

## The Bible in One Year Week 8: Psalm 23 – A Life Without Lack

(Psalm 23; John 10:7-16; Philippians 4:11-13)

### • **“A Prayer Book for Exiles”**

- *“The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 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.”*
- How many of you have Psalm 23 memorized? It’s one of the most well-known and well-loved Scriptures of all time. Many know it, but the truth is, not as many really *live it*. Few experience the *reality* Psalm 23 describes in their daily lives. We’re going to get into that today as we talk through the 6 verses of this amazing prayer.
- You probably know that we’re journeying through the Bible in One Year here at Trinity, and we’ve been mostly focusing on the Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament) to start. We finished Exodus last week and we’re turning aside to look at *the Psalms* today. Next week, we’ll pick up the Torah again with Leviticus. But today, it’s Psalm 23.
- First, let’s look at what the book of Psalms as a whole is about: checkout this 5-minute video from the Bible Project, “The Book of Psalms” <https://youtu.be/dpny22k7uk>
- So, most of the Bible is narrative, or story—“prose” writing. But 30% of the Bible is *poetry* and the biggest book of poetry is *the Psalms*. Like the video said, “*Biblical poetry invites us into an experience, to ponder ideas slowly and from many angles,*” (The Bible Project).
- The book of Psalms is 150 chapters in 5 sections: There are many different types of psalms, but they can be generally broken into two categories: Praise and Lament. Now, it can be tricky to categorize, because many Psalms contain elements of both, but between 40-70% of the Psalms can be considered *Laments*. There’s a lesson here about *how* to process our pain and struggles with God—but that’s another message, let’s keep moving.
- We can understand the book of Psalms as a “Literary Temple,” a “Virtual Tabernacle,” a “Prayer Book for Exiles.” Again, like the video said, “You enter the Psalms to meet with God and to hear the entire story of God’s Kingdom sung back to you in poetry,” (The Bible Project).
- It really is an incredible gift that God’s given us in His Word that we can spend our lives enjoying! Through the ages, the Psalms have been so important to God’s people and they should be an important part of our walk with Jesus, too. That’s why we’ve been praying through the Psalms, one chapter at a time at our Wednesday Night Prayer Services. It has been such a blessing! (And by the way, we happen to be praying through Psalm 23 this Wednesday Night—join us at 7pm online!)

### • **Psalm 23**

- Alright, now that we’ve had a little overview, let’s get into the incredible blessing that is Psalm 23.
- Dallas Willard led a church group through a study on Psalm 23 that was eventually published into a book after his death, and the title he gave to those messages was, *Life Without Lack*. Here’s some of what he said about Psalm 23: “*Many can recite the Twenty-Third Psalm from memory, including people who don’t believe much of anything about God. Some have learned the psalm purely as poetic literature. But far too few have experienced in their own lives the vivid reality described by the psalmist. Unfortunately, ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’ is a sentiment carved on tombstones more often than a reality written in lives. [Psalm 23] describes the life we all desire—a life in which we want for nothing or better yet, lack nothing. The psalmist is portraying a life we were meant to enjoy, one that is imminently available to us. But do you believe [these words are] actually true? Few people act as if they were.*”
- He goes on to give this advice about reading and memorizing Psalm 23 that would be so good for us to follow: “*I encourage you to meditatively read Psalm 23 for ten minutes or so [on a regular basis]. This will help renew your mind by giving the Holy Spirit opportunities to teach you about what it means for the Lord to be your Shepherd. Memorization is an essential element of a life without lack. It is a primary way we fill our minds with the Word of God and have our thoughts formed by God’s thoughts...*”

*Memorization enables us to keep God and his truth constantly before our minds, allowing his Word and wisdom to help us.*” (Life Without Lack, © 2018 Willard Family Trust)

- So, since we’ve already said the Psalms are meant to be *experienced*, I want to give you a few moments to put Dallas’ advice into practice. Before we study Psalm 23, take just five minutes to prayerfully meditate on it. We’re going to put the words on your screen with some quiet music in the background. Pause what you’re doing, eliminate distractions (if you can), and take a few deep breaths. Give your full attention to God, inviting the Holy Spirit to lead.

