

Sumer Bible Study 2020 - Psalm 23

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 August 2020

Preacher: Pastor Cathy Hall Stengel

[0 : 00] do so do so We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

[3 : 30] We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

We'll be right back.

[5 : 59] The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

He leadeth me. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I will fear no evil. Don't fear no evil. He'll be right back.

Thou preparest a table. My cup runneth me, my cup runneth, my cup runneth over.

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord. Amen. Amen. Let's talk about what we know about the 23rd Psalm.

[7 : 13] It's thought to be a Psalm of David. And it is thought that it was written after David. And it is thought that it was written after David came through a very difficult time. And we know that David went through a number of difficult things.

So I don't know exactly which experience. So I don't know exactly which experience this might have been. But David writes this as one who has gone through a terrible experience and come through on the other side, more certain than ever that God is present with him.

So it would be interesting to think about which Psalm in scripture might be the story of what actually happened in that valley.

What we know is that here in the 23rd Psalm, we're on the other side of it. So let's look at some of what it says. There are things about it that are patterns, patterns of thought, patterns of proclamation, patterns of the way things are phrased that are very important to the way that we might look at how it is that this piece of scripture is so important to us.

And for one thing, we know that this has been a psalm of encouragement for Christians and for Jews for centuries and centuries.

[8 : 38] Scholars have attempted to categorize the psalms. And sometimes we see Bibles that have put the psalms in numerical order, but have listed them as specific kinds of psalms.

So this psalm, 23, is built on a major theme in the psalm literature, which is the distress and deliverance of the writer.

And you can see that in other psalms because we experience the distress of the person writing these words. And we also experience their deliverance as they travel this journey in their faith, a deep and profound journey in these very short verses and a very short chapter in the psalms.

So we can look at, first of all, the proclamation, the proclamation, the Lord is my shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd. And we can think of that as part of three parts, provision, abundance and restoration.

[9 : 53] What do those three terms mean? Well, provision means providing for. And so the psalm speaks of providing for David.

The psalm speaks of providing for you and I as readers and people of faith or people who hope to grow in our faith.

The psalm talks about abundance, which we're familiar with, probably more than the use of the word provision. And we see in some kind of places where you go get provisions for a trip.

But we know about abundance. Abundance is a lot. Abundance is enough. Abundance is much of something. God provides an abundance.

And the last one is restoration, which I think is at the core of the 23rd psalm. To be restored. God provides in this psalm restoration.

[10 : 59] So we have provisions, abundance and restoration. And so if we look at it, the first verse, as I said, the Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not want. This introduces us to the fact that God cares about us and wants to provide for us.

This isn't some distant, faraway God who just says, okay, go ahead. You're kind of on your own. I'll be here, but you're on your own. No, this is a description of someone who's there.

A shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. And we know through reading throughout the Bible, and if you've read anything about the Middle East, that being a shepherd is a well-known profession, they aren't always the most personable people because their job is out in the fields, taking care of their sheep, keeping them from danger.

They're not going to be hanging out in libraries or restaurants or places where there are a lot of people because you can't leave your sheep unless you get somebody else to stay with them.

[12 : 19] So the Lord is my shepherd. And when we think of the role of a shepherd with sheep or with flocks, the shepherd is the one who watches, the one who protects, the one who guides, the one who knows the sheep.

We read in the Gospels about the shepherd knows his sheep. So we have this idea that God is a near God.

God is present. The Lord is my shepherd. The second verse, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters.

Now, this is abundance. When you think about the Middle East, you don't think of green pastures and still waters.

If you've ever been to Israel or the area, you see that there isn't a lot of green, nothing like what we have here. It's not that there isn't any place where it's green, but it's not the kind of green that we know in this area.

[13 : 37] It might be more like places in Nevada or Arizona, places like that that tend to be more rocky and barren.

And still water. Water has been a source of travel and destination and desperation in the Middle East.

Water has dictated for so many years, generations and generations, where will people live in the Middle East? Because they have to live somewhere where they can find drinkable water.

So here's the abundance. Green pastures and still waters. And he makes me lie down.

I'd say that that's abundant. For many people, resting, taking time out, laying in the grass and looking at the sky next to a brook or stream or river, is something we're often not very good at.

