

Meditations on the 23rd Psalm

A Two-Week Devotional

There are few passages of scripture that – if one were stranded or imprisoned without a Bible – potentially provide such a comprehensive description of the character and nature of God, His unconditional love for His chosen ones, and a sustaining source of daily grace from His throne, that one could “survive” spiritually on the passage alone. The 23rd Psalm is not only such a passage, but perhaps the central one meeting this criteria, just as John 3:16 would be perhaps the same thing in a single verse.

I believe that these six verses are perhaps the most powerful statement of the height, breadth, width and depth of the love and grace of God in all of scripture - again, second only to John 3:16.

For many years, in the middle of the night when I could not sleep for one reason or another, I have meditated on the 23rd Psalm. Occasionally in those meditations, God has opened my eyes and heart to wonderful truths in these verses that continue to bless me, help me, and encourage me over much of my Christian life.

In what follows I hope to simply provide some devotional thoughts from my meditations on the Psalm that will bless the reader and draw him or her to their Lord, Master, Savior, and Lover. May the Holy Spirit help the writer in this effort, for without His leading, inspiration and anointing, we can do nothing.

Introduction

This wonderful psalm – the favorite Bible passage for millions - is the revelation of God as given to one very unique man – King David of Israel. I believe that these revelations were given not when David was king, but long before, even in David’s youth.

God took great care to prepare David for his unique calling. I am not speaking of his calling to be king of Israel, but rather his calling to be one of the leading types of Christ in all of the Old Testament. The life of David as recorded in the Bible is unique in so many ways, that we could spend many pages on this single subject. But if we were to select only one thing that separated David from others, I believe that it would be God’s own testimony of him through Samuel the prophet: “The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after his own heart.” (I Sam. 13:14).

David’s whole life from youth until his death is one of the most powerful statements of a man who knew God’s love for him and thus loved God passionately in return. He was not sinless, but a fallen creature, dust like the rest of us. But He knew God’s heart, and reflected that in almost all of his life. The scripture has used this life to show God to millions both before the coming of Messiah and since, perhaps more than any other life in the Bible.

What was God’s means of preparing David for his great knowledge of the living God? It was not in palaces or in a home of privilege, but rather the lowly and often lonely life of a shepherd of sheep. As the youngest son in the family, the lowliest duties fell to him, and it appears that he accepted these responsibilities with faithfulness and a heart to know God.

It was alone with the sheep that David had hours to meditate on who God was, and most likely meditate on memorized passages from his Hebrew Torah and tradition. He clearly sought God, and God was pleased to answer David's seeking with a deep knowledge of Himself.

It was as a shepherd that David learned to care for the sheep, and seek green pasture for them. It was as a shepherd that David sought protection for them from their enemies. It was there that wholly trusting in God he took on the bear and the lion by himself. It was preparation like this that qualified him to confront and defeat Goliath, long before he was even a man. It was his unique preparation as a lowly shepherd that qualified David alone to be both able and willing to defeat "the enemy of Israel" in the Goliath.

I believe that all the truths in this wonderful psalm came out of David's youth as a shepherd of the family sheep. He learned things about "The Great Shepherd", His great love, His mercy, His faithfulness, His protection – and so much more – all in the days of his youth. And all this preparation, beyond our comprehension and only known to God Himself – prepared him to be able to give us this incredible 23rd Psalm. I pray that we may be as blessed as David was with the revelation of who God is in the words of this psalm.

Day 1 – "The Lord is my shepherd . . ." Verse 1a

"The Lord ..." David begins where everything begins - with the Lord, not with us. He is the origin of everything, The Source, The Originator, The Creator. "I am the Alpha" Rev. 1:8. I am the First . . . " Rev. 1:17. And He is the Omega, the Last. He is really "all-in-all", but it takes a lifetime to learn that. Since Adam's decision to be independent of God, we are by nature egocentric, which is a tragic state of self-deception. We all are by nature self-centered, and each of us – until brought into His grace – is the center of our own universe.

So the first two words of this Psalm call us to reality - the true center of the universe – the Lord. The Almighty. God. All things begin with Him, and only in seeing Him as the center of everything is for man the beginning of all wisdom and understanding.

"The Lord IS . . ." Hebrews tells that "he who comes to God must believe that He is . . . "(11:6), and the "sweet" Psalmist David begins stating the reality that the first thing that leads us to a living relationship with Him – believing that "He is."

"my shepherd . . ."

The second thing that the Holy Spirit reveals in this Psalm is a declaration of God's pure grace and infinite love in the character of a shepherd. Peter calls the Lord Jesus "The Great Shepherd."

This description of God states that I have a special relationship with the Him that has nothing to do with my actions, my deeds, my successes or failures, my sins, or my condition. It is not a result of what I am – a sheep – but of Who He is – The Shepherd. His nature is that of a shepherd.

It is quite amazing that the next three words tell us that the One who created all would humble Himself to the lowliest of servitudes – a shepherd of the weakest and most helpless of animals, sheep. But Isaiah long ago told us, *“For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.”* (Is. 57:15). This is His nature. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords - is a shepherd. To the Egyptians – and probably most of the world in earlier times – a shepherd was a reviled and lowly occupation.

How profound is this truth, that He who is above all takes the lowly place of being a shepherd – and that of shepherding we who are “yet sinners”, and we who are truly like sheep in all that we are.

