

Goodness, Mercy, and Cynicism

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[0 : 00] You guys sound fantastic tonight. You know, congregational worship is different than a lot of other styles of music. The most important instrument in congregational music is your instrument.

And so our sound people do a really great job at keeping the instruments out of the way. And you guys are up to the challenge tonight. It sounds really great. Just saying. Today is our sixth and final Sunday meditating on Psalm 23.

And it feels like it's been just the right time to be doing this sermon series. As this psalm has been intensifying verse after verse in its expression of intimacy with God.

And culminating today with verse 6. Which is as concise an explanation of hope as you can find. So also has this summer been drawing to a close.

A summer which might teach us to do anything but hope. We live in an age of cynicism. And just like you learn certain behaviors and safeguards after getting your fingers burned.

[1 : 08] So can we become more deeply cynical after a summer like the one we've had. And what a summer it's been.

Now for those of you who are visiting and haven't been aware of what's going on in our congregation. You should know that for many of us it was a summer of sickness and even death. Extended stays in hospitals. Death of parents. Relationships sick and shattered. And I don't mean to sound flippant when I say this.

But it's enough to make you actually believe in the underlying message of a zombie film. Zombie films teach us that death is constantly pursuing us. Climbing through windows to get to us.

And over walls to grab us. Bursting from the ground to snatch at our ankles. Death always having the final word. A cynical take on this summer could be that surely sickness and death will pursue me all the days of my life.

[2 : 15] For many of us it was the headlines that we'll remember. Things happening in our country and our world that feel unprecedented to us.

Or at the very least things happening the likes of which few can remember. Surely anger and disappointment will follow me all the days of my life.

And I will dwell in a world of fragmentation forever. There's a man in the Bible whom none would fault if he had become a cynical person.

David, who wrote this psalm, faithfully served his king as a young man. And then he married the king's daughter and became best friends with the king's son. But when David's father-in-law became jealous of him, Saul tried to kill him.

King Saul drew him into exile and hunted him like a dog. Later when David became king, he would lose an infant son to death.

[3 : 18] Later in life, one of David's sons, Amnon, would sexually assault David's daughter, Tamar. And another of David's sons, Absalom, murdered Amnon in revenge.

A while later, the same son, Absalom, would rebel against David and try to usurp the throne from him. And once again, David was driven into exile.

David would survive this coup d'etat but would see yet another one of his sons killed. At the end of his life, at the end of David's life, yet another son, Adonijah, didn't even wait for David to die to set himself up as king.

So you can imagine the cynicism that David must have felt tempted to about family and relationships and love and closeness. And yet David didn't really need to look outside the confines of his own heart to be made cynical, did he?

Early in David's reign as king, from his palace, he sees a beautiful woman bathing, decides that he must have her, so he seduces her, he gets her pregnant, and then to cover this all up, he has her

husband killed, and then he quickly marries her.

[4 : 41] And in reflecting on this episode, in deep remorse and regret, David very correctly would write, Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Yet history would not remember David as a bitter cynic, but as a man after God's own heart. In spite of everything that happened in David's life, David's refrain was, Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

So let's look more closely at the hope found in this verse, and then we'll look briefly at cynicism, and then we'll talk about how we might replace cynicism with this hope.

Let's pray. Father, we're acutely aware that as we talk about hope, we're sitting in a dry sanctuary in full safety, while many people are facing catastrophic flooding and devastation.

They need to know your hope. They need to know your presence. Would you provide? Would you protect?

[6 : 08] Would you rescue? Would you be with the ones who are doing the rescuing? And God, through all of this, would your church shine? Would your church come to the aid of many?

Would your church show mercy and be generous? All for your glory, Lord. Help us in these next few minutes to also learn about hope.

Replace our hope, replace our cynicism with hope, Lord. We really would love to hope. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. If you were here last week, you may remember the tone of this psalm shifting from David talking about a shepherd and his sheep to God being a gracious host.

And in verse 6, we shift back to the familiar imagery of being a sheep and a flock. We find the shepherd at the front of the flock.

And there we see his staff in his hand. We hear the familiar sound of his voice that we are following. But what's behind us? What's in the back? What might be coming up from behind, lurking in the shadows?

[7 : 22] With many flocks, we would find predators. Predators standing back, waiting for that one sheep to lag behind, perhaps to get lost, perhaps to get caught.

And there, a predator would find his supper. But David doesn't have that anxiety in this verse. David pictures there being a rear guard to this flock.

God's own goodness and mercy, personifications of two of God's most essential attributes. The word goodness is a translation of the Hebrew word *tof*.

And you've probably heard this word before when you've heard the Hebrew expression for congratulations. *Mazel tov*, right? At the end of each day in the creation account of Genesis 1, God declares the things he has made to be *tof*, to be good.

