



THE GOOD SHEPHERD

GEORGE G WATTS

The LORD is
my shepherd.
I shall not want.

BUT WHAT IF I SHALL?

Here we are at the start of another year. As we flip the calendar to January, there's a sense of a clean slate that mingles optimism and hope. Maybe 2023 will be a year of *precedented events* to break the cycle we've experienced these last few. Maybe you're still optimistic about that thing you didn't quite get done in '22.

But there is also dread. Remembering all the things we failed to do in 2022. Still feeling the setbacks. Twelve months' worth of regret. Many of us have been sucker-punched by life a few times too many to have any naïve optimism left.

Yet the pages of scripture call us to hope in the midst of anything, and everything. They call us to see what we have already been given. They direct us to appreciate what God is doing, has done, and will do.

The Good Shepherd

We are all familiar with Psalm 23. Quiet waters. A restored soul. No more fear. We're sheep, He's the Good Shepherd. Sure, but knowing *about* the subject and deeply experiencing it are vastly different. As we start another year, Psalm 23 for 2023 seems like a good fit.

We know what it says: “I shall not want anything.” But what if I shall? If this statement in the Shepherd’s Psalm is true, then why am I not living it?

The Good Goatherd

Our youngest had a pet goat when we lived in rural Burundi. Man, did she love that goat. She played with it, carried it, fed it, talked to it, loved it. In return, the goat followed her everywhere she went. It was by her side from the moment she woke up until she put it safely in its pen at dusk. It would stand by the kitchen door waiting for her to come out. Sometimes it would sneak in when it couldn’t wait for her any longer. Sparky figured out which window was Alma’s bedroom and it would stand there just to hear her talk. That animal knew very well who took care of it. It easily recognized Alma’s voice. It knew it had a loving person who would always look out for it. She truly was the Good Goatherd.

That’s the image we’ll start our study of The Shepherd’s Psalm with. The loving embrace of someone who cares deeply. The concern that constantly looks out for the good of the other. Care that sacrifices.

Each day, we’ll read the Psalm from a different English translation and then dive into a short section. I’ve included a daily image I hope gives a glimpse into what deep, true contentment can look like.

Cover Photo: our daughter and her beloved Sparky, the day she had to leave him in Kibuye, Burundi



DAY 1

NOT JUST FOR GRANDMA'S CROSS-STITCH

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

PSALM 23

English Standard Version

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The twenty-third Psalm has got to be the best known, most widely used, most mis-understood, and strangely used chapter in the entire Bible

We all know it.

Even people who know almost nothing of the Bible have some familiarity with two passages: John 3:16 and Psalm 23 (and probably the opening of 1 Corinth 13)

We use Psalm 23 in funerals, especially those movies and tv. It seems to often be quoted in strange situations. It's made into posters, has the words laid over blurry photos, and is a solid contender for "scripture you've most likely seen cross-stitched in someone's grandma's house."

Max Lucado says these words are "Framed and hung in hospital halls, scratched on prison walls, quoted by young, and whispered by the dying. In these lines sailors have found a harbor, the frightened have found a father, and strugglers have found a friend."

The Psalm is surprisingly short, only six verses, barely over 100 words. You can read it out loud in about 45 seconds (yes, I just timed myself) You could probably memorize it this afternoon if you wanted to.

But like so many things we are familiar with, we lose sight of it. Forest for the Trees, Water to Fish and all that.

The sad thing is we lose sight of what a powerful teaching Psalm 23 is on contentment.

A sheep that lies down even when surrounded by food. An animal not scared in terrifying situations. A creature that sees and appreciates what the shepherd has given. Sheep that find, to use Dallas Willard's words, 'a life without lack.'

So let's spend ten days digging into *The Shepherd's Psalm*.

Trying to clearly see truths that have always been there. Understanding and applying all these verses have to say about contentment for our lives.

One way to get a different perspective on the Psalm is to listen to it - really listen to it - in a musical arrangement. Click on one of the options below - or find another one you like.

