

Psalm 23, Part 1

Psalm 23 is the most well known psalm in the world. But do you really know it? This psalm is the John 3:16 of the Old Testament. I think almost every Christian has memorized or should memorize John 3:16.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

We think we know the above verse, but every word is full of theological and practical significance. Every word or phrase could be a sermon in itself: "God, loved, world, He gave, begotten Son, whoever believes, perish, everlasting life." Every Christian should memorize John 3:16 and think about it deeply and pray over it with a grateful heart.

In the same way, every Christian should memorize Psalm 23 and think about it deeply and pray over it with a grateful heart.¹ The key point of this short but powerful Psalm is that God's infinite goodness and grace is our best and truest hope for good, in this life and in the age to come.

Some of us understand this truth; we've experienced it. We have seen God work in our lives guiding us, providing for us and protecting us. If you are in this group, let God's Spirit water that seed of truth within you so that it bears more fruit. And if you have never experienced God's grace or been able to trust Him, then I pray that God's Spirit works in your heart to plant and cultivate this wonderful truth. So, let's begin.

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
² He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
³ He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.
(Psalm 23:1-3)

¹ There are seven promises in Psalm 23. You could take one promise a day and use it in your time of prayer: Monday – v. 1, The Lord will work for me, Tuesday – v. 2, The Lord will cause me to rest, Wednesday – v. 3a, The Lord will renew me, Thursday – v3b, The Lord will guide me, Friday – v.4, The Lord will protect me, Saturday – v. 5., The Lord will provide joy and strength, Sunday – v.6, The Lord will pursue me to do good to me (the word "follow" actually means to pursue).

Our ancient song was written by David. And it begins with a very personal, confident exclamation: “The LORD is **my** shepherd.” There are many different images of God given in the psalms. And these images reveal God’s reputation and fame as He cares for His people. In the psalms God is called a shield, a rock, a Judge, a refuge, deliverer, provider, and redeemer.² Here he is called a shepherd; someone who leads, feeds, guides and protects.

And we miss a powerful truth in our English Bible. The term “Lord” can be an impersonal noun meaning master or owner. It can be a positive or negative title only as we know who the “Lord” is. But as I’ve mentioned before the word “LORD” in the Old Testament, when you see it in all capital letters, does not mean master or owner. It is the translation of God’s personal name Yahweh.³ And it is important to know that Yahweh is my shepherd.

It is not that some unnamed, impersonal higher power is my shepherd, Yahweh is, not Allah or Krishna or Fred or Barney. There is a difference between Yahweh and all other so called gods. What is the difference? First of all, the one true God exists! Now, that may be debatable to some people. But the Scripture says that there is only one true God and the rest are idols.

Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
² Sing to the LORD, bless His name;
Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.
³ Declare His glory among the nations,
His wonders among all peoples.
⁴ For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.
⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the LORD made the heavens.
(Psalm 96:1-5)

Yahweh alone is God. He is to be feared, honored and worshipped. We are to declare His glory and greatness to all nations so that they find peace, comfort, strength and hope in Him. And we are to do this because all of the other so called gods are idols. Now what does this mean that they are idols? Here’s the answer.

² Shield – Psalm 3:3; 28:7; 119:114, Rock – Psalm 18:2; 42:9, 95:1, King – 5:2; 44:4, 74:12, Shepherd – 23:1; 80:1, Judge – 7:11, Refuge – 46:1; 62:7, Fortress – 31:3; 71:3, Avenger – 26:1, Creator – 8:1, 6; Deliverer – 37:39, 40, Healer – 30:2; 103:3, Protector – 5:11, Provider – 78:23-29, 145:14-16, Redeemer – 107:2

³ Also as I’ve mentioned before it is important that Bible versions use Yahweh, God’s name, rather than the title “LORD.” One version that does this correctly is The Holman Christian Standard Version of the Bible.

But our God is in heaven;
He does whatever He pleases.
⁴ Their idols are silver and gold,
The work of men's hands.
⁵ They have mouths, but they do not speak;
Eyes they have, but they do not see;
⁶ They have ears, but they do not hear;
Noses they have, but they do not smell;
⁷ They have hands, but they do not handle;
Feet they have, but they do not walk;
Nor do they mutter through their throat.
⁸ Those who make them are like them;
So is everyone who trusts in them.
(Psalm 115:3-8)

Idols are not true gods. They are the work of our hands and imagination. People carve out an image of some being with eyes, ears, hands and feet, but there is no godly life or power there. There is only demonic influence and power.⁴ And the people who worship false gods are spiritually blind and truly helpless and hopeless. But its not just pagans who construct idols, God's own people do at times too. The prophet Jeremiah brought this charge against God's people.