The shepherd's *tof*, his goodness, is demonstrated in his abundant care, in his order of things, in his promises, in his blessings.

[8 : 33] Now, the word for mercy here is the English translation of the Hebrew word *chesed*. And it's often translated as loving kindness.

God's *chesed*, his love, is his covenantal commitment to love and bless his people with his own goodness. In Exodus 34, when God describes himself, he uses this word a couple of times.

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *chesed*, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

Now, cynicism teaches us to look over our shoulder, because surely there's something pursuing us. Surely the world isn't as it seems.

Surely there's something in the darkness that's lurking for me. Surely God doesn't have his eye on every single thing. But David tells us, sometimes God leads us beside quiet waters.

[9 : 49] Sometimes he leads us through a valley of deepest shadow. But what remains the same is God's steadfast love and his goodness, always hemming us in behind and before, always having our back.

For that reason, David can say that he will dwell in the house of the Lord for the length of days. In other words, every day of my life, I can experience God's presence.

Every day I can experience intimacy with him. Every day is defined by the reality of redemption and salvation. Every day, what is more real than the deluge of media and noise and fragmentation, is the nearness of God.

And now, 3,000 years later, after David wrote this, we have a fuller understanding of God's goodness and loving kindness, demonstrated to us in his son, Jesus Christ. Chesus is God's faithfulness, his covenantal commitment to love us. Well, we have an obligation in this covenant, and we couldn't keep it.

[10:58] So God himself came and kept that part of the covenant for us, so that we can experience intimacy and nearness of the Father. Plus, Jesus died and rose again, destroying death and sin, so that we can dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

So this intimacy that we know here, in the here and now, we can experience and know through eternity. This seems to me to be the very definition of hope. Being hemmed in by God's goodness and love, knowing his presence every day of our lives.

But a person who has this kind of hope today, let's be honest, would seem rather peculiar. Like, very attractive to run across a person like this.

But still, peculiar. Because in our culture, we are all immersed in an amniotic fluid that's made of cynicism.

So let's shift to cynicism. And let me just briefly, just paint a picture of cynicism for us, okay?

[12:10] Cynicism tells you to look over your shoulders, and when you do, you will really see the reality of what's going on in this world. Cynicism is constantly looking for threats.

It's constantly looking through people and institutions to get their angle. So while cynicism makes us feel in the know, at the same time, it destroys intimacy.

Because it breeds isolation. The cynical person can't find the joy in things. Cynicism makes us feel like we are hyper-aware, preventing us from really trusting or hoping.

Cynicism makes us feel energized at times. But what it really is, it's just a concoction of indifference and apathy and discontentment.

There's a guy named Paul Maxwell. He describes it as an emotional rocket launcher mounted on a lazy boy. Cynicism gives us a feeling of superiority.

[13:21] That's right, it's intoxicating. Paul Miller writes, since the fall, that's the fall of man. Since the fall of man, evil feels omnipresent, making cynicism an easy sell.

Because cynicism sees what is really going on, it feels real, authentic. That gives cynicism an elite status, since authenticity is one of the last remaining public virtues in our culture.

Cynicism teaches us not to pray, because nothing is going to change. And if I pray about something, and it does change, well, that probably means it was just going to change anyway.

Lastly, because cynicism is the spirit of the age, then cynicism is our great temptation. It's more than a disposition.

Cynicism is a sin. And I must confess, it is one of my big besetting sins, and it always has been. I would like to think, well, it's just part of my calling card as a Gen Xer.

[14:33] But it's more than that. And I've always wrestled with it. I remember being in elementary school, and I went to get my pictures taken. I don't know what I said to the photographer, but he said, go ask your parents what the word cynicism means.

Like, cynicism? I was like, yes, you are very cynical. So I went home, like, Mom, the photographer called me a Seneca.

Like, what's a Seneca? Oh, you mean, he said you were cynical. So she told me what it is. And so from that point, I just kind of thought, oh, that's just my disposition.

That's just the way I am. That's fine, right? Like being, I didn't know these words back then, but it's like being like sanguine, right? Or melancholy. It's just a disposition, right?

But it's not. It's not. But cynicism is a sin because at the root of cynicism is questioning the goodness of God on our behalf.

[15:43] It's doubting God when he says he loves us. It's the original sin. Adam and Eve doubting God and his trustworthiness and his love and his protection.

Cynicism is disbelieving that goodness and love are following you all the days of your life. So what are we to do? So we've talked about hope and we've talked about cynicism.

How do we replace one with the other? If Psalm 23 verse 6 tells us that we're to have hope, but if the spirit of the age is constantly telling us and calling us to cynicism, then what are we to do?