Acoustic folk? [The House of God Forever](#) John Foreman

More singer/songwriter? [Psalm 23 \(Surely Goodness, Surely Mercy\)](#) Shane & Shane

Fancy 2000's pop/rock? [Psalm 23](#) Peter Furler

Really old school &/or you speak German? [Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt, BWV 112](#) - J.S. Bach

Another way to see how our culture understands this Psalm is to look at what images are associated with it. A quick image search turns up a lot of soft, fluffy, blurred-dream-like scenes. We seem to love the soft, comforting part of protection, and not so much the reality of what we are being protected from, or what it takes. There aren't a lot of images of the valley of the shadow of death, or the rod of the shepherd.

PRAYER

Lord, you are my shepherd;

I don't need anything else.

You allow me to lie down in green pastures.

You lead me beside still waters. You restore my soul.

You lead me in paths of righteousness

for your own name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will not fear any evil thing,

for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

I know you will prepare a table before me

in the very presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil like a King;

you give me so much that my cup overflows.

For sure goodness and mercy

will follow me all the days of my life,

and Lord I will stay in your house forever.

Amen

Today's Photo: a little girl bringing home an abundance of freshly picked greens for dinner



DAY 2

NOT SO SURE ABOUT THAT

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He leads me...*

PSALM 23

The Message

God, my shepherd!

I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,

I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.

Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.

You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.

I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He leads me...

Let's just stop right there.

We've barely started this Psalm, but we need to examine something up front. We can probably recite this first phrase pretty easily. However, if we stop to think about what it means, we might not be so sure how we feel about it.

This poem was written by David, who is referred to as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). David was a deeply sinful man committing a murder-adultery combo that few people are bold enough to attempt. However, he was also deeply remorseful over his sin, and was fully aware of his dependance on God.

David's words and actions show he had a deep passion to follow YAHWEH. He wanted to do what was right, to seek the Lord, to have more of him.

It wasn't just that he wanted to be saved from his enemies (although he did), he wanted Yahweh for the sake of being with him. He wanted to be led by God, because he trusted him, not just because of what he'd gain from it.

He wanted God. Full stop. Not because he will get something. Not because he'd be spared some punishment. But because he wants God. He wants to follow the shepherd.

That's where we need to start. If we can't get on board with that desire right from the beginning, the rest of the Psalm will be fairly meaningless.

So let's get this straight and be honest with ourselves and with God about our desire to be led.

What the part of your life is the part you just can't give up?
The parts where you are unwilling to be led by the Good Shepherd?

Examine your heart - really.

Truly.

Do you really - honestly - want to follow Jesus through this life?

Or are you more convinced you need to keep control?

At least for a while?

At least in that one area?

Before we look at the Shepherds Psalm any further, examine if you really - really - want to be led by him.

Ask for faith to follow. Ask for the courage to want to be led.

There are often reasons that feel good / compelling / reasonable for not wanting to give up control. Especially when we feel we are doing well in that part of our life. Like Peter and Andrew who walked away from their boats and nets to follow Jesus, perhaps it's a part of your life you feel so familiar with that even the idea that Jesus could possibly have influence makes you nervous. What if he asks the same crazy thing He asked of them and you had to give it all up?

PRAYER

Lord,
I know you are the Good Shepherd,
yet I struggle to trust you.
I know you lead me in good ways,
to peaceful places
yet I struggle to follow.
You know what's best,
yet I still want to lead myself.
Give me courage to set aside my pride
and follow you.
Amen

*Today's Photo: kids showing that someone else's literal
garbage still has value if you have the right attitude*



DAY 3

THAT'S NOT WHAT YOU DO WITH GRASS

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

PSALM 23

New Living Translation

The Lord is my shepherd;

I have all that I need.

He lets me rest in green meadows;

he leads me beside peaceful streams.

He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths,

bringing honor to his name.

Even when I walk

through the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid,

for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff

protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me

in the presence of my enemies.

You honor me by anointing my head with oil.

My cup overflows with blessings.

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me

all the days of my life,

and I will live in the house of the Lord

forever.

Today's perspective is an audio version of the twenty-third Psalm from Streetlights, which is an urban/modern reading of the NLT. If you would prefer a more traditional reading, here is NIV.

Yesterday we looked at those opening words of Psalm 23 "he leads me.." and I asked you to think about if that's even something you want.

