

Summer in the Psalms: Fearless Rest in Labouring Days

Psalm 23

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~Absolute fearlessness belongs to those who follow their Shepherd and live for His glory~

Early this last week many of us received a phone call or an email telling us that Pastor Lyle's grandson Brandon had been killed in a car accident.

For any who don't know Lyle was the last pastor of this church, a godly man who has refused to stop serving Christ full time even though he is pushing 80 years old. And now his grandson has been struck dead at only 21. Isn't anyone safe?

Today I have Christian friends who are dying of cancer; I have other brothers and sisters who are struggling in their marriages; I know of some who have lost their jobs because of unjust accusations. I know of men and women who love Jesus profoundly and yet can't find the money this month to pay rent or put enough food on the table. I know of other God followers who are besieged by teenage children who are outright rebellious.

Beyond what is common to all, there are millions of Christians today who are embracing even more hardship simply because they refuse to denounce their loyalty to Christ.

This week I was on The World Watch List¹ which categorizes and documents Christian persecution globally, and I found that in at least 65 of the world's 195 countries – so in more than 25% of the world - Christians are directly persecuted for their faith. They are either imprisoned or killed or oppressed or significantly discriminated against simply for choosing to live in a way that honours Christ. Back here in Canada we don't face anything like this, but even here there is organized hostility aimed at the church in the form of an attack on the charter – and in many places it seems to be winning.

So with all this evil coming against the saints, is it any wonder that many Christians live in a spot where their confidence in God is shaky? Is it surprising that when the stressors of life become extreme many just hunker down and try to hide? I mean theologically, intellectually, we know God is sovereign, but sometimes it feels like since Jesus followers encounter just as much brokenness as everyone else, plus a little more, God's sovereignty isn't that comforting. We wonder, perhaps without ever putting it into words, is God really enough?

If you've found yourself in a place where some of these thoughts have run through your mind, today's text was written for you and your scenario.

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¹ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

If you are new with us this summer, which like clockwork has proven to be over, we have been walking through the Psalms. And during this study we have been seeking not to just learn stuff about God, but actually to be led into an encounter with Him – and that’s because while the Psalms are full of deep teaching, they intend to be worship leaders more than theology professors.

And so we are continuing in that vein today for a final time. And this morning we are not only in the most famous Psalm, but arguably the most familiar passage in the entire Bible. This is a text people who have never set foot in church have heard of. So please open up your devices, or the Bible in the pew in front of you, to Psalm 23.

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Now it’s no mystery that the reason Psalm 23 is so well known is that it contains some of the most comforting imagery in Scripture. Our God is like a Shepherd who loves His sheep and has good things in store for His own. He brings us into green pastures near quiet and refreshing waters. He leads us along right paths. He sets a table for us to recline at. In His presence our cup overflows. And with Him goodness and mercy are ours in this life and then eternal rest lies promised beyond the grave. And it says all of this in rich poetry that flows off the lips and sticks in our memory. Almost everyone knows the words “The Lord is my Shepherd.”

And to be honest, because it is so famous, I was a little nervous to touch this Psalm in this series. What could I say? Its words are art that in many ways defy being taken apart and analyzed – they demand to be experienced.

But then that has been the purpose of this series, not to spend hours picking apart the Hebrew roots of words and unpacking dry theology, but swimming in the presence of God. And this Psalm is a deep pool.

So what I’d like to do today is wade into these familiar words with you. We will be reverent and respectful, but at the same time I encourage you to be hungry to meet the Shepherd God today, and perhaps in a way you haven’t before. There are gems here I had never seen before this week.

So would you stand with me and let’s read the Psalm together:

The LORD *is* my shepherd;
 I shall not want.
 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
 He leads me beside the still waters.
 He restores my soul;
 He leads me in the paths of righteousness
 For His name’s sake.

Yea, 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 runs over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 All the days of my life;
 And I will dwell in the house of the LORD
 Forever. (Psalm 23 NKJV)

You may be seated.

Now usually we preach from the NIV here at Fort George – which is an excellent translation – but I’ve decided to preach from the New King James today because of the way it handles the poetry of these verses – it does well. On top of that many of you have memorised these words, and likely this translation is closer to the way you memorised it than the NIV.

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Now the big idea that sits at the very core of this passage is that **Absolute fearlessness belongs to those who follow their Shepherd and live for His glory.**

Absolute fearlessness! My prayer this morning is that as we ingest the gift of these words together everyone who struggles with fear or anxiety or stress from any aspect of life will find peace in the arms of the Shepherd God. Do you need that today? If you are one of those people – and I think all of us find ourselves here at least from time to time – I encourage you to prepare yourself to take this home.