A shepherd is responsible for the lives and welfare of His sheep, as they cannot care for themselves. *He cares.* This Shepherd cares infinitely and perfectly, like no other. Every earthly shepherd – the very best of the best – is only an earthly example given us to understand the perfect Shepherd – the one Shepherd who is truly “good”.

We only need to look to John 10 for the description – in the words of our Lord Jesus – of the many traits of the “Good Shepherd”: He “enters by the door.” He does not force Himself upon us, but waits until we, from the inside, open the door. He only comes by the legitimate entrance. He “calls his own by name.” He “leads them out.” “The sheep follow him because they know his voice.” “I know my own.” And so on.

Of course, the greatest of these statements in John 10 is this: **I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.**

This shepherd so loves His sheep, that He is willing to lay down His life for them. *“Greater love hath no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”* (John 15:13).

Only the weak need a shepherd. The strong do not. Only the weak need guidance, feeding, love, comfort, protection. We are the weakest of the weak, but He is the greatest of Shepherds.

Like David before he was king, the shepherd takes on the lion and the bear that threaten His sheep – with His bare hands. The Psalm tells us more about that later.

The Christian life is not one of growing stronger and stronger, but of, in a sense, becoming weaker and weaker. Actually, our weakness does not increase, but only our awareness of it. Only when fully aware of our utter and total weakness – our inability to do *anything* of any value – apart from Christ – can we exchange our weakness for His strength. Paul knew this.

“And He has said to me, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”** Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” II Corin. 12:9.

Only sheep need a shepherd. Cattle do not. Horses don't. Goats certainly don't. Oh, how long does it take us to learn this – that we *need* a shepherd? We need all that a shepherd provides – much more than the lowly sheep.

“The Lord is MY shepherd”

Here again, the relationship between me and the Shepherd is personal. It is intimate. The Psalmist does not say, “*our*” shepherd, but “*my*”. It is not that David thinks that he possesses the shepherd, but rather the clear declaration that he – the sheep – is the possession of the shepherd. “I am my beloved’s” says Solomon, “and He is mine.”

Again, the declaration here is that my relationship with the shepherd – the Lord – has nothing to do with any action, or lack thereof, of mine. He, solely by His doing, has made Himself to be my shepherd. It is all amazing grace.

Day 2 – “I shall not want . . .” Verse 1b

Whenever we see an absolute statement in scripture, we need to “Selah” – we need to stop, pause, and meditate on all the implications of this statement – it’s “height, depth, breadth, and width.” It is four-dimensional – (Eph. 3:18). Like every “all”, or “every” in God’s word, it calls us to search out dimensions that are hidden from a cursory glance. Only by “revelation” and much experience with the Lord do we come to see the dimensions of this statement.

Early on, we many times question and challenge it. “I shall not *want*” ???????? I won’t lack *anything?!?!?* Certainly this is absurd! Did not Paul said, “*To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless;*” in I Corin. 4:11? And what about II Corin. 4:8 – 10, 6:4 & 5, 11:23 – 27?

Are not our experiences like Paul’s, though much lesser in degree?

Oh, but God is telling us here – again – that which is so hard to believe, and takes many years to discover – that indeed, He will meet all of our true, deep needs. The real ones, that is. Nor our wants, though that is the very word here.

I’ll never forget the most profound thing I have ever seen on television. It was during the genocide in Rwanda, and the video was captured of a woman in a refugee camp who had fled the killing in Rwanda. It was a camp of tens of thousands, and she was sitting in an open field, in the pouring rain – without food, shelter, or the most basic of needs. I think she had a child with her.

In this camp, one network – contrary to all that is politically-correct – showed and recorded for us all to see, this destitute woman reading – yes, reading – the 23rd Psalm out loud. The network may have meant the scene to mock this wonderful passage, I don’t know.

But before the whole world, here sat this one woman, and all she had was her Bible. And in desperate destitution, she clearly comforted herself with *truth* – *THE* truth. The truth that overrides and overcomes all external difficulties and impossibilities: “I shall not want.”

When all around her – and I’m certain all inside her as well – shouted the greatest of needs – she rested her faith in *TRUTH. Eternal* truth.

Oh, what a lesson for those of us in the most rich of all nations – the most spoiled of peoples. “I shall not want.” How timely is this word in light of the current financial collapse all around us. I truly believe that in the soon coming days of our future, we may have to learn the truth of these words as never before in our lives.

It is true beyond our wildest imagination, but contrary to our experience - we think. The same Paul who wrote those passages in I and II Corinthians also wrote Philippians 4:19: “And my God shall supply ALL your needs *according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*”

Oh, how we can take this very first line in this Psalm, and use it to lay our head on Jesus breast like John did. We can, in the midst of every circumstance that shouts to us the greatness of our (apparent, external) need, declare to those shouts, “I shall not want.”, knowing that these words contain the greater truth. We can make them our words, our own possession.

And find the greatest comforts in them, because they were really written and given us not by David, but by the One he knew to be his Shepherd – our wonderful Lord Jesus.

Is there a believer who does not have these first nine words of this Psalm memorized? Written eternally on his or her heart? We even knew these words before we knew Him, most likely. How comforting even that He would see that these words are sealed within us – virtually all of us in the western world – for our rest.

May we repeatedly and always meditate on them, and taste of the fruit of the truth within.