Today we look at the phrase we skipped, and the sentence after it:

He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.

For the longest time, this image didn't really speak to me. The thought of a fluffy, white sheep next to a babbling brook, in a lush green meadow was pleasant. It gave feelings of comfort and safety.

But I never noticed what the sheep were NOT doing.

The sheep in this passage are not acting normally. They are walking past the water they normally love to drink. They are laying down on the green grass they should want to eat. For some reason they are so content they are ignoring these material blessings they *should* want.

The way I see it, there are three reasons why we would not be drawn to things we want or even need.

ONE

We convince ourselves that we don't have desires for 'worldly things.' Don't misunderstand, we often have desires for things that are not good for us, and we should ask God to take away those desires as we fight against them ourselves. But food and water are not those things. Neither are a lot of other good things we can pretend we don't want. We can pretend we don't want friends, or that we don't crave some level of acceptance by others. We can put on appearances that we aren't bothered by things when deep down we really are. But this is clearly not a sustainable approach. We're perhaps tricking ourselves for a time - but that's all.

TWO

We have received so much we're satisfied. We can momentarily look past these things, because we've recently received them. If you're just rolling out of an all-you-can-eat buffet, walking past a donut shop may not hold any temptation. You don't even care because you can't possibly eat any more. Maybe we are finding contentment in all the blessings God has given us. We have family, and health etc... However, we are still basing our contentment on things. Skye Jethani said of this approach, "When I seek contentment in God's blessings my wants only subside temporarily, and they soon return, stronger than ever." So perhaps the sheep have temporarily abated the desire for more because they are so full. But, that desire will come back, likely stronger than before.

THREE

The third option is they are so focused on the shepherd they don't pay as much attention to the things he offers them. They have moved their eyes from the gift to the giver. Jethani finishes the above quote with: "When I learn to seek my satisfaction in God himself, however, the pleasures offered by the things of this world grow dim in comparison."

There is only one real option sustainable contentment. We can pretend we don't need things, or binge on them, but eventually we come back for more. We will be discontent because we don't have what we want, or think we need, or demand we deserve.

Focusing on the shepherd is the only way to not become discontent by the things of this world even when they are good, and necessary.

Have a listen to the old hymn Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus - (perhaps Lauren Daigle's rendition).

One line directly addresses what we're talking about:

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.

What things of this world do you need to grow strangely dim?
What aspects of his glory and grace are you missing out on?
How can you make changes to your life - TODAY - that will

allow you to dwell on these things more deeply, so the others will grow more dim?

PRAYER

Good Shepherd,
help me to focus on you.
Not on the problems,
not even on the solutions.

Not the hurts,
not the gifts.

Give me the clarity to turn my eyes upon you,
on your glory, on your grace,
so the things of this world grow strangely dim
Amen

Today's Photo: a young girl, sibling on her back, at the feeding program for malnourished children in Kibuye, Burundi.



DAY 4

A PATH TO WHAT?

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

PSALM 23

Contemporary English Version

You, Lord, are my shepherd. I will never be in need.

You let me rest in fields of green grass.

You lead me to streams of peaceful water,
and you refresh my life.

You are true to your name, and you lead me
along the right paths.

I may walk through valleys as dark as death,
but I won't be afraid.

You are with me, and your shepherd's rod
makes me feel safe.

You treat me to a feast,
while my enemies watch.

You honor me as your guest,
and you fill my cup until it overflows.

Your kindness and love will always be with me
each day of my life,
and I will live forever in your house, Lord.

When we lived in Kigali, every Monday morning at 6.45 I gathered with a handful of men on someone's porch. Fellow believers who lived in Rwanda for various reasons. One of them was probably 20 years older than me, but had experiences that should take several lifetimes to accumulate.

He was going through a season of change, with a lot of confusion, and lack of clarity. For several few weeks he kept coming back to what the Lord was putting on his heart: the journey *is* the destination.

Today is a brief passage, but it packs in a lot.

He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

Notice where the shepherd leads. Not *to* some place (a meadow or a pasture or somewhere) but *along* a path. A path of righteousness.

