

Psalm 23 Coming Home

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[0 : 00] Jo and I are going to read the Bible, not together, but in different languages. So I'm going to read in Chinese, Mandarin Chinese.

So Psalm 23. So in English Bible is page 458. Okay, Psalm 23.

Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd.

I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for the name's sake.

[1 : 27] 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.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. All right.

Good morning. Today we finish our final three-part series on Psalm 23. So if you have your Bibles, then please open them to that. If you don't have a Bible, there's these black ones up the back there on the back table.

And it's page 458 on that. Psalm 23. All right. As David wrote this psalm, if you're new back from, fresh back from holidays, this is a psalm of David.

[2 : 40] And as David wrote this psalm, he wrote it into a cultural context where there were a vast array of different gods to choose from. There was a lot. We're kind of conditioned as Christians to thinking of a context where there is only one true God.

Everything else is idols. But they all believed. They all had their own idols, which they called gods. They believed were their god. And they determined which god was the most successful and most powerful by results in battle.

They were the things that determined who really was God. So into this context of multiple gods, many of which were represented by countries which were incredibly successful in battle, David writes this psalm of a small country, Israel, in the ancient Near East, surrounded by world superpowers.

That's kind of a little bit of a distance from where we are in Australia, isn't it? I think there are a number of different deities worshipped in our Australian culture. But it seems to be that the direction Australian culture is wanting to go is in the direction of God versus no gods, not which god out of the many.

And so we have this situation where people like Daniel Dennett, an atheistic philosopher, are actually coming up with trying to understand the meaning of life, the universe and everything, without a god concept involved at all.

[4 : 12] He wants us to believe that if it can't be explained by physics, then it doesn't really exist. Him and people like him, Stephen Hawking, for example, want us to believe that our brain is no more than a biological computer.

Attached or enmeshed in what is basically a bag of chemicals. A complex bag of chemicals. A complex chemistry experiment.

Kind of kept on track by our DNA. But a bag of chemicals nonetheless. Nothing more than that. And in fact, then it goes further to say that our consciousness, our sense of self, is actually an illusion.

It's something that our very complex biological brain, computer of a brain, actually projects from itself so that this bag of chemicals can navigate a very complex social life.

Our self is actually an illusion, he says. So we have these two worldviews, one where there was actually a room for multiple gods.

[5 : 23] And our current one, which actually has no room for, is increasingly, certainly in the West, not the majority of the world, but certainly in Western thought, is actually moving towards there being no room for God at all. And into this context, we have David's psalm.

And it speaks so powerfully, and under God's sovereign hand, it speaks so powerfully to both of those different options. And it gives us a third one, which is that there is a God, but there's only one. And he is a personal God. The God who happened to create the universe and everything in it, happens to be personal. And is knowable, because he is personal.

And that's where David comes from when he writes this psalm. And so he starts off in Psalm chapter 23, verses 1 to 3. He starts off with a shepherding imagery. This is a king who spent a fair chunk of his life as a shepherd.

And so he uses something that he knows well. The concept of a shepherd looking after his sheep. And in this shepherding imagery, he brings out the personal nature of this God by the kind of God who actually provides green pastures for us.

[6 : 26] Quiet waters. Guides us by quiet waters. And then the significant statement that actually explains what David is talking about with his whole shepherding metaphor.

David says the words in verse 3. He restores my soul. He restores my soul. When you read the word soul there, don't imagine something detached from yourself.

But actually, it is your very self that David is talking about. So this self that we're not really sure which direction to go in terms of worship. Or if you're more on the atheistic bent, then you're actually pretty sure there's only a projection anyway.

And part of a biological experiment that's kind of roughly in control according to your DNA. David says something totally different and totally transformed.

If he says there is such thing as a self. And that self is something that is broken, that needs restoration. And that there is a personal God who is devoted to restoring you.

[7 : 34] And he does that by leading us in paths of righteousness. For his name's sake. Remember we discussed that in the first talk.

For his name's sake. You can't have one or the other. He leads us in paths of righteousness. Those right paths. Correct where we've gone wrong. But it can't just be that our behavior is modified.

It needs to be that our whole purpose for living is modified. Back toward God. For his name's sake. And then in verse 24, David started to get real.

Because even as he expresses this, he recognizes that he is a small country in the midst of a bunch of world superpowers. Who believe that their gods are more powerful because their countries are actually doing better in the world.

And so he says this sort of thing. He says, the reality is within relationship with this personal God, this all-powerful personal God, there will be valleys.

[8 : 37] There'll be valleys of shadow. Ultimately, the valley of the shadow of death itself. There are hardships living in this wilderness-shaped world.