Day 3 – “He makes me lie down in green pastures” Verse 2a

“**He makes . . .**” Again, please note Who is the initiator. It is not me, it is God. In the first three verses of this Psalm, there are six statements. Five of the six start with God, and show Him as the One Who acts, the One Who changes the status quo, the One Who changes us.

He makes me do that which I will not do myself. I am nervous, fretful, worrisome. I run to and fro desperately trying to get my needs met. My search is ceaseless, as unrelenting as the blood that pulses through my veins. But all my searches are in vain.

So, in spite of me, along comes this great and wonderful Shepherd, and He makes me do something I cannot do.

He makes me lie down. “Be still and know that I am God.”

A sheep will lie down – in a verdant, full, lush, green pasture – only when it has eaten to its fill. When it is so sated, so satisfied, that it no longer is driven to walk, search, for its food, or even stand to eat it – it will lie down.

He makes me lie down because He alone satisfies me. As He said in John 6, his flesh is *true* food, John 6:55. He *alone* can satisfy, for He Himself is our greatest need, and at the same time, the great satisfier of our need.

He Himself is that green pasture – the food that is the “bread of life”.

Until I learn to feed on Him – daily – moment-by-moment – continually – I will never know the satisfaction that allows me to “lie down”. I will ever be restless, until I let Him “make me lie down” in the lush food of Himself and His unconditional, never-changing love.

But once I learn the secret of abiding (see John 15), the secret of trusting wholly and only in Himself and in the absolute completeness of His blood sacrifice on Calvary, can I lay down.

And when I lay down, even then am I surrounded – even enveloped – by His all-sufficiency. He Himself is my green pasture. I am surrounded – as far as my eye can see – with more to meet my needs that I could ever imagine – or consume. And in feeding on Him, I lay down and rest in Him, fully satisfied with Him. For He *alone* can satisfy.

Day 4 – “He leads me beside still waters” – Verse 2b

Our most basic of physical needs are food and water. In John 4, our Lord told the Samaritan woman that she had a thirst greater than that for physical water. It was a thirst for Him. He told her that He was the water that one can drink and “never thirst again” (verse 14).

I hear that a sheep will not drink from noisy, fast-running streams – they are too fearful. Here is not the rushing water of a creek or river, but the placid water of a pond or still lake.

How is it that He can lead me by the only waters that I feel safe to drink – and I do not drink?

As in being sated with His goodness, I have no hunger for “green pastures” or physical food, my thirst is so satisfied by Him that even by still, totally secure and safe waters, I have no interest in stopping to drink. . . so I willingly let Him lead me on by.

In John 4:14, Jesus told the woman at the well “**but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.**”

Note our Lord's words, "shall never thirst." This is the sheep of the Good Shepherd being led by still waters. Even the most delicious of natural waters do not tempt His sheep to drink or distract them from being led by Him because His sheep know the satisfaction of drinking of Him.

Our nature is to let our needs drive us in our actions. How much of our life is spent getting our physical needs met? But our Lord tells us,

"For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, *as to* what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, *as to* what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and *yet* your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a *single* hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these."

"But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will He* not much more *clothe* you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

As I "seek first the kingdom of God", the Good Shepherd promises that He will take care of my physical needs.

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." And "And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Phil 4:6,7, 19.

While "the Gentiles" (unbelievers, who do not know the Good Shepherd) live their lives driven to get their physical, mental and emotional needs met – always ultimately unsuccessfully – we who have the Lord as our shepherd can simply lay our head on His breast – and rest.

Day 5 - "He restores my soul . . . " – Verse 3a

If one is attempting to probe the depths of this wonderful Psalm, one must notice a remarkable shift of focus in these four words. The first two verses clearly *seem* to be referring to our physical needs.

But in the third verse, there is a quantum leap from the outward, physical and external world to a wholly different realm – that of the soul. We are forced to ask the question, why this notable change of subject, this change of focus?

There is a second major point to be noted in these four words: Something needs to be restored. Something is broken, something is wrong that needs to be fixed, repaired, restored. What is it that is broken, needing restoration? The psalm says it is our soul.

I understand that in Hebrew, the words for “soul” and “spirit” are interchangeable. The Hebrew word here is “nephish” and the same word used in Genesis 2:7, and closely related to the words “breath” and “breathed” in the same verse.

What differentiated man from all the rest of God’s creation is that God breathed into him His own life, His own spirit (“God is spirit”). But when Adam and Eve chose their own path in rebellion and independence from God, that spiritual life within them died. Their spiritual connection to their Creator was severed, and death was the result. Physical death was not the immediate result, but spiritual death was; and sin, sickness and enmity between man and God followed.

Could it be that our real needs are not the outward, external and physical? Could it be that our real needs are in the spiritual realm? The words of our Lord Jesus that we just listed from Matthew certainly point us in that direction, “seek first His kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Man’s real need is not food and water. His real need is spiritual - a restoration of his relationship with God. But we are helpless to restore that relationship. The whole history of religion is that of man attempting to restore his relationship with God through his own efforts, and all of history is proof that religion cannot bring such a restoration.

Only God can do the restoring Himself – totally apart from any effort of man. It does not say, “I restored my soul.” It says, “**HE** restores my soul.” He does what I cannot do. He initiates. He acts. He gave His beloved Son to shed His blood on the cross of Calvary to once and for all time restore my relationship with Him. I simply receive – by faith. It is all grace – all God. How we are deceived and robbed to think that our spiritual restoration is our responsibility. We don’t understand our helplessness, and God’s sovereign grace. But David did. He knew that it was God, and God alone who restores his soul – his relationship with God.

