

**“A Psalm of Comfort in a Time of Trouble”**  
***Sermon Series – Learning to Pray the Psalms***  
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**First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC**  
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**(Psalm 23)**

**Introduction.**

What a crazy time we’re living in. Covid-19 has us holed up in our homes and fearful of getting sick. The stock market lost about a third of its value earlier this year. And the social unrest over the unjust treatment of people of color in our country has led to protests all over our nation. The closest thing I can remember during my lifetime to what we’re experiencing today was back in 1968 or 1969.

I heard one sociologist say that there are four things which lead to profound social change: war; an economic downturn; a medical pandemic; and widespread social unrest. Well, we’ve got three of the four going on right now. If there ever was a time when we needed the comforting words of Psalm 23, it’s today. Perhaps you could use a good dose of the promising words of this beloved passage of Scripture too.

Over the years, I’ve found the psalms to be a great comfort to me in the difficult seasons of my life, like the one we’re living in today, and this book of the Bible is unique in giving voice to the cries of the human heart both in praise and in pain. Philip Yancey once wrote<sup>1</sup> that the psalms are a mosaic of spiritual therapy in process. Doubt, paranoia, giddiness, delight, hatred, joy, praise, and betrayal – it’s all there in the psalms. The writers don’t rationalize their anger or give advice about pain. Rather, they express their emotions vividly and loudly, directing their feelings primarily at God. From the psalmists we learn that we can tell God whatever we’re feeling, and we don’t have to candy-coat it or cover up our failures. We can be honest about our weakness and our pain, our sin and our sorrow, because only God has the power to heal.

This morning we’re going to study the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, one of the best known and well-loved of all the psalms. Some people refer to it as The Shepherd’s Psalm, and it’s a poem of comfort in times of trouble. As I read through this wonderful passage of Scripture, there were three things that strike me about David’s insights into the care of God, and His Son Jesus who the Bible calls the Good Shepherd. Let’s take a moment to reflect on each of these briefly.

## **I. The Provision of the Shepherd.**

*The LORD is my shepherd; I lack nothing.*

*He lets me rest in green pastures;*

*He leads me beside quiet waters.*

*He refreshes my soul.*

This passage reminds us that the Good Shepherd provides everything we need. He is attentive to our concerns, and He's interested in providing for our well-being. It says that everything you and I really need the Lord will provide. Now, sometimes it takes a while, and there are occasions when we wonder why God takes so long. Other times His provision isn't quite what we had in mind, and He doesn't give us what we hoped He would. But we've got to trust that the Good Shepherd loves His sheep, and He wants the best for us.

Over the years I've learned that there is a difference between want and need, and it's important to bear that in mind whenever I think of the provision of the Shepherd. When our kids were growing up, sometimes we would go to a restaurant that advertised an "All You Can Eat" special." I'd tell my family, "Now, boys, let's eat until we make a profit!" About mid-way through my third helping of whatever the special was, I'd begin to realize there is a BIG difference between need and want. I may want another dozen fried shrimp, but I sure didn't need them.

Where do you struggle with discerning the difference between your needs and your wants? How do you ask yourself the hard questions about what you really need in life verses what you simply desire? I think we need to own the ways we confuse a want with a need. Whenever I've traveled overseas on a mission trip or visited a poorer part of the country or of the world, life comes into clearer focus. All of a sudden many of the things I think I need in life I come to realize that they're really just wants, not needs. Contentment is the key to being satisfied with the provision of the Shepherd. Have you come to the place where you can honestly say, "I lack nothing"?

There is a second aspect of the Shepherd's provision I want to share with you, and it is the Good Shepherd also provides rest for his sheep. "*He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters, He refreshes my soul.*" One of the positive aspects coming out of this pandemic we're in right now is that many people have shared with me it's given everyone permission to slow down and catch their breath. We haven't had as many places to go or commitments to fulfill. It's functioned sort of like an *enforced Sabbath* for the entire world. We've all been given the gift of rest.

