

Personal Reality with the Living God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, thank you for tuning back in as it were. We had a remarkable series of coincidences this morning, technologically, and our service was interrupted.

So I'm going to preach from Psalm 23, and I pray and hope that it blesses your soul and the Lord will draw near to you and speak to you through it. So the title of the sermon is Personal Reality with a Living God.

And that's a phrase that I heard, or I read a pastor in the States use in an article recently. And it just got ahold of me. Personal reality with a living God.

We can be incredibly good at impersonal reality with a theoretical God. Do you know what I mean? We can go through the motions of spirituality.

We know our Bibles, we can say our prayers, but we can do all of that without the risen Christ actually entering into our experience and grabbing ahold of our hearts and our emotions and our perceptions with all of His goodness and power.

[1 : 0 7] And it can begin to feel a bit empty sometimes. So what would it even be like to live moment by moment, day by day, fully aware of God with us and God for us?

What would it be like to move through this new year with all of its unknowns, fully conscious of God's smile in Christ on us?

Well, personal reality with the living God is what Psalm 23 is all about. There's just, there's nothing theoretical, nothing impersonal here.

So let's read the Psalm together. Psalm 23, a Psalm of David. 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 His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

[2 : 1 3] 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 shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That is the word of the Lord.

Now let's notice a couple things first, because it's good when we come to any passage of the Bible to just spend some time noticing. Noticing is a great habit to get into. Just keeps our eyes open to what God is doing.

So let's notice first how incredibly personal this Psalm is. If you look at the first line and the last line, you'll see the only two instances in this Psalm of God's name.

Every other instance of referring to God is He or you. But here we have the Lord is my shepherd, and at the bottom I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[3 : 1 4] Now, capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D, of course underneath that, when you encounter all Cap Lord in the Old Testament, what lies below that in Hebrew is the name of God, Yahweh.

It's His covenantal name, and a covenant is a deeply relational, deeply personal thing. And so using His covenant name at the beginning and end is like putting two personal relational bookends around this Psalm as if to say everything that comes between is about personal reality with your God.

Of course, reality is an objective thing, right? So reality is out there, it just is. Whether or not we like it or not, we can't change what just is.

We can't change the objective reality. So when I'm talking about personal reality, what I mean is when the objective reality breaks into our subjective existence, our experience, our emotions, our perceptions in our heart, because sometimes we go through this Christian life and our subjective experience, the way we feel, doesn't line up with what's actually true.

So three points tonight or today this morning, whatever time it is. Number one, what is the reality? Number two, how can I be sure?

[4 : 51] And number three, where is it going? Because reality has a trajectory, it's going somewhere. Number one, what is the reality? In Psalm 23, all of the hopes and all of the comforts of this Psalm, which are many, they flow out of its first statement of reality, right at verse one, the Lord is my shepherd.

And if that weren't true, none of the rest of it would be true either. It's actually, this is a Psalm about journeys. Sheep journeying through from one pastor to the next.

We're a traveler's journeying in foreign lands, being taken in by a host, as we'll see in a little while. And life is often, so often, by poets and songs, it's likened to a journey, isn't it?

And our journey through this life is a guided one. Now our life as Christians, our life is not guided by impersonal principles.

And our life is not guided by our own fickle hearts. We have a shepherd, a personal, living shepherd.

[6 : 07] Now any other guide would leave us lost, lonely, and unsatisfied. We would say, my heart is my shepherd, I shall never have enough. But if the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Now it doesn't just say, it's not just saying what the Lord is like. It doesn't say the Lord is a shepherd, or the Lord is like a shepherd. It says, the Lord is my shepherd. And now, now we're doing real theology.

So a theology that just speculates about who God is, impersonally or theoretically, is just a half theology, really. And an impersonal, theoretical God never comforted anyone, never saved anyone.

But true theology says, on the one hand, who is God? And on the other hand, who is God for me? Now we're talking theology. It's one thing to know who Bill Gates is.