Here I would like to include a quote from Robert Farrar Capon in [*Kingdom, Grace and Judgment*](#) that Wayne Jacobsen posted on his website (www.lifestream.org):

“Christianity is not a religion’ it is the announcement of the end of religion. Religion consists of all the things (believing, behaving, worshipping, sacrificing) the human race has ever thought it had to do to get right with God. About those things, Christianity has only two comments to make. The first is that none of them ever had the least chance of doing the trick: the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sins (see the Epistle of Hebrews) and no effort of ours to keep the law of God can ever succeed (see the Epistle of Romans). The second is that everything religion tried (and failed) to do has been perfectly done, once and for all, by Jesus in his death and resurrection. For Christians, then, the entire religion shop has been closed, boarded up and forgotten. The church is not in the religion business. It never has been and it never will be, in spite of all the ecclesiastical turkeys through two thousand years who have acted as if religion was their stock in trade. The church, instead, is in the Gospel-proclaiming business. It is not here to bring the world the bad news that God will think kindly about us only after we have gone

through certain creedal, liturgical, and ethical wickets; it is here to bring the world the Good News that ‘while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.’ It is here, *in short, for no religious purpose at all, only to announce the Gospel of free grace.*”

Can there be any better news that God, wholly apart from me, my failures, my sins, my past – restores my soul, my spirit, into its proper relationship with Him, that I may have fellowship with Him and experience His love forever?

Day 6 - “He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake” – Verse 3b

Not only does God restore me to my proper relationship with Himself, He wants to maintain that relationship forever. So not only does He restore my soul, He then *guides* me.

This only follows naturally because HE IS my shepherd. “He makes me....” “He leads me....” “He restores....” “He guides....” Oh, beloved child of God – please see how everything is His action, His initiative, His doing, His grace!

Because He is holy and righteous, and He wants my continued fellowship and communion, He now takes the responsibility of guiding me “in paths of righteousness.” He gives fully and freely of His Holy Spirit who now lives inside me to guide me “into all truth”.

All of man’s religion only guides man externally. It guides with external commands and direction. And while these external commands restrain, limit and restrict man’s natural lawlessness – the natural result of the soul independent from God – they do nothing to bring man into a relationship with God.

David is repeatedly found doing something more than any other person in the Bible. It is a significant mark of his character, his heart, and his understanding of the access that he had to God’s heart. All through David’s life, it is recorded that, “David inquired of the Lord.” David first wanted to know what God’s will was – and so he asked God directly. He knew that “if any man is willing to do His will, He shall know . . .” (John)

God always heard David’s cry, his heart, and revealed his will to him – except perhaps in his prayers for the life of his first son with Bathsheba. David knew that God loves to guide us, if we will but seek His face and inquire of him. David knew that God’s will was always in his best interests, and that God only wanted to bless him in every way. I think this is one of the secrets to David’s intimacy with the Lord – he always wanted to know God’s heart.

David also knew that a major work of God’s restoration has to do with restoring righteousness in fallen man who lost all righteousness. As He is righteous, he restores to us righteousness. Is it ours? No, He gives us Himself.

“Jehovah Tsidkenu – The Lord our Righteousness.” - Jer. 23:6

“I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”
Isaiah 61:10

“He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” II Corin 5:21

So God not only restores, but then he maintains what He has restored. Now the commands are not external, but in the heart – a heart now aligned with God’s heart. His Holy Spirit guides us in all things if we will but listen to His usually still, small voice. We are new creatures, now in harmony with God, and both willing and able to follow His leading.

And the Psalmist then tells us *WHY* God so guides us – it is for His name’s sake.

Does this mean that God is concerned only to protect His name? I think not. His name is continually dishonored and denigrated by man, especially man claiming to represent Him. It will be that way “until He comes.”

But in the midst of all that contradicts who He is and what He is like, He will have those who truly represent His character and nature – light in the midst of darkness. He has those in the world whom He has restored, and whom He guides in righteousness, to display His love, His grace, His mercy and kindness to all. They are His sheep. And they are like Him. They are righteous, they are displays of His love, His grace, His mercy. “For His name’s sake.”

Day 7 - “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me;” – Verse 4a

Again, the Psalmist takes a sharp turn in his declarations. He begins the psalm declaring who the good Shepherd is, and what He does. He begins with physical imagery, then turns to the spiritual realm of restoration of a relationship and walk with God, and His work of becoming our righteousness.

We wonder why he would now turn to thoughts of such darkness as thinking of “the valley of the shadow of death”. But is this really such a surprise turn? Or is it to be expected? I would suggest that it is to be expected.

Once we have been restored to a relationship with God, we are no longer a slave of God’s enemy. We have been translated from one kingdom to another. When we were slaves of God’s enemy, we were enemies of God. Yet He loved us, and gave His son for us. He sought us, pursued us until he captured us for Himself.

So now we are the friends of God, and enemies of His enemy. Is it not only natural that His enemy would now pursue us? If we are now being “guided in paths of righteousness”, should we not expect all the powers of hell to try to deter us from that path?

A valley is a low place. Every life will have its low places, where the mountains on all sides seem not only insurmountable, but fully occupied with our enemies. We will at times feel that “the shadow of death” from the mountain walls around us will be our end.

