

A Song of Hope in Fear-filled Times (Psalm 23: 1-6)

Intro. Today, we're going to look at a very popular passage of scripture. Psalm 23 is a famously quoted hymn, and widely memorized by both Christians and the secular world. Millions of people throughout the centuries have quoted this passage in dark times. The passage has brought them comfort in times of war, national crisis, death, sickness, disasters, and in all kinds of trials. So today, here are 3 insights we're going to look afresh from this passage: *a) The green pastures we all seek. b) The shadow of death we all fear. c) The goodness and mercy that flows from Christ.*

A) The green pastures we all seek.

1. The Lord is *my shepherd*; I shall not want. 2. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. 3. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

David, the writer of this Psalm, here portrays God as a caring shepherd. In urbanized Japan, *shepherds and green pastures are a rare sight. Even the rural areas are developed with car parks and shopping malls.* But the image of a shepherd here shows that God cared for the Israelites, His people. For example: Elsewhere in Ps. 80:1, God is called the shepherd of Israel. Also in Ps. 77 and 78, God is seen as a shepherd who cared for Israel in the wilderness. So here David says, "The Lord is MY shepherd; I shall not want."

Q. Who and what is the Lord of your life? How you answer that question really matters. Because all the blessings here apply only to God's flock. Notice how David says: "The Lord is MY shepherd (not *The* shepherd but *My* shepherd). To David, God is not a distant God, but very close. He sees God as His personal shepherd. He says, "The Lord is *my* shepherd; I shall not want." Now, the word "want" means to lack, to have need. What do you lack? See, if we're honest, everyone lacks something isn't it? No one is entirely fulfilled. So who and what is The Lord of your life? What does your heart trust functionally to lead you everyday- that is your Lord! If anything other than the God of the Bible functionally becomes the Lord of your life, you'll always lack in something. See, deep in our hearts, we know there is a *lack*, a need, an emptiness. This is why the entire city is always in a rush; externally busy but *lacking* on the inside.

See, David sees himself here as a weak sheep who depends on His shepherd. In v. 2 he says, "He *makes me lie down* in green pastures." Have you ever heard of the phrase, "The grass looks greener on the other side?" Why is it that modern people are always looking for *greener grasses*? Beneath our search for greener pastures is a lack, a lack of satisfaction. If you seek for greener pastures apart from the God of the Bible, you're

going to be lacking in the end. But if the Lord is not just your theoretical shepherd, but the functional shepherd, wherever you are can become *green pastures*. Elsewhere the psalmist said, “The young lions suffer *want* and hunger; but *those who seek the LORD lack no good thing*” (Ps. 34: 10). David says, “My shepherd makes me lie down in green pastures.” *He makes me lie down*. Only the true shepherd can bring true rest to this restless city. **#Notice the images and the sequence in v. 2.** Green pastures there means *resting and feeding*. What are *still waters*? Still waters speak of stillness and renewal in God’s presence. Look again at what he says: “*He makes me lie down*.” The shepherd sets the pace for the sheep. He is not in a hurry.

The sheep is restless; so the shepherd makes him lie down to feed and rest. An anxious and restless city, that overworks itself, needs to be “made” to rest. In other words, you need a caring shepherd like this. He’s not like a Boss that overworks you until you can work no more. The shepherd brings David to “green pastures,” to feed and rest. And then he says, “He leads me beside still waters.” The sheep is not able to find still waters on its own. The shepherd *leads* the sheep to the still waters; to drink, and to find peace.

And as a result, David says, “He restores my soul” in v. 3. The word “soul” means your innermost being; the seat of passions, emotions, the activities of the mind- *the core of who you are*. And then David says, “He leads me in the paths of righteousness.” These are paths the sheep cannot walk on its own. Do you see again how Christianity is not moralism? No one is righteous enough to walk the paths of righteousness without the shepherd. In Psalm 143: 2 David says to God, “no one alive is righteous before You.” If we think we can do life, and walk the paths of righteousness without God, we’ll become internally exhausted, always lacking, never finding any satisfaction or fulfillment. Look carefully: It is after his soul is restored, that David says, “He leads me in paths of righteousness *for His name’s sake*.” God restores him and leads him. He leads him for His name’s sake, to be true to His character! Notice again how he says (in v. 2): *He makes me; He leads me. He restores my soul (in v. 3)*. And then He *leads me* in the paths of righteousness. Without the shepherd’s leading, the sheep cannot walk the paths of righteousness. Without the shepherd, the sheep cannot walk through the valleys of deep darkness. So next we see:-

B) The shadow of death we all fear.

