

## Comfort My People

### Psalm 23

Question: Why is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm so powerful?

Two memories come to my mind when I hear the question, “Why is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm so powerful?” The first is an event that has been repeated dozens of times in my experience as a pastor. The funeral service begins. I speak some words of introduction and possibly a prayer. Then, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” There is palpable change in the room – an intensity of feeling you can touch.

The second memory is something I have experienced only on a few occasions. I’ll be meeting with family members after the death of a loved one. Everyone has gathered to share stories and memories and to plan the funeral service. Then, someone says, “We don’t want the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.” It’s overused and too sentimental. So, I use other texts and the service is very meaningful.

I’ve experienced the power of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in a lonely hospital room, a crowded funeral service, and the silent mystery of a personal retreat. Part of its power is tradition and familiarity. Maybe it was your grandmother’s favorite passage of scripture? That’s probably also why some people find it overused or overly sentimental. Either way, by its inclusion or intentional exclusion, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm seems to have a powerful presence. Is it powerful or meaningful for you? Why?

I find the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm powerful for many reasons. First of all, it is a poem. Poetic language tends to be porous language. It invites us to move into it -- inside its imagery. We can walk in the green pastures and immerse ourselves in its still waters. The psalm invites us to make it our own. It is deeply personal “The Lord is MY shepherd. I lack nothing. [My shepherd] guides ME through green pastures and still waters and restores MY soul.

That’s pretty appealing if you’re a sheep. What about people? What are the human corollaries to the sheep promises of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm? What of our needs does the God of this psalm meet? In his hierarchy of needs, psychologist Abraham Maslow suggested that there is a pyramid effect regarding human needs. The lower, more foundational, needs were met before the higher ones could be addressed. The foundational physical needs -- food, water, and shelter-- come first. Then, the need for security and safety can be addressed. After that, we give attention to social, communal, relational needs, etc. Finally, when all these needs have been met, human beings can address the need for self-fulfillment and meaning in life. For example, security needs are not the highest priority for a person who is starving!

The God of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm meets all these needs –food, water, shelter, safety, relationship, companionship, and intimacy. God enables us to face the fear of death with confidence. Our faith in God is vindicated even in the presence of our enemies. We are safe and secure. Ultimately, we are given a calling -- the anointing of oil – just as the king was anointed with oil as a sign of his special vocation. There is the promise of abundance and protection throughout all of life and ultimately a home with God.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is also powerful in our lives for a reason more intrinsic to the passage itself. It conveys the promise of comfort from the presence of God who is powerful and personal. Many of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century struggle intellectually with the idea of God being personal – or anything like a person at all. It might be worthwhile to take a moment explore this idea.

Albert Einstein talked about *supra-personal* values within the universe. Theologian Paul Tillich identified God as the *ultimate concern* of people. Their understanding of God is more intellectually satisfying than what we might call the traditional Judeo-Christian theistic picture of God. This is a God you can believe in with your whole mind – a God who is Mystery and unimaginable Being.

The Bible does use this kind of cosmic imagery for God on many occasions, yet the more common biblical image for God is personal. The Bible usually depicts God in *theistic* terms – as a particular being with human-like attributes. People have also always longed for a personal God to comfort and care for them in times of trouble. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm reflects such a God and that is one reason for its power.

At a 1940 conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion, Einstein delivered a paper with the title “Science and Religion.” The conference was held in New York City, September 9, 10, and September 11 of that year. In this paper, Einstein effectively rejected the idea of a personal God. His arguments, though not original with him, were very compelling especially coming from the mouth of this cultural and scientific icon. They also got a lot of publicity and that did not sit well with many in the religious community.

Several years later, Tillich wrote a response to Einstein’s paper (Tillich’s *Theology of Culture*), though not in defense of the religious community. In his response, he actually agreed with all of Einstein’s arguments. Why did he do that? He did it because Tillich was a very smart man! Finally, he asked the fundamental question why the symbol of the personal should be used at all about God. Tillich used Einstein’s own term to make his case. The term was *supra-personal*. Einstein acknowledged the reality of supra-personal values in the fabric of the universe.

