

The Promises of God

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. As you've probably worked out by now, my name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here, and it's my joy to be opening up this wonderful and familiar psalm for us this morning. It would be really helpful for you to have it open in front of you, even though I'm sure many of you probably know it off by heart. It would still be great if you had it open in front of you. And as you do that, let me pray for God's help.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you are with us by your Holy Spirit. And we pray that this morning, as we spend time in your word, we would know your presence with us, that you would help us to understand it rightly, and that each of us would be applying it to our hearts this morning. In Jesus' name, amen.

And if you know me, actually, even if you don't know me, probably just looking at me, this won't be a surprise to you. I love cake. And I'm really lucky because my wife, Katie, she loves baking, and she's really good at it. I mean, she really is very good at it. And I hope that some of you will get to try her lemon drizzle cake one day. It's really good. But when I'm at home, I know that my wife is baking because I can smell it, right? You might know that familiar smell of a baking cake in the oven. You can almost taste it. If you're lucky, you might even get to taste it as you lick the spoon before the cake comes out of the oven. But that smell and that taste of the cake on the spoon, it's not the cake, is it? Not yet. It's just a flavor of it.

We just can't help ourselves, can we? It's just what we're like. We're so impatient. We want to experience the cake now. A cake is a silly example, but it's true in life. It's everywhere.

Buy now, pay later, keep the instant gratification monkey happy. Lots of good things in life, and we want to have them now. This Psalm, Psalm 23, is probably one of, if not the most familiar and loved passages in all of Scripture. And it's got me thinking over the last couple of weeks, in the Christian life, what can we expect from God now? And what are God's promises for the future?

[2 : 37] The now and the not yet promises of God. That might sound slightly trivial or even academic, but this really affects everything for the Christian. Just a couple of weeks ago, I spent a weekend down south with some friends, and they go to this church where the emphasis really is on what is for now. Chasing after healing and blessing and experience. So much so that sadly, they really, I think, struggle to engage with ordinary life. Ordinary life, which is for all of us, isn't it? Marked by challenges and trials and suffering. These friends of mine, they love Jesus.

The church that they go to loves Jesus, and they want to make Jesus known. But I worry that as they emphasize and chase blessings in this life, they miss out on the reality of eternal blessing. Because in conversation with them, it's really clear that many of them are actually facing massive disappointments. Swept up in this language of heaven come down. But if they're honest, they are struggling and suffering in life. That tumor that they're praying for continues to grow.

The family dynamic remains broken. The trauma remains painful. And because of the way that they're taught, it just doesn't add up for them. Because every Sunday, they're promised this sort of freedom from suffering blessing today. Blessings that ultimately aren't actually guaranteed until eternity.

That's not to say, of course, that the Christian life is one without blessing or healing or experiences of God. As we walk through this psalm together this morning, we'll see that being a Christian, that knowing Jesus, it is really good. But it is not a promise of a suffering-free life. Not yet.

[4 : 43] So we're going to do two things this morning as we approach this psalm. Firstly, just a sort of note on how to read these psalms that we've been as David and as Jesus. That's sort of a recap of where we've already been in this series.

And then secondly, we're going to just read this psalm for ourselves. And as I mentioned, we're in this series, the King in all his glory, looking at Psalms 20 to 24. And we've got to ask the question, how do we actually read these psalms well?

Instead of just reading ourselves straight into them, with each of these psalms, if you have a look at them, and even just spread across that page, the italics at the top of each of these psalms has something like a psalm of David, or a variation on that theme.

And those subtitles in the psalms, they're there in the original Hebrew, so we've got to pay attention to them. This is his psalm, David's psalm. He wrote it. David, the King of Israel.

But of course, Psalm 23 is such a personal psalm, isn't it? I mean, just scan your eyes over the text, see how many I's and me's there are in it. I think there are 16 in the NIV.

[5 : 51] Someone's probably going to tell me after the service that they've counted and I've got that wrong, but there are lots of I's and me's. And I don't know about you, but maybe it's because of that, the temptation for me has always just to immediately make this psalm all about me.