And David speaks into this context and he says, I will fear no evil. We need to understand here as well that evil is the opposite to restoration.

So this restoring my soul in verse 3 and the concept of evil in verse 4. Evil is the sort of thing that actually undoes us. It breaks us down. Restoration is the thing that restores us to what we should be.

How does David say this? How can David say when he is in the midst of such turmoil as the world was back then? How can he say this with such confidence? Remember we talked about this last week and we talked about the fact that in terms of applying our understanding of God to the world, this is the direction we need to go in.

What is the truth about God? And then I need to trust in that. I need to take that truth and trust in it. What do I fear? And how do I apply what I believe to that fear?

[9 : 52] Apply my faith to my fear. And for David, that is centered around the very person of God. In verse 4, the thing that really, really comforts me, and I don't know if you found this yourselves, the thing that really comforts me is smack dab in the center of this verse where David conquers the fear of evil with the truth that God is with him.

I will fear no evil for you are with me. This is the direction that David encourages us to sing, to praise, to pray. And now we finally get to these verses, verses 5 and 6.

And this is a point at which the imagery changes. The shepherding imagery kind of gets, it's almost broken, well, broken apart by an even bigger vision that David has, shall we say.

And it's a vision of coming home. The shepherding imagery is gone. And it's replaced by this image of arriving home.

And arriving home to God's extravagant welcome and God's eternal provision. That's verse 5 and 6. Very simple structure to this talk.

[11:09] There's only two points. Not very evangelical, but we'll have to get by, won't we, today? So let's start with God's extravagant welcome. And look at the extravagant welcome in verse 5.

Let me read it out to you. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Just think of the first one.

You prepare a table for me. Hands up if you actually came for pancakes for breakfast this morning. Yeah? Pancakes on Sunday. Yeah. Alyssa was here early.

And I have it on... Yeah. I was informed that she had actually arrived early and started to bake a whole bunch of pancakes. What do you call it? Bake it? What? Fry them? Yeah. Cook a whole bunch of pancakes.

And she had plates of pancakes ready for when people arrived. A whole bunch of different things to go on those pancakes ready to go. Plates. Knives and forks. Alyssa organized a feast for us for breakfast.

[12:17] I don't normally eat that much. Particularly on a Sunday morning. But I don't normally eat that much in the morning. And this is the picture that's going on here. When David says, you prepare a table for me. He's actually depicting a God who's so personally engaged with us that he's anticipating our arrival and planning and laying out a feast.

A feast the likes of which we will have never seen before. When Joe and I lived in Sheffield, we used to do some English teaching and some evangelism amongst the international students there. A lot of the international students were from places like China, Southeast Asia. And they were really interested to hear about what Christianity was about because they thought that it shaped our culture. Surprised, isn't it, to us to think that people would think that.

But they did. And so one of the things that Joe would do was she would teach English to the wives of the PhD students. Because the PhD students, they were in Sheffield University all the time.

They were learning the language. They were mixing with people who could speak English. They were picking up the language by necessity. But the wives stayed at home and mixed with the other wives from the same country and didn't really get exposed to the language.

[13:29] So Joe would teach them. And she would use the Bible to teach them how to speak English. Well, one day it got to the point where this family, the man had finished his PhD and the couple were going to go back home to China.

And they invited us over for a meal. We thought this was lovely. So we went across to their place. So I got invited to, I thought it was lovely because I got invited too. It wasn't just Joe. So I was a freeloader.

But we turned up. And they brought us into the lounge room. And they sat us down. And then the wife proceeded to go into the kitchen and prepare a meal for us. When it finally came out, it was a beautiful Chinese dish.

We thought, this is great. Wow. Never have we seen such or eaten such quality. Certainly not at the local Chinese restaurant that we, in the takeaway place. This was far in excess of that. And so we troghed in and ate our fill and loved it.

Little did we know that that was the first of many dishes. And the wife would only come out of the kitchen to give us the next dish or to watch us finish off the last one.

[14:38] And by the end of it, we were groaning with the effort it took us to partake of about 10 different dishes, of which we thought the first one was the only one.

And then they started to bring out the wine and the scotch and all the alcohol at the end for us to share a drink with them. We were just overwhelmed by their hospitality. It was unbelievable.

Our taste buds wanted to eat the food. But there was just way too much for us even to take in. It was an overwhelming thing. And so when you read this simple sentence, you prepare a table before me.

Read this. A God who delights in our presence and who delights in lavishing blessing upon us. So much so that our sides will groan as we try and take it all in.

You prepare a table. He then goes on and says, you anoint my head with oil. As Andrew said, Alex said, sorry.

