

Psalm 23

Introduction

- “Most folks are about as happy as their thinking allows them to be.” *Abraham Lincoln*
- If emotional illness is a failure to rightly assess and manage feelings, then mental illness must be the failure to understand and see life as it really is.
- Each of us has at least a touch of emotional and mental disorientation.
- This should not surprise us given the fact that the enemy of our souls (the evil messenger Satan) is described as “the father of lies.”(Jn.8:44).
- The God of all comfort (2 Cor.1:3) is committed to be “with His people” and help them manage their fears. The incarnation is a dramatic expression of this truth.
- Common misperceptions (I don’t need a shepherd or there is no shepherd.)
 1. The world is generally a safe friendly place for my soul.
 2. I have life under successful management.
 3. If it can go wrong it will.
 4. There is no hope, hero, or help.
- Two twisted paraphrases of Psalm 23

“The culture is my shepherd. I am always wanting more. I stumble from mall to mall, job to job, and shrink to shrink, seeking relief but never finding any. I am trapped in the valley of the shadow of death and feel sorry for myself. I fear everything from processed food to power lines, and I’m starting to act like my mother. I go down to the weekly staff meeting and am surrounded by people who seem out to get me. I go home, and even the dog scowls at me. I anoint my headache with extra-strength Tylenol. My beer mug runneth over. Surely misery and misfortune will always be my lot, and I will live in self-doubt and pain for the rest of my lonely life.” (Psalm 23 – the Victim’s version)

“God is my servant, and He promises to give me more stuff than I can imagine. He has given me the right to have the best of everything and if I claim His promises I will have smooth sailing in life. I may face outward symptoms of trouble but my faith reminds me that it is just a trick of the Devil. Because God is with me, in me, and for me, I have authority over Satan. He has given me the power to change my circumstances. My enemies scatter before me. He has given me the anointing to be a child of the King and as such the riches of this world belong to me. There is no doubt about it. It all belongs to me.” (Psalm 23 – the Triumphantist version)

- King David’s life and legacy provide a context for this Psalm.
 1. David was a person of great power and privilege.
 2. David was a person of great weakness and brokenness.

3. David was a person with a great legacy.
 - a. “A man after God’s own heart.”
 - b. A prototype of Messiah – “The Son of David.”

Psalm 23

“¹ The *Lord* is my shepherd,

I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.

³ He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name’s sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death, I fear no evil;

for Thou art with me;

Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.

⁵ Thou dost prepare a table before me in the presence of my
enemies;

Thou hast anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of the *Lord* forever.”

Psalm 23 in praise of Immanuel

- A. The Psalm's **literary structure** follows a Hebrew pattern where the text builds to a central point (In this case "I fear no evil for Thou art with me") from both the beginning of the Psalm and the end with parallel ideas. (Protection, Provision, Position, **Privilege, Presence**)

"¹ The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.
³ He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.
⁵ Thou dost prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
Thou hast anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and loving-kindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Isaiah 40:1

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God," Note that this is followed by a passage that is used in the NT (Matt.3:3) of John the Baptist to announce the coming of Messiah Jesus. Jesus comforts God's people by coming to them and by "being with them."

Matthew 1:23 (the dawn of Jesus' earthly mission)

"Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name "Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us.""

Matthew 28:19-20 (the twilight of Jesus' earthly mission)

"¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

- While there are several Psalms that speak powerfully to our soul's need for support, there are few Psalms that have enjoyed the popularity of Psalm 23.
- B. There are **four truths** that we need to appreciate as we study this Psalm.
- 1. Psalm 23 addresses the stress of living in a hostile world.**
 - While the fallen world is not always life threatening in dramatic ways, it is always life threatening.
 - 2. Psalm 23 is about God's comfort in the midst of fear (not the removal of affliction).**

- The virtue of Mother Teresa of Calcutta was not in her alleviation of poverty and suffering but in her bestowal of comfort and dignity on those who were dying.

3. Psalm 23 is about Jesus, the incarnate “Immanuel.”

- God did not send His Son to remove the presence of evil and pain but to give us hope in the midst of trouble by removing the sting and the fear of death. He came to be “with us” and shepherd our souls through the valley of the shadow of death without fear.

4. Psalm 23 is descriptive (not prescriptive).

- There is no exhortation to do anything but rather a challenge to see and understand something about life in a covenant relationship with God.

Mark 6 as an application of Psalm 23

- A. While there is no direct link between Mark 6 and Psalm 23, it is not difficult to detect some parallels. In verse 34 we read that Jesus “**began to teach them many things.**” We can see that the message of Psalm 23 would have fit this setting perfectly.
- B. In Mark’s telling of the Gospel story John the Baptist has just been beheaded. (6:14-29)
- C. This frightful event sets the stage for what follows – the feeding of the 5000. (6:30-44)
- “³⁰ And the apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) ³² And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. ³³ And the people saw them going, and many recognized them, and they ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and He felt compassion for them because they were **like sheep without a shepherd**; and He began to teach them many things. ³⁵ And when it was already quite late, His disciples came up to Him and began saying, "The place is desolate and it is already quite late; ³⁶ send them away so that they may go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." ³⁷ But He answered and said to them, "You give them something to eat!" And they said to Him, "Shall we go and spend two hundred denarii on bread and give them something to eat?" ³⁸ And He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go look!" And when they found out, they said, "Five and two fish." ³⁹ And **He commanded them all to recline by groups on the green grass.** ⁴⁰ And they reclined in companies of hundreds and of fifties. ⁴¹ And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food and broke the loaves and He kept giving them to the disciples to set before them; and He divided up the two fish among them all. ⁴² **And they all ate and were satisfied.** ⁴³ **And they picked up twelve full baskets of the broken pieces, and also of the fish.** ⁴⁴ And there were five thousand men who ate the loaves.”
- D. The point of the feeding of the 5000 is clarified in the appearance of Jesus walking on the water. (6:45-52) Jesus comforts His people by coming to be with them as a shepherd-host.

“⁴⁵ And immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the multitude away. ⁴⁶ And after bidding them farewell, He departed to the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ And when it was evening, the boat was in the midst of the sea, and He was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ And seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night, He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them. ⁴⁹ But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw Him and were frightened. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, **"Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid."** ⁵¹ And He got into the boat with them, and **the wind stopped**; and they were greatly astonished, ⁵² for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.”

- E. All this goes to say that the message of Psalm 23 is about comfort to God’s people as they face life in a hostile environment. This comfort is offered through “Immanuel” (God with us in the person of Jesus Christ).
- F. For additional examples of application for this Psalm’s message see Numbers 13-14, 22, Judges 6 and II Cor.12:11-18.

The core lessons of Psalm 23

- Note that this Psalm is not about exhorting us to do something but rather it reminds us to see or understand things in a special way.
- Life in a fallen world is characterized by fear - “the valley of the shadow of death” and “wind that is against us.”
- God’s heart is to comfort us and give us courage in life by being with us in the person of Jesus.
- We find comfort and courage as we experience Jesus’ presence “with us” - feeding us, and guiding us.
- Our fears should draw us to Jesus.
- Our feelings are changed as we see and experience Jesus’ presence with us.