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Psalm 23
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Praying the Psalms¹

German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book called “Psalms the Prayer Book of Jesus.” In it he poses that the Book of Psalms is actually a collection of prayers that Jews, including Jesus, would have used to guide their daily prayer lives.

Bonhoeffer writes, “In Jesus’ mouth the human word becomes God’s Word. When we pray along with the prayer of Christ, God’s Word becomes again a human word. Thus all prayers of the Bible are such prayer, which we pray together with Jesus Christ, prayers in which Christ includes us, and through which Christ brings us before the face of God. Otherwise there are no true prayers, for only in and with Jesus Christ can we truly pray.”²

Indeed, we see direct traces in the Gospels when Jesus used these exact words for his prayers.

For example, as Jesus hung on the cross in Matthew and Mark, we hear his heart cry in Psalm 22:1 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”³

And then as he died in Luke, Jesus quoted Psalm 31:5, “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”⁴

So clearly these sacred words, God’s Words, were in Jesus’ soul and on his lips when he needed them most.

This morning what I’d like to do is divert from our typical sermon format where I pontificate eloquently a bunch of spiritual information that you may or may not remember before lunch and instead teach us how to pray through a very familiar psalm, Psalm 23. Listen now as I read Psalm 23 for us today.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

¹ Much of the content for this sermon was taken directly from the 24-7 Prayer Tool Box: “How to Pray the Psalms” at [https://downloads.24-7prayer.com/prayer_course/2019/resources/pdfs/5 How to Pray the Psalms.pdf](https://downloads.24-7prayer.com/prayer_course/2019/resources/pdfs/5%20How%20to%20Pray%20the%20Psalms.pdf)

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted by Matt Erickson in “Joining Jesus in Prayer: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Praying the Psalms,” April 30, 2020. Quote was taken from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Introduction in *The Prayerbook of the Bible Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Volume 5, pages 155-162

³ Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34

⁴ Luke 23:46

3 he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

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.

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

6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

What the Psalms do for us is to train us in how to pray. So instead of praying about God, we pray to God directly. Timothy Keller in his book on *Prayer* writes, “What is prayer, then, in the fullest sense? Prayer is continuing a conversation that God started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him.”⁵

We start with the words of the Psalm but then let our minds wander down trails led by the Holy Spirit and the Spirit brings to mind what we should place before the throne of God.

Another thing that we see in the Psalms is that they cover the full range of human emotion. “Instead of just praying out of the emotional overflow of our own personal circumstances, the Psalms bring our feelings into line with the reality of faith experienced by countless people down thousands of years; including Jesus Himself who memorized and recited these prayers even from the cross.

For the Psalmist, all of human emotion – indeed all of life itself – was brought under the rule of God in prayer.”⁶

There are two ways we pray the psalms. Systematically or thematically.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Prayer, Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (NY, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 48.

⁶ “How to Pray the Psalms” from 24-7 Prayer Movement Prayer Tool Box at [https://downloads.24-7prayer.com/prayer_course/2019/resources/pdfs/5 How to Pray the Psalms.pdf](https://downloads.24-7prayer.com/prayer_course/2019/resources/pdfs/5%20How%20to%20Pray%20the%20Psalms.pdf)

Systematically, we take a psalm a day. And since there are 150 psalms, with a few really long ones, this would take us about 150 days. This means that we could pray through the Psalms twice a year. Monastic communities, like the Benedictine order at Mt. Angel Abbey, chant the Psalms as part of their worship ritual and rhythm five times daily.

To pray Psalm 23, we will take it line by line. Talk about it. Meditate on it. And then pause to pray individually and quietly in our hearts. Read them aloud and let the ancient words wash over us like the falling rain.

The other way is thematically. “Theologian Walter Bruggeman in his book *Spirituality of the Psalms* suggests that the Psalms could be broken down into three categories based on the different seasons of the soul. Orientation. Disorientation. And New Orientation.

“Psalms of Orientation describe those seasons that evoke gratitude for God’s faithfulness and steadfastness. They speak about God’s character, creation, and the unchangeable nature of God’s love and favor.

Psalms of Disorientation are a response to seasons of the soul that involve heartache, pain, grief, complaint, disappointment, loneliness and suffering. Psalms of disorientation are plentiful and while many of these laments are personal, many are also communal. Over one third of the one hundred and fifty psalms are of lament.

Psalms of New Orientation express a type of surprised joy which has broken through the season of pain and despair; we have become aware of a ‘fresh intrusion’ – a gift of God’s grace and healing that has brought us into a new place.

There are also Psalms that reflect the rhythm of the day. And so there are dawn psalms to be read in the morning. And dusk psalms that are to be read in the evening.

Dawn Psalms prepare us for action, waking us up to what God is doing in the world and how we can join in with Him, allowing His will to work its way in us for His purposes.