Several years ago, I listened to a talk by Dr. Richard Swenson on the subject of “margin.” He said that when life is normal, most of us have no margin in our lives. We over-commit our schedules, we overspend our bank accounts, and we over-tax our emotions with too many things to do. We have no margin.

One of the things he pointed out was the way in which books have margins on every single page, and he said that the margin gives the space we need to read effectively. If the print was written all the way to the edge of the page, it would be too much and it would actually make the book difficult to read. It would tire us out because the page would be too cluttered. There would be too much information. How much of a printed page in a book do you think is margin? Dr. Swenson actually measured it and discovered that 43 percent of the average page in a book is margin! If you and I need margin on the page of a book to read it effectively, how much more do we need margin in our lives to live effectively for Christ?

Whenever Covid-19 is over, how are you going to keep margin in your life when things ease up and you return to your regular rhythms each day? What has God been teaching you of in the way of the priority of rest and pacing yourself during this pandemic? And how are you going to remember that when social distancing restrictions are lifted?

## **II. The Protection of the Shepherd.**

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me.  
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

The Shepherd promises to be with us whenever we have to walk through the dark valleys of life. Sometimes that dark valley is the valley of the shadow of death, as other translations of the Bible render this verse. Other times it’s the valley of despair, pain, loss, suffering, ill health, rejection, or criticism. No matter what valley you may be in right now, God is with you, and the Good Shepherd wants to remind you you’re not alone. Remember, when everyone else abandons you, when the days are the darkest, when you don’t feel like you can put one foot in front of the other, God is with you. This promise in the Bible is for you – *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.*

God’s promised presence is an abiding comfort during the difficult times in our lives, and it assures us that we’re never alone when we have to go through them. But I’ve also learned that I’ve got to be attentive to the Shepherd’s voice if I want to experience His presence in the dark valley. Jesus said, “*I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and they know Me.... They... listen to my voice*” (Jn. 10:14,16). Are you listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd?

After a plane crashed into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, many people inside the building were trapped by a cloud of thick, blinding smoke. Police officer

Isaac Hoopi ran into the darkness, searching for survivors, and he heard people calling for help. He began shouting back, over and over again: "Head toward my voice! Head toward my voice!" Six people, who had lost all sense of direction in a smoke-filled hallway, heard the officer's shouts, and they followed him. Officer Hoopi's voice led them out of the building to safety. <sup>2</sup>

"Head toward My voice!" That's the invitation of Jesus the Good Shepherd to each one of us when we have to walk through a dark valley. Are we listening for Jesus' voice through prayer and the reading of Scripture and through the power of His Spirit? When we're in difficult circumstances, are we walking toward Him or are you groping around in the dark, trying to find the way on our own? Listen for the Shepherd's voice. He'll show you the way.

Have you ever thought about what life would be like without the presence, provision, and protection of the Good Shepherd? David Powlison has written an inverted version of Psalm 23, and it's very revealing. It reads like this:

I'm on my own.  
No one looks out for me or protects me.  
I experience a continual sense of need. Nothing's quite right.  
I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed.  
It's a jungle - I feel overwhelmed. It's a desert - I'm thirsty.  
My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself.  
I stumble down dark paths.  
Death is waiting for me at the end of every road.  
I spend my life protecting myself.  
I find no lasting comfort.  
I'm alone facing everything that could hurt me.  
Other people use me for their own ends.  
I can't *really* trust anyone. No one has my back.  
My cup is never quite full enough. I'm left empty.  
Disappointment follows me all the days of my life.  
Will I just be obliterated into nothingness?  
Will I be alone forever, free-falling into a void?  
It's a living death,  
and then I die.<sup>3</sup>

Not a very positive picture, is it? That's what it feels like to be a sheep without a shepherd. Aren't you grateful for the presence, provision, and protection of the Good Shepherd in your life? I know I am.

