

My Cup Overflows

Psalm 23

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Hampshire

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Psalm 23: The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Forty years ago, when my oldest child was just three years old, and his brother and sister had not even been thought of yet, I worked for a time as the food service manager at a church camp in Texas. It was pretty much like all church camps everywhere – rustic buildings, nestled in clusters among oaks and pine trees, and acres of open grassland for frisbee and volleyball and long walks. My job was to plan the meals and lead the cooking for church groups, and I am proud to say that I developed skills in that job that have stayed with me for the rest of my life. We lived in a little house right on the camp property and I walked just a quarter of a mile down the dusty camp road to the

chow hall to cook breakfast each morning. I welcomed the simplicity of that life just then.

The manager of the camp was a retired minister named Fred Babb. He handled all the bookings, managed the finances, kept the swimming pool in good working order, and he loved to mow the open fields on his tractor. I tell you this story because of Fred's dogs. He had two German shepherds, one named Goodness and the other named Mercy. He said he had chosen those names because he knew that goodness and mercy would follow him. As it happens, he also had a little dachshund, whose custody he had received in a divorce. The dachshund's name was Frieda. So, whenever Fred got into his pickup truck for a drive to the post office in town, he would whistle to the dogs and call out, "Goodness! Mercy! Frieda! Come on, jump in!" The big shepherds would jump into the back of the truck, and Fred would bend down to pick up Frieda and hoist her onto the front seat to ride beside him. Whenever he called out "Goodness! Mercy! Frieda!" it grated on my ears. It seemed to me that Frieda's name just didn't fit with the others. I thought she should have been called Shirley, so Fred could say that Shirley, Goodness, and Mercy followed him all the days of his life.

Today's scripture is probably the best-known passage in the whole Bible. People recognize this beautiful psalm even if they don't go to church and don't own a Bible. You may have memorized it as a child, as I did. Many churches focus on this psalm at least once a year in

worship, and we hear it at every memorial service. The well-worn words are comforting through their sheer familiarity, and the pastoral images are beautiful and calming. The Bible study group told me this week, when they think of this psalm, they focus on the still waters. We could all use a little of that comfort right now.

As we consider this scripture this morning, I think we have to begin with the sheep. I learned a lot about sheep this week as I prepared for this sermon, and so you should learn something, too. Some of it is fascinating and surprising. Did you know that sheep can distinguish different facial expressions in humans, and they can detect anxiety in the faces of their fellow sheep? They can recognize the faces of up to 50 different sheep and remember them for up to two years. When sheep experience stress or isolation, they show signs of depression, such as hanging their heads. Like us, sheep experience fear when they're separated from their flock or when they are approached by strangers. Sheep's heart rates have been found to increase by 20 beats per minute when they are unable to see any members of their own flock.ⁱ Is any of this sounding familiar to you as you sit isolated from the people you care about? We need our own flock, and we need a shepherd, too, just like sheep do, to keep us safe and together, to ensure we are well fed, to lead us to those still waters, and to guard us against all the scary things out there that might really be out to get us.

But then the psalm shifts away from sheep images to human ones. It says, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." I think this is such a striking picture: the psalmist, the great King David, getting ready for the fight ahead, a battle that could end in victory or in death, and God appears on the battlefield to prepare a meal for him. Not just a quick meal, mind you, but a bounteous feast, with a cup that overflows with blessings. And there, with enemies threatening all around him, David sits right down and has a picnic.ⁱⁱ What confidence this shows in God, to set aside anxiety about the life-threatening day ahead and feast on the banquet that God has provided.

Can we do that? Can we set aside our fears and anxieties and just focus on the blessings God has given us? Knowing that the world is truly dangerous, that our earthly lives are finite, can we just rest in the love and care of God and feast on the bountiful meal that God lays before us? Can we be content with whatever lies ahead, knowing that God has always provided for us?

So, now we come to the promise of this psalm, the promise that makes it so comforting to us in the darkest times of our lives. It says, **IF** we depend on God to be our shepherd, to keep us safe and together, and **IF** we can set aside our very human anxieties and focus on the bountiful feast that God sets before us, **THEN** we can be sure that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will live in God's house forever. Goodness and Mercy, God's protective

shepherds, following us around wherever we go. Isn't that what we all yearn for?

God's goodness is greater than whatever is worrying us now. No matter how anxious we are at being separated from our flock, no matter what enemies surround us, even if we feel we are walking in the valley of the shadow of death, we don't need to fear any evil, for God is there with us. So, sit right down on the battlefield of life and have a picnic. The table is spread before us. Our cup overflows with God's mercies. And we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen

ⁱ <https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-clothing/wool-industry/hidden-lives-sheep/>

ⁱⁱ Credit to Mike Goree for the idea of the picnic on the battlefield.