But before this can become my psalm, before it can be your psalm, it is first David's. And he knew God's leading and his blessing, even in verse 4, through the darkest valley.

And David did face dark valleys, not least for the challenge for the throne of Israel. He was anointed, chosen by God, but then he was hounded and hunted by his enemies.

And he then experienced God's victory in that battle. And so verse 5, verse 5, it reads like the celebration of David becoming king. It's like his coronation.

You prepare a table for me. It's a great celebration feast in the presence of my enemies, as David has won his throne, defeating those who claimed it in his place. And finally, we see you anoint my head with oil.

[6 : 58] That is the ritual of kingmaking, the symbolic setting apart and crowning. This is David celebrating becoming king. It's a personal psalm, but can you read that as yourself?

Right, it definitely doesn't map onto my experience. I am not the king of Israel. But notice how it also isn't David's experience. Because in verse 3, he writes that he is guided along the right path.

But we know that David wasn't always on the right path. He wasn't without sin. Elsewhere, we read that he was a rapist and a murderer. And yet, we read at the end of this psalm that he claims that he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

For David, he's talking about his desire to be in the temple, really. For the ancient Israelite, that's the Lord's house. But we still have to ask, how could this rapacious, murderous king possibly dwell with the perfect and just Lord of the universe?

And how on earth does he expect to do that forever? Well, this is David's psalm, but it is also Jesus' psalm.

[8 : 13] And it's only because of Jesus, only because David trusted the promise that a perfect king would follow him, a perfect king who could really claim this psalm as his own.

It was only trusting that a perfect king like that would come and deal with his sin. Only that way could David boldly claim that that's where he'd be forever. And so we see this is really Jesus' psalm. All of these psalms, they're Jesus' psalms. And it is my prayer this morning that we would see him in all his glory. He is the one who was led by his father.

He is the one who was given all that he needed. The one who truly followed along right paths. He's the one who went into the darkest valley of all and faced the wrath of the father in David's place.

He's the one who rose again and who was crowned king of all creation. See how he enjoys the eternal feast at the eternal table. How he really does dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[9 : 19] It's all about Jesus. He's the king. So this is David's psalm and it's Jesus' psalm. And only in Jesus, only in Christ, can it become our psalm too.

Maybe you're here this morning and you love the poetry of Psalm 23. Perhaps you grew up with it or you've heard it at a funeral and it's a motive. It's wonderful language and you want to be able to claim the wonderful blessings of it for your own.

But if you're honest, Jesus isn't where you look. You're not trusting in him for forgiveness of your sin or for freedom.

I want you to know this morning that this psalm can be yours too. If you, like David, trust that God would do something about your sin, that God has done something about your sin in Jesus, then you would be born again to this living hope of Christ in you, the hope of glory.

That way, in Christ, this psalm can be yours. As we walk through it together and see the glory of our king, as we see Jesus.

[10 : 35] Because not only does Jesus pray this prayer with us, it is also to him that we pray it. Because we'll see he is our shepherd king in verses 1 to 4. And he is our host king in verses 5 and 6.

We've seen how David might have prayed the psalm. We've seen how Jesus might have read it. So let's spend the rest of our time this morning. Why don't we just reading it for ourselves? Here's our first image.

In verse 1, the Lord is my shepherd. And just notice the contrast there. A shepherd is the lowest of the low. That might not be true today.

I guess it's probably not. But in ancient Israel, it was a grim and a dangerous job. It was very often given to the youngest son. It's like an unwanted hand-me-down piece of clothing or a toy.

The job of the shepherd, it's like the hand-me-down job. No one wants to do it anymore. The job of the youngest son. The Lord, on the other hand, the king, he sits on the throne.

[11 : 35] He is most exalted. And so a shepherd king, it's an image of great contrast, isn't it? And it's an image that David was uniquely familiar with.

David, who had been the youngest son, a shepherd boy, and now king. And he understands this picture of almighty God, lord of all, eternal king, stooping down as a lowly shepherd to care for his sheep, his people.

And that's exactly what Christ did for us in coming to dwell among us. It's why Jesus could describe himself as the good shepherd in the gospels as he did. And that means that we are the sheep, prone to wander aimlessly from the loving God who created us, unable to find our way home on our own, or to provide for ourselves and our greatest needs.