Tillich used Einstein’s term, but questioned the impersonal context of it by asking:

If the supra-personal is only *It* and not at all *He [She]*, then it is no longer perceived as supra-personal, but as sub-personal, less than human. Such a neutral sub-personal cannot grasp the center of our personality; it can satisfy our aesthetic feeling or our intellectual needs, but it cannot convert our will, it cannot overcome our loneliness, anxiety, and despair. For as the philosopher Schelling says: “Only a person can heal a person.” This is the reason that the symbol of the Personal God is indispensable for living religion. (*Theology of Culture*, p. 131-2)

Whether you agree with Tillich or Einstein, it seems a compelling argument that much of the power of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm comes just from what Tillich says – the ability of a personal God to “overcome our loneliness, anxiety, and despair.” The God of this psalm brings healing.

Fifteen years ago, Kathy and I traveled to Bogotá, Colombia with our son Jonathan to adopt our daughter Lisa, we encountered a number of obstacles. One of these required me to stay a second week in Bogotá while Kathy and Jonathan returned home. There would be additional trips back and forth for both Kathy and me and, yes, we did eventually bring Lisa to the United States and, five years ago, all the way to Kansas City. The first night after Kathy and Jonathan had returned home, I was sitting holding Lisa, who was about two months old. I was sitting with a group of adoptive parents and we were sharing our stories. Suddenly, a fire alarm sounded and the reality struck me that it was my room that was ablaze. A candle, burning because of the power outage at the hotel, had fallen onto the bed and the room was consumed in destructive smoke and fire.

Everything I had except the clothes Lisa and I were wearing and some I had washed out by hand was lost. I managed to retrieve her paperwork from the desk drawer in the room. Thankfully, our passports and my wallet were in my pocket. My greatest anxiety was that somehow we would lose Lisa as a consequence of the fire. That was a lonely night – a time in the valley of the shadow. Suddenly, I pictured the faces of family and friends. I felt the feel of community. They were with me and I felt comforted. There was a very personal aspect to that inter-personal connectedness between us. God had brought healing to me.

Each of us enters the life of this psalm with our own hopes and expectations. Where in your life do you long for comfort? How important is it for you to think of God as Comforter, one who makes us feel better? Here's an important question: is the comfort we desire sometimes the last thing we need? What else do you need from God?

Comfort is not always what we need. Sometimes receiving comfort can lead to a sense of dependence on another. Biblical faith is never about fostering dependence. YAHWEH set people free! Freedom is still the hallmark of truth faith.

The Bible never explains God, never seeks to prove God's existence or understand God's origin. It assumes God and all our language for God is symbolic. Using symbolic language is the only way to describe the *supranatural*. The biblical description of the universe no longer reflects our knowledge. So, the idea of God as a Being who lives just beyond the clouds, keeps score in our lives, and pops into the world from time to time either to fix things or to wreck havoc no longer rings true for many people.

As a result, many people, including many faithful followers of Jesus, are inclined to discard entirely the sense of a God who is, among many other descriptions, also personal. As fond as I am of intellectual integrity, I believe that we are in danger of "throwing out the baby with the bath water." We risk allowing suspicion and fear of untenable doctrines, repressive creeds, and oppressive institutions lose for us the blessings present in the image of a personal God. Tillich's words in response to Einstein have helped me tremendously to keep a sense of my integrity intellectually and also to embrace that personal aspect of God who "converts [my] will, [and] overcomes [my] loneliness, anxiety, and despair."

Without healing, without peace, we are ruled by anxiety, separated from our true selves. To follow Jesus, we must become ourselves. The power of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is to help us let go our fear of fear, and be our best selves even in the darkness of life, even in the valley of the shadow of death. Peace is the gift of self. We find it in community. We discover it within ourselves as we choose to step into our fear and walk by faith.

The gift you and I have to share with this world is the peace we discover in our lives, the experience we have of the living God, and the willingness to walk with others through their valleys of shadowed darkness. The hope we can give to others is the hope we embrace ourselves that "goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and," in some mysterious and unknown way, "we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."