

Psalm 23 (NRSV)

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 right paths
for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I 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
my whole life long.

Psalm 23 (NKJV)

A Psalm of David.

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.

4 Yea, 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 runs over.

6 Surely goodness and
mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the
house of the Lord
Forever.

Psalm 23 (CEB)

A psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd.
I lack nothing.

2 He lets me rest in grassy
meadows;
he leads me to restful
waters;

3 he keeps me alive.
He guides me in proper
paths
for the sake of his good
name.

4 Even when I walk
through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger because
you are with me.
Your rod and your staff—
they protect me.

5 You set a table for me
right in front of my
enemies.
You bathe my head in oil;
my cup is so full it spills
over!

6 Yes, goodness and
faithful love
will pursue me all the
days of my life,
and I will live in
the Lord's house
as long as I live.

Psalm 23 Study Guide

Opening

- Begin by relaxing and clearing your mind of any distractions. Close your eyes, and take three deep breathes with the exhale being slightly longer than inhale. After the third breath, opening your eyes and begin reading Psalm 23 aloud.
- Read the Psalm out loud three times using the three different translations provided for you. Give yourself at least one minute of silent reflection in between reading the psalm aloud. In the moments of silence in between each reading, circle a word or phrase that speaks to you or jumps out at you or that you focused on as he was reading.
- After the third reading and moment of silence, close with this prayer or a prayer of your own:

“O Christ Jesus, Good Shepherd of us all,
when all is shadows and we feel our weakness and helplessness,
give us the sense of Your presence,
Your love, and Your strength. Amen.”

Unpacking Psalm 23

- Psalm 23 is attributed to King David. Possibility written during David’s reign, some scholars suggest that Psalm 23 may have been a poem written during that period before David’s reign when he was at war with Saul.
- Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 form a literary couplet. Psalm 22 is a psalm of lament, while Psalm 23 is a psalm of assurance. Each speaks to a legitimate response to calamity and suffering, but from completely different sides of the same coin. The two psalms are meant to be read together. Psalm 22 will be read in the coming weeks as we get closer to Good Friday.

- Psalm 23 is part of the literary form called a “Song of Trust” alongside Psalm 4, 11, 16, 27, 62, and 131. Songs of trust have two things in common: a perceived hardship or immense crisis of some kind and trust that the disaster shall pass and all will be well. In fact, as Rabbi Dr. Amy Jill-Levine notes, “in these songs of trust it is the very crisis that instigates the psalmist to cry out in trust -- and not, as one might expect, in despondency or dejection.”
- Psalm 23 has not always been a popular scripture when burying our dead. The psalm became a popular Biblical verse to be read at funerals and burials in the United States and England after WWI (1928). The Anglican and Episcopal *Common Book of Worship* added Psalm 23 to its “Service for the Dead” liturgy and then over the next decade other denominations followed suit. Until the 1928 release of the *Common Book of Worship*, Psalm 39 and 90 were the two psalms listed in the liturgy to be the psalms read for a memorial service.
 - v.6 “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord” was originally intended to evoke images of the Temple.
- Unpacking the Hebrew will (I think) give us new appreciation for Psalm 23
 - The Hebrew verb *haser* (v.1) often translated as “want” in English is better understood as “lacks nothing.” It is a call back to Deut. 2:7 and how God provided for the Israelites in their wilderness walk.
 - Green pasture = food, still waters = drink, straight path = protection
 - The KJV famously translate v. 4 as “the valley of the shadow of death” but a more accurate translation of the Hebrew would read “though I journey covered in deep shadows.”
 - v.6 concludes the Psalm with the “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow (*radap*) me all the days of my life.” *Radap* is rarely, if ever, translated as “follows” but rather in Ex. 15:9, Hosea 8:3, and other places, the verb *radap* is translated as “pursues.” Mercy can also just as easily and rightly be translated as “kindness.”
- Psalm 23 is often read in public worship in the Lenten Season as part of the Revised Common Lectionary. It’s pairing with Psalm 22 is meant to give an Easter hope even in the wilderness wanderings of Lent.

- The imagery of green pastures, still waters, and treks through valleys found in Psalm 23 has made the psalm a favorite of Pope Francis and other Creation-Care Christians to conserve and protect the blessed and beauty of Creation.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think of all of the Psalms (and maybe even of all Biblical scripture) has the 23rd Psalm held such an important place in the heart of the modern Christian tradition and present-day Christians?
2. Does knowing that the 22nd and 23rd Psalms form a couplet and are meant to be read side by side with one another change your understanding of the Psalm(s)? How and why?
3. Modern Christianity has often thought of the 23rd Psalm of speaking about a promised life after death, but David (or the original author) did not. Knowing that the original readers would have seen it speaking to their daily lived experiences, how does the meaning of the Psalm change for you?
4. Psalm 23 is one of the “Trust” Psalms. How does the Psalm inform our faith/trust in God that is with us even as we dine with “enemies” and walk in a valley full of “shadows”?
5. Psalm 23 has become a rally Psalm for the Creation-Care movement in Judaism and Christianity. Do you see any Creation-Care/Eco-Justice/Environmental Stewardship messages present in the psalm? Have you ever thought of Psalm 23 as a call to Creation-Care?

Closing

For your closing prayer, hear Psalm 23 being chanted by the combined choirs from the Anglican Diocese of St Andrews, Dunkeld and Dunblane. This recording was performed in St Ninian's Cathedral, Perth, Scotland in 1986.

The musical setting to the Psalm was originally done by Sir Henry Walford Davies after he served in the RAF during WWI.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OcwrQN9_1o