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Now there are several angles to this text that could become whole sermons, but I believe that central to everything this Psalm wants to lead us into are the words at the center. And I’m talking the words of verses 3 and 4.

And this isn’t surprising, because Hebrew poetry often works like this. The Jews loved to write in sandwiches. So an idea at the beginning and an idea at the end, and the real meat in the middle.

And so at the end of verse 3 we get the words “For His name’s sake” – for God’s name’s sake – this is the motivation for why God does everything good that is spoken of in this Psalm. And then in verse 4 we get the incredible words “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” – no fear of death; no fear in the face of the worst this world can throw at us! This is a description of an absolutely incredible life. I mean if a person could take all the fear and anxiety and stress out of living there would be nothing left but joy. This is what it means to be blessed!

And these two ideas are the pulled pork or the Cajun chicken that make the buns of this sandwich seriously worth eating! So are you hungry for that kind of a feast this morning? Let's look at verse 1.

[Read Psalm 23:1-3]

The imagery here is rich and flowed naturally from David. David was a shepherd. He knew what it meant to provide the best for his sheep. He knew what it meant to bring simple minded animals into safe places where they could eat and drink without fear.

So there are a few things to just capture here. First notice that in this section David is speaking to us about God and the good things He has done. And so the pronouns are He, He, He. "Hey listen up friends, He makes me to lie down. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul."

Our God is a good shepherd. Amen? Haven't you seen this in your own life? Doesn't the Good Shepherd have the pulse of His sheep? Doesn't He know what is good for you? And hasn't He led you into it?

The other day I was driving our van, and in a moment of bad judgment I pulled out without double checking my blind spot. I just pulled out onto a busy street. All this happened in a fraction of a second. And as I was pulling out I was realizing what I was doing and I looked – a bit frantically – where I should have looked before I pulled out. And there was a car bearing down on me. But unlike me, she was paying attention and had her breaks on. Thank you Jesus. And she didn't even salute me!

Isn't God good? Hasn't He always been watching over you? Don't you see God's hand on your life?

David says there are green pastures and quiet waters along the path of following God.

But then he expands this a little bit and we actually realize that he isn't talking about "traveling mercies" or good things that seem to coincidentally happen to us. He defines what he is talking about with the words "He leads me in the paths of righteousness." This means God leads me towards doing the right thing. He convicts me and puts me in places where I have the choice to live my life in a way that honours Him.

And actually verse 1 brings this up first. It says "I shall not want." And together with verse 3 this sandwiches the green pastures and still waters. So to not "want" here doesn't mean I don't have any desires, it means I'm not in want; there is nothing I lack.

And that is in relation to being led on the path of righteousness, so David is saying I have everything I need in order to live my life in a way that honours God.

Friends, let me ask you, do you have everything you need in order to live your life in a way that honours God?

This is the blessing that I pray over you every week at the end of the service:
 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought
 back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that Great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you
 with everything good for doing His will... (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Has God brought you to that place? Are you equipped? Now you might not choose to
 live in that power every day, but hasn't God provided it? Aren't you able to live in a way
 that honours God? If you have Jesus' Spirit living inside you then the answer is "yes."

And when you make the choice to live in that power that's where you will find yourself in
 green pastures and by still waters. When we get God, as Spencer told us last week,
 that's when we get the prize. A life walked with God is the reward. God is the treasure!

And it's at this point that we get to the big words at the end of verse 3. God does all this
 good for His name's sake. What this means is that God's primary motive for saving you
 and filling you with His Spirit and enabling you to walk on righteous paths and therefore
 to experience a blessed life full of green pastures and still waters is not because He
 loves you – it's not about you at all – it's because He loves Himself.

Now if you've been in our church for a while you've heard this before, but I think it
 always bears repeating because it is such a counter-cultural thing to get our minds
 around. We like to think we are the center of the universe, but we aren't. And this
 verse and literally dozens and dozens of others affirm this. I'll just give you two. So the
 prophet Isaiah quotes God saying:

For My own name's sake I delay My wrath;
 for the sake of My praise I hold it back from you,
 so as not to destroy you completely.
 See, I have refined you, though not as silver;
 I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.
 For My own sake, for My own sake, I do this.
 How can I let Myself be defamed?
 I will not yield My glory to another. (Isaiah 48:9-11)

God preserves and corrects and prunes His people in order that His glory may be
 established. And Jesus lived for this, and told us to live for this too. He said:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see
 your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Jesus, who was God incarnate, lived for the Father's glory. So God is passionate about
 His own glory. And He is committed to this because He is not an idolater; He refuses to
 center His life around anything that isn't worthy of His absolute devotion.