Maybe the journey is the destination. Maybe it's not so much about where God is leading you to right now, as much as the fact that He's leading you. That you follow. That the Good Shepherd is taking you along a path that He knows is best, even if you have no idea where it ends.

In the Psalm, King David doesn't specify where this path leads or where he hopes it ends. We have already read the shepherd leads beside still waters, and to green pastures, but it seems we're still going.

Sometimes we believe the only goal of following Jesus is to get to heaven. Yes, we will (by His grace) get there, but is that

the goal? Just limp along, dodging whatever evil and hurt we can in this life so we can get to the next one?

The shepherd doesn't just pick us up and take us to the destination; he allows us to walk, and he leads us. There must be a reason for that.

How do the following verses speak to you about the path you are following right now:

Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,"

Romans 8:14, "All who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God."

Where is the righteousness (rightness, God-honoring, justice, right-relationships) in the path?

The Good Shepherd has a reason for leading you along the path that he currently has you on. Maybe you have no idea where it ends, and maybe you'll never really figure that out. Maybe you'll realize at the end that the destination itself was much less important than the fact that it was the Good Shepherd who was leading you, and that you continued to follow him.

Continue to follow him when He takes you past green pastures of plenty and good, and when He leads you through the valley of the shadow of death.

Don't put too much emphasis on understanding the designation, because that information is probably above the pay-grade of a simple sheep.

PRAYER

Good Shepherd,
You have given me your word,
The example of your Son,
And the indwelling of your Spirit.
All of which help guide me.
But I'm easily distracted,
second-guess your instructions,
and just stubbornly ignore.
Forgive me.
Lead me.
Teach me on this journey.
Use me on this journey.
Amen

*Today's Photo: a child proudly holding up their soccer ball,
made of discarded plastic bags and twine.*



DAY 5

NOT JUST FOR THE DEAD

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*

PSALM 23

Easy-to-Read Version

The Lord is my shepherd.

I will always have everything I need.

He gives me green pastures to lie in.

He leads me by calm pools of water

He restores my strength.

He leads me on right paths to show that he is good.

Even if I walk through a valley as dark as the grave,

I will not be afraid of any danger, because you are with me.

Your rod and staff comfort me.

You prepared a meal for me in front of my enemies.

You welcomed me as an honored guest.

My cup is full and spilling over.

Your goodness and mercy will be with me all my life,
and I will live in the Lord's house a long, long time.

This line is the one we hear every time a movie fades to a graveyard scene with a priest standing over a descending casket “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death....” But it’s so much more important than to just be used for funerals.

When we hear the phrase “Shadow of Death” it feels like it only applies to that one final moment of life. However, the original Hebrew word is *tsalmaveth* צֶלְמָוֶת. It’s a compound word formed from *tsel* “a shadow” + *maveth* “death”. So literally the word in Psalm 23 is “death-shadow.” But this same Hebrew word occurs in many other places in the Bible and it’s usually translated into English as: *deep darkness, deep shadow, thick darkness, dark, or even black gloom*. So we more accurately can think of it as death-like, but not necessarily literal death.

The word ‘evil’ here is commonly translated in other places as *adversity, affliction, bad, calamity, displeasure, or distress*.

So perhaps it’s clearer for us to think of this verse as:
Even when I walk through places of black-gloom-shadows, I will fear no bad thing.

The Message translates it: “Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I’m not afraid.”

The line is not written in the future but present tense. Now, as I walk through. Not some time in the future when one time I will walk through.

OK...So what?

So ... this phrase, this idea, this Psalm is not just for funerals.

The idea that we don't have to be afraid is meaningful to our everyday lives. We need to remember it whenever something bad/scary/dangerous/threatening/evil happens to us ...in any way, at any time.

That's when we should remember we have a good shepherd with us. And we don't need to be afraid.

Yes, it should bring us hope when we are about to take our final breath on this earth. But it should also bring us comfort every day that we're still here breathing.

What frightens you?

Not like snakes or heights, but what events, situations, realities of your current life really scare you.

What is scaring you right now, at this point in your life?

What threatens your life, reputation, resources, career, family, health, well-being, happiness?

Re-read the Psalm with that thing as your "valley of the shadow of death".