[14 : 52] So God is leading to green pastures and still waters and rest. This is an abundant life.

The third verse, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. He restores my soul.

This is about restoration. If you've ever seen or watched anybody or if you've ever done restoration work, then you kind of get this, except this is inner work.

If you've ever restored a car, and people do it incredibly, it's about not just making the car work and functional.

It's about restoring it to its original state of perfection, I suppose. Restoring pieces of woodwork. Restoring things that have somehow been damaged or neglected or abandoned.

[16 : 00] We know about doing some of that kind of work. I've done a little bit of that myself. Just some work on some things that my grandfather, that I have for my grandfather, that just need some tender, loving care to restore this one piece to its beauty.

I don't know if it'll ever be the way it used to be, but it is beautiful and is becoming more beautiful. Restoring. Restoring. Restoring. Filling.

Filling. A sense of putting things back in place. He restores my soul.

What does that look like? Can you imagine? What might you think of in terms of having your soul, your spirit restored?

I think it's going to be different for all of us. I think from my own perspective, if my soul and my spirit were to be fully restored, then I wouldn't be able to find maybe disappointment or anger or resentment towards things and people and experiences that are long ago and far away.

[17 : 28] I feel like if my soul was to be restored, it would be as though I was new in all ways, which would mean that some of that old would be gone.

Or at least made new. It's one of those places. And the care of the soul, the restoration of the soul, what does that say about God?

It says God doesn't just care about the provisions that we are taken care of by a shepherd, that we are watched over and protected.

God doesn't just care about the abundance of our lives. God cares about our inner selves, the stuff that's going on inside of you or has gone on inside of you.

God cares about that. And this particular verse, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness, meaning that his intention for me is to continue a path of faith.

[18 : 44] He doesn't restore me and then just leave me in the wilderness. He doesn't fix us up so that we can just be left on our own or find a different way.

You wouldn't restore an incredible car and then just leave it. Just leave it. Just abandon it. I certainly won't do that with this piece of furniture for my grandfather.

God cherishes us, cares for us outside and inside. And so as the psalm reads, leads us in paths of righteousness, which means that we are led on a journey of faith.

We are not led astray. We are not left. We are like the sheep. We are kept in the direction that the shepherd wants us to go.

We don't always follow. But the psalm assures us that God leads us on that path of righteousness. It is the God who restores.

[19 : 59] God is the one that restores. The fourth verse is probably one of the main pieces of why we often use this particular scripture at funerals and memorial services.

The writer declares, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. His life, his journey, has come through a valley, a ditch, the bottom.

We can use all kinds of words to describe what that might look like in our world. And it says, I will fear no evil. Evil is named as the source of anxiety.

I will fear no evil. I will not be anxious about evil coming to me. I will fear no evil.

Because even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God will be with me. Now let's look at that a little bit closer. Because one of the things it doesn't say, and one of the things that theologians have written about for centuries, is the fact that it doesn't say, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I know I won't have to stay here because God's going to beam me up.

[21 : 33] God's going to make all the suffering go away. It doesn't say that. As we walk through the verses of the 23rd Psalm, what we hear is that God is with us.

God walks with us. God leads us. God provides us. God is with us in the darkness. God is with us. A lot of times, people of faith have been called disingenuous or hypocritical or lots of different things.

And there's lots of story behind that, mostly on the part of the person speaking. And yet there are places in which there's a level of truth about how it is that we as people of faith present.

I don't know about you, but have you ever been in a conversation that goes something like this? Hey, Kathy, how are you? It's good to see you. Oh, hey, Jordan, it's good to see you.

How are you? Hey, Kathy, it's great to see you. How are you doing? Now, did you listen to that? There is no actual finding out how each person is doing.

[22 : 49] It's this passing place that we often find ourselves where we don't have time, we don't have opportunities, and sometimes we don't always want to hear how a person is.

We kind of gauge when we ask them how they are. Do you want to hear what they have to say? When I ask my children how they are, sometimes they'll say, I'm fine.

My response to that is, what's the difference between fine and good? Because most of the time when I ask them, they say, I'm good. When we encounter each other, we often want to keep us all in a place of positivity, of celebration, of gratitude, of happy.

