

JULY 9, 2021

Psalm 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² God makes me lie down in green pastures;
leads me beside still waters;

³ God restores my soul.

God leads me in right paths
For God's own name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

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
my whole life long.

Of all 150 psalms that make up the psalter, why is psalm 23 the most popular? It certainly lacks the emotional intensity of many of the lament psalms or the vibrant exuberance of many of the praise psalms. But it also provides rich metaphor, opening up imaginative possibilities for our praying and believing.

It begins with a statement of faith: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." In other words, because God is my shepherd, I will be in need of nothing fundamental to my flourishing. Really? That's a grand statement is it not? Can I believe it? Well, the rest of the psalm elaborates on why it is that with God as my shepherd I shall be in need of nothing fundamental to my flourishing. There are three parts to this elaboration:

Part 1: vs 2-3 – Lying down in green pastures evokes an image of the lush foliage of inner fullness. Leading me beside the still waters evokes an image of profound calm. Restoration of my soul evokes an image of coming to myself after being overwhelmed, exhausted and spent. Leading me in the right paths evokes an image of finding the right way after I am lost and perplexed as to choices and decisions before me. I am invited to enter a journey of believing and praying to One like a shepherd in communion

with whom I will experience a fullness, a calm, a restoration and a guidance towards better and best choices and decisions rooted in the solid wisdom of a higher love.

Part 2: vs 4-5 – But as we know, we cannot escape times of life when much that has kept us rooted and grounded is thrown into question, when believing and praying are difficult to sustain. The psalmist describes such difficult times in two profoundly evocative ways. First, there is the valley of the shadow of death. What experiences of life and times of life have felt akin to walking through a valley of the shadow of death for you?

Second, there is the image of having enemies encircling me. What experiences are evoked for you with the image of an enemy or enemies? Is it a particular person or group? Is it circumstances, a disease, an addiction or compulsion or some kind of obstacle that has grabbed hold of you and will not let you go? This psalm is inviting us to imagine though the means of faith and prayer what it's like to have a shepherdly rod and staff to protect and guide us through a dark valley where profound fear is confronting us. We are also invited in the face of defeat or humiliation before our enemies to experience the vindication of being celebrated with a feast in our honour and an anointing with oil, all intended to raise us up as cherished and valued regardless of how we have been run down and ground down. So exuberant is the experience of vindication, honour and feeling cherished that the psalmist exclaims: My cup overflows!

Part 3: vs 6 – and that exuberance leads to a renewal of confidence in the accompaniment, support and resurrecting power of the great Shepherd: Goodness and mercy will be my companions as I continue my journey, and my whole life will be lived with a more vivid awareness of the presence of God surrounding me (the house of the Lord is where God is especially present and where I am especially safe).

Now, if only I/we can develop such a faith! We are so called and inspired by Psalm 23.

PRAYER: You are my shepherd, O God... When I am rooted and grounded in you I can truly flourish in my life... But all too often, I do not feel so deeply rooted and grounded... I can feel harassed, shaken, frustrated, alone... Be patient with me, O God... Never cease coming to me and seeking to ground me again and again... I need that consistency and perseverance, O God, for every new twist and turn in life throws me off... May your love never leave me, no matter what valley of the shadow of death I will pass through, and especially when enemies surround me and infiltrate my thoughts and emotions... I entrust myself to you anew... Amen.