Something like this:

"Even though I walk through a week where I'm not sure my company will survive one more pay-day, I'm not living in fear - because I remember you are truly with me through all of it."

PRAYER

Good Shepherd,
you are with me.
Even when I don't remember,
even when I don't see it,
or feel it,
or even believe it.
Give me strength to walk through today's valleys.
Amen

*Today's Photo: our daughter Matea age 10, in a catholic church
in Pezenas, France*



DAY 6

TWO STICKS OF GOD

*For you are with me, your rod and your staff,
they comfort me*

PSALM 23

Good News Translation

The Lord is my shepherd;
I have everything I need.

He lets me rest in fields of green grass
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.

He gives me new strength.
He guides me in the right paths,
as he has promised.

Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid, Lord,
for you are with me.
Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.

You prepare a banquet for me,
where all my enemies can see me;
you welcome me as an honored guest
and fill my cup to the brim.

I'd love will be with me all my life;
and your house will be my home as long as I live.

Many who have been around church for a while, may have heard the description of these two different kinds of sticks mentioned in Psalm 23.

The *rod* is usually described as an instrument of defense. It's what the shepherd uses to smack a rogue beast on the head if it comes after his sheep. It's what he uses to protect the sheep, and take care of threats they could never deal with themselves.

The staff is the stereotypical stick-with-a-hook a shepherd uses to guide and direct. The hook can pluck a wayward sheep out of a bush or a lake. For some reason, every picture I've ever seen of "The Good Shepherd" only has this one stick in his hand. Maybe because it would look super awkward to be standing there with two sticks.

One small tidbit I've only recently learned is how shepherd also used a rod (or staff...whatever) to count their sheep. They'd hold it up and the sheep pass under one at a time to ensure an accurate count (Lev 27:32 is an example of this).

This Rod/Staff combo then is not only symbolic of protection and guidance but also concern. The Shepherd wants to make sure he's still has every sheep he started out the day with. Each one is important. There are other passages in scripture where this is spelled out more clearly (like the parable of the one sheep that wanders away from the other 99).

It's not just that the shepherd will protect the sheep.

Or even that he will guide and rescue them.

He also counts them and is concerned each is still there.

Which of these characteristics of Jesus as the Good Shepherd do you most deeply need to believe / feel / hear - right now?

That you are guarded?

That you have a guide?

That you count?

PRAYER

Good Shepherd,

Thank you for your protection,

your guidance,

your concern.

We especially pray today for the people of Ukraine.

Hundreds of thousands of people made in your image,

Suffering the brutality of evil, hatred, and pride.

Bring hope to the hurt.

Rescue to the lost

Be with those putting their own lives on the lines to help others.

Be their guiding, protecting, caring Shepherd even right now.

Amen

Today's Photo: a hospitalized burn victim, transformed to deep joy at the sight of a toy to play with.



DAY 7

GRAB A BITE, WASH MY HAIR, SPILL MY COFFEE

*You prepare a table in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows*

PSALM 23

The Living Bible

Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need!

He lets me rest in the meadow grass and leads me beside the quiet streams. He gives me new strength. He helps me do what honors him the most.

Even when walking through the dark valley of death I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me, guarding, guiding all the way.

You provide delicious food for me in the presence of my enemies. You have welcomed me as your guest; blessings overflow!

Your goodness and unfailing kindness shall be with me all of my life, and afterwards I will live with you forever in your home.

We've hit another section of this Psalm where we need to remember who the author is. David was a Hebrew who lived in the Middle-East about 3,000 years ago so his world was very different from ours. (OK fine - I can't speak for you - but it's a really different from mine)

If a modern, western person hears a phrase like: "make a meal for you with your enemy around, put oil on your head and fill your cup to overflowing," the image may be something like "OK - so I'll grab a bite to eat with Larry from accounting looking over my shoulder....but now I have to wash this oil out of my hair, AND my latte spilled out of my travel cup."

Not exactly the original intent.

First, we have to realize the phrase "prepares a table" indicates not just a meal, but a feast. This is not a reheated burrito eaten over the sink and back to work. This is not consuming a protein bar to get the nourishment you need to survive. This is much more. Remember "I lack nothing" is how this Psalm started. It's not just enough, it's more than enough.