For that is what the shepherd king does for his sheep. A shepherd, he provides for his sheep's greatest needs. See in the rest of verse one, I lack nothing.

I've got to ask, what does it really mean to lack nothing? Because I guess some of you sitting there, maybe this morning thinking, well, I am in Christ, but I don't lack nothing.

[12 : 57] There's lots of things that I want in life. And there are those who would give you just the answer maybe that you want. Take this verse, apply it with a broad brush, claim these things now, regardless of the not yet.

If you trust in God as your shepherd king, they might say, well, you have all you want. This is what the verse says. Any blessing that you want, material or otherwise, you will lack nothing.

Trust this shepherd and it's yours. But here's the thing. Those things that we feel that we are in want of, we don't actually need Jesus for them, do you?

Even to be incredibly wealthy or to have the healthiest relationships, to be the most popular or have the healthiest body, to be the best looking or the strongest. Lots of people successfully pursue these sorts of worldly goals without Jesus.

So what does it mean to lack nothing now? Well, read on in verse two. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

[14 : 02] He leads me beside quiet waters. Such a lovely image that, isn't it? Maybe you picture yourself in a lovely green meadow with a peaceful pool to drink from, a sort of oasis.

The perfect place to restore your soul. It's a wonderful scene. And let's remember the metaphor here. It's a shepherd meeting his sheep's greatest needs. It's good green grass to eat.

That's what they need. It's clean water to drink. It's what they need. It's what the sheep desperately need. And this is what our shepherd king leads the sheep into. They lack nothing of their greatest need.

And so what is our greatest need now? Is it those material things? Well, the Bible is pretty clear about this. What we really need is to be restored to a relationship with our loving heavenly father, the king.

That's refreshment for our soul. But you see, God, he's perfect. He's perfect in every single way. And because we have walked away from him, we are not.

[15 : 06] For our relationship with him to be restored, something had to happen. Because God is a God of perfect justice, he is perfectly just. He couldn't simply overlook our rebellion.

And a price had to be paid. And Jesus paid that price on the cross. What that means is that in Christ, we can now truly say in the rest of verse three, he refreshes my soul.

Our greatest need is met. If we trust in Jesus, our sins are forgiven. The price is paid. The relationship is restored. The soul is refreshed.

Will you trust him? And more than that, as we read on, because just as Jesus defeated death and rose again and was given new life, so we too in Christ can be given new life.

And as we are still in verse three, what does he do? He guides me along right paths. That's what the new life looks like. It's not that the Christian will always follow down those right paths.

[16:15] We know that's not true. But in so much as we trust and follow him, that is where he leads us. Will you follow him? Why?

Well, in the rest of verse three, it's for his name's sake. It's so that those around us might see how wonderful and gracious our God is.

Not for our sake, not because we pulled up our socks and worked a bit harder and walked down all the right paths on our own, but for his name's sake, that people might be pointed to him who guides us.

Friends, this is so much better than any material provision we could possibly ask for. I guess maybe you even know that that's true, but do you believe it? As you think of the things that you want for, whether that's a new car or a new house or a wife or a husband or a perfectly restored body, let me invite you to dream about those things.

Do you really believe that this promise is a much more abundant provision for you than any of that could possibly be?

[17:28] Those things are so precarious in this life. They can so easily dissolve before us and they cannot refresh our souls.

And so come. Come to the shepherd king. He is the only one who can provide for our greatest needs. These are wonderful verses.

And it's a wonderful image. The shepherd and his sheep in the peaceful meadow by the still waters wandering down paths without obstacle. It's the sort of image, actually, that you often get on like a Christian calendar.

I don't know if you've seen that, like a beautiful picture of a meadow or some still waters. Maybe the verses from this psalm even quoted at the top. Maybe it's on a poster or promoting a summer sermon series in the psalms.

I was very happy to see, actually, this week on Instagram that our post pointing to this Sunday, pointing to Psalm 23 here at Brunnsfield, the image wasn't all still waters and green meadows.

