

This is “Good Shepherd Sunday” when it is traditional to read Psalm 23. 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,¹ then the first verse of Psalm 23, for me is so specifically tied to the very greatest of prayers, that one that Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:11, when he taught 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.”



Christ as *The Good Shepherd*, familynova.com

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. Even when we in our over-competitive nature and our pride want to push things even 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.”

Last Part of Verse 2/First Part of Verse 3 together : *“He leads me beside quiet waters; He restores my soul.”* If we will just 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 (see Eph. 3:20).

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 do indeed arrive at our place of joy and peace that passes all understanding.

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 shepherds 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.

¹ This is apparently a belief that Dietrich Bonhoeffer held very dear.

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."* The imagery here is that God's loving kindness will pursue us forever, and 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.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

JWB+ 4/01/16



Detail of *The Good Shepherd*, St. Mary's Cathedral, Lincolnshire (UK) by Duncan Grant (1885-1978)