### **III. The Peace of the Shepherd.**

There is one final matter I want to mention from this passage, and it ties into an interesting verse in the middle of the psalm. It's where David writes, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*" (23:7). For the longest

time in my Christian life I thought this verse was sort of a smack-down on David's enemies. It was kind of like him saying, "Just you wait. Someday I'm going to prevail, and I'll be on top. And then you'll see that God was with me the whole time. And He's going to settle the score with all of you. God is going to prepare this awesome meal for me to enjoy, and all of you will just have to sit there and watch the Lord reward me."

That's what I used to think this verse was saying, and I thought David was being kind of cocky. However, I've come to see that's not what this verse is about at all. Rather, it's talking about reconciliation and the healing God can bring to broken relationships. The picture is of the reconciled community of God at the end of time when we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever – you and I sitting down at a dinner table with people we used to think of as our enemies, breaking bread with one another and enjoying the fellowship of God with all of His people. It's a promise of reconciliation and redemption and the healing of everything that is broken in this world.

There is a scene in the movie *Places in the Heart* which depicts this image. It's at the end of the film. The closing scene takes place in a church, and the movie ends as it began, on a Sunday. The church choir sings "Blessed Assurance," and the pastor reads "the Love Chapter" from 1 Corinthians 13. Then as the elements of communion move from one person to the next, we see that people who had been in conflict earlier in the film have now been reconciled, and they're sitting in the pews next to each other. For example, the man who cheated on his wife and then left her has had a change of heart, and he's sitting right next to her sharing communion.

As the camera moves along the rows, we see people in church that weren't typically present in a Texas congregation in 1935. There is Moze, a black man who helped a widow save her farm, but who was later driven off by the KKK. But Moze has returned. He's back at the church. And there are others present who aren't the typical church-going types like the band from the honkytonk bar in town. Something strange is going on. We also see people who have died earlier in the movie are now reunited with their families. That's when we realize: this is a picture heaven.

As the movie concludes, we see the widow, played by Sallie Fields, served communion by her children. And then she turns to serve her husband, the sheriff, who was killed in the opening scene of the movie. He was shot by accident by a drunken black teenager showing off with a gun. After the sheriff is served communion he turns and serves communion to that young black man, Wylie, who killed the sheriff and brought such harm to his family. The last words of the film are spoken by Wylie to the sheriff when he says very quietly as he receives communion: "The Peace of God be with you." This is a picture of the reconciled

community of God, where we find grace and a power to forgive. *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”*

Oil and water don’t go together. You can stir them, blend them, or boil them. It doesn't matter. They just won’t stay together very long no matter how hard you try. In order to get the two together, you need what is called an emulsifier. And oil and water with an egg as an emulsifier produces mayonnaise.

People are struggling to get along these days. The death of George Floyd has ignited a firestorm in our country. We need an emulsifier. We need Jesus the Good Shepherd now more than ever. He’s what can help us bridge the divide and bring healing as well as justice. Jesus is what we need to become the Beloved Community of which Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed so many years ago.

As he sat in a cell in the Birmingham jail in 1963, Dr. King wrote these words, *“Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty. Yours for the cause of peace and brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.”*

It can happen today, and it doesn’t just have to be just a heavenly vision in the future. We can experience reconciliation in Christ. *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”*

## **Conclusion.**

What a great psalm this is. I hope it has spoken to you as much as it has to me. I hope you’ll take some time today and in the coming week to make margin in your life to remember the Lord is *your* shepherd. He’ll provide everything we need, and He assures us of His presence, His Provision, His protection, and His peace in whatever valley we must walk. Look to God to see you through. He is a good and loving Shepherd who wants the very best for you. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *Our Daily Bread*, August 5, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> David McCasland, *Our Daily Bread*, October 29, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> David Powlison, "Antipsalm 23." Slightly edited.

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2009/07/25/antipsalm-23-vs-psalm-23/>