And sometimes churches look like that. Can you imagine yourself as a person who comes to a church in desperation, in brokenheartedness, and sees that everybody is smiling, everybody's happy, everybody looks like they've got it all together, everybody is celebrating something.

How might it feel to be the one who comes into that place broken, going through a loss, diagnosed with an illness, marriage, gone, whatever the case might be.

[24 : 30] And the reality is, is this happens every single time we are together. and will be when we are back together. We sometimes forget in the 23rd Psalm, we hear, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Why? Because thy rod and thy staff, you are with me with that rod and staff, and they comfort me. people sometimes feel like we're not honest because we might say we're fine or we're good when we're not.

People might say that we make light of things because when someone's suffering, we might say, it's okay, you'll get through it, or no, no, no, don't think that way.

don't think that way. Or, we might say, it won't last long, don't worry, you'll get through it. Kind of an acknowledgement of, this is where you are, but you can't stay there.

And I'm uncomfortable visiting with you in that place. Sometimes, even though I might love you very, very much, I want you to feel better.

[25 : 59] That's what a person might feel. A person might feel, maybe if I say something encouraging or cheer a person, then they will move on their way towards being okay.

What we often forget is that, just like this part of the 23rd Psalm, God isn't saying that we have to leave our suffering, that we have to not be truthful or not be honest about the fact that we might be in the valley or in the darkness, because essentially what God is saying in the 23rd Psalm is, I see you there.

I see how you're feeling. I see what you're going through. And you know what I'm going to do? I'm just going to come and sit right down next to you. And that's what I am sure that you do.

And I try to, when it's possible, to be that God with skin on who comes alongside and reminds a person, you are loved, just the way you are.

God is with you just the way you are. You do not have to hide your feelings or not talk. No, you don't have to talk.

[27 : 28] Nobody has to share because God knows where we are, even if the people sitting in the pews next to us don't know. Or sometimes even in our own families, people don't know.

God always knows. And I'd like us to imagine ourselves being on a park bench or a bench at the cemetery or someplace where there's room for two to sit.

And sit there and think of the 23rd Psalm and think about even though I may be in that place, in that valley, in that shadow, God is with me.

It isn't like God is waiting at the end of the tunnel, waiting where the light is. God's not waiting for us to get somewhere. God is with us, beside us, walking with us always.

And so imagine that. And right now, maybe you're not going to a park bench or something like that, but I think you can still imagine it.

[28 : 46] Find a place and sit with God and try to picture that God has come alongside you and is sitting with you.

And when you're walking through the valley of the shadow of death, oh, what a comfort. What a comfort to think that whether you've just buried a loved one or whether your job is dead or your marriage is dead or a relationship has died or you feel to some extent dead inside of you, those things feelings are the feelings that God wants to sit next to.

Oh, of course God is with us when we're playing and running and laughing and feeling overwhelmed with gratitude. My son and daughter-in-law and I were sitting near each other with masks on at their home, spread apart, and we were looking at the baby monitor where we saw my new grandson and their son and we watched him sleeping.

Now, who isn't grateful for a baby that's sleeping? And he was all wrapped up, swaddled, laying in his crib, just sleeping as peaceful as possible.

Pretty sure God is sitting next to me in those grandma moments where I just cannot believe that this gift has been brought into my life and I'm sure that you are there as well in places of love and delight and celebration and gratitude.

[30 : 38] I think it's safe to say that God is with us always, but this is specific. In the tough times, in the valley times, God is sitting beside us.

I want to tell you my own personal story of going through this. A number of years ago, it was the middle of October and I went to visit my twin sister.

My twin sister who, for the first number of years of our lives, you couldn't even tell the difference between us. We looked so much alike. We were able to trick people really up into college and even as an adult, she went to the grocery store in a town where I was the pastor and someone spoke to her because she thought that that was me.

So I asked my sister, what did you say? Oh, I didn't say anything because I don't know her and I was like, ah, you're going to get me in trouble. But anyway, that mid-October trip, I went to see her in Maryland, in Southern Maryland and she was dying.

I knew that she was dying. We had known for some time but now I knew that it was close and I had to go to Dayton, Ohio and so that mid-October I left her and I went to Ohio.