But is it not only to be expected that our Good Shepherd would want to prove to us – in our experience – His faithfulness, love, and goodness? How could He do so in any greater way than

to allow us to “walk” through His enemy’s territory? And to allow us to go – not untouched (think of Job, think of Paul) – but unharmed – and blessed? And to give us a promise to hold tightly to our breast when all around us is screaming that we will “die.”

As we walk now in paths of righteousness, battle, war, and the threat of death are inevitable – to one degree or another. But as we face this threat – which is really a lie – we are given this incredible assurance: “I will fear no evil.”

Margaret Manning, with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, has noted that the command, “Do not fear” is the most repeated command in all of the Bible and is found 366 times - one for every day of the year and for Leap Year. Jill Carattini, managing editor of the daily “A Slice of Infinity” also with Ravi Zacharias, recently wrote:

Throughout Scripture the divine vow "I am with you" is made with sovereign confidence and in stirring circumstance. Speaking into the fears of exile, God told the prophet Isaiah, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west" (43:5). The apostle Paul who was struggling with uncertainty and weakness was encouraged in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10).

And Jesus even as he anticipated the nearing Cross gave his closest followers a promise that remains comforting today: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

The promise of God’s nearness is one that Christians rightfully utter as encouragement and cling to in joy, in fear, and in sorrow, knowing the character of the one who is near. For when God promises his presence in Scripture it is more than just a promise of proximity and intimacy. There is a purpose for God’s nearness, a specific reason for the vow of a relationship. God’s presence is not empty or superficial, putting on humanity itself to draw intimately near us. As the Father reminded the prophet Jeremiah so God assures us, the promise of proximity is more profound than we can fathom: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...Do not be afraid...for I am with you to deliver you" (1:5-7).

There is indeed a throne. And God is not only on it; God is near, God is good, and we need not be afraid.

At this point, it would be easy to attempt a long discourse on fear as discussed all through the scripture, we will avoid that temptation, but address just a few points. Looking back on our lives, we all can see that the vast majority of our fears were never realized. They were imaginations and expectations that never materialized. And yet, at the time, they were real and gripping. In actuality, most of them were lies – from the father of lies. How do we resist and not succumb to such lies, which at times circumstances will convince us are real?

For David, we know that he had to face fear when he took on the lion and bear that were after his sheep. Whatever his fear was, his confidence and trust in God was greater. He “tested” God in a good way, and took on the lion and bear – and found that God indeed was His protector. He

proved God's faithfulness and love, and could trust Him even more in more difficult days in the future because He had seen and experienced God's faithfulness in the past.

Cannot we as well look back on our lives, and say with confidence that He has seen us through every valley of the past with His faithfulness?

Day 8 - "For You are with me."

As Carattini and David the psalmist make clear, there is a strong and very simple reason that we should not fear. **God** is at our side. Can anything threaten Him, or the object of His love? Of course not. Paul declares to us in Romans 8:35 – 39:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is not promised to us that we will not have to walk "through the valley of the shadow of death" (please note – it is *not* the 'valley of death', but only the 'valley of the shadow' – a shadow is not the reality, only an image). It is not guaranteed that there will be no suffering in our lives, or "tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword."

It is guaranteed that none of these things will in any way separate us from God's nearness – that God will be closely next to us, providing grace upon grace, peace, and strength – for He is also in us.

And as importantly, we are promised that whatever negatives that our sovereign God allows into our lives, He will turn all of these for our own good, and the good of others who are His. Rom. 8:28, 29. For additional and perhaps new light in understanding the depths of this favorite verse, I would encourage the reader to read "The Shack" by W.Paul Young – with the qualification that it is not a theological work without its problems, but it is a fresh and eye-opening look at the nearness of God, the greatness of His love, and His redemption of all that happens in our lives.

This promise, "For You are with me" is actually found throughout scripture, and were even the Lord's last words to His own in Matthew's gospel – "for lo! I am with you always!"

Day 9 - "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Verse 4b

Once again, the psalmist takes a turn that must be a surprise to the meditative reader of the psalm. Our familiarity with the psalm will hide from us that which otherwise would cause us to pause and wonder.

Why would David jump from pointing out that fear is quenched by the nearness of God in the darkest of times, and then bring up God's rod, and staff?

Of course, the rod is throughout scripture they symbol of authority and discipline. The staff is similarly so but with the added element of adjusting/correcting the direction or path of the subject. Why are these in reality to be expected, and not a surprise?

With God's great love and nearness, even with His divine protection, it only follows that we as His children will need His loving discipline to grow in our knowledge of Him. Hebrews 12:5 – 11 is familiar to most of us:

"MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, so that we may share His holiness.

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

Clearly we see three simple truths: Love has to discipline. Discipline is for our good. And the fruit of loving discipline is holiness and righteousness.

How is it that David says that he receives comfort from God's discipline? David knew in his heart that God's love was not a question, and that love required discipline. As David was likely a father with his own sons at this time, he would know both from his experience as a son of Jesse and as a father that love always disciplined.

His wisdom in understanding the fruit of discipline gave David the insight to actually be comforted by God's discipline. He knew that it was for his good, and could embrace God's discipline willingly.

The staff is different from the rod. While the rod inflicts discomfort, the staff has one purpose: to draw the sheep that is straying – and headed away from the shepherd, back toward the shepherd. It is to stop the sheep from running away from the shepherd, and bring it close.

