



Sermon Transcript

March 21, 2021

Psalms of Encouragement

From Praise to Peace

Psalm 23

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 21, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Psalm 23

A Psalm of David

- ¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters
³ He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
⁴ 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.
- ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows
- ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Introduction

Do you recall the journey we took last week? It was the journey from pain to praise. We talked about the turns you need to take in order to move from the anguish that comes from our pain to a heart filled with ardent praise. How do you get there? Here is what we saw last week.

Pain has a way of turning our hearts to Prayer.
Prayer turns our minds to the Promises of God.
As we speak those Promises to our hearts it fills us with Praise.
All of this is possible because Psalm 22 leads us to the Passion of Jesus.
We saw last week why Psalm 22 is called the “Psalm of the Cross.” Aside from seeming to describe the scene around the cross, three of the seven words Jesus speaks from the cross come from this Psalm. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? . . . I’m thirsty . . . It is finished!”*

Pain to Prayer . . . Prayer to Promise . . . Promise to Praise . . . And all of this is because this Psalm leads us to the Passion of Jesus. But there is more. On Monday, Bonnie sent me a text message during the day and said, “I’ve been thinking about your sermon yesterday and I can think of another word that begins with the letter “P” that flows from our “Praise.” The word is “Peace.” My initial reaction was, “Why didn’t I think of that?!?” But then it dawned on me that we will be in Psalm 23 this morning and I can’t think of a better word to use to describe the tone of this most beloved Psalm than the word “peace.”

“I shall not want . . . He makes me lie down in green pastures . . . leads me beside still waters . . . restores my soul . . . I will fear no evil . . . you are with me . . . your rod and your staff, they comfort me . . . you anoint my head with oil . . . my cup overflows . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” Psalm 23 is a wonderful poetic picture that has understandably brought peace to many hearts of faith down through the ages.

And furthermore, Psalms 22, 23 and 24 go together. There is a reason I chose to preach through these three Psalms the three weeks leading into Easter. Each Psalm uniquely points us to Jesus. Last week, we saw Jesus the Savior through the “Psalm of the Cross” in Psalm 22. In Psalm 23 we can’t help but hear the words of Jesus from John 10, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”* And then next week, on Palm Sunday, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem announcing himself as

Israel's Messiah and King, we will see from Psalm 24, Jesus the King of Glory. Savior! Shepherd! King! So since these Psalms flow together we can continue the journey we began last week: Pain to Prayer . . . Prayer to Promise . . . Promise to Praise . . . Praise to Peace. (I guess we will have to come up with another "P" word for next week. The need for alliteration is one of the curses of being a Pastor—yet, another "P" word!!)

Peace in an Age of Anxiety

We live in an anxious world that longs to find peace. I began reading the book I mentioned last week. It is the book on the resurrection that Tim Keller wrote this past year while dealing with his pancreatic cancer, called *Hope in Times of Fear*. At the beginning of the book he said that back in 1947 there was a book written with a title that captured the spirit of the age: *The Age of Anxiety*. This is back in 1947! This was the prevailing mood 75 years ago. Keep in mind, they had just come out of four traumatic decades where they saw two world wars, a pandemic and the Great Depression. Furthermore, they were about to step into the Cold War and the ongoing tensions between the West and communism. It was an "age of anxiety."

But by the late 1980's optimism and hope began to emerge and it was the common feeling that the next generation would be better off than the previous one because of all the advances being made. In fact, Keller points out, that as recent as 2017 there was a book that became a bestseller called *Home Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. The title *Homo Deus* is Latin for "man is God." Keller noted that the title said it all. "It is not merely that we no longer need God. Humanity now is God. We are our own hope for the future, our own God. We can have not just hope but confidence in a bright future because we have all the resources within ourselves to bring it about."¹ It is the spirit captured with "the progressive movement" in our current politics—we are constantly progressing and we have all the resources within ourselves to do it.

And yet, for all the talk about making progress, it seems that "the age of anxiety" is back in full force. It was here before COVID but it has accelerated all the more this past year. Right now, there is the prevailing mood of pessimism about the present and the future. No longer do we assume that the next generation will be better off than the latter. This leads to anxiety. Where can we find peace?

This anxious feeling is not just something that plagues the secular heart and mind that has taken God out of the center of things. This anxiety is something we also feel, because in many ways, we have unconsciously assumed the frantic patterns and

rhythms of the culture around us. Like we said last week, we readily turn good things into ultimate things and they can't deliver what only heaven can. And so, this misplaced trust—this idolatry—leaves us anxious as well.