[32 : 16] I was doing my doctoral work and I had to go there and then the plan was that I would go back to New York and probably then go back to Maryland.

If you've ever driven from Maryland up north into Pennsylvania and gone west or just gotten up far enough in Maryland where you go west, you go through a lot of hills.

I'll use an example of one road, Route 80 that goes east to west and west to east in Pennsylvania takes you up to the top of what seems like mountains and then down to the bottom.

Well, as I was driving to Ohio from my sister's house I stopped at one of those overlook areas where I could see for miles and miles and miles and in that moment I felt like God could see me.

I felt like God could guide me. I felt a sense of gratitude for God's presence, for God's abundance, for God's provision for me.

[33 : 35] When I got to Dayton, Ohio and got to my hotel room, it's like the reality of everything was kind of traveling behind me and when I got to my hotel room it kind of rolled over me.

Kind of like dust rolls over a car or a truck when you're going fast on a dusty road. And I sobbed and I just was crushed by the fact that my sister, the person who'd been with me since conception, was no longer going to be in my everyday life in the way that she had been.

And this was heartbreaking for me. And I know it was heartbreaking for a lot of people in very different ways. But that night in my hotel room I was broken apart by the pain.

And yet there was a sense of being held by God.

Of being held by God. Like having the Holy Spirit wrap around me and just like in the 23rd Psalm it wasn't shh shh don't cry.

[34 : 58] It wasn't it's okay. it was I'm just gonna hold you until you can get up and put one foot in front of the other.

That's part of my 23rd Psalm story and I hope at some point you'll share with me some of your 23rd Psalm stories.

It's not like it's over that that's the only one but the reality is that's a defining one for me and I know that as we all go through the high points and low points we each have defining moments in our lives where we I hope and pray feel somehow that God is with us holding us and caring about us no matter how it is that we feel.

When we get to the next part you are with me your rod and your staff they comfort me.

I picture the sheep out on the field in the pasture and there's the shepherd and the shepherd is holding what we know of as the staff long pole with a curved top you know that's the shepherd's crook the crook of that is the shepherd's crook and I don't know if anybody's ever talked to you about what a shepherd does with that well sometimes it's pulling a sheep away from some place that they shouldn't be pulling them back from harm maybe they're not getting along and the shepherd pulls one away from the other one but sometimes out in the wilderness there are places in the ground where there are holes and a sheep might not see that hole and a sheep might fall into it so the shepherd reaches down with the shepherd's crook and pulls the sheep to safety just like you know a dog or a cat will kind of pick up their kitten or puppy they do it by the back of their neck the shepherd pulls the sheep out by their neck when you see that that's comfort not only is it comfort but if you see it it's a direction to go in you want to keep your eye on that staff you want to keep your eye on where are we going because you know we can all get crowded up and in a big group or we can just be all crowded inside work kids family loneliness sometimes that can be filled with chaos look for the crook look for where it is because I'm pretty sure that God is reaching to you and to others just as we hear in this psalm thy rod and thy staff they comfort me not only will the shepherd take care of me but these are symbols of care the tools of the shepherd that showed that the shepherd would defend us and take care of us the fifth verse you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies you anoint my head with oil my cup overflows this goes back to the beginning with the green pastures and still waters in the abundance this is about the abundance provision abundance restoration provision abundance restoration and this is definitely a passage about abundance but it's not just that it's not just the green pasture or the still waters it's not just about the rest in this particular verse you you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies in this passage we might see that the enemies are the ones who have denied the writer a place at the table the ones who have said you're not welcome here the hospitality that would be due to a person who is wandering in the desert in the wilderness wouldn't get it and if

[40 : 03] I have been in so many places and I have the places where I have seen some of the greatest hospitality to strangers is in Israel and Jordan and Palestine you meet a person on the street you talk to them and the next thing you know they might invite you for dinner to get to know you better you stop by a place to see something that's maybe part of where Jesus walked or it might be a community that you're visiting and it doesn't matter if there's 20 of you the host would likely invite you to dinner even though they're probably wondering where would they get food for 20 people so to be denied a place at the table a shelter out of the storm shade from the sun would be to be denied well-being maybe safety and certainly companionship and God responds with abundance and with great significance because God is saying that he'll prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies no matter who they are that God will step in where others won't that God will welcome to the table those who might not be welcome in other places if you think about the middle school cafeteria and let's pretend it's a cafeteria where there's not assigned seats and you picture yourself you don't know anybody maybe you're new in the school and you go into the cafeteria and you look around and you don't know anybody and nobody's offering you a place to sit down kids know how this feels and we adults we do know how it feels and so