What comfort is this thought! When we want to run from God, He will often stop us in our tracks and draw us to Himself. What love! It is always God seeking us first.

A wise, deep man of God in his sixties who mentored me when I was in my twenties once asked me what was really occurring whenever I began to seek God. I didn't understand his question. I was seeking God – and that's all there was to it. He told me, "No." "The scripture clearly says, 'There are none righteous, no, not one. There is none who seeks God.'" (Rom. 3:10, 11) "There is nothing in you to seek God – except for the Holy Spirit. So if you seek God, it is because the spirit within you is stirring you to seek God – and therefore it is actually God who has sought you, and stirred your heart to seek Him. It is really God seeking you first, stirring you toward Himself." He then noted that whenever we are stirred to seek God, we should be greatly encouraged – realizing that in reality, it is He seeking us. What joy this truth has brought to me through my life whenever I find myself seeking His face. He, in His infinite love, has reached out with His staff, caught my stiff neck, and gently drawn me to Himself.

Oh, that we, like David, could understand the love and wisdom of God when His rod and staff appear in our lives, and that we could be comforted as David was. Such an attitude will usually work to hasten the end of the discipline, a shortening of the time of "the rod" and from it bring much fruit in our walk and relationship with the Lord. And when the staff around our neck leads us to seek Him, we will humbly and joyfully will turn to Him and pray as Samuel, "Speak Lord – your servant heareth."

Day 10 - "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;" Verse 5a

This is actually one of my favorite parts of the 23rd Psalm, for my mind's eye opens wide to an incredible scene demonstrating both God's intimate love and sovereign protection. One night many years ago when I was going through a very difficult time, and could not sleep, this vision came to me as I meditated on this verse and the vision has never left me.

Throughout the scripture, to sit at meal with another is a demonstration of intimate fellowship and communion. It is a family scene, where everyone present can relax and be themselves, with no fear of evil. The Passover was celebrated with the Seder meal. The Lord began the practice of His Table during the last hours on earth with his most intimate friends, and clearly spoke through both the gospels and Paul that it was to be a frequent practice of love and intimacy amongst His own "until He comes."

The first thing to notice here is who is doing the preparation. As in the whole life of our Lord Jesus, it again is the Lord who is doing the preparation. Our part is only to receive from Him. The work is wholly His, and the word 'preparation' speaks of a labor of love, taking much time, energy, commitment, and cost. As from the 2nd verse of this psalm, all the work is on God's part. I am but a receiver of His work, His labor of love, His paying all of the cost. The banquet is "spread" (KJV) before me because He is lavish in His love. The feast is far above and beyond "all I could ask or think," as it is a demonstration of love and grace.

But then, we have to take note of the setting of this lavish banquet that God has prepared and set before me.

It appears to not be set in His house, but rather looks to be spread in the very midst of a great battlefield! All around me, as I sit to feast, are all of my enemies, who only want to destroy me!

They hate me with a hatred only exceeded in magnitude by the love of the One who gave His life for me! And it is here that He spreads my banquet before me! Why?

When we become God's possession, we become the enemies of His enemies. The evil one and his minions wish to destroy us, for we are now His. They cannot touch Him, but if they can touch us, they touch Him in a secondary way. Thus, we are at war from the day of our salvation. We are in a fierce battle that really has nothing to do with us. It has all to do with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Of course, the good news is that we know who wins. Or, we should say, more accurately, Who has already won. The battle was won at Calvary, and like the Japanese isolated on isolated islands that continued to fight to the death after WWII was over, we are in battles only for a short time – until He comes.

But the good news is even greater than this. His victory is so great, so complete, and His loving protection of so total, that He sets before us this table of communion with Himself in the very middle of the battlefield! How could this be?

What I saw in the vision in the night was the luxurious table of the Lord spread before me – and an invisible “Star Wars” type force-field around the table that completely protected me from all the weapons and assaults of my enemies. Nothing could touch me. While my enemies were only a few feet away from me, fully armed, screaming and shouting with rage and hatred, and firing their horrible weapons at me – all of their weapons and attacks would bounce harmlessly off the invisible shield.

But it was even better than that. The invisible shield that protected me from my many enemies not only safely separated me from them and their weapons – the shield totally kept all of the sounds of their hatred and rage from my ears. Inside the shield, was total silence – and peace.

I felt that the Lord bid me to enjoy my fellowship with Him, and to ignore the battle and rage all about me, for me to simply enjoy being with Him, and eating of the sweet delicacies that He had prepared for me.

It seemed to me that he had set this table of fellowship, love and communion in the presence of my enemies for two reasons. The first reason was to demonstrate to me how great His love for me was, and how total His protection was of one who was His. The second was to visibly demonstrate that love and protection *to His enemies*, as if to taunt them and demonstrate that in spite of all their rage, hatred, war and weapons – they were incapable of touching me.

Oh, the peace and joy that this sight brought me! How great is His love; how great is His protection of those He loves! How we should rest in this sight – His preparing a table before us in the very presence of His enemies.

Day 11 - “You have anointed my head with oil . . .” Verse 5b

For the Hebrew, the anointing of the head with oil had deep historical meaning. God told Moses to separate his brother Aaron to be the High Priest of Israel. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and come into the very presence of God. But he had to be first

set apart – set aside, declared special and for one purpose – to be the only priest representing all the people before God.

