

Psalm 23 is the Psalm everyone knows, even if we’ve never opened a Bible or entered a church. It lilt through the public domain unawares, and makes claims on our language and our imaginations about God in ways that prod even hardened hearts. We hear its verses quoted in popular culture, in songs from artists as varied as John Rutter to The Grateful Dead, in movies from *True Grit* to *Full Metal Jacket*. In the movie *Titanic*, the priest is reading Psalm 23 as the ship goes down. The Psalm comes immediately to mind even for those drenched in the language of Scripture. A young Abraham Lincoln, after being called to a dying woman’s bedside, was offered a Bible that he might read her some verses of Scripture to comfort her. But he declined, and began reciting Psalm 23 from memory.<sup>1</sup> So many of us have held this Psalm just as closely to our hearts, having memorized it from childhood. In the console of my car, the book of prayers I keep ready is marked with ribbons at Ps. 121 and Ps. 23.

Called a Psalm of David, it isn’t hard to imagine David reciting this under his breath under the terebinths in the shaded Valley of Elah, as he fixes his sights on Goliath’s brow: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” Yet, I can hear the Psalm whisper through the lives of others throughout Scripture. When Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden, with God’s voice echoing, “Cursed is the ground because of you,” they’re yet made able to till the ground in God’s presence, and to say, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me to lie down in green pastures...” I can hear Abram setting out early from Ur, with the rising sun at his back, full of faith, taking the risk of his life, saying, “He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake...” And the man blind from birth, remembering the day Jesus spat on the ground, making a healing salve, washing his face in the pool of Siloam, receiving his sight, and saying, “He leads me beside still waters...” And in our own time, so given to loneliness, this Psalm stands out among the others as a reminder of God’s companionship. We find peace in knowing, “You’re with me, your rod and staff, they comfort me...”

The picture of the single human being, facing terrible odds, extreme adversity, always comes to mind when I hear the Psalm read. But only later in my life have I come to see the Psalm from a different perspective. Not only as a beloved prayer for times of trouble. Not only as David’s prayer. Not only as mine. But, finally, as Jesus’ prayer. Even more, I believe when we crack the ribs of this Psalm, and open it wide, we find it’s beating heart is the person of Jesus Christ, pulsing through every verse. Hauerwas said, “In truth only one life, the life of Jesus, has been the perfect prayer the Psalms are meant to form.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is the person for whom Psalm 23 was written in great anticipation. Jesus is the hope of Psalm 23. Jesus fulfills Psalm 23.

There in the wilderness, Jesus, tempted 40 days and nights by the devil, to turn stones into bread, to throw himself down from the temple, to rule the kingdoms of the world... but rising up in his parched throat, the Psalmist’s words come. From the heart, with the prayers of his people on his lips, in the face of great temptation, Jesus says, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

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<sup>1</sup> Ervin S. Chapman, *Latest Light on Lincoln, Volume II*, p. 524

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ*, 61.

The LORD leads him along the narrow shores of the Sea of Galilee, in search of the beloved community. The water lapping gently over his feet and spritzing the bottom of his tunic, Jesus calls out to Peter and Andrew, who leave their nets, and then to James and John, who leave not only their nets but their father, and follow. They've heard his voice, skipping across not only the still waters, but also the flotsam and jetsam. The storm overwhelms the ship. Panic. "Lord, we're going to drown! Save us!" And he rises to rebuke the waves and lead them beside "dead calm" waters...

A scribe also wishes to follow Jesus, "Teacher, I'll follow you wherever you go." But Jesus says to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." But this homeless Jesus lies down in the green pastures that rise to meet him on the road. And even on the Sabbath day he rests in them, plucking their heads of grain, so that he and the disciples may eat their fill...

The Psalmist hopes in the LORD who restores the souls of his people. The one bearing this prayer in his very flesh issues the same invitation, "Come to me all of you who're weary and carrying heavy burdens," Jesus says. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...I'm gentle and humble of heart, and you'll find rest for your souls..."

And yet, Jesus' soul is troubled. Did you know? Jesus grieved. Taking his disciples to Gethsemane, he says to them, "I'm deeply grieved, even to death." Going a little farther, he throws himself on the ground, "My Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me..." Having sat at the table prepared for him and his disciples, the table at which Judas sits, and all the brothers who would abandon him. "You prepare a table for me in the presence of mine enemies," Jesus prays. And at this table of his enemies, he holds his cup of blood, and all of them drink from it.

Now, with cup overflowing, Jesus walks the valley of shadows. The authorities come for him, arrest him, and lead him down the Kidron Valley, through the shadow of death, and back up to Jerusalem, where they will anoint his head with a crown and with blood. And take him to Golgotha, where they will drain him, and bury him in the darkest valley.

But the prayer doesn't end there. "Surely," says the Psalmist, "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Read another way, "*Only* goodness and mercy shall follow me...*only*." So the women come to anoint his head with oil, but there is *only* one problem. Jesus is not here. He is risen! Surely, to sit at God's right hand, to dwell with God and with us, forever.

This is how Jesus prays, confessing the Psalmist's words with his mouth, believing them in his heart, until we can no longer see the difference between the Psalmist's prayer, and Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The Psalmist seeks the heart of God, and upon finding it, sees Jesus. Jesus does more with the Psalm than even the Psalmist could dream. Jesus not only fulfills the Psalm, not only expands the Psalm in his own person, but also gives it back to us to pray and to embody. Israel gives the Psalm to Jesus. Jesus *swells* the Psalm to overflowing. Jesus pours the Psalm back into our hearts, that we may dwell with him through these words our whole life long.

This is how Jesus prays. He prays with us, so that he may pray for us, so that he may finally pray through us. *He is* the good shepherd, who makes us his own in the praying of this prayer, in whom we shall not want. He makes us lie down in green pastures, he leads us beside still waters; *he* restores our soul.

Have you ever heard Jesus pray? I remember one day when I got the call. I was sitting in a deacons meeting. Phone rang in my pocket. “Pastor, can you come? Mom doesn’t have much longer...”

So, I went to see Eula (whose name, in Greek, means “sweetly spoken”). To hold her hand. To read her the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. To pray. But when I arrived at the little mobile home and walked across its feeble floors to the bedroom, Bible in hand, I could already hear the faintest voice. Upon crossing the threshold, I saw Jesus praying. She had only hours left. She was gasping for air. But precious Eula. There in the dark valley, I saw her lips moving, I heard her words, sputtering through her oxygen mask. And I stood transfixed, as she drew her suffering breaths...  
“The LORD is my shepherd...I fear no evil...he restores...my...soul...”