So I think the answer is a liturgical one. Okay? When I say liturgical, I mean that we're to address the habits and rituals that shape our imaginations.

It starts by realizing that our cynicism is shaped by a liturgy, by a posture. It's not like isolated outbursts of emotions here and there, but it's the constant, subtle reactions to the things around us. [17:05] The rolling of the eyes. The snarky tweet. The Jim Halpert smirk and raise eyebrow. Combo.

It's a constant fixation that excludes the presence of the shepherd. In his book, *The Praying Life*, Paul Miller takes Psalm 23 and he crosses out all references to the good shepherd and everything that the good shepherd does.

And this is what is left. I shall be in want. Me. Me. My soul. Me. Me. I walk through the valley of shadow of death.

I fear evil. Me. Me. Me in the presence of my enemies. My head. My cup.

Me all the days of my life. Cynicism ignores the presence of the shepherd and all we're left with is ourselves. Therefore, to move from cynicism into hope, I would suggest that we practice the presence of God.

[18:20] He's always present, but we have to practice that. St. John of the Cross tells us that human health consists in the continuous and conscious experience of God's presence.

Human health consists in the continuous and conscious experience of God's presence. This is why the philosopher and author Dallas Willard meditated on Psalm 23 every day.

In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard wrote, the 23rd Psalm is an exquisite summary of life in the kingdom. The mind of the disciples should have it prominently displayed within to always foster the joy and peace of the kingdom as well as to orient all of his or her actions within it.

This is an essential part of any curriculum for Christ-likeness. Positive engagement with these scriptures will bring kingdom order into our entire personality. We really come to think and believe differently and that changes everything else.

So what I recommend for us at this end of our study of Psalm 23 is very simple. It's to memorize Psalm 23. Memorize it and return to it often.

[19:41] As Dallas Willard says, a constant awareness of God's presence and our place within his kingdom shapes the way we think and believe and feel and respond. It pushes out cynicism and it gives us a childlike faith.

Hope is different than naive optimism. It doesn't blind us to the realities of the world. If anything, we see them more realistically as we did before but we don't despair because we know that King Jesus is intent on crushing all those things that set themselves up in opposition to his kingdom.

Hatred, hostility, brokenness, sin, and death. We become more realistic than a cynic and we become more optimistic and hopeful than the idealist and this is what gives us our fuel and our power to actually go into the world and to make a difference, to join in God's mission of recovering and redeeming a broken world, sunken in cynicism.

Now, if you're a skeptic, that is, if you don't fully believe all the things that we're saying here, if you don't believe what Jesus said about himself, then memorizing the Bible might seem a little much to you or a little weird.

Let me just explain that a little bit. Christians memorize the Bible because we believe it's the very word of God, right? So, you know how when you really love somebody you hang on their every word, right?

[21:25] Well, that's what we do. That's what we do. We hang on as every word and we read scripture all the time and we memorize it. But if you're a skeptic of Christianity, maybe instead of memorizing this passage, maybe just start with this.

Just start with this. Just be open to the idea that cynicism in its truest form, in its purest form, in its most consistent form, is an impossible project.

C.S. Lewis explains it this way. You can't go on seeing through things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see the thing through it.

To see through all things is the same as not seeing at all. Now, once you agree to that, that the purpose to see through something is to see a something on the other side, then I'd say the next thing to do is to look at the thing that Christians base their hope on.

That's the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Start with the eyewitness accounts. We call those the Gospels. We read those every Sunday in worship. And I read from John chapter 20 tonight.

[22 : 45] Those eyewitness accounts tell Jesus' testimony about himself from eyewitness perspectives. And if you want to go from there, ask me or Tommy and we'd be happy to direct you further in your investigation.

If you are a Christian, then choose to remember this summer as the summer of the shepherd.

Remember it as the summer of the shepherd. Does that sound cheesy to you?

It's because you're being cynical. Jane Olson gave us the psalm challenge at the beginning of this summer. Like, memorize a psalm and then video record it and perhaps put it on Instagram.

I won't ask for hands. People who did that, I did not do it. But it's not too late to memorize a psalm and make it this one. Make it this psalm. And once it's memorized, let it give you hope.

Let it give you hope. I think you will go on remembering this summer as it really was, full of challenge, and sadness and disappointment. But if you do it right, you'll remember most of all the presence of the shepherd as he led you beside both quiet waters and as he led you through a valley of deepest shadow.

[24 : 05] You'll remember that he fed you and that he sustained you. You'll remember that he restored your soul. You'll remember that he spread a table before you and threw a party for you.

You'll remember that his goodness and mercy had your back and that they'll continue to follow and pursue you all the days of your life. The Father is present.

Jesus is with you. The Holy Spirit is near. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.