And it's another thing entirely to know that Bill Gates has written you into his will. That's the sort of difference we're talking about. And God is so determined to be a personal reality to you that he enrobed himself in flesh and blood.

[7 : 27] Jesus of Nazareth, fully God, fully man, stood up on the same earth that we stand on. And he called out in John's gospel, I am the good shepherd.

And in doing so, Jesus graciously put flesh and bones to this psalm so that his church could sing for centuries later, the Lord is my shepherd.

And we mean Jesus, our good shepherd. So if you've received Jesus and his payment for your sins by faith, then he has spoken to you through his spirit, saying to you what he said to his first disciples 2000 years ago, the same thing that every shepherd says to his sheep, follow me.

And in so doing, made you part of his flock. The Lord is your shepherd. You shall not want. He makes you lie down in green pastures.

He leads you beside still waters. He restores your soul. This is personal. And this is who God is and who God is for you.

[8 : 39] Because he's your shepherd, he will meet all your deepest needs. I don't mean there won't be hard seasons in this life. I mean, for every hard season of this life on this earth, God gives you himself the thing we really need.

All your peace and all your rest will come from him. And he leads you over those well-worn paths of the saints who've gone before you.

So you can completely trust him with your future. Now there are two images in this poem, in this Psalm. There's two metaphors.

The first is shepherd as we've been looking at. The second is host. Look at the second half of the Psalm. He says, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. The Lord is your shepherd and the Lord is your host, which makes you his sheep and his guest.

[9 : 44] Now in the days of King David who wrote this many thousands of years ago, hospitality and travel went hand in hand. So nowadays it would be very weird if you went from Edinburgh to Glasgow and started knocking on doors to see if someone would take you into their home.

But that wasn't strange in the days of King David in the time of the Old Testament, even in the time of the New Testament. And the image that David is painting for us here is of a weary, harassed traveler taken in graciously by a magnificent host.

Now in those days, travel was absolutely the furthest thing from a leisure activity. Traveling was done out of dire necessity most times. And only sparingly because it was very, very dangerous.

So the traveler would have to be very careful of wild animals, of bandits. They would have to journey often through waterless wastelands and deserts.

There would be a tremendous scarcity of food. You would be sore and dirty and grimy and blistered and uncomfortable. And you'd be going often through hostile territory of nations and people groups opposed to you because of what tribe you belong to.

[11 : 03] Travel was not leisurely in those days. So this preparing a table before me is so much more than just a meal.

This was a table amidst, this was a feast filled table amidst a famine. This was shelter and protection in the midst of your enemies.

To every force opposing you and seeking to do your harm, your gracious host says, let them rage outside and you come in here and you dine with me on the best that I have.

You're in my house now and you're under my protection. That's the second glorious reality of this Psalm. The Lord is your host.

Now before we move on, there's something we need to see about this. We know this really well in these weird times of social distancing and isolation.

[12 : 03] And that is this fact that personal relationship requires personal proximity. In order to have a deep and lasting and joy filled and life giving relationship with somebody, you need to be near them, don't we?

We all feel that lack after so long. Well, that's why in verse four, he says, I will fear no evil, why?

For you are with me. The shepherd has not left you to fend for yourself. He is there to comfort you and comfort you with his nearness by protecting you, by disciplining you, by guiding you, by meeting all of your needs.

That's how you know that he's near. And the divine host hasn't just sent Uber Eats to bring some takeaway to your doorstep. He's lovingly prepared a feast for you himself.

He's poured his bountiful wine into your cup and he is personally seen to your refreshment and security. That is the great thread that runs throughout this Psalm. God with you personally.

[13 : 15] Isn't that what we really long for? Isn't the real and felt presence of God what we really deeply need and want when we feel spiritually dull and listless?

I was listening to Sarah Groves' album, I don't remember the name, but there's a song on it called To the Dawn and this line struck me. There's a hush of expectation and a quiet in the air and the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of prayer.