Dusk Psalms mark the transition from daylight to the sleep of darkness where in our passive state of sleep we relinquish control of ourselves and others, trusting our whole lives (not to mention the running of the world!) to our Heavenly Father who ‘gives His beloved sleep.’”⁷

And so with that background on praying the Psalms, we turn our attentions to Psalm 23.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” He said, “I know my sheep and my

⁷ “How to Pray the Psalms” from 24-7 Prayer Movement Prayer Tool Box at [https://downloads.24-7prayer.com/prayer_course/2019/resources/pdfs/5 How to Pray the Psalms.pdf](https://downloads.24-7prayer.com/prayer_course/2019/resources/pdfs/5%20How%20to%20Pray%20the%20Psalms.pdf)

sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep.”⁸

So we cannot read this psalm without praying...Jesus, You are our Good Shepherd. You know us completely, the good, the bad, and the ugly. There is nothing we can hide from You. Nor is there any place we can go to hide from Your presence.

You hem us on all sides. Above, below, besides. You even knit us together in our mother’s womb. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We know that full well.” You see I drew that directly from Psalm 139.⁹

Lord Jesus, thank You for the way You lovingly take care of us. We have everything we need. A roof over our head. Food on the table. Meaningful work. Loving relationships. We come before You with complete peace. Because You know both what we need and our heart's truest desire. We lay those before You now.

We confess that we long for more. We crave more of everything. More power. More territory. More praise. More money. We just can’t seem to be satisfied that what you have provided us in this life. We are truly sorry.

On our hearts right now, we are aware of Pam Boehning and her need for healing from breast cancer. We are so grateful for the good news that her surgery was successful and there are no traces of cancer in her lymph nodes. We also pray for for Bob McKusick, Bob Orey, Peggy Riley, and others that are on our hearts right now who we mention out loud by name. Heal them Jesus, and give them all a peace that goes beyond understanding.

We are also heart torn by the wars in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine and the senseless genocide that is taking place in Gaza. Jesus, You are our Prince of Peace. Government rest on Your shoulders. And so Jesus we ask boldly as our Mighty God through whom all things are possible, that You would bring an end to these conflicts, stop the bloodshed and hatred, and restore Your kingdom shalom throughout these war torn lands.

We pray for our government and the world’s shepherds. May You turn them from wicked and vindictive ways and give them hearts of love and goodwill toward all, especially our neighbors and allies, and fellow countrymen with whom they disagree.

And Jesus we also lift up our undocumented brothers and sisters who have come to the United States in desperate need, trying to escape the drug and gang violence and utter poverty of their homelands, hard working people who are simply trying to make a decent life for themselves and their families - as our own

⁸ John 10:11, 14-15

⁹ Psalm 139:5, 13-16

ancestors did. Instill in our nation a greater sense of compassion, understanding, and goodwill toward all people - especially the disenfranchised, the orphan, the widow, the alien, and the poor.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.”

Pete Greig in his book, *How to Pray, A Simple Guide for Normal People* quotes French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, “All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”¹⁰ And Greig writes, “The human soul is wild and shy. The Psalmist compares it to a deer panting for streams of water.” And he tells the Parable of the Deranged Greyhound and the Wild, Dog-Eating Chair.

“The tranquility of Guildford’s picturesque cobbled High Street was shattered one sunny morning by the yelping of a dog and a strange metallic clattering.

Suddenly, a crazed greyhound came scrabbling by around the corner with its whippet tail between its wild legs, weaving between shouting shoppers. Frantic with fear, the dog was being hotly pursued by one of those cheap chrome bistro chairs attached to the other end of the dog’s leash. The chair seemed alive, like a dancing snake weaving and flailing, striking and biting at that terrified animal’s rear.

Perhaps the dog’s owner was unaware of the pet’s plight, innocently waiting for coffee at some nearby shop. A movement must have made that chair twitch, which had made the dog jump, which had made the chair leap, which had made the dog scamper, which had made the chair pounce, which had made the dog yelp, which had made the shoppers shout, which made the dog run even more frantically, pursued all the while by this terrifying piece of metal and these crowds of screaming, grabbing strangers...

We can live our lives a lot like that demented greyhound - driven and disoriented by irrational fears, pursued by entire packs of bloodthirsty bistro chairs, too scared to simply stop.”¹¹

And so we pray...Lord Jesus make us stop. Make us lie down in green pastures. Lead us beside quiet waters. Our souls are frantic like this poor greyhound that simply cannot keep up the pace of the world around us. Help us to be more intentional, with our time and our resources so that we can get away, alone, to a quiet place, like You often did with Your disciples, so that our souls might slow down and peak its head out and drink from streams of Your living water.

¹⁰ Blaise Pascal as quoted in Pete Greig, *How to Pray, A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Grand Rapids, MI: NavPress, 2019), 35.

¹¹ Greig, *How to Pray*, 36-27.

Jesus, You tell us, “that if anyone is thirsty that we should come to You and drink. And whoever believes in You, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within us.”¹² Give us this water!

He guides me along the right paths 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.