In fact, the book *The Common Rule* was the result of the author, Justin Earley, waking up in the middle of the night with panic attacks. He didn't know what they were at the time, but in the ER, the doctor looked at him and said that there was nothing physically wrong with him. He was just experiencing anxiety and having panic attacks. This lawyer, who loved Jesus, found that his habits and the rhythms of his life were shaped more by the pace and values of society than they were by God. He said, "My head said one thing, that God loves me no matter what I do, but my habits said another, that I better keep striving in order to stay loved."² It left him anxious. Hence, new habits.

What is all of this telling us about how to find peace in an anxious world? If 75 years ago they were putting a stake in the ground and claiming the title "age of anxiety" for their own generation, then I think this issue of being anxious is universal and a common experience for every generation. It is the common human experience. It was the same anxious cry of David back in Psalm 22, a thousand years before Christ, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" And, isn't this the reason Psalm 23 has long been a Psalm of comfort? Humanity has long been an anxious bunch. Anxiety is the bi-product of a culture that has replaced faith in God for faith in humanity. We don't have the resources in and of ourselves to find the peace that only God can give. But even as followers of Christ, as we saw last week, the pains of life cause us to see the many ways we too need to look outside of ourselves to God as the source of our peace. We all need the comfort that comes from that opening declaration, "*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*"

And so we make another turn this morning as we turn from Psalm 22 to Psalm 23. And the turn we make is from "praise to peace." When we praise God, we are delighting in him and acknowledging his worth. That is where we get the word "worship." It is "worth-ship." There is no one or nothing greater than God and so there is nothing in this world that can satisfy the longing of our hearts like God can. The more we comprehend God and who God is, the more our hearts experience the peace we long to know. What does Psalm 23 tell us about God? What does it tell us about Jesus?

There are three images of God in Psalm 23 that fill our hearts with praise. When it comes to Psalm 23, we usually only focus on the first image, *the Good Shepherd*. But there are two other images of God in Psalm 23 that add to our understanding of God's

good care for us. In fact, some commentators have said that the order in which these images are placed in Psalm 23 form an ever growing and escalating picture of the goodness of God. In other words, you could put it this way. “If you think the image of the *Good Shepherd* is something, he is also the *Generous Host*. “*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*” But then the Psalm saves the best for last. With a measure of crescendo, David tells us that God is also our *Eternal Home*. “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*”

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Generous Host. Jesus is our Eternal Home. The more your heart is captured by these wonders, the more you will know peace in a world swimming in pain and anxiety. Jesus is our peace!

Our Good Shepherd

This idea that “praise turns to peace” is the long enduring testimony of Psalm 23 as we consider what it means that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. The reason why the image of Jesus as our Good Shepherd fills us with peace is because it reminds us that where we are helpless and incapable, the strong arm of Jesus is able and he provides for us and protects us even when we pass through the valley of deep darkness.

The image of a shepherd and his sheep is a perfect picture of our total need to depend upon the Good Shepherd. If you understand the relationship between sheep and the shepherd, you can understand why David uses this image to describe our relationship with Jesus. Erwin Lutzer said of sheep, “No domesticated animal is as helpless as sheep. But don’t tell them that! Shepherds tells us that most sheep think that they are quite capable of living on their own. They are stubborn, manipulative and determined to find their own pasture. No matter how many years the shepherd has cared for them, they still act as though he might do them wrong.”³ Haddon Robinson put it this way. “Some commentators insist that the only reason God ever created sheep was to have an illustration of what Christians are like.”⁴ That may be overstating it a bit, but it sure puts into context the quality of God’s goodness. To this stubborn lot, to this helpless “flock” sitting before me, of which I am one, God’s goodness comes to us in such a way that all of our needs are fully met through the care and the love of Jesus our shepherd.

Here is the claim of the Shepherd. If Jesus is your shepherd, you will not want in life. In Jesus you find the deepest satisfaction life has to offer. The physicist, Blasé Pascal, said this. “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means

they employ, they all tend to this end.” What he is saying is, we are all looking for happiness and rest and peace and contentment. The Christian would say that Jesus is the only one who can fill that vacuum in this life and until you find Jesus you will always be found wanting more. Only Jesus is able to fill your heart with peace.