[18:30] Because that image ignores the realism of Psalm 23. Life simply isn't always like that. Well, my life isn't like that. Is your life like that, all meadows and still waters?

But see in the psalm, our shepherd king doesn't only provide our greatest need. He is also with us in our suffering.

See in verse 4, That was true of David.

A life marked by suffering as his enemies chased him by the fear of death. Of course, that was supremely true in Jesus, as we saw last week in Psalm 22, who suffered terribly, where he hung on the cross, where he cried out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

As he took the sins of the world, my sin, your sin. As he took those on his shoulders, he was walking the deepest valley. The valley, as some translations have it, and as you have a footnote in the Pew Bibles, the valley of the shadow of death, he knew that he need not fear evil.

[19:47] For though in that moment he looked most defeated, he was in fact most victorious. So that you and I might not face death, but only its shadow.

Billy Barnhouse. Billy Barnhouse was an American pastor. He and his wife had four children under the age of 12 when she was diagnosed with cancer.

And on the day of her funeral, as they drove to the church, Billy read this psalm. He read it to his children. He got to verse 4.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. And his middle son interrupted, Dad, what's the shadow of death?

And just at that moment, a lorry passed by their car, blocking the sun, casting its shadow. And so Billy responded, would you rather be hit by a lorry or by its shadow?

[20:48] Looking curiously at his father, the son replied, well, the shadow, of course. Your mother has not been defeated by death, but only its shadow.

Because she trusted in Jesus and he took the full force of the lorry for her. You have nothing to fear. Friends, in Christ, there is no fear in death.

Will you trust him? And as we face it, will we know in the rest of verse 4, for you are with me.

For the sheep, it is the presence of the shepherd that reassures them in the valley. Notice it is here that the psalm becomes increasingly personal, moving from he to you.

You are with me. How important that we know that in the valleys. Jesus, the good shepherd, by his Holy Spirit, he is with us.

[21 : 54] Whatever suffering it is that you are facing today, know that in Christ, our shepherd king is right there with us. And what does his presence offer us?

Well, look at the rest of verse 4. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. These are the tools of the shepherd to protect and to correct, to keep the sheeps on the right path, to ensure that they continue to trust in him.

And what do they do? They bring comfort in the valley of suffering. Notice it's not that the sheep do not suffer, but rather that there is comfort in the suffering.

These blessings are not the cake. Not yet. They're the tantalizing smell of the oven, the lick of the spoon, the foretaste.

For those Christians who emphasize what God does for me today, healing and blessing and experience, especially for them, and if that's you here today, an especially important truth for you, because I've seen it ruin people's faith.

[23 : 06] If you're not careful, this could be you, it could be your friends. The disappointment when that is what you expect from God. In your earnest prayer, expecting that whatever suffering you are facing might just be removed.

If that's you, well, it may be only a matter of time before you give up. Because that is not the promise. And don't hear me wrongly. It is absolutely good to pray for miraculous blessing in the midst of suffering.

We're commanded to do that. We've done that this morning. And God does heal and he does bless and we do experience him today. But he is not a genie in a bottle.

He is not a vending machine of worldly blessings. He is the shepherd king. And he promises wonderfully to bring comfort with the very greatest blessing in this life, his presence.

And so ultimately, friends, now would we take refuge in him? Would we trust in him? He's a shepherd king. He provides for his sheep's greatest needs.

[24 : 18] And he's a shepherd king who is right there present in our suffering. And he is also, if you come to verse 5, you'll see that the metaphor here changes as he's pictured as a host king.

Have a look at verse 5 with me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. We'll see how the picture becomes of an eternal not yet.

Having walked through that valley, this is where he leads us, to the heavenly banquet where the cake is ready. Now, I've often come to this bit of the psalm and actually been forced to sort of ignore it.

I'm very happy for the Lord to be my shepherd. I actually even quite like the idea of him being an epic dinner party host too. But I definitely don't want my enemies to be there. Right? That's awkward, isn't it?

So what's going on? What's the host hosting? Well, as we thought about at the beginning, for David, this looks like his coronation feast as he becomes king.