One of the most important parts of the separation and preparation of the High Priest was the pouring of anointing oil over his head. The oil symbolized several things – the Holy Spirit coming upon the one man chosen to represent Israel before God, and his being selected to represent others before God. (Exodus 29:7)

While the anointing of the head of a guest at a meal was a common practice for those in the middle East, for Israel it symbolized the following: selection by God and separation for God; divine authority; and position before God as a representative of others.

Later, when Israel demanded to have a king “as the other nations”, God gave them Saul. Samuel was commanded by God to anoint him with oil, not as a priest to represent the people, but as a king, a God-chosen authority over them (I Sam. 10:1). It also symbolized that the Holy Spirit would uniquely come upon him to enable him to lead God’s people (I Sam. 10:6). Later, when Saul was rejected by God as king for his disobedience, and the Holy Spirit removed from him, God told Samuel to anoint David as king (I Sam. 16:13). Here, the anointing oil being poured over the head indicated both the authority of God and the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

After the Lord’s ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the anointing is no longer limited to a single, unique, selected individual. The anointing of the Holy Spirit is upon all of God’s people.

In I John 3:27, we are given new light in understanding that the anointing of the Holy Spirit, now on all believers, “teaches you about all things.”

While it is a fact that David was anointed with oil on his head when Samuel was told to anoint him as king in place of Saul, I personally think that David’s thought here in Psalm 23 is beyond that initial anointing that he received from Samuel when he was a young man. David seems to be indicating that now that his experience of being anointed with the Holy Spirit – God’s very presence – is no longer just an event of the past, but now is a daily, continuing experience.

He has found that because the Lord is his shepherd, the Lord continually anoints him with His presence, His authority, His nearness, and His wisdom and teaching. It is clear to us from all of his psalms that David had an intimate and personal relationship quite unlike that of perhaps any other saint under the Old Covenant.

What incredible and wonderful news it is for us today that this same anointing that was upon David is now available to each of us, every day, every minute.

What can be our response to this glorious truth?

Day 12 - “My cup overflows . . .” Verse 5c

Overwhelming abundance. Blessing beyond comprehension. “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). What more is there to say?

I love the version that I sometimes heard from saints years ago when I would ask how they are: “My cup runneth over and is sloshing in the saucer!”

David knew the overflowing love of God, and His “beyond imagination” blessing.

While our daily experience may not tell us this, the Word of God is clear. We are blessed by God beyond comprehension. Every blessing that our Lord Jesus has as the Son of God, the Lamb of God, the crucified One – has been passed on to us as we are now “in Him.” Our cup is overflowing. There are times that we experience this, there are times that we do not. But the fact remains regardless. We are blessed beyond comprehension, for “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND *which* HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.” (1 Corin. 2:9)

All of the riches and treasures in Christ are revealed to us in the Word of God, and “through His spirit”, if we will but avail ourselves of His promises. He bids us to come, and partake of them daily.

Day 13 - “Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life. “ Verse 6a

This wonderful psalm begins with a powerful but very simple statement. The statement is not about anything that God has done for David, those follow later. David’s opening declaration is one of WHO God is. It is a statement describing His being, His nature, His character. He is a shepherd. He is *his* shepherd.

For us to understand something of what God’s shepherd heart is, we only need to read the statements of our Lord Jesus in John 10 that we addressed in the beginning of this little article.

Here at the end of the psalm, David returns to describing the character of his shepherd. But here he does so detailing what will happen in his life in the future.

He declares that there will be two evidences of the nature of the shepherd that will be statements of who God is, and that they will be evidenced only by looking at one thing – what follows the days of David’s life.

Why does David refer to what is going to follow? I think for several reasons. One is that I believe David penned these words in his youth, and he is writing looking ahead....”will follow me”. He was looking into the future, but doing so knowing what would occur.

I believe that hidden in these words is an assumption: David knew he was a fallen creature, not without sin. He knew his frame, that he was “but dust”. He knew his own heart. He knew that somewhere, sometime in his life, he would fail God. It was inevitable.

Of course, he didn’t know what his failures would be – adultery, murder, direct disobedience to God in numbering the people that would result in the deaths of many others – but he knew that there would be moral failure in his life.

As a Hebrew well-versed in the Mosaic law, we would expect David to tell us of how God’s judgment would *inevitably follow his great failures and sin*. And in a limited way, it did. His

son of adultery with Bathsheba was not healed, and after he numbered the people of Israel, a pestilence was the result. But David's words in confessing his sin were, "I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great . . ."

Instead of focusing on the negative results of his sin, David confidently looks forward to his future for one reason: He knew that his failures, his sins, his falling – no matter how great – ***would not be followed by the harsh judgment of a severe God, but rather would be followed by only lovingkindness and mercy – the unconditional love of a God who did not overlook David's sins, but had made full provision for them that David might be the recipient of grace.***

What is lovingkindness for the Hebrew? I believe the Old Testament uses this word just as the New Testament uses the word "grace." The word lovingkindness is found 121 times in the Psalms alone, and in every one of the 26 verses of Psalm 126.

What is mercy? A frequent good definition of mercy and grace is that mercy is that we do not receive what we do deserve (judgment), and grace is that we do receive what we don't deserve (all the blessings that are in Christ). Mercy is that we do not receive God's judgment when we fully qualify for it!