This truth was brought home to me this week as I began to study for this sermon. Bruce Waltke is an Old Testament scholar and I found a paper he wrote on Psalm 23. The first page of the paper had the Hebrew text on the left column, and Waltke’s English translation of the text in the middle column. I was taken back by how he translated the opening phrase of this Psalm. It brought fresh insight to me and it deepened my praise for the Good Shepherd. Here is how he began the Psalm. *“I AM is my shepherd, I do not want.”* I love that! It reminds me that whenever you see the name for God in your English text with all capital letters . . . L-O-R-D . . . it is a reference to that sacred name for God revealed to Moses at the burning bush—*YHWH!* God introduces his name to Moses by saying *“I AM WHO I AM.”* Through this sacred name for God, he is declaring to Moses his nature. He has no beginning and he has no ending. He is from everlasting to everlasting. He is self-existing. It is the strong name of the eternal God. And this is who your Good Shepherd happens to be! *“The Great I AM is my shepherd!”* Naturally, if I am in his hands, *“I do not want.”* It reminds me of what David said in Psalm 27. *“The LORD (that is . . . I AM) is my light and my salvation.”* And so he concludes, *“whom shall I fear?”*

In the Gospel of John, there are seven statements Jesus makes that begin with the phrase, *“I am . . .”* It is not incidental. It is tying Jesus to his divine nature. In fact, one of those statements is found at the end of John 8 where Jesus directly ties himself to this great name for God. He said, *“before Abraham was, I am.”* The religious leaders knew exactly what Jesus was claiming to be true of himself because they picked up stones to stone him. One of those seven I AM statements is found in John 10 where Jesus says, *“I am the good shepherd . . . And I lay down my life for the sheep.”* This is what fills our hearts with wonder and praise. As helpless sheep, we are incapable within ourselves of making ourselves right with God. But he have a Good Shepherd who is *“gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”* Because he is the *I AM* he is able to brings us to God.

This Good Shepherd entered into the valley that reeks of dying when he died on the cross for our sin. And so when you enter the valley of deep darkness—whatever that happens to be—your Good Shepherd, Jesus, walks with you. It is a valley he is acquainted with. We heard his cry in that valley last week, *“My God, my God, why*

have you forsaken me?” We know that Jesus Christ walked through the ultimate *valley of the shadow of death*, the darkness of condemnation and hell—a fate that should have landed on us—helpless sheep. But he conquered this valley of darkness when he rose from the dead because he is the *I AM*. And so he walks with us and brings us safely through. Where we are incapable, he is able. Because Jesus is able to make us right with God, we know peace.

Our Generous Host

The second image we find of Jesus in this wonderful Psalm is that of a Generous Host. The image moves from a shepherd to a host in verse 5. Here we read, *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”* It is the picture of a royal host—a king—who brings us, his servants, into his royal tent as his guests of honor. And he pulls out all of the stops. “Our cup runs over.” His goodness and grace is lavished upon us in excess—the table is brimming with food in abundance. It actually reminds me of what Paul says in Ephesians 1. He tells us here that in Jesus, *God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places . . . according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us.”*

Isn't it an interesting phrase when David says that this sumptuous table is spread out *in the presence of my enemies*. It is a phrase that marks David as one whom the Lord loves and delights. It is a distinguishing between the righteous and the unrighteous. Which causes Iain Duguid to ask this question. “Why would I be invited as an honored guest to such a feast reserved for faithful servants of the King? After all, my obedience is sporadic at best, and often far less than it should be. I frequently and deliberately turned my back on obedience and joined the rebels in eager worship of their idols. Instead of steadfast love and mercy, I deserve God's curse to pursue me all the days of my life.”⁶ Can you relate to that? I don't deserve this kind of celebration. I have not been a faithful servant the way I know I should be.

That is the beauty of it, isn't it? Jesus, the Son of the Great King, lived the life we could not live. And yet, on the cross took the judgment we deserved. When we turn in faith to him, we are not only forgiven, but we become the children of God. We become the objects of his delight. We are welcomed around the table and all that belongs to Jesus is shared with us. It is a little like that welcome you receive when someone invites you into their home and sets you around their table. All that is before you is open to you. It is that, and so much more, around God's table. You are no longer his guest. You are his son. You are his daughter. His arms are open wide

and he finds great delight in you. We taste a little bit of this lavishing grace when we come around the Lord's Table and are reminded that as sure as we eat this bread and drink from this cup, we can be sure that God's grace has been lavished upon us. When our minds are drawn to the wonder of this kind of grace, amazing grace, it fills us with peace. God loves you. It is the greatest wonder of all.

Our Eternal Home

This leads us to the final image of God's goodness to us—the crescendo of the passage. Not only is Jesus our Good Shepherd who is able to do for us what we can't do for ourselves . . . And not only is he the Generous Host who lavishes us with his grace in kindness that our cups can't even hold it all . . . But he is our Eternal Home. *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."*

I love that word *"surely."* It means, "indeed" or "absolutely" or "beyond any doubt." There is no question about it. *We shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* The image here is not just that the "goodness and mercy of God follows us." That implies to me that I am leading the way and God's goodness is keeping up with me wherever I go. Actually that word *follow* could be translated with *pursues*. God's goodness and mercy chases after us. It holds us. It won't let us go. It brings us home.

