

*Summer in Psalms**“Surely, Goodness and Mercy...”*[Psalm 23](#)

The psalm that we have just read together is the most familiar psalm out of the 150 that appear in the Book of Psalms. Throughout many generations, people of faith have found comfort and hope in this ancient old song, especially in times of great fear and anxiety, as well as loss. Many of us learned it as children and continue to rely on it for our personal prayer and meditation.

But, Psalm 23 is not only the song of the faith community. Along with the “wedding reading” from 1 Corinthians, it is one of the best known scriptures in the Bible, readily recognizable even for non-Christians as the “funeral reading.” And also, various presidents have used this psalm to bring words of healing to a grieving nation. From President Abraham Lincoln, who was heard reciting the verses during the Civil War to President George W. Bush, who quoted it in his address to the nation after the traumatic events of 9/11.

Psalm 23 also appears in various other cultural contexts, whether it is in music, art, literature, and film. One reference from pop culture I can recall is a scene from Titanic, where we see a priest reading the psalm as the ship begins to sink down into the frigid waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

Why is this particular psalm so popular among believers and non-believers alike? I believe one of the reasons for the popularity of this psalm is its personal nature. If you pay attention to the language used in Psalm 23, you will notice that you hardly hear any reference to the first-person plural pronouns of Us, Our, and We. Instead, the first-person singular pronouns of Me, My, and I are repeated again and again throughout its 6 verses.

While this feature might not seem so strange in the current age of the selfie, it was oddly individual-focused in the world of the psalmist. You see, his world was a community-oriented society, where one’s personal identity was shaped in the communal context. In other psalms where God is portrayed as a shepherd, God is not a shepherd of the individual. Instead, God is the shepherd of the whole nation of Israel. So, the psalmist might have been expected to say, “The Lord is OUR shepherd.” Yet, his confession is that “The Lord is MY Shepherd.”

This use of the first-person pronoun reveals to us his personal, intimate relationship with God. We can see the development of this theme in the subtle shifts in language we find within the psalm. In the first 3 verses of the psalm, God is addressed as the third person: “The Lord is my shepherd. HE makes me..., HE leads me..., HE restores my soul... HE guides me...” Then, in verses 4 and 5, the way God is addressed changes from the third-person pronoun to the second-person pronoun: “YOU are with me... YOUR rod and YOUR staff... YOU prepare a table before me... YOU anoint my head with oil...” The psalmist is no longer talking ABOUT God, but is rather talking TO God. His speech is not an explanation of God, but a prayer to God.

Then, let’s look at what is happening when the shift in addressing God changes from the third-person to the second-person. You will notice that the shift happens when the psalmist is talking about his valley

experience: *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for You are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me!”*

According to the King James Version, the psalmist is in “the valley of the shadow of death.” In other words, the valley the psalmist finds himself in is a place of his deepest troubles and fears, a place of complete desperateness and loneliness, a place of death. In the midst of such darkness, the psalmist is boldly proclaiming, *“God is right here with me. The Lord, my God, walks with me!”*

What is the result of this kind of bold proclamation and personal relationship with God? The psalmist sums it up in his faith statement found in the first verse: *“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”* The Common English Bible translates it as *“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”* The Message translation meanwhile has it as *“God, my shepherd, I don’t need a thing!”* It’s a statement of trust in God’s management of his life. It’s a statement of his conviction that God will provide for him, that God is the only necessity of life.

I wonder if we are bold enough to claim this as our faith statement, too. Can you say with unwavering conviction that no one but God is the provider of your life?

My father was a Methodist pastor. Throughout the 40-plus years of his ordained ministry, he chose to serve in mostly the smallest churches in the poorest neighborhoods across the Korean peninsula. Because of this, he did not receive much pay from his churches. You can imagine the difficulties my mother faced, having to raise 6 children on the limited resources she could procure from my father’s modest income!

But, her faith was strong. She gathered her children every night for family devotion. Before she prayed for each one of us, she always said this prayer that I can still vividly remember: *“O God, don’t you think the difficulties my husband and I face in our ministry and life are enough for us? Promise me that you will never put my children through any of these trials in their lives - that you will provide for them with what they need throughout their lives!”*

Now you may be wondering if my life has been trouble free. Of course not. I’ve had my share of problems and challenges in my personal life and ministry. But, whenever I encountered them and my heart was troubled, I could not help but recall my mother’s nightly prayer. And as I remembered, I knew I would be okay because I believed God had answered my mother’s prayer. I believed that God was there with me in the midst of my trouble, providing for me and my family with what we needed right at that moment. And, I am here testifying before you, witnessing to God’s mercy and deliverance. Despite all the troubles I have faced in my life, I am here, doing what I love to do, surrounded by those dearest and closest to me. Thanks be to God!

In *Feasting on the Word*, a lectionary commentary, John E. White writes these words: “In the consumer-oriented society, it is extremely difficult to hear the simple but radical message of Psalm 23... To say in our prosperous context that God is the only necessity of life sounds hopelessly quaint and naive. Then, again, the words of Jesus may also strike us as naive: *“... do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.... But, strive for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”* (volume 2, p. 433).

Both the psalmist and Jesus are telling us not to let the worries and anxieties in our lives get in the way of seeking the kingdom of God, putting God at the center of our lives. They tell us not only that God will

provide but that we find God in the process of providing for us in the here and now. Let's hear again from the psalmist: "He *makes* me lie down in green pastures, *leads* me beside still waters, *restores* my life, *leads* me in right paths..."

Yes, if we have the eyes to see, we find that the Lord our God is always at work in our lives. Whether it is in our darkest valleys or on the brightest mountaintop, God is present, seeking to lead and guide us as the Good Shepherd through our journey. We are promised that when the kingdom of God is what we set the eyes of our hearts to, we will be given not just the things we need to survive, but to thrive!

Have you noticed the depiction of God's provision for us in the psalm? It is an image of a banquet table and an overflowing cup. Friends, our God is a generous and gracious host, who invites us to share in the abundance that is available to all who gather at God's table! For God loves us unconditionally and seeks to provide for us extravagantly.

Are you restless and fearful? Sing this psalm. Are you worried about your health or finances? Sing this psalm. Are you worried about your children or parents? Sing this psalm. Are you wrestling with a broken relationship? Sing this psalm. Are you anxious about your future? Sing this psalm.

May this singing lead us to encounter the God who is presently at work in all of creation and in each of our lives, seeking to be a lamp unto our feet, lighting the path to still waters and green pastures! May we look back on our lives and see how God has led us and provided for us! May these words from today's psalm be our song! "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."