4. 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*.

Notice how the Psalmist says, “*Even though I walk through the valley*.” He is not saying that a Christian will not face the darkest valleys of life. The point of God’s restoration is

so that you can face the darkest days in the valley. The mountain tops are vantage points from which you can look down the valleys. *From the top of Mt. Fuji you you can see Aokigahara forest below, the famous suicide forest.* The valleys are the low points between hills. As the sunlight shines, you can see your shadows. Here, the shadow of death in the original language means *deep darkness*; a place and time of distress, extreme danger. It also means *a place of the dead*. Notice how David says, “*Even though I walk.*” He is not avoiding or ignoring. He is walking through the valley. Whatever momentary satisfaction a person experiences in life is going to be tested by difficult and dark times. Dark times and moments in life will expose what your heart really trusts. Yet, David’s trust is in God. He says, “I will *fear* no evil, for You are with me.”

In the shadows of sickness and diseases (such as the CoronaVirus) fear rises in our hearts, isn’t it? It is normal for human beings to fear. But is the fear paralyzing your heart? Is fear coupled with overwhelming worry? Right now, the nations are panicking in fear of virus and the economy. **See, the reason fear paralyzes us is because there are idols of control beneath our fears.** When situations and circumstances are within our control, we are calm. But when situations that are not in our control hits us, we react in fear. **Q. Who can bring true comfort as death and evil knocks on your door?** See, it matters who is with you, right? If your friends say, “I am with you” that’s not the most comforting, because they are human--right? But David turns to God, “For YOU are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” He’s experiencing a close relationship with his shepherd. See, dark days can drive us into a much deeper experience with God. Notice how he says, “your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” What’s the rod and staff? In Lev. 27: 32, the shepherds would let the sheep pass under a rod to count them. Elsewhere, in Ps. 89: 32, the rod is a symbol of God’s discipline. But the rod here serves as a tool to protect the sheep from wild animals. For e.g, in 1 Samuel 17: 34, 35, David describes how he would care for his father’s sheep. When a lion, or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, David would go after them and save the sheep. Similarly here, he sees God as the shepherd who protects him. The rod is a symbol of God’s protection.

See, even at the lowest point in your life, God will be there to comfort you. “For You are with me” he says. It means: God is the perfect close friend you’ve always wanted but never had. Notice, David is not hiding or running in fear of the shadow of death. He is walking THROUGH the valley. He is not paralyzed by the fear of evil. He is walking THROUGH the valley of death, without fear. He is walking *through* the valley, not around it. Why? Because His shepherd is with him. If you’re not a Christian, here is a question: Who can comfort you in the face of death? **See**, even the very best of friends cannot bring comfort to your hearts in the way that this shepherd can. David says to

God, “Because God is with me, I can walk *THROUGH* the valley of the shadow of death. I can face my fears in the darkest hours. In the valleys where there is danger, uncertainty, darkness, sickness and Satanic devices, *I will fear no evil*. For You O God are with me; Your presence brings me comfort.”

In other words, death itself is an entrance into *life* for the Christian. Not only does he not fear evil because of God’s presence, he knows there’s future grace waiting for him. How do we know? Because of the goodness and mercy that flows from Christ. So, finally, we see:-

c) The goodness and mercy that flows from Christ.

5. You prepare *a table* before me in the presence of my enemies you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6. Surely *goodness and mercy* shall follow me all the days of my life and *I shall dwell in the house of the Lord* forever.

Suddenly the image changes from the shepherd and the sheep-- to the Host and his guest. Keep in mind: Psalm 22 is a Messianic Psalm. It speaks of Jesus’ suffering and death for us. No one has walked through death and won. But Jesus did! Here in Psalm 23: 1, David said earlier, the Lord is *my shepherd*. And who is the Lord here in vv. 5 & 6? He is the Gracious Host! See, Jesus is the Lord, our Shepherd and Host, who provides our need, who protects us, who leads us, who blesses us with lavish hospitality forever. He is the Lord who conquered death in Psalm 22. He is the shepherd who guides us in Psalm 23. And in Psalm 24, Jesus is the “King of Glory.” This is why David says here, “I shall *dwell* in the house of THE LORD forever.” Where was God’s goodness and mercy displayed most powerfully?