For the suffering, dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne and the hearts of men are stirring to know they're not alone. We want to know when all else fades that we are not alone.

We who suffer, we who are anxious, we need to know there is a Christ for you on the throne. Us poor sheep need to be able to take our anxious gaze off of our unknown tomorrows and fix them on our mighty head.

We need to take our anxious gaze off of our unknown tomorrows and fix them on our mighty shepherd instead and then just breathe and follow.

[14 : 38] We can do that. He'll help us. Personal reality with God begins with knowing the Lord is my shepherd, my host and he's right here, he's so near.

If you are a follower of Jesus, that is objectively true even when you don't feel like it is. Number two, how can I be sure?

Fair question. If that objective reality about who Jesus is for me doesn't break into my experience, if I don't feel it, how can I really know? Well, thank God that our comfort, our hope is rooted in something so much deeper than our emotions and our perceptions.

Our emotions just do this. They go up and down all the time. We're about as emotionally stable as me trying to walk up Blackford Hill the other day in the ice. But God is who he is.

He said to Moses that his name is I am. God is the one who is. He's steady.

[15 : 53] So personal reality with God is not rooted in how we feel or in what we perceive but is rooted in the bare facts of who God is for us.

And in that objective reality we can find, we actually can find some certainty. Two things to notice here. First, it says that the Lord provides for us and leads us for his namesake.

Which means when it comes to God giving himself to you as the solution to all of your deepest needs, what's at stake is the glory of his name.

It's his reputation on the line, not ours. So he's as committed to you as he is to himself. Second, the first verb of the Psalm is in the present tense.

That is important. The Lord is my shepherd right now, present tense. But what follows is in the future tense. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want in the future.

[17 : 14] And even though it would make a clunky English translation, but all the verbs that follow that first verb are future tense. So David is actually saying, because of who the Lord is right now, I can know what the future holds for me.

I will be provided for, I will be refreshed, I will be given rest, I will be protected. If this is who God is for us now, then he will continue to be for us forever.

Furthermore, we have the great benefit of looking back now to the New Testament, to the life of Christ on earth, and we can get even more certainty. You can be certain of having green pastures in Christ because he was hungry in the wilderness for you.

You can drink from the quiet streams of the Spirit of God and get true rest because Jesus croaked, I thirst from across for you.

Unbelievable. You can enjoy the cup of God's good wine flowing in your heart because Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath down to the dregs for you.

[18 : 33] And you can know, you can know, that he will lead you through the valley of the shadow of the death, not leave you down in that darkness because he went into that shadow of death and he died there, and then he came out the other side more alive than we could ever know.

Praise God. Now, that phrase in verse 4, the shadow of death, I want to talk about for just a moment, it's really interesting. It's one little Hebrew word, and it could mean deep darkness, or it could mean the shadow of death as most English Bibles translate it.

Now, deep darkness, it does fit the imagery quite a lot. You know, the idea of just a deep dark valley being a place of fear and uncertainty and how God is with us, even in those dark times to protect and lead us.

I think David did intend that meaning for us here, and David knew the word he was using. The other understanding of this word that would come into the reader's mind was the shadow of death itself.

And there's something beautiful here, but forgive me for using a sad story to illustrate it. Once upon a time, there was a little boy who was almost hit by a truck, and at the very last moment, his mother ran out into the road and threw her child out of the way, and she was hit by the truck instead.

[20 : 00] That heroic mother was struck by the truck itself. That little child was only struck by the shadow of the truck as it passed.

Jesus Christ was struck by death itself for you, and because of his death on the cross, if you trust him, he will only be struck by death's shadow.

That's why in the New Testament, after the resurrection of Jesus, the writers of the New Testament almost exclusively use this phrase. When they talk about people, Christians who have died, they call them this, those who have fallen asleep in the Lord.

That's why Paul can quote the poets of Israel and victoriously write, where oh death is your victory? Where oh death is your sting? Jesus Christ really died, and Jesus Christ was really raised from the dead.