Has a nation changed its gods,
Which are not gods?
But My people have changed their Glory
For what does not profit.
¹² Be astonished, O heavens, at this,
And be horribly afraid;
Be very desolate," says the LORD.
¹³ " For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,
And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can
hold no water.
(Jeremiah 2:11-13)

Why would people abandon a natural spring for a broken cistern? Yahweh, the one true God, is a fountain of living water, not a cistern or watering trough. A fountain is self-replenishing. It supplies water to others. A cistern needs to be filled by people carrying water to it.

⁴ Deuteronomy 32:17, psalm 106:37, 1 Corinthians 10:20, 28

So, if you want to worship a cistern you work hard to keep it full and useful. And if it has a crack in it then you work even harder. We do this when we deny God's goodness and power and love and feel that we must trust our lives and concerns to someone or something other than God. But if you want to worship a fountain you simply drink from it to your hearts delight. There is only one fountain of goodness, hope, peace, love and joy—Yahweh. God calls forth and says,

Gather My saints together to Me,
Those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice."
⁶ Let the heavens declare His righteousness,
For God Himself is Judge. Selah

⁷ "Hear, O My people, and I will speak,
O Israel, and I will testify against you;
I am God, your God!
⁸ I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices
Or your burnt offerings,
Which are continually before Me.
⁹ I will not take a bull from your house,
Nor goats out of your folds.
¹⁰ For every beast of the forest is Mine,
And the cattle on a thousand hills.
¹¹ I know all the birds of the mountains,
And the wild beasts of the field are Mine.
(Psalm 50:5-11)

The point here in Psalm 50, is that God is upset with His people. But He is not rebuking them for gathering together for worship, but for their attitude in worship. They sacrificed and sang and offered praise, but in their hearts thought "Look at all we do for God." They acted as if God was a broken cistern and needed their help. But unlike idols God needs nothing from us except our trust and faith. He created everything and owns everything.

"If I were hungry, I would not tell you;
For the world is Mine, and all its fullness.
¹³ Will I eat the flesh of bulls,
Or drink the blood of goats?
¹⁴ Offer to God thanksgiving,
And pay your vows to the Most High.
¹⁵ Call upon Me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."
(Psalm 50:12, 13)

God, Yahweh, our shepherd is the most glorified when we are the most satisfied in Him. He wants us to know that He is our ultimate good. When Yahweh revealed Himself in the Bible, He revealed Himself as one who cares for us and provides for us. The Old Testament reveals eight redemptive names of God. Here they are:

Psalm 23:1 – Yahweh is my shepherd

Genesis 22:14 – Yahweh will provide

Exodus 15:26 – Yahweh heals

Exodus 17:15 – Yahweh is our banner (He fights those who oppose His people)

Exodus 31:13 – Yahweh sanctifies (He makes holy or sets His people apart for blessing and worship)

Judges 6:24 – Yahweh brings peace

Jeremiah 23:6 – Yahweh is our righteousness

Ezekiel 48:35 – Yahweh is always present

When we call out to God He doesn't come running from far away. He is near, as close as your breath. There is an encouraging and comforting promise made to us in Psalm 46 where it states,

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
Even though the earth be removed,
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;

The psalmist says that we should not fear even in times of great trouble. Why should we not fear? God is "A very present help in trouble." Verse 1 could also be translated "God is our refuge and strength an **abundantly available** help in trouble. When God comes to our aid, we don't just get a little bit of God, we get all of our great God. Yahweh is always present and He is strong and mighty and He is for us. The prophet Isaiah declares,

Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, the LORD,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,

Neither faints nor is weary.
His understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹ He gives power to the weak,
And to those who have no might He increases strength.
³⁰ Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,
³¹ But those who wait on the LORD
Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.

Now with all of this information about Yahweh in mind let's re-read Psalm 23:1.

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

Well, of course not! This is like saying Bill Gates is my sugar daddy! Psalm 34:10 declares, "those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing." We are encouraged in Matthew 6:33 to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all [that you need] shall be added to you." And Philippians 4:19 promises us that "my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

All of our truest and deepest needs will be met when we allow Yahweh, God, to lead us as a shepherd leads a flock and we follow in obedience. Do you need forgiveness? He will grant it to you. Do you need wisdom? He will provide it. Do you need hope? You will find it in Him. Do you need some material thing? Make your request known. Do you need to know God better? He will reveal Himself to you as you read the Bible.

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God's infinite goodness and grace is our best and truest hope for good in this life and in the age to come. God will guide us and provide for us and lead us to a righteous and good life. But what is His motive? Is it His love for us? Yes,

but it is even deeper than this: all that God does He does for His glory and namesake. And in God's glory we will find our greatest good. We will explore this great truth in Psalm 23, part 2.