Much later, in John 10: 11, Jesus said, “I am *The Good Shepherd*. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” Jesus is the good shepherd who sacrificially laid down His life for you. The good shepherd became the sacrificial lamb for your sins. Jesus is the true and good shepherd by whose *death* God shows goodness and mercy to sinners. This is why,

Heb. 13: 20 says: “Now may the God of peace *who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep*, by the blood of the eternal covenant, **21.** equip you with everything good that you *may do* His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Jesus is the true and good shepherd who walked the paths of righteousness perfectly. Jesus is the true and good shepherd who walked through *death* on the cross and rose again. Jesus is the true and good shepherd who didn't run from the shadow of death on

the cross. He walked through the darkness of the cross and overcame it. He walked *through* death and rose again. He is the good shepherd who became our sacrificial lamb for the forgiveness of our sins. Because of Jesus, the Christian can walk *through* death and pass on to life.

Back to (c). So David is now an honored guest at the table! He says, “You anoint my head with oil; *my cup overflows*.” His cup is not empty, but full, overflowing. His heart is more than satisfied! Even his enemies cannot prevent him from enjoying God’s gracious hospitality. His cup is overflowing with blessings and favor. It speaks of God’s lavish grace poured out for us in Jesus. Jesus drank the bitter cup that was reserved for us, so that our cup will overflow with grace. As the song we often sing says, “Once an *enemy* now seated at your table, Jesus thank you.”

The shepherd leads David *through* the *valleys* of death, to feast on *the table of grace*, and to live securely in the *house* of the Lord forever. Until then he says, “*Surely*, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” His future is secured. In other words, there is God’s grace for the future. He can face tomorrow because of God’s overflowing goodness and mercy. The goodness and mercy of God shall literally follow him all the days of his life- *however long or short his life on earth*. Death itself is the beginning of life. He says, “I shall dwell in the house of *the Lord* forever.” Goodness and mercy awaits him tomorrow in the house of *the Lord- forever!* In **John 8: 35 Jesus said**, “The slave does not remain in the house forever; *the son remains forever.*” See, Jesus is our great Shepherd and Host! Through His death, burial and resurrection we too will remain as sons in God’s house forever.

You don’t know how good Jesus is until you know how bad your sin is. You don’t know how great His mercy is until you realize how dangerous sin is. Jesus is the good shepherd, who laid down His life for you, so that you too can live in God’s house forever.

Did you notice how David does not contribute anything here? The shepherd provides for him. The shepherd makes him rest. The shepherd leads him to the still waters. The shepherd leads him in paths of righteousness. The shepherd walks with him through darkness and protects him from evil. The Host prepares a feast for him. He honors him as a guest of honor by anointing him. He blesses him abundantly in the presence of his enemies. And goodness and mercy follows him all the days of his life. And finally he dwells in the house of the Lord forever. This is a picture of God’s lavish grace for you. If you’re not a Christian: Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down His life for you. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow you too *if* you follow Him today.

He is gently calling you. #Notice how David says, “Surely.” David is confident in God’s goodness and mercy. In the house of the Lord, in God’s family, there’s goodness and mercy.

You too can belong in the house of God by coming to Jesus today. This is the future grace Jesus purchased for you. The word “follow” here means to “pursue.” It means, Goodness and mercy shall *pursue* you. You cannot earn it. God’s grace will pursue you even when you cannot walk the paths of righteousness. God’s lavish grace cannot be earned but is offered to you by Jesus.

See, Jesus is the good shepherd who became the sacrificial lamb for our sins. The good shepherd became the lamb that was slain. He rose again as the Lion King. He didn’t merely walk through the valleys of the shadows of death. He defeated death for you and me. Tomorrow His goodness and mercy will pursue you!

As the good Shepherd He will be all you ever need. He will bring rest to your weary soul. He will expel your fears. He will lead you by His Spirit, and He will protect you from evil. He will renew and restore your strength! Come feast on His grace! Come be fed, and be led by this Great Shepherd! Surely, by His goodness and mercy, He shall bring you safely to dwell in God’s house forever.