In Acts chapter 2, Peter says this in this marvelous sermon. He says, God raised up Jesus, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

[21 : 18] So how can I be sure? You can be sure that all the comforts and hopes of Psalm 23 are yours in Christ, because it is sealed as a promise with the death and resurrection of the very Son of God, your shepherd and host.

Number three, where is it all going? Well, like anyone else, David had seasons where he longed for personal reality with God. I think that this Psalm is very likely his own heart cry for that reality to become apparent to him.

He starts off with the image of shepherd and then moves to the image of host. He starts out speaking about God. I don't know if you noticed, he says, he makes me lie down, he leads me. But it shifts to talking to God.

You are with me. You prepare a table before me. So by the end, it's almost like he's speaking to his own soul.

Here's what I think happened. I think David started out saying, I don't feel that the Lord is my shepherd, but I'm going to just preach to my own heart and declare what I know to be true, that the Lord is my shepherd.

[22 : 35] I shall not want. And by the end, he's rejoicing in the felt presence of the Lord. Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue after me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Surely is an exclamation of certainty. In Hebrew, it's this little word, ach. Ach, goodness and mercy will follow me. Do you hear the vigor in that? The certainty in that?

Jesus got real to him. Then he says a curious thing. He says, I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. So up in verse three, I think, or in verse four, he discovers this truth.

He says, for you are with me. So God with me. But by the end, me with God forever.

If the Lord is your shepherd, you can know that he is leading you to eternally green pastures. If the Lord is your host, you can know that his feast is eternal, his kingdom is unshakable, and his home will be your home.

[23 : 50] Hospitality in the ancient Near East was a very, very important thing. Unbelievably important, much more so than any Western culture.

And every culture has its own rules of hospitality. It has expectations on the host. So when we moved from the Pacific Northwest in Seattle to Nashville, Tennessee, we had to learn about Southern hospitality, y'all, which means expectations on the host is all about, you know, sweet tea and porch swings.

Then when we moved from Nashville to Edinburgh, Scotland, we had to relearn new rules of hospitality, where the expectations of the host are more like hot pots of tea and a tray of biscuits.

Well, in King David's day, there were expectations on the host as well. It was the host's honor to provide the very best of what he had for his guest.

No stinting. Pull out all the stops. The best lamb, the best calf, the best wine. And it was the host's honor to offer absolute protection to the guest for two or three days.

[25 : 06] So the host would say, please come dine with me, weary traveler. Stay in my house. All that I have is yours. And, you know, for perhaps two or three days, I will protect you from anyone that would wish to do you harm.

Once a year, we usually go to Kansas. Before we moved to Scotland, we would go to Kansas and spend about three days with my wife's grandmother in the old family farmhouse there.

And we would never stay for longer than three days, because Marlene is known to often say, guests are like fish. They start to stink after three days.

Here's what's remarkable. The Lord is our host. He shelters us from our enemies. He provides us the rich feast right here in the presence of our enemies. And how long does that offer of protection extend?

Three days? I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Length of days. Jesus doesn't get tired of you.

[26 : 18] Jesus is not bored with your company. You cannot encroach on the hospitality of the risen Christ. You will never stink to him.

And that's where this is going. If the Lord is your shepherd now, this is your future. This is the trajectory of ultimate reality being with God.

God with me now, me with God forever. You'll never be alone. And one day this foggy existence will fade away, and you will be face to face with Jesus.

And you'll stand tall. No shame. He bore that on the cross. No sin to come between you. Just eternal, unfading, personal reality with the living, resurrected God.

I love how Gandalf puts it in Lord of the Rings. The gray rain curtain of this world rolls back and all turns to silverglass. And then you see it, white shores, and beyond a far green country under a swift sunrise.

[27 : 34] Better still, and we'll close with this, this is how the apostle John puts it in Revelation chapter 7. Therefore they, that's you, Christian, therefore they are right before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple, and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat, nor the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd.

And he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Amen.