The Hebrew word used for right is actually tzdeq which means righteousness. It should actually read, “He guides me along paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

And you might also see some translations, like the New International Version, read, the darkest valley instead of the valley of the shadow of death. But the Hebrew is tsalmeveth which means shade of death, shadow of death, or the grave. Clearly the psalmist was trying to paint a word picture of the physical death that none of us can escape. But with Jesus the Good Shepherd at our side, we don’t have to fear it.

His rod or spear was for fighting off roaring lions like Satan. And his Staff is Jesus’ word that keeps us on the right path in life. Jesus tells us that at the moment of death... “He goes ahead of us to prepare a place for us in His Father’s house so that where He is we can be also.”¹³ And that on that day we will be with Him in paradise.¹⁴ And since Jesus conquered death by rising from the grave. We confidently believe we will too!

So there is nothing to fear.

And so we pray... Lord Jesus lead us in paths of righteousness both in our lives and in our nation’s life for Your name’s sake. Right now many people who claim to follow You have bought into a false gospel that looks more like American nationalism than it does like You. Open their eyes to Your true character. That our lives ought to be full of the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Help us always to do what is right according to Your law of love and grace. And Lord may we all know that no-one is above the law and that one day you will hold each of us accountable for whatever we have done or left undone, whether in word or in deed.

Lord Jesus thank You for conquering death and inviting us into Your victory over the grave. Be with everyone right now who is facing their final journey in life. May they know that You are with them as bookends of life, the Alpha and the Omega. May You comfort them and provide them peace. And may they too be convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present

¹² John 7:37-38

¹³ John 14:2

¹⁴ Luke 23:43

nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creations, will be able to separate them from the love of God that is in You, our Lord and Good Shepherd!

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

Now I admit that this seems like an odd twist to the psalm. Who wants to share a meal with our enemies? The Hebrew word for enemies is *tsarar*. It literally means our oppressors, adversaries, those who bind us up, beset us, or bring us distress. Think of Hamas terrorists sitting down at a heavenly banquet table with their Israeli hostages and their families. Pretty powerful imagery isn't it?

You see at this point, the psalmist invites us to imagine having crossed over and through the valley of the shadow of death, and into a new life that awaits us on the other side. Where everything that was wrong in our lives, is made right. Every broken relationship we experienced is healed and made whole, where “Jesus himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. And there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away.”¹⁵

In the Bible, anointing with oil symbolizes sanctification, consecration, and divine favor, often indicating that a person or object is being set apart for a specific purpose or mission by God. It can also represent the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

We are the guest of honor at this banquet who is being set apart. Our head is anointed with oil. Our cup overflows. It's mind boggling to even imagine how perfect everything just is. And our souls cry out, “It just can't get any better than this...and then it does!”

And so we pray...Lord Jesus, thank You for having a greater imagination of what is to come than we do. We cannot even conceive the idea of communing with our enemies, those who have hurt us, cut us off, or estranged us. Forgive us for our short sightedness. Forgive the way we have hurt those who we love. And help us to forgive them in return. Give us the strength to restore these relationships right now while we have breath and not just one day when we die. Set us and them free from the bondage of our sin.

Lord Jesus, we silently name these people in the quietness of our hearts right now.

May your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it in heaven. And may You use us to make this happen today.

Lord Jesus, we can only imagine the complete joy we will feel when we are reunited in Your presence with those we love who have gone ahead of us into glory. What a reunion that will be! What love will surround us! What joy will fill

¹⁵ Revelation 21:4

our hearts! Oh how we long for this! Oh how our hearts yearn for this! Lord Jesus what a gift that is for us now!

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The psalm confidently ends with SURELY! The Hebrew is actually a little word *ak* which means nevertheless, certainly, or nonetheless. It is a word of absolute assurance of God's character. The Hebrew word for goodness is *tov* and means God's beauty, best, or bounty. The Hebrew word for love is *hesed*. This word appears some 247 occurrences in the Old Testament to describe God's character. It means loving-kindness, mercy, or favor.

Now, I actually don't like the translation in our text today for the word "follow" because I think it misses the intent of the Hebrew. The Hebrew is *radaph* which means to chase after, pursue, or run after in hot pursuit. God's loving-kindness, mercy and beauty chases us down throughout our lives until we are caught in God's arms of love and grace.

And so we pray...Thank You, Lord Jesus, that like with Your lost sheep, You aggressively chase us down. You even come to those places where we'd rather not be found. And You bring us back into the safety of Your fold, like wayward children whom You dearly love. Thank You, Lord Jesus, that there is nothing we can ever do to make You stop loving us. Nothing. Help us to believe that. Help us to receive that. Plant this same confidence in our souls that David had in Psalm 23.

Lord Jesus, we pray for those who don't have this same certainty. We take time to silently name them in the quiet of our hearts right now. We pray that You would plant this truth in them. Open their eyes to see You as their Good Shepherd.

And finally Lord Jesus, may we know that You are ours and we are Yours. And the knowledge of this will never ever end.

This my friends, is how we pray the psalms.

Amen. Amen!