This is so encouraging as we live in a world filled with pain and when we are keenly aware of our own shortcomings. Will God really bring ME HOME? Does he not know what I am like? Acknowledging that at times it seems that the shepherd appears to neglect his sheep or at times God appears inaccessible and silent when his sheep suffers, or that God might even be tempted "to give up on you" because you just don't seem to measure up, Lutzer imagines this interchange with David through Psalm 23.

Lutzer interrupts David when he begins, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."* He says, "David, that is fine for today when the sun is shining; but what do you do when King Saul wants to hunt you like a partridge in the wilderness?" David says, *"He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters."* "Well what about the time you committed adultery and had the woman's husband murdered to cover up your sin? What about it, David?" *"He restores my soul . . . He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."* "David, how do you handle the death of the baby born to you and Bathsheba?" *"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.” “But what about your son who turned against you? What do you do when Absalom rebels, divides your kingdom, commits immorality with your concubines and tries to kill you? What about that David?” “*You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.*” “David, what do you do when this son whom you loved so much is finally killed, against your express orders? How do you bounce back from the humiliation, David?” “*You anoint my head with oil . . . My cup runs over.*” “David, David, David. You are dying now,. Your wives are laughing at you behind your back. Your three remaining sons are fighting over the throne. You have failed as a father. Your kingdom is in ruins. David, tell us, what now?” “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*” And so the curtain closes and David’s life ends as it began. All that there is, is David and his God.

Lutzer concludes, “David, thanks for writing this down so that people who have messed up like you have can be encouraged. Thanks for reminding us that we are just stubborn sheep and the Lord is our Good Shepherd.”⁷ He is our Generous Host who lavishes us with his grace. He is our Eternal Home. His goodness and mercy will chase after us and will not let us go. Hebrews 13:20 tells us that God is the *God of Peace*. How so? *He brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant.* Therefore you can say, Surely . . . Indeed . . . Absolutely Beyond any doubt . . . Jesus is my Eternal Home. This word of praise fills me with peace.

Conclusion

So lets take our trip down that road again this week. Pain forces me to turn to Prayer. Prayer causes me to speak the Promises of God to my heart. The Promises of God lead me to Praise Jesus. I can praise Jesus because he is the Good Shepherd who dies for you and me so that we can be forgiven. He is the Generous Host who lavishes his grace and kindness upon us. He is our Eternal Home. His goodness and mercy pursue us and keep us. This is what gives me true and lasting peace, even when I pass through valley of deep darkness.

Some pastors have introduced their sermon on Psalm 23 by saying that this Psalm stands on its own and barely needs comment. How do you take this work poetic picture and break it down into sermon points? It’s simplicity is it’s beauty. So, if you are in pain and need to journey to peace, let this Psalm focus your praise and consider the Good Shepherd . . . the Generous Host . . . the Eternal Home. This is the road to true peace.

¹Tim Keller *Hope in Times of Fear* (New York: Penguin, 2021) xvi

²Justin Earley *The Common Rule* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018) 5

³Erwin Lutzer “The Shepherd and His Sheep” www.moody.church.org

⁴Robinson, 19

⁵Bruce Waltke “My Shepherd! Psalm 23” <https://pbcc.org/ArchivedTeachings/Psalms/IndividualPsalms/Psalm-23-MTEng.pdf>

⁶Iain Duguid “You Prepare A Table For Me In the Presence of My Enemies” www.theaquilareport.com

⁷Lutzer

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share something you are celebrating. As a group, give thanks for these things.
2. Share something you are finding to be a challenge. As a group, pray for each other.

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Psalm 23. Why do you think this Psalm is so special to people? What speaks to you the most about this Psalm?
4. Read Psalm 23:1-4 and John 10:10-18. How would you describe the work of the “Good Shepherd?” How does this fill you with peace?
5. Read Psalm 23:5 and Ephesians 1:3-14. How do these verses describe the generous nature of God’s grace to us in Jesus? In what way have you experienced the extravagant nature of God’s grace?
6. Read Psalm 23:6 and Hebrews 13:20-21. How certain are you of God’s grace? What causes you to question the certainty of it? How do these verses help you rest in Christ?

Taking It Home

7. Since “praise turns to peace” spend time in prayer praising Jesus—the Good Shepherd, the Generous Host and our Eternal Home. Rest in Jesus.