

PSALM 23

WEEK 9



Context & Historical Background

The book of psalms is a collection of 150 ancient Hebrew poems, songs, and prayers that were written during all different periods of Israel's history. There are many different authors, although 73 of the Psalms are attributed to David, and there are many different genres of Psalms. The Psalms were used for communal worship for Israel, but it was also edited together and used as a curriculum to prayerfully understand the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) and to look forward to salvation that will come through the future messiah. In its essence, the book of Psalms is a prayer book that invites you into the story of the God of Israel. There are also two major genres of psalms: Lament and Praise. You will notice that the book of Psalms is front loaded with psalms of lament and then ends on a high note of praise.

Psalm 23 is probably the most well-known and well-loved psalm in the entire collection. This psalm has been incredibly weaved into the fabric of American culture, so much so that you may find it referenced in any genre of literature or quoted in your favorite hip-hop song (ex: "Gangsta's Paradise" by Coolio). This psalm is all about how God personally walks with his people through the mountain tops and valleys of life. In this way it actually mirrors the heart of the entire book of Psalms.



Related Passages

John 10:11-18 - Jesus as the Good Shepherd

Ezekiel 34:11-17 - God as a shepherd that searches, rescues, and protects

Isaiah 40:10-11 - God as a shepherd (again!) whose sheep as close to his heart

Psalm 27:4-14 - Longing to dwell in the house of the Lord



Key Terms

Soul: The hebrew word here is "*nephesh*," which really means the totality of a human being—our minds, bodies, spirits, emotions, and our will. This is important because God doesn't just restore our emotional state, or just our physical state. His restoration is complete and holistic. He restores our minds, bodies, spirits, emotions, and our will. He brings all of these to complete restoration and into complete unity.

Love: The hebrew word for love here is "*chesed*", which is sometimes translated as loving-kindness. This is a word used in the context of a covenant. This is the type of word a husband and

wife would use when talking about their life-long, unconditional, commitment to one another.

Rod and Staff: The “rod” was basically a short club that shepherd would carry to protect himself as well as the sheep from predatory animals or robbers. It was also used for disciplining the sheep. The “staff” is exactly what you would imagine: a long walking stick with a curve on the end. This was used to guide the sheep as they would walk great towards their destination.



Key Themes

“I Lack nothing”: In the Hebrew, this phrase really means that the psalmist doesn’t feel that he needs or wants anything. It’s one thing to have all of your needs met, but to actually feel as though you don’t have any wants—that’s radical. You can have everything you *need* and still be terribly discontent, restlessly chasing after more. But to know the Lord is your shepherd means knowing a peace that stills and satisfies your ever-searching heart. The peace of knowing that God is *with* and for you is the answer to the anxiety that began in the Garden (recall the curse upon Adam after the fall). The New Testament is filled with exhortations and blessings about peace. The early church “passed the peace.” For us, peace is an essential way of life.

Christ both demonstrates this point, and he preaches this point. He lived a life of poverty: he didn’t have a home, his friends abandoned him, his hometown and brother scorned him, his people killed him. And yet he is the most peaceful guy to ever live. He tells us (and warns us) to live the same: “Seek first the kingdom of God and all this will be given unto you” (Matt. 6:33); “What good is it to gain the whole world, but lose your soul?” (Mark 8:36). Life with God is a life of peace because it’s a life without longing. When you want nothing but God, you have everything. But how do we do this? How do we want nothing but God? How do we *get* that peace? That’s what you need to figure out with your group.

Green Pastures, Quiet Waters, Right Paths: Israel is surrounded by desert, which means that “green pastures” and “quiet waters” were not a common occurrence. Imagine the desert as you read this Psalm. Imagine you’re a sheep walking with his shepherd through the desert—the longing you would have for some soft green grass to lay down on and for a cool, quiet stream of water to drink from. I feel tired and thirsty just thinking about it! Yet in this want, this thirst, this desert, he is with God even still.

It is important to note that the “right paths” here *include* walking through the “darkest valley.” You will walk through valleys in your life—this is unavoidable—but the promise is that God will be with you, guiding and protecting you throughout every aspect of your journey through life. This means that during those times when life sucks, God’s leading you. And just because life’s hard doesn’t mean you’re on the wrong path (faithfulness to him is always the right path, and it’s often a hard road). And even if you don’t feel the peace of God in those times, pray this psalm. Make it the petition of your heart, even if it’s not a reflection of it right now.