[25 : 22] And that was in the presence of his enemies. Right? It's a wonderful picture of the host king blessing David and his cup overflowing as the people too were blessed.

And his enemies were there because they're the ones that he had defeated in his claim to the throne. But the final promise was always that God would send a forever king.

One who would defeat death, the ultimate enemy. One who would reign eternally. For Jesus, this is a picture of his forever coronation.

The one who would be crowned the eternal king. And so for us, as we read these verses, if we are in Christ, then what is true of him is also true of us.

We've just read that, haven't we, in Ephesians chapter 1. That we're adopted into his family. What is true of him is true of us. If he has died, we have died and we will die.

[26 : 23] If he rose again, then we have risen and we will rise. If he sits at the right hand of the father, we sit and will sit at the right hand of the father. If he reigns, then we reign and will reign.

If his cup overflows, our cup overflows and will overflow. It's a beautiful picture of the now and the not yet in Christ. And the promise here is that as we enter into the eternal, the eternal not yet, we will be able to say, see as we read on into verse 6, surely your goodness and love will follow or have followed me all the days of my life.

As the host welcomes us into the eternal not yet and points to his work throughout our lives. I was listening to a podcast the other day and they were talking about this guy Salman Rushdie. Rushdie was a writer and in 1988 he wrote a novel that spoke irreverently of Mohammed. And as a result of that, there was a death warrant issued by the Iranian state, which obviously put Rushdie's life at serious risk.

In fact, the reason that he was being talked about on this podcast is because just recently he was attacked and hospitalized, probably as a result of that decades old now death warrant. It's a pretty horrific story, actually.

[27 : 43] But the point for us, you see, wherever he went after that death threat was issued, Rushdie was escorted by bodyguards. You can picture him even going to dinner at a friend's house, these two huge men flanking him on either side.

And maybe it's a bit twee, but I like to think of these two bodyguards, goodness and love. If I'm honest, I barely notice that they're there most of the time, God's goodness and his love. But they follow me at my back just like two divine bodyguards. Certainly it's my experience that as I look back and see God's goodness and love have touched my life over and over again. He has been so gracious and so loving to me in my foolishness. And yet rarely did I see it at the time. And as I look ahead, it's so easy for me to forget that his goodness and his love are with me. But they are right there with me. And he promises that they will be in Christ all the days of my life. And so in this psalm, this is a picture of David, a picture of Jesus, a picture of the believer entering into the eternal banquets and looking back and seeing how their host has always been providing for them.

[29 : 08] Friends, in Christ, this is coming home to the wonderful presence of the host king who welcomes his people at this glorious eternal banquet where the cake is finally ready.

Just as we finish, it was just a couple of days ago, Alistair's prayed about it. This psalm was read at Gordon's funeral.

And the life shaping transformation that this psalm can have in someone's life was just made so clear for all of us that were there. We heard stories about a man who knew that this psalm was true for him in Christ.

Who knew that his greatest need in life had been met. Who lived a life led by the shepherd king. Who lived a life knowing the comforting presence of his shepherd king, even in his suffering. A man who now knows the glory of the not yet. Who lives reigning with his host king at the eternal banquets.

[30 : 24] Able to look back on a life marked by goodness and love. Now home with the host king forever. Friends, cake is a wonderful thing.

And the foretaste of it is a joy, the smell of the oven, the lick of the spoon. But it's not yet the real thing. For us, in Christ, this is our psalm too.

Even now, in Christ, we are the sheep. Our greatest need is provided for. And he is with us in our suffering today. That is just a foretaste of heaven.

So that if we trust in him, we will one day be welcomed by him. Into the eternal, not yet. Just before we sing, let me pray.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this wonderful psalm. Lord, we thank you for Jesus, the king in whom it finds its fulfillment.

[31 : 32] Lord, we're sorry for where we have wandered like sheep. And we are so grateful that you have done everything to bring us home. Lord, would you be with us by your Holy Spirit.

Comfort us now in our suffering. And we do ask that we would know your healing and your blessing. That we might experience you now. But ultimately, Lord, help us to look forward to that eternal, not yet banquet.

Keep us safely trusting in you, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.