

**Scripture: Psalm 23 John 10:14-18**

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Psalm 23

**A psalm of David.**

<sup>1</sup> ***The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.***

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,

he leads me beside quiet waters,

<sup>3</sup>he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> ***Even though I walk***

***through the darkest valley,***

***I will fear no evil,***

***for you are with me;***

***your rod and your staff,***

***they comfort me.***

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> ***Surely goodness and love will follow me***

***all the days of my life,***

***and I will dwell in the house of the Lord***

***forever.***

John 10:14-18

“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. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Scripture: Psalm 23 John 10:14-18 by Michael R. Burkley at Plains Presbyterian Church 08/13/22

Psalm 23 is an invitation to trust in the LORD. It's divided into five balanced parts beginning with rejoicing that God is present with us, then that God is the one who provides all we need, and then middle part that tells us that God is the one who protects us, and we need not be afraid. Then comes the fourth and fifth parts, repeating the first two parts with a difference—instead of talking about sheep, now it's talking about us, how we can realize that God is the one who provides for us and that we can celebrate in our commitment to the Shepherd and the Shepherd's commitment to us, for all of our lives and forever.

**God provides:** verse five says, "he sets a table before me..." The idea behind that is not that God gives us a snack, but that God gives us a banquet, and banquet tables are loaded with food *and* celebration. If we're really feeling insignificant we can limit that to the idea that God *just* provide us with our food, but in the same way that Jesus meant more than food when he taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" so too this phrase means more than just food. When someone threw a banquet for you in the ancient culture of Israel it was not just a meal given but also a relationship shared. If someone throws a banquet for you it means that you're family to them. It's what Jesus meant when he said that we shouldn't worry about what we will eat or wear because our heavenly Father knows that we need those things. Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, he said, and all these things will be given to you as well. God prepares a banquet for us, and it's a banquet that stretches into every part of our lives because our loving shepherd stretches into every part of our lives. All we have to do is follow him.

And what God provides is even more than a banquet, it's a banquet "in the presence of my enemies." There are two ways of understanding what this "presence of my enemies" means. Some say that these enemies are everyone and everything arrayed against us, seeking to defeat us whether they be enemies within us or outside of us. There are enough of those both to go around. They would see in this that God promises that we will have all we need in comfort and hope, and those enemies who were against us will be defeated and ashamed, and hungry, before us. That would be a miracle, for there are a lot of enemies against us. But some see an even greater miracle here, the miracle of turning enemies into friends. Remember, eating together is a recognition of family and friends, and eating in the presence of our enemies might just mean that God has turned our enemies into our friends. That would be a miracle. Which is right? I actually think that both of them can be a description of what God will do. Jesus calls us to love our enemies because that's what he did. But not everyone became his friend, and we can't expect that to happen to us, either. But we can always hope. I for one aim to always try to turn my enemies into my friends. What do you try to do?

Not only a banquet, but God also anoints our heads with oil and our cups will overflow! I know we're not in the age of Brillcream today, but back then a good host would pour oil on your head. It was a symbol of the blessings of God that the host wanted to bless you with. It came from the practice of using oil on your hair to kill off any lice that wanted to take up residence there. It's done today of slathering Crisco on the head of a child with headlice, no insecticides needed! Not having lice is a wonderful thing if you've ever had them, and the utility of oil on the head came to represent the joy of God's blessings on us and our blessings on others. The same with the overflowing cup. It meant more than a cup overfull, spilling over the side, it means that we can never out-need God. God gives us what we need, and more, so that we can invite others to share in our bounty. It's as if a fast-food store not only had a policy for free refills but also encouraged you to share your cup with as many people as possible until they wanted to get their own cup! The oil, the cup, all represent the promise of life, a life lived in joy before the one who supplies our every need.