Then there is the oil on the head. This is something that was done at the coronation of a king, but also at festivals and times of celebration. Anointing with oil was also something you did for an honored guest who arrived at your home. Also, shepherds would put oil on sheep when they were injured, and to keep off bugs. So David perhaps had both the human and sheep oil-anointing in mind since he had been both a shepherd and a king.

Then there is the overflowing cup. Not just a bit of water to drink. Not even a full cup. Literally more than enough. So much that you can't even hold it all at one time, and it's spilling over it's so much. Holding your water bottle under a waterfall kind of 'full cup.'

However, there is one additional phrase in there that we can't skip over:

In the presence of my enemies

I've heard this explained as an almost spiteful way to eat. Your enemies are right there, hungry and tired, and you sit down to binge in front of them. They get nothing as you are given more than you can eat, and they see it all. That doesn't seem in line with the God of scripture. The God revealed in the Bible asks us to love our enemies, and pray for those who are unkind to us.

It seems more likely this image is supposed to show God's protection. Remember, He is the shepherd with the rod and staff. Even though our enemies are within sight of us, they can't hurt us. If God thinks it's time for us to have a respite from the battle, they can't stop it. If God decides to spoil us with more than enough, others can't destroy that. Even though they are still a threat, and are close by, we still have a sense of safety that allows us to sit down and eat.

What a great image to hang on to when those who consider themselves your enemies, are still within striking distance.

What kind of table is God spreading out for you right now?
Even though enemies, evil, sadness, sickness, death...may be right there.

In what tangible, specific ways is the Good Shepherd caring for you?

Remember the Psalm isn't saying the enemies are gone, in fact you are in their presence. But still, the Good Shepherd finds ways to nourish you, and give you more than you need.

PRAYER

Good Shepherd,
you give me so much, sometimes I can't contain it all.
Help me to be generous.
When I have lots, When i have too much.
When I don't think I have enough.
We pray you would somehow be preparing tables for the people of Ukraine.
Even though others who act as enemies are in their presence.
Be their rod and their staff.
Help me be mindful and thankful today - and every day - of your protection
Amen

Today's Photo: a young mother holding her child who is overjoyed at the singing at the malnutrition program



DAY 8

SERIOUSLY... HOW EASY IS YOUR LIFE?

*Surely goodness and mercy follow me
all the days of my life.*

PSALM 23

The Voice Translation

The Eternal is my shepherd, He cares for me always.

He provides me rest in rich, green fields
beside streams of refreshing water.

He soothes my fears;

He makes me whole again,
steering me *off worn, hard paths*
to roads where *truth and* righteousness echo His name.

Even in the *unending* shadows of death's darkness,
I am not overcome by fear.

Because You are with me *in those dark moments*,
near with Your protection and guidance,
I am comforted.

You spread out a table before me,
provisions in the midst of *attack from* my enemies;
You *care for all my needs*, anointing my head with *soothing*,
fragrant oil,
filling my cup again and again *with Your grace*.

Certainly Your faithful protection and loving provision will
pursue me
where I go, always, everywhere.
I will always be with the Eternal,
in Your house forever.

Psalm 23 has some lines that feel out of place in our world. Sure there are no phones, and the shepherd is doing manual labor in the hills. Tending to sheep, and speaking of banquets but mostly it feels strange because King David speaks of such sweet, honest contentment. And for us that feels foreign.

At first glance, it's easy to feel David is totally out of touch. Or at least his life is not like ours. Really David? How hard is your life that you say "goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life"? Really... that is your every day? The House of the Lord forever? Really. How easy is your life man?

Just to recalibrate what experience he's speaking from....

While it's not entirely clear at what point during his life he wrote the Psalm, it was after the death of King Saul. Saul, the most powerful man in the nation, the father of David's best friend Jonathan. Saul, who had David hunted down and repeatedly tried to have him killed. David fled for his life, literally. Not just to save his profession or reputation. The King was trying to have David assassinated.

It's possible Psalm 23 was written later in David's life, after his own son Absalom staged a rebellion against him. This is after Absalom killed his brother and then staged a coup. Then David was on the run again, hiding in the wilderness trying to not be murdered by someone he loves. Again.