David knew that mercy would follow his sins and failure! I believe he could do this as he knew the significance of the blood sacrifice that a regular reality of the Hebrew life in Israel.

How much more than David should we, who know the complete sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the cross, and the efficacy of His shed blood, be confident that every day of our lives – our whole future - will be followed with both the lovingkindness and mercy of the Lord!

How this delivers us from a fear of the future, and enables us to look to our days ahead with expectancy, hope, and even joy.

Day 14 - "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." - Verse 6b

As someone long ago said, "Beginnings" are always significant; and "Endings" are always significant. Both should always be noted with special attention given.

David begins this psalm with simply declaring WHO the Lord is: "my shepherd".

He ends this incredible, intimate, and very personal psalm with a profound thought that is easy to miss.

Remember that David was a man "after God's own heart." In God's heart, we see His longing to have a dwelling place with man. It began in setting apart for Himself a people – the Hebrews. He then gave them a place where His presence could dwell in their midst – the Tabernacle. It was a tent, because His people lived in tents and were mobile until He brought them home to the promised land.

Remember that David penned almost these identical words in Psalm 27: 4 - 6, where we find a more complete perspective on their meaning,

One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD And to meditate in His temple.

For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; In the secret place of His tent He will hide me; He will lift me up on a rock.

And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me, And I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD.

David could have asked God for many things, but only one thing was his passion: to dwell in God's house. And here he tells us why. It is in God's house where David can see, behold, and meditate "on the beauty of the Lord"! David's greatest longing was to see the Lord, face-to-face!

The apostle Paul had the same heart, as he wrote in Philippians 3 (near the end of his life), "that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."

Both men had the same heart – a heart after God's own heart.

David also knew that in God's presence, in His house, was perfect protection "from my enemies" as in verse 4 of his 23rd psalm.

And he knew that the primary activity in God's house was one thing: worship. David was above all things a man who loved God. Thus, his favorite activity was worship – all of his psalms attest to this – as he does here in the 27th:

I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord!

David was a worshipper. And one aspect of worship is joy. Do we realize this?

Again, we see David's heart when he brought the ark back to Jerusalem, and he danced so heartily to the Lord in public that his wife despised him. He knew that symbolically God was "coming home" to His own dwelling place.

He also wrote in Psalm 122, one of the Psalms of Ascents, "I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." How could one not be glad to enter into God's presence in His own dwelling place? In another one of the Ascents (132), another author wrote of David:

How he swore to the LORD And vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,
"Surely I will not enter my house, Nor lie on my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes Or slumber to my eyelids, Until I find a place for the LORD, A dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob."

Because of David's heart, God gave David the plans and blueprints for His temple. He had Solomon build the only physical "house of God" that he ever wanted built. As Israel was His physical people, He wanted a physical house, again to dwell in their midst.

None of these satisfied either the heart of God, or of man. All of these were “shadow’s” of what God really desired; they were physical, external “types” of what was to come.

Until the day of Pentecost. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God – who “is spirit” (John 4:24), for the first time had a spiritual house. Peter tells us, “you also, as living stones, are being built up as a *spiritual house* . . . “ (I Peter 2:5). While we are God’s spiritual house, we are yet with many imperfections, and only are a glimpse of what God has in store in the future.

What is a house? It is the home of its owner. What is a home? In its ideal, it is a place where one can be himself or herself. It is one where one can relax. It is a place of love and joy – and fellowship. It is where the family can enjoy one another, with the head of the house bringing all things together. It is a place where one can rest, play, laugh, whatever the moment calls for. It is a place where one can lay one’s head in peace and comfort.

Lost to us for many generations is a concept and experience that has existed since creation - the idea of a large family. Two hundred years ago and before, it was common. There are numerous unique experiences found in large families, especially where Christ is the head of the home and love exists. Large homes aren’t perfect, and have their problems. But there can be joys of fellowship, oneness, harmony and love that are beyond the experience of small families.

While our hearts are limited in capacity, God’s heart is not. And God desires – and has – a very large family. God loves to be with His family, His children, far more than any earthly father can imagine.

David knew God wanted a house, a home, a place to commune with His own – a place where God’s children enjoy Him and one another in communion, fellowship, worship, and love.

And David wanted to be in that place for the rest of eternity. It was his hope, his longing, his greatest desire. He left this earth not able to see the building of God’s only physical house, even though God had given him the very plans and blueprints. This made his longing even greater.

David knew that God would have His house, His home, where all the family of God would dwell in joy and harmony. And he knew, as he told us in this last verse of the 23rd Psalm, that he would spend eternity enjoying both God Himself, and His people.

This same image is left for us at the end of the Bible. Again, endings are important, and both the 23rd Psalm and Revelation end on a common note. Only the house has now become a city, as only a city – a three dimensional one at that – can contain all of God’s children. The city comes down from heaven (Rev. 21:10). There is “no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple.” (10:22).

The attention in the last chapter then goes to the center of the city – “the throne of God and of the Lamb.” (22:1) “and His bond-servants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face . . .”

Knowing this in his spirit, David closed his psalm with this one thought – dwelling in God’s home, with God’s family, forever. David had asked for this in the 27th psalm, but here he knows with certainty that he will receive that for which he asked.

We as believers all the more should see and be stirred by this great hope – to see His face, and be with Him and our brethren in perfect communion and fellowship – forever.

And in seeing, our only response can be, “Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!”

rahanes
11/08