Now yes He loves us, but that love is a secondary love. His primary love and devotion is to the same Being He calls us to give our primary love and devotion to – The Creator. So friends, you aren't God's god; God is God's God.

And this is why humanity exists – we exist to increase God's infinite glory. And the only way this can happen is when we – other beings – join God in reveling in His glory. This then becomes the chief end of man – enjoy God's glory. That's primary, but the secondary spin off is that when we do this, when we focus our life around the worthiest Thing in the universe, then we find our self full of God's joy.

So God says “do what I do because this is where true life is found. I've got all the green pastures; I've got all the quiet waters. So by the empowerment of My Spirit join Me in living your life for the glory of God. When you do this you will get Me, and the by-product will be your joy.

Brothers and sisters, the entire Bible can be boiled down to this message. And Psalm 23 has it. Actually it is everywhere, but Psalm 23 has it too.

So friends, there is an invitation here to everyone who has been living their life their own way and finding out that things don't turn out awesome when we do that. So this is for everyone who is stuck in sin; this is for everyone who has allowed their selfishness to ruin relationships; this is for everyone who has greedily kept their wealth to themselves instead of generously providing for the widow and orphan; this is for everyone who has preferred to lie than tell the truth; this is for every sinner who isn't enjoying the green pastures and quiet waters – focus your life on the Good Shepherd. He's got what you want; He's got what you need – He's got Himself, and you could have Him too.

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Now look at verses 4 and 5 where David goes next. Eugene Peterson's “The Message Bible” reads:

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. (Psalm 23:4-5 MSG)

Now “Death Valley” was likely a real place. It was a narrow and winding path between two cliffs. It was dark and dangerous. Wild animals hung out there. And even bandits would plot the demise of travelers there. So no one went to Death Valley on purpose.

But notice that our choice has nothing to do with it. Verse 4 follows verse 3. Death Valley is one of the paths the Shepherd leads us on. And of course this is very much the reality of life. None of us choose to walk in Death Valley, but all of us go there eventually, and most of us visit there multiple times as we walk with those we love.

But the brilliance of David's point is that even in the dark recesses of Death Valley, when we are with our Shepherd there's nothing to fear. There is just absolute fearlessness when we are living our lives with Jesus. He's got this path nailed. Literally it got nailed to His feet and hands and it's got nothing on Him now.

Friends, God is by far the biggest and scariest thing in Death Valley and if we are sticking with Him what's going to touch us? A bear? A lion? A bit of cancer? Some financial stress? A relationship strained to the point of breaking? What is strong enough to force you off the path of righteousness? What's strong enough to take you away from the place of God's provision?

Yes, you are walking in dark place. Yes, things aren't easy and you can't see any green pastures. Yes, your lips are parched and it feels like decades since you tasted fresh water. But if the Shepherd is in front of you follow Him then there is nothing to fear.

Now let me tell you the worst idea in Death Valley would be to venture off into some God forsaken crevice on your own. Don't take your life into your own hands. In the face of what seeks your demise you've got nothing. But Jesus – He's been here before.

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He's comfortable here. Actually He's so comfortable He's offering to cook for you in the middle of the valley. He's set a table for you while evil looks on. He says "Sit down, lower your guard. Let Me anoint your head with oil" – this is something they did back then for their guests, and it meant they were under the protection of the home they were visiting. The Shepherd goes on: "let Me fill your cup up right to the brim – that's with Okanogan Shiraz – and I've got so much I'm just going to keep pouring – it's spilling everywhere. Just drink."

"Don't worry about what's going on over there. Don't worry about the eyes in the shadows. Don't worry about the troubles that stare at you. I've got that covered. See this stick? This is My God stick. What are they going to do with Me here? So close your eyes, go to sleep – if you're with Me you've got absolutely nothing to fear."

See death has lost its sting. There is just nothing that can hurt a person who is with The Shepherd. Oh no, don't make me go to heaven!! Come on! I'd much rather be there. I'd leave this behind – the best of it – in a second because my treasure isn't tied up in stuff that can rot and be stolen, God's my treasure.

This is why Paul says

For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. (Philippians 1:21 NLT)

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Now this doesn't mean we don't hate death. Death is our enemy. It is the final enemy that Jesus is going to destroy when He returns on His white horse. But the worst thing about death is eternal separation from those we love. And Jesus promises that's not our reality, so even death has lost its sting.