Ah yes - what was David saying ... "Goodness and mercy follow me every day of my life."

We need to remember mercy is not being punished like we ought to be. Not getting what we deserve. (compared to

grace - which is getting what we don't deserve). So having mercy follow every day is an admission of guilt. I need mercy every day, because I will screw up every day. For someone like David (that adultery-murder combo with Bathsheba) he was perfectly aware of how evil he could be, how much he needed daily mercy.

But - goodness? Every day? Even the days he was literally hiding in caves, being hunted like an animal?

Note the Psalm doesn't say "easiness, and niceness will follow me," or that "pleasantries and kind people."

Goodness.

Goodness can occur in the midst of sadness. Goodness can be felt in the middle of depression, guilt, betrayal. In fact, in my life, those are the times I've felt goodness the most. His kindness, gentleness, and compassion when it feels like everything is falling apart.

Maybe that's what David is getting at. Goodness in the midst of all the hard things. Daily mercy because we need it.

Not a promise of an easy life, but the promise of one of contentment. Looking around and seeing the goodness and mercy that are with us in the hard times. David is not promising the Good Shepherd will make all the hard stuff go away (you're still in the presence of enemies) but something even more.

Where is God showing you his goodness - right now? Even in the middle of hardship, and sadness, and hurt.

What mercy are you being shown? Those graces given that you don't deserve.

PRAYER

Good Shepherd,
giver of mercy,
giver of goodness.

Give us eyes to see the gifts all around us,
especially when our eyes want to focus on the problems.
Remind us of your mercy, make us aware of your goodness.
And let us find contentment in that.
Amen

Today's Photo: our dear friends Helene and Fidel. They have known so much suffering, sorrow, and pain in their lives - yet they are some of the most joyful, giving, kind, loving and content people we've ever known.



DAY 9

**NICE PLACE
TO VISIT,
WOULDN'T WANT TO
LIVE THERE**

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever

Tehillim 23

Orthodox Jewish Bible

(Mizmor of Dovid).

Hashem is my Ro'eh (Shepherd); I shall not lack.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the mei menuchot (tranquil waters).

He restoreth my nefesh; He guideth me in the paths of tzedek l'ma'an Shmo (righteousness for the sake of His Name).

Yea, though I walk through the Gey Tzalmavet (Valley of the Shadow of Death), I will fear no rah (evil); for Thou art with me; Thy shevet (rod) and Thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a shulchan before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with shemen (olive oil); my kos runneth over.

Surely tov and chesed shall follow me kol y'mei chaiyyai (all the days of my life); and I will dwell in the Bais Hashem l'orech yamim (for length of days, whole life)

David concludes his Shepherd's Psalm with this wish to be with God forever. Not just sometimes. Not just an hour on Sunday morning. Forever.

Not only that, David wants to go to where God is. The house of the Lord.

For the Jewish people, the temple (and before it, the tabernacle, which is what David is referring to) was the physical place where God dwelt, where he ruled from. This was one place they believed mankind and the creator came together. It's where the people of God made offerings to show contrition and atonement for the wrongs they'd done. It was the one real place of God's presence on earth. Where heaven and earth overlapped.

Side Note: when Jesus came, he claimed he was the new temple. The place where God and Man overlap. The way for people to be with God. The ultimate offering for our wrongs. So in many ways, when we hear Old Testament talk of the Temple, we can think of Jesus. [This 4 minute teaching from the Bible Project](#) is the most insightful teaching on the temple I've ever come across.

The real question we need to ask ourselves is:

Do I want to visit God,
or live with him?

Another way to ask it is:

Do you want things from God;
or do you want Him?

David expressed a similar desire in another one of his poem/songs, Psalm 27:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

David wanted to dwell there. To live there. To stay there. Not just visit over holidays, but to actually move in and take up residence. Change the address on his drivers license kind of move.

The way many of us treat God is more like visiting in-laws over the weekend. We like to hang out with God on our terms. We visit for a bit, but then get to go home. We spend a day or so, but then duck out if we get bored. We can pop in for a bit, but take off if it no longer suits us.