[15:42] You know, this anointing with oil, we don't generally do that. He mentioned the concept of cradle cap. And I think we put baby oil on that. But probably not a, it's not allowed, is it, to make baby oil anymore?

I don't know. But, you know, we don't kind of use that concept. We don't use this whole anointing with oil thing. But it was a very hot, dry environment back then in that area. And so what they used to do is a refreshment after a long journey or a refreshment at the end of a day when someone, an honoured or an esteemed guest came, you would actually offer them oil to anoint their heads with. They would rub it on their faces, in their hair. And it was usually a scented oil, a special oil. You did it for special visitors, not just anybody, but the people that you actually really, really valued. People that you really esteemed. And that's what's happening here. David is saying that the welcome that we get from God is actually a welcome of someone who values, prizes us, esteems us.

It just seems totally the wrong way around, doesn't it? We're kind of thinking about the concept of a God who is all-powerful, through whom everything exists.

[17:00] And yet this is how he engages with us. Not only that, but just if you haven't got the sense of the extravagance of what's going on here.

David then goes on to say, my cup overflows. Are you a half cup full or a half empty kind of person? This cup isn't just full.

It's overflowing. Wine slopping everywhere. The neat freaks among us are probably getting nervous at this kind of imagery. But the focus here is on the extravagance of God.

The prodigal nature of God. If you think of Luke chapter 15, verses 20 to 24. The extravagant love of God for us. And think about how this works for us.

You know, we know this sense of wanting to pour out love on each other. Hannah came home unexpectedly this week. She went to a funeral, which is of a friend's father, was north of Newcastle.

[18:07] And her and her friends on this road trip decided they'd drop in on us on a, when was it? Wednesday night. Wednesday night we'd normally be at Bible study. Or we'd be in our pajamas watching television when she dropped in.

And thankfully, neither was the case. We were actually still dressed. And her and her friends just poured in. And we were delighted that she was there. Even unexpectedly we were delighted. And so we started getting stuff out of the cup. They haven't had dinner. So we started getting stuff out of the cupboards and the fridge. And started feeding Hannah and her friends. And really enjoying the company. And just so glad that she was with us again. Even if it was only for a couple of hours.

It was a delight to us. And to think that you are loved in that kind of way by God.

You are loved. The message of the psalm is that you are anticipated. And you can read in Ephesians chapter 1 verses 3 to 5.

[19:08] Where you'll find that that anticipation started before God even created the earth. Your arrival is being prepared for even now.

John chapter 14 verses 1 to 3. Where Jesus is preparing a room for you. Our carpenter saviour is building a room for you.

You are the focus of God's generosity. His outpouring of affection. His joy. This is the imagery that David's actually trying to...

And the feeling that David's trying to create in us. The reality of God's attitude toward us. But even as we read these words and recognize the reality of them.

There are two perspectives here that we actually need to deal with. You notice that I've actually jumped over one particular part of this verse. See there are two perspectives overlapped.

[20:15] And there are two perspectives that are mirrored in these particular verses. First is the overlapping. And that is the welcome home versus the presence of enemies.

Have you noticed the clash there? That there's this beautiful symbolism of what God is thinking about toward us. And his affection toward us. And yet there's a reality of the presence of enemies in our lives.

Where in verse 4 it was the hardships of life. Now in verse 5 it's actually become personal. There are people who are against us. And these two perspectives.

God's welcome home. God's welcoming embrace. Or the presence of my enemies. Which one will win in my thinking?

Which perspective wins? When you think about your own life. Do you feel the presence of God as the primary thing? Or do you feel the presence of your enemies?

[21 : 22] Think about that. When you think about your own life. Which perspective wins? The presence of your enemies? The reality of that?

Or God's joyful celebration. Does that drown out the presence of your enemies? Because that's what David is trying to show us in this psalm. He's trying to get us to celebrate the faithfulness of God.

His joyful celebration over us. In a way that drowns out the reality of our enemies. They're there. Yes. But the reality is a far greater God is for us.

That's the two perspectives that overlap. But then we also have two perspectives that are mirrored. You see we have the cup of blessing on the one hand versus the cup of wrath on the other.

I don't know about you but I don't like parties for myself. In particular I don't mind throwing parties for other people. I don't like parties for myself.

[22 : 22] I kind of feel uncomfortable when the focus is on me. And that's just in normal everyday life. Let alone the kind of person that I am if you were actually to dig under the surface.

I can give you a quick illustration of what that's like. If you just count the number of grey hairs on Joe's head versus the number of grey hairs on mine. You'll discover who has the hardest time of it in our relationship.