But is all of that blessing just for us? I don't think so, and that's because of the next verse, "Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forever." Here's a question I expect you've never asked – I hadn't asked it before someone pointed it out to me. Who goes first in this verse, me and you, or "goodness and mercy"? John the Baptist went *ahead* of Jesus to prepare the way for the Lord. In Deuteronomy 9 God goes *before* the people as they cross the Jordan River to prepare their way into the Promised Land. But here in Psalm 23 it's *we* who *go before* goodness and mercy, we who *go before* to prepare the way for them, and goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives as we follow our shepherd. What does that mean? I think it means that when we know God's care for us and God's everlasting love for us, we are

free to go through life living for God and living for others as God has shown us the way. What happens when we live for God? What happens when we are living disciples of Jesus Christ? What happens when we celebrate God's presence with us and God's providing for us and God's protection of us? *What happens* is that we prepare the way for God's goodness and God's mercy to take root wherever we go. When we follow Jesus, growing ever closer to him we will naturally prepare the way for the Lord, wherever we go. We might never see the results of our service. Are we willing to let that service to the Lord be enough to satisfy us, or do we demand the results? more? I know my grandmother prayed for my father's salvation every day, and yet she never saw the results of her prayers. She died when he was not a believer. It was nearly twenty years later that he gave his life to the Lord, and said, "I should have done this long ago." But I know it was enough for her to trust God because she told her grandchildren, "Keep praying for your Dad." Like my grandmother, David didn't always see the good results of his following the Lord. Saul, the first King of Israel, tried to kill David, time and again. Later, when David became King, his own son Absalom tried to kill him to become King himself. But David followed the Lord, even when he didn't see the good that was coming, but others down through the years have seen the goodness and mercy that followed him because he followed the LORD. A question for us all is, "Are we willing to follow the Shepherd even when we don't see any good results of that following? It's a question much like President Kennedy told us to ask when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

It's not easy to follow the LORD when you're walking through the darkest valley and don't see the green pastures, when fear rises up and help seems so far away. I know that when I'm afraid, that I'm afraid because I'm not trusting the shepherd who has promised never to leave me or forsake me. That's when I experience that knowing and trusting are two different things! Has that kind of fear ever been a part of your life? The only thing we can do when that's true is to hold on to the truth that we're a part of God's flock and that we care and support each other as we follow the shepherd. That's who we are even when we're not perfect, even when we're not trusting, which is a very good thing because none of us are ever perfect!

But there's even more. Just as "goodness and mercy" shall follow us all the days of our lives" we also have the blessing of dwelling in the house of the Lord. For the longest time when I heard that I would think it was referring to my own preferred room in heaven, but "The House of the LORD" is never used that way in the Old Testament. From where we stand, knowing what Jesus has promised his followers, we can see that we will have a home in heaven forever, but David wouldn't have thought that. In Scripture, a "House" was often a family or a heritage. The House of Jacob, or the House of David, meaning the family beginning with Jacob or David. Here, the "House of the LORD" likely means the "Family of the LORD," of which every believer is a part. David is saying that he's sticking with God and God's people. He has no desire to wander anywhere else and he's declaring, "Here I stand, I can do no other!" But that's not all. There was another, similar, image that the "House of the Lord" would evoke and that was the Tent of Meeting where God was worshipped—The Tabernacle and then the Temple that succeeded it. Again, David is saying that he will be committed to the LORD forever. It wasn't that he was saying he would move into the Tabernacle and never leave, because we know that's not what he did, but it was saying that worship and obedience and service to God would be the center of his life, that he would "dwell" there. That's a goal for me that I have not yet achieved, but it's a sure and certain hope because I know at the end of my earthly life, when I stand before God, my God will make it so.

God doesn't bless us just so the blessing can end with us. God blesses us so that we can pass that blessing on to others, and when we do that, we will be celebrating and living in the presence of the Lord forever, and that's good news, news that we can share. Just as God gives us the example of a shepherd caring for their sheep so that we can learn how to care for others, and just as God blesses us so that we can make every effort to be a blessing to others as we live in God's blessing, the freedom of following the Shepherd. As we live in that freedom, we experience the blessings of it, not just for us but to pass it on to others so they can experience it as well. As citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and of this country may we leave freedom in our wake by caring for others, by giving of ourselves for their good and by upholding their freedom as something just as important as our own. I think the best way for us to do that is to follow our shepherd, to be disciples of Jesus, so that goodness and mercy, and freedom, shall follow in our wake wherever we go. As we go about our daily lives, does goodness and mercy follow us, do we prepare the way for the LORD? What will we do to make sure that is happening each day?