That kind of relationship usually exists not for the sake of deep, true relationship, but something else. Maybe obligation or guilt, perhaps you want to be there a bit, but not too much. Maybe you don't want them really affecting your kids' behavior, but you like how they pay for things.

So the question really is:

Do you want to visit God when you need a hand, or move in with him?

Honestly - which do you want?

Answer this question:

What do you most want God to give you?

Is it a solution to a problem?

A reprieve from suffering?

A way out?

A 'blessing' of some kind?

What do you want more: That thing....or God himself?

Do you long to dwell in the house of God, or have him leave a present for you on the porch for you to pick up?

Do you want that thing...or God himself?

If you could only have one....which one do you really want more?

PRAYER

God of all,

give us hearts that desire you.

Not your gifts, your blessings, your benefits.

But give us hearts that ache to be with you.

Give us hearts that long to dwell with you.

Hearts that long to be with you always.

Amen

Today's Photo: a small boy who isn't concerned about fit as much as function



DAY 10

THE LOVING SHEPHERD

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever

PSALM 23

Expanded Bible

The Lord is my shepherd;
I have everything I need [will lack nothing].

He lets me rest [makes me lie down] in green pastures.
He leads me to calm [quiet] water.

He gives me new strength [renews my soul].
He leads me on paths that are right [righteous; or straight]
for the good [sake] of his name [reputation].

Even if I walk through a very dark valley [or the shadow of death],
I will not be afraid [fear no evil],
because you are with me.
Your rod and your shepherd's staff comfort me.

You prepare a meal [table] for me
in front [the presence] of my enemies.
You pour oil of blessing on my head [anoint my head with oil;
oil was a means of refreshment in a hot, dry environment];
you fill my cup to overflowing [make my cup overflow; a
cup of blessing].

Surely your goodness and love [loyalty; mercy] will be with
[pursue; follow] me all my life,
and I will live in the house of the Lord forever [for length of days].

We have now looked at Psalm 23 in its entirety, viewing it through the lens of contentment.

And what have we seen?

A “life without lack” is what Dallas Willard calls the contentment described in Psalm 23. Lacking nothing. Nothing else we need, desire, or long for. Good where we are, as we are, with what we have, and who we’re with.

In the parable of “The Prodigal Son” the wayward younger son returns home when he “begins to lack” or “begins to be in need.”

When he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. -Luke 15:14

That son was disappointed in himself and others. He was probably bitter, frustrated, unhappy, dissatisfied, full of regret, lonely, guilty, hungry... He lacked a lot, and he knew it. That’s why he was willing to make extreme changes in his life to find something else.

The image painted for us in Psalm 23 is the inverse of all of that.

lacking nothing
green pastures & cool water
restored soul
feasting amid danger
anointing
goodness and mercy
dwelling with God

The Psalm is an image of bounty, plenty, more than enough. But it's an image that's still firmly rooted in the harsh reality of this world. Needing mercy because we mess up, needing goodness because things are hard, enemies around us. Adopted into God's family, we know love and acceptance, but remember how much we needed it because we were orphans.

The Good Shepherd has more than enough for us -the question we have to answer is: do we want it? Do we want the goodness and mercy of our Father more than the pleasures we find outside of him?

PRAYER

Heavenly shepherd.
you have so many good things in store,
give me patience to wait on you.
Give me courage to follow you.
Give me faith to believe in you.
Give me wisdom to know how to follow you,
So that I may dwell in your house,
All the days of my life
Amen

Today's Photo: Susan's dear friend Annick who worked with her at the malnutrition program, visiting homes, and pictured here at the orphanage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Watts and his family have lived and worked in East Africa since 2015 where he has co-directed an impact-driven consulting firm, managed capital projects for a mission hospital, lead an MBA program at a Christian university, and now works at a school for missionary children.



Before moving to Africa he worked in high-tech marketing, as a consultant, and as a management professor. Over the years his work and studies have taken him from Canada to the US, Kazakhstan, France, Burundi, Rwanda, and now Kenya. George and his wife Susan have four children currently semi-scattered across the globe.

His previous book on and other writings can be found at www.ggwatts.com

SIGN UP HERE To receive

LIVING CONTENTMENT

weekly teachings on true, deep contentment.