I always say well if we go and we sit by ourselves or we take a risk to sit with people we don't know and they let us sit there God is providing us a table no matter how we've been abandoned or left behind no matter what enemies there might be out there you anoint my head with oil when I anoint someone and I've anointed a lot of people as a pastor as a chaplain sometimes when I've gone to visit a newborn at the hospital in my congregation I can't do that right now but when I could if the parents were okay with it I would often anoint the child it's a before their baptism this is not a baptism this is a claiming you have come into this world and God knows you

I have anointed people when they got married that they might not forget that they are marked with the sign of the cross in the name of Jesus Christ and I have anointed people as they find their way down that final road towards death most recently when I went to see Anna K.

Anderson when she was very very close to the end of her life and I anointed her and I said Anna K. you have always been claimed by the God who made you Christ your Savior and by the Holy Spirit I anoint you that you may know that on this final journey you are still claimed in the power of God it's a beautiful thing so when we hear about you anoint my head with oil God claiming us prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies anoint my head with oil claim me surely my cup overflows because I have more than I could ever hope for in that moment and then we get to the last verse surely goodness and love or mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the

Lord forever one biblical translator said that maybe this line could be most appropriately translated as some version of the goodness and love and mercy of God will pursue me all the days of my life that God will seek after me not just that goodness and love or goodness and mercy will follow me like something that trails behind you but rather imagining it as the love and the goodness and the mercy of God pursuing you pursuing you so that it's not left it's always going to find you and I imagine that sometimes that goodness and mercy that's pursuing us might be coming from more directions than just one because God cares just that much and so we get a sense that that goodness and mercy is a part of us all the days of our lives and it will hunt us down and I often tell people when they go through periods of time where they think maybe they're not sure that they believe or what they believe

[46 : 35] I reassure them that God's always right there that no matter what darkness you walk through no matter what doubt or anger or frustration with God or the world you might have it's not going to get the Holy Spirit to go away it's just not how God is relentlessly pursuing us with goodness and mercy one of the books that I have enjoyed and really found inspirational around the 23rd Psalm is Max Locato's book called Traveling Light Max Locato admits that he doesn't travel light and he doesn't know how he uses humor to talk about himself and how ever since he put his three fingers up and took the Boy Scout oath to be prepared he's been prepared ever since for tsunamis and snowshoeing and you name it and he describes it in some humorous ways but he talks about how every travel catalog company has his credit card number

I have an iron that doubles as a paperweight a hairdryer that's the size of a coach's whistle a Swiss army knife that expands to be a pup tent and a pair of pants that inflate upon impact he jokes about sitting with his wife Dental and on the plane and she pats him on the leg and pretty soon the pants expand and then he can't get out of the seat he's joking and yet he's not because he talks about how much stuff we carry along with us how much we travel with and he describes it as somewhere between the first step on the floor and the last step out the door this morning you grabbed some luggage you stepped over to the baggage carousel and load it up you don't remember doing so that's because you did it without thinking don't remember seeing a baggage terminal that's because the carousel is not the one in the airport it's the one in your mind the bags we grab are not leather they're burdens the suitcase of guilt the sack of discontent the duffel bag of weariness a hanging bag of grief backpack of doubt an overnight bag of loneliness and a trunk of fear pretty soon you're pulling more stuff than a sky cap isn't it no wonder that we're so tired by the end of the day what you were saying to me

God is saying to you set that stuff down you're carrying burdens you don't need to bear come to come to me come to me he says all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest from Matthew 11 if we let him God will lighten our loads but now we wonder well how do we let him he invites that we let an old friend show us what to do the 23rd Psalm the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want he makes me 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 namesake 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 let's travel light together maybe a little lighter one day at a time bless you tonight and each day amen my God endeavor none it