### **PRAYERFULLY REFLECT ON PSALM 23**

- *The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.* Notice how it all begins, *The LORD is my Shepherd...* Have you ever noticed that in many parts of the Old Testament, it says the “LORD” capital L-O-R-D? Whenever the Bible says “LORD” in all capitals like that, it’s actually the Scriptures’ way of presenting that special name of God, YHWH, as revealed to Moses. Remember, the Israelites were taught to revere God’s Name and never misuse it; so, they had a tradition in reading the Scriptures and eventually in copying them down—whenever they came to God’s special Name, they would say the Hebrew word for “Lord”—*Adonai*—which is why our translations, instead of saying, *YHWH*, say, *The LORD*.
- The more you know this Story of God, the more you’ll realize just how amazing it is that *anyone* could say, *the LORD, YHWH*, is my shepherd. Who is the LORD? He is the Eternal One who created everything from nothing by the power of His Word. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The One who rescued Israel from slavery with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, who led them through the wilderness—like a Shepherd—and gave them a new identity of freedom and holiness. He is the one who made promises through the generations of the coming Messiah. He is the one who *came to us* in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with us, and gave His own life for us, conquering sin and death forever and offering eternal life.
- *That LORD, He is my shepherd.* And if *He* is the one leading me and caring for me, the natural response—the logical conclusion is, *I have everything I need, I lack nothing!*
- Dallas Willard puts it this way, “...*the glorious, eternal, all-sufficient, omnipotent Creator of the universe whose greatness surpasses anything we could imagine. Unlimited in resources, just as he is unlimited in love, he is the Good Shepherd who generously provides for our every need.*” (Life Without Lack)
- And the rest of the Psalm unpacks this one, powerful thought, “*The LORD is my Shepherd...*”
- *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.*
  - What kind of sheep *lies down* in the midst of green pastures? A sheep that is full! Totally satisfied, totally content, totally safe. That sheep can lie down in contentment, beside quiet waters. And there the LORD refreshes and restores our soul: His presence is what *heals us*, even in the deepest places. Do you long for that? It starts with a relationship with the Lord.
- *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.*
  - When we try to find the paths of life on our own, when we let our own instincts and desires guide us, we end up lost—we go searching for life, but we ultimately find just the opposite. Even if we get ourselves lost, though, our Shepherd pursues us—remember, Jesus said that he leaves the 99 to go after the 1!
  - Still, it’s better by far to walk with God, to let God guide us along the right paths, in this world of trackless wilderness. But even when surrender to God, and allow Him to truly lead as our Shepherd, it doesn’t mean we are spared from trouble: along the journey, God’s path can lead us directly into times of trouble, often for reasons we cannot understand. As the Lord led Israel through the wilderness, and as the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tested, sometimes God’s path is not the one that takes us away from trouble, *but leads us into trouble*.
  - And yet, when we know that *the LORD is my Shepherd*, we can live completely free from fear. Why? *For you are with me.* Five of the most powerful words in Scripture: *For you are with me.*

- *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*
  - God gives us the abundance of life, God refreshes our souls, not just to the full, *but to overflow!* We could think about this imagery in terms of “hot showers and warm fluffy towels, things that make us feel clean, comfortable, and special, and how God makes that possible,” (Willard, *Life Without Lack*). Even as we journey through the wild wastelands of life, God leads us to abundant life and gives us the “spa treatment” and a “feast” in the presence of our enemies.
- *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.*
  - Your goodness and love will *pursue me*—everywhere else in the Psalms, the word “pursue” is used to describe the terror of being *pursued* by enemies and troubles that threaten our very lives. But here, the experience of living life with God is described as *being pursued*, followed everywhere by *goodness and love*. Not anxiously looking over your shoulder because you’re afraid of some evil—as we so often do—but looking back in confidence to see the sight of God’s smiling face, guiding you on the path of Life, even into the House of the LORD forever.
  - At the end of the day, Psalm 23 is just describing the *personal experience of living in a covenant relationship with God*.
- Now, in view of all this, I ask you: *what could be better? Could we find anything greater than this?* And here is the best part: if you long for the life described here, you don’t have to strive to earn some special favor with God or fight to gain His attention. *This relationship is granted to me and you as a totally free gift because Jesus, the Son of God, has made it so.*
  - You don’t have to do anything but receive the gift *and go with Him!* If you’ve never experienced the reality of Psalm 23, ask yourself, *Have I ever truly surrendered to the Lord as my Shepherd? Or am I still trying to find the paths of life on my own? Am I trying to be my own Shepherd?* If so, why not begin today? “The LORD is my Shepherd,” can be your prayer, too. It truly can.

- **The Shepherd Boy and The Good Shepherd**

- In *The Bible in One Year Commentary*, Nicky Gumbel shares an amazing story about Psalm 23. Let’s finish with this: *“High on the moors in the Welsh highlands, two ministers met a young shepherd boy who had impaired hearing and was illiterate. They explained that Jesus wanted to be his shepherd, who would always look after him as he, the boy, looked after his sheep. They taught him to repeat the words, ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ using his right hand to help him remember, starting with the thumb and then a finger for each word. They told him to pause at the fourth word ‘my,’ and remember, ‘this psalm was meant for me’. Some years later, one of them was passing through that same village and asked about the shepherd boy. The previous winter there had been terrible storms and the boy had died on the hills, buried in a snowdrift. The villager who was telling the story said, ‘There was one thing, however, that we didn’t understand. When his body was discovered he was holding the fourth finger of his right hand.’*
  - *The...LORD...is...**my**...Shepherd.*
  - The journey we take through this troubled world is full of uncertainty. But for those who walk by God’s grace on the path of Life, *life without lack*, the Way of Jesus we have the *certainty* of God’s presence with us. If I find myself in the valley of the shadow of death, I want to be found clinging desperately to this: the Lord is *my* Shepherd and *I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*—because He is leading me there.
  - Do you want this to? If this is the life we want, then it’s not enough to just turn to these words as an emergency, a last resort—we have to consent to walk with our Shepherd *daily*. And that’s exactly what He wants to do! That’s what Jesus invites us to, and that’s what this big Story of Scripture is all about. Let’s continue to journey, so that we can *live it* together. Amen.