That's down to me. I know that. I don't want you to find out all the details of that. But that's the reality of it. We know that if we look inside ourselves. There are all kinds of dark corners that we just don't want anybody else to see.

So when I look at this concept of the cup of wrath versus the cup of blessing. Which is the kind of two images that go throughout the Old Testament. The cup of wrath is where God's judgment is righteous anger.

And his judgment that he's going to pour out on the people who have rejected him. Versus God's desire to bless his people. And to draw together a people of himself.

[23 : 31] Which cup do I deserve? Which cup do you deserve? Which cup does David say here is mine?

How is it that the cup that I deserved passed from me? Well, it happens because the cup of God's wrath was drained dry by my Savior.

On my behalf. And because he did that. Because Jesus died on the cross in my place. There is now only one cup destined for me.

Friends, we are loved. And we experience that love. Every day. For eternity. That's the reality.

Of what David is talking about here. When we talk about God's extravagant welcome. And move into starting to think about God's eternal provision.

[24 : 44] See, that's verse 5. Got another half of the talk to go yet. In verse 6, we read these words. David concludes his psalm by saying this. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. God's eternal provision begins now. And it's experienced through God's character.

We'll see in these verses. And God's very presence. Let's start with his character. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me.

If you look at these words. Like goodness. It means good, excellent, morally right. We kind of know what that word is. And I'll just point out that it means the same. It's the same word that God used to describe his creative work in Genesis 1.

So you get a sense of what it's about. It has a sense of excellence. And it has a moral element to it as well. Morally right. Goodness on the one hand.

[25 : 49] And then mercy. Which can be translated steadfast love. Or covenant faithfulness. Goodness and mercy. These attributes are relational.

They can only be seen and experienced in the context of relationship. As they're expressed by one person toward another. And only God expresses them perfectly. So goodness and mercy or steadfast love.

Can only be fully experienced in their fullness. In relationship with God. The way God expresses goodness and mercy toward us. It actually changes us as well.

He restores them in us. Even as he loves us. And even as he shows his love toward us. We can say those who have been shown mercy will show mercy. And Jesus told parables about this.

Those who are loved will love. And we can read John 3.16 to show the initiating love of God. For God so loved the world that he gave his son. And then we can read in John chapter 13, 34 and 35.

[26 : 52] Where Jesus anticipates that that love. As I have loved you. So you must love one another. God's character is contagious.

And it's more than contagious. Because as we do catch it. We actually become signposts that point back to him. God's character is contagious.

And God's presence is home. David concludes this psalm by saying this. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

It's really interesting that he finishes this way. Because the word dwell. You can see there's probably a number on it in your Bibles. Which you can look down to a footnote. And see alternative translations. But that word dwell is the same as the restore word.

In verse 3. So when David writes, He restores my soul. In the very end of the psalm.

[27 : 58] What we're reading is. A God who restores us to his presence. To return. Dwell or restore means to return to a previous better state.

I am being restored to who I should be. As I encounter God's character. And to where I belong.

As I return home. And to whom I belong with. As I enter into his presence. The promise of this psalm is this.

That where I feel broken. I shall be made whole. Where I feel guilty. I shall be forgiven. Where I feel ashamed.

I shall be lifted up. And where I feel lost. I'm heading home. In conclusion.

[29 : 03] I'll just say this. This simple psalm of David. Six verses long. It promises. The reality.

Of a God. Whose power. And plan. Encompasses the whole of human history. In fact the whole of existence. And that the purpose of that God.

That faithful God. Is to welcome you home. To remove every barrier. To you being in his presence.

To accompany you through every hardship. And difficulty. An enemy you have to face in life.

Between now. And when we are restored. To being with him face to face.

And to finally. To finally. Welcome you home. Friends we are loved. And we are loved by a God.

[30 : 03] Who is drawing us home. Let me pray. Father God. Father God.

These promises are. Almost too good to believe. But if I'm faced with the option. Of there being. A God amongst gods. Then. how more perfect and beautiful can you possibly be than any other option that my imagination could come up with.

And if I'm faced with a concept of life without a God like you, I just don't see where the meaning is.

So I pray, Lord, that you would help myself and all of us here to not only embrace the reality of what David is saying, but to take it to heart and to recognize that this God that David describes is you, our God.

That you are more than following through dutifully on a promise, but you are a God who delights in showing extravagant love toward us.

[31 : 26] You are a God who is drawing us home and is anticipating our arrival far more than we could possibly realize. Lord, may these be the truths that our hearts sing each day.

May these be the truths, Lord, that drive out our fears. In Jesus' name, amen.