When Nathan died two years ago He wasn't just my friend, he was special to my daughter Elliana. Every Sunday she would run to him and he would pick her way up. She loved Mr. Nathan. And Nathan loved Jesus and lived his short life with Jesus' glory in mind. And so when he died I refused to tell Elliana that God needed him in heaven – because God doesn't need anyone. Instead we told her that Mr. Nathan won the race. He beat us to go see Jesus. Mr. Nathan is the winner!" You see we hurt for him, but he doesn't hurt for us. And so we don't hurt ultimately. Death has lost its sting.

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There is one more thing you need to see in this verse. Notice the pronouns change. In verses 1-3 David is talking to us about the Shepherd, but here he can't contain himself and he bursts into worship. In the middle of Death Valley David forgets we are even here and just starts talking to his Shepherd.

You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You're right here in the middle of everything I'm going through. You've walked this way before. And You've got this, You've got me. You are preparing a table for me. You are anointing my head.

Now don't miss this because it is the key to following our Shepherd. Don't let yourself just sit here in church and talk about the goodness of God. Don't get through life telling people about how good God is to you without allowing His goodness to draw you into worship.

You're here God. You are at work in the lives of everyone here. You're sovereign. You are in control. You see everything we are facing right now. Come and fill this place. Come and move in us. We thank You for being good. We thank You for not leaving us stuck in our sin and facing the Valley of Death alone. Thank You for not staying up there on Your throne, but coming down to us and making a way for us to be with You. Thank You for the cross. Thank you for taking our sin upon Yourself. Thank You for dying so we don't have to. And thank you for rising and giving us hope of life beyond what our natural eyes so often get stuck focusing on. We worship You because You are worthy. We have gathered here today for You. You are our Shepherd. We love You. And we say all of this in Your Name – the name of Jesus. Amen.

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This isn't the end. It could be, it's enough, but it isn't. There is verse 6. Here David turns the conversation back to us and leaves us with words of confidence for facing the worst today can throw at you.

He says "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Now this could be bad if we were stuck with English because this verse kind of sounds like we are walking along and goodness and mercy is just a step behind us being dragged along but just out of reach. But that is not the kind of "follow" this verse talks of.

The “follow” here is actually the word pursue or stalk. And it’s the word the Jews used to describe a lion hunting its prey. But here David flips it around and says, God’s goodness has been stalking me. I’ve seen it all over the place. With God my life has been green pastures and still water. The blessing of being with my Shepherd has been glory after glory. I’ve just been swimming in it.

And I’m not just talking about in the good times, I’m talking about Death Valley. God got there first and has everything under control. So there has just been nothing this world can throw at me that can force me off the path of right-relatedness with Him.

Remember David knew rough times. King Saul tried to kill him for four years and literally chased him all over the country. At the end David’s best friend was killed in battle. Then after David became king he had nations of enemies that were constantly plotting his demise. And even his own country was full of traitors. His own son tried to steal his kingdom. And on top of all this David lost three children during his lifetime. So this was no fairy-tale life. It was hard.

But David says “God was there through it all.” And now he says my Shepherd hasn’t left me yet, of course He’s not going to do that now! He’s been with me in good and bad, and throughout it all He’s never let me down. Yes, I’ve run away. I’ve done it my own way and there have been consequences. But God never deserted me. He’s always been there. And He isn’t going to leave now.

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Friends, God’s goodness and mercy is a relentless stalker. It’s hunting you. And it’s going to keep doing this all the days of your life. So choose to spend every breath you’ve got living with God. Enjoy His blessing. Follow your Shepherd, because God owns the green pasture. He is the blessing.

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And then one day we are all die, but that’s just the beginning. I get forever. I’m just going to go further up and further in. I’m going to dwell in the house of the LORD. YHWH’s house is going to be my house.

So brothers and sisters, absolute fearlessness belongs to those who follow their Shepherd and live for His glory. This is where true blessing resides. Now yes Death Valley is real. And yes you are surrounded by powers and principalities and enemies that seek your demise. And yes there are things that are outside your control. Yes, kids get killed in car accidents, and we get sick and our relationships struggle, and the money runs out. But the Shepherd is there and He’s got all this under control.

So friends stop hiding in the crevices. Stop it! If you are a child of the King, if you are a sheep of the Shepherd, let His Spirit empower you to follow Him on the path of righteousness. Tuck into His cloak and get close to that big stick. It is there for you, because when He enables you to walk the right path and rise above the impossible circumstances you find yourself surrounded by He will get the glory.