The Shepherd’s Banquet: Describing God as a shepherd is not completely surprising within the historical context. Many kings were described as “shepherds” of their people, and even King

David is described as the *Shepherd of Israel* in the Old Testament. But what is surprising is the personal nature of how God shepherds his people. The heightened intimacy in this passage is rarely paralleled in the Old Testament. You'll notice that the psalm becomes more intimate as it progresses. The metaphor of God being a shepherd smoothly transitions into God becoming a personal friend that you would share a meal with.

Verses 5-6 are an image of a grand banquet with God. Banquets were very important in the Ancient Near East. They were a way of celebrating victory and usually have the connotation of a King inviting someone to be his friend in a public and personal way. This would also be an extended celebration, not just a dinner party. And indeed this banquet that God is inviting us to is an everlasting one. This is what it means to dwell in his house forever. So what we have here is God inviting his people to the victory feast even before the battle has been fought.

📖 Quotes & Illustrations

'Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.'

ST. AUGUSTINE

Confessions by Saint Augustine — an entire book about one man's conversion from a life of chaos to a life of peace, including all of the valleys.

! Three Main Points

1. Our hearts long for peace, but they will be restless until they rest in God. If God is with us, then we can confidently say we have all that we need.
2. Psalm 23 uses two metaphors, the shepherd and the friend at the banquet, to help us know that God deeply desires an intimate relationship with us, along the way and at the end.
3. Jesus is a dirty shepherd: Psalm 23 gives us an image of a God who is not afraid to walk with us along the right paths—including deep ravines and hot deserts—to arrive at God's house.

? Discussion Questions

- Why do you think God inspired this story to be included in Scripture?
- What do we learn about God in the passage? What do we learn about us in this passage?
- What genre is this passage of Scripture? How does that affect how we read it?
- When reading poetry, always look for metaphors, repetition, and imagery. What are the various metaphors and imagery in this poem? Make a list. What is the intended effect these are supposed to have?
- Why would David describe his relationship with God the way he does? What do you think

was going on in his life? When you think of your relationship with God, would you describe it in the same way?

- If the Lord is your shepherd, then what does that make you? How does the shepherd metaphor understand how our relationship with God operates?
- The Psalm begins my saying, “The Lord is MY shepherd...” Do you see God as the one who guides your life? What areas of your life are hesitant to let God direct?
- Is there any part of your life that needs to be restored by God?
- How do we know how to follow God’s “right paths?”
- What does it mean that God will prepare a table in the presence of our enemies?
- Who are some of the most peaceful people you know? (maybe Curt Vernon?) Why do you think they are that way?
- If you don’t feel how David feels, how does this psalm apply to you? How do you use it?
- Can you have peace with God and still get stressed out about everyday stuff?
- What do you make of the rod and the staff in this passage? How would those two objects represent comfort?
- Reflect on the things you feel like you lack—even genuinely do lack. How might finding rest in God satisfy these longings? Is there a limit to that?
- What do you think it means to dwell in the house of the Lord forever? What might this practical look like in your life?

Application & Practice

Refresh the image you have of God in your imagination. We all have a picture of who God is to us in our minds whether we are aware of it or not. Practice picturing God as your shepherd and as your friend. Ezekiel 34:11-17 really highlights this. Read this passage and list the attributes and actions of God. Write out a description of who God is in light of these passages Psalms and Ezekiel.

Dark Valleys: Practice recognizing that God is with you in the dark valleys of your life. Just because you’re in a tough situation doesn’t mean God is absent. To help this reality sink into your heart and mind, begin each day this week by writing out Psalm 23 by hand, meditating on the passage as you do so.

Lack nothing: Meditate this week on one Psalm a day and let it lead you into prayer. We do this every day at 3 o’clock prayer. Tim Keller’s devotional book on the Psalms would be a good place to start.

Memorize Psalm 23 this week.

Going Deeper

Life Without Lack: Living In The Fullness of Psalm 23 by Dallas Willard

The Songs of Jesus: A Year Of Daily Devotionals In The Psalms by Tim Keller

N. T. Wright: "Praying the Psalms: Personal, Pastoral, and Theological Reflections"
<https://vimeo.com/36080462>

Tim Keller: "How To Pray The Psalms"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWLN-2pQds4>

"Read Scripture: Psalms"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9phNEaPrv8>