup of communion? I certainly think so, because as you have probably heard me say and will hear me say in the future, the entire Bible is all about Jesus from first to last, and that includes the Psalms.

First part of the final verse: *"Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life."* What many people don't understand about this verse is the use of the Hebrew verb, *radaf*. The meaning here is "to chase," "to hunt," or "to hound." The imagery here is that God's loving kindness will pursue us forever. You can't shake God's love, dear ones. Oh sure, you can break his heart. But there is nothing that you or I could ever do which will make God stop loving us.

The Last Part of the Final Verse: *"And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever more."* To David, the Hebrew which is used here would mean "I shall dwell in the house of The Lord throughout the years." But to the Christian this Psalm is a foreshadowing of the last verses of the Bible, which show us the New Jerusalem which is really where you and I will make our final home. For we will truly dwell in the House of the Lord Forever-more. That is what it means to be sheep in the fold of Jesus. That is what it truly means to have The Lord as Our Shepherd.

JWB+ 5-04-17