

Pastor Brad Smith

4th Sunday of Easter/Good Shepherd Sunday

For such a time as this: unprecedented times, and at a time when things are most uncertain, we turn to ...

WORDS OF HOPE, PEACE, COMFORT AND STRENGTH

The 23rd Psalm is the most well-known of all the psalms in the Bible. It has been used an uncountable number of times. Next to the Lord's Prayer, it is the most quoted passage in scripture - valued by serious and casual believers alike, where both find in it hope, peace, comfort and strength.

For all its popularity and visibility, Psalm 23 significance is often missed. Have you ever heard something so often you barely listen to it anymore? Or have you seen something so often that you do not even notice it anymore? That is how it can be with the 23rd Psalm. Its familiarity is so common that one may acknowledge it and then in the next instant dismiss it. It can be like a story you hear so often you just stop listening when you hear someone tell it again. For many of us the 23rd Psalm may become just so familiar.

In a Pinterest post and shared on social media, we are given a "Line by Line Meaning" of Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd = **RELATIONSHIP**

I shall not be in want = **SUPPLY**

He makes me lie down in green pastures = **REST**

He leads me beside quiet waters = **REFRESHMENT**

He restores my soul = **HEALING**

He guides me in paths of righteousness = **GUIDANCE**

For his name's sake = **PURPOSE**

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death = **TESTING**

I will fear no evil = **PROTECTION**

For you are with me = **FAITHFULNESS**

Your rod and your staff they comfort me = **DISCIPLINE**

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies = **HOPE**

You anoint my head with oil = **CONSECRATION**

My cup overflows = **ABUNDANCE**

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life = **BLESSING**

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD = **SECURITY**

Forever = **ETERNITY**

GOODNESS AND MERCY

Timmy was a little five-year-old boy whose Mom loved him very much. Being a worrier, she was concerned about his walking to school when he started Kindergarten. She walked with him the first few days, but he came home one day telling her he did not want her walking him to school every day. He wanted to be like the “big boys.” He protested so loudly that she had to find another way to handle it.

She asked her neighbor Nancy if she would secretly follow her son to school at a distance, but close enough to keep an eye on him. Nancy said that, since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise so she agreed. The next school day, Nancy and her little girl set out behind Timmy as he walked to school with his friend Ronnie. This went on for a whole week. Timmy’s friend noticed that this same lady was following them every day. Finally, Ronnie asked Timmy, “Have you noticed that lady following us all week? Do you know her?” Timmy nonchalantly replied, “Yeah, I know who she is.” Ronnie asked, “Well, who is she?” “That’s just Shirley Goodnest an’ her little girl Marcy,” Timmy said. Ronnie inquired further, “Well, why does she follow us every day like that?” “Well,” Timmy explained, “every night Momma makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers cuz she worries about me so much. And in it, the prayer says, ‘Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life.’ So, I guess I’ll just have to get used to it.

That story conveys almost the same message that the duo “Shane & Shane” communicate in their song from their 2015 album *Psalms, Vol. 2*. Shane Barnard and Shane Everett are a worship duo who formed in 2002 and released their first album *Psalms*.

Even though the artists change the order of Psalm 23, both in wording and verse order, the same themes in the Psalm are presented: that God is our guide, our comfort, and source of goodness to which our response is worship, entering into a personal relationship with God – a relationship that was broken and restored when Jesus offered his life ...

- *through teaching and healings, always on the move to seek out the lost like a Good Shepherd.*
- *on the cross, revealing God's vulnerable love emptied and on display in a world where influence, wealth, and status are thought to be the only powers.*
- *to us in the Resurrection, revealing that our wounds can be healed, forgiveness is possible, and everything Jesus taught can be trusted as the truth.*

Through God's goodness and mercy our relationship with Him is restored, resulting in eternal praise. A goodness and mercy ...

- within the world that death cannot swallow
- that offers abundant life
- that will outlast the powers and principalities that only know violence, oppression, and fear.

And therein lies the good news [**Surely Goodness Surely Mercy Chorus**]

Surely goodness surely mercy / Right beside me all my days
And I will dwell in Your house forever / And bless Your Holy Name

Friends in Christ, redirect your gaze from your spirit of fear, [and/or temptations of wealth, power, and influence,] so that, together, we might once again see God as the source of goodness and mercy.

PSALM 23 (IN PREPARATION FOR COMMUNION)

The psalm moves from creed to prayer, from statements about God to communion with God, from a declaration of faith to a humble confession of his need for grace.

The psalm was broken up into two sections. The first was a declaration of faith about God. In the Church we call this a Creed. David, the writer of the psalm, begins by wonderfully sharing a statement of faith in God as his Shepherd. He then goes on to share how God is such a good shepherd to him ... making him "lie down in green pastures," "leading him beside the still waters," "restoring his soul," and "leading him in the right paths, for His Glory." All these statements are about God's goodness, God's sustaining power, God's guidance, God's forbearance. They tell us about God! This is what makes Psalm 23 the most beloved song in the Bible's hymnal. As the old song says, "My Lord knows the way through the wilderness; all I have to do is follow."

But then in verse 4 David changes his focus, and his approach. He stops sharing his "creed" about God, and suddenly starts praying to God. Hence it becomes a prayer of praise and conviction. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil..." Why? "...You are with me. Your rod and staff, they give me comfort and assurance."

What could be more comforting and reassuring than this? *"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me."* When we're facing hard times, the greatest thought of all is that of God's presence with us. And then there is this confident affirmation, and prayer for a blessing ... *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."* Indeed, it is such a confident expression in the goodness of God and His faithfulness to us.

David did not deserve any of the things God did for him, and neither do we. When we engage in creeds, statements about what we believe about God, we can too often get into an argument over who is right, whose beliefs are correct. But here in this humble psalm David seems to be showing us and telling us, "Get past your creeds, and get into communion with God."

- True faith (Salvation) is always moving from creeds to conviction.
- True faith (Salvation) is always moving from what we say to how we witness it.
- True faith (Salvation) is always leading us to a place where it is not what we believe about God that matters as much as how what we believe affects us and those around us.

QUESTION: Is your true faith (salvation) moving from creeds to prayer, from declarations of faith to conviction of soul, from a matter of the head to a matter of the heart? If not, then reread this wonderful psalm and like David get back into that place of Conviction and Grace that you may live out your praise of God in all you do with all you meet. And know that God is always reminding us of God's divine presence. No matter how dark things may seem, or how alone we may feel, the Good Shepherd and Gatekeeper is relentlessly for us (John 10).

[John 3:16, 17]