

4. The Great Feast

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[0 : 00] And if you'd like to turn to Psalm 23 in your Bibles, if you have one of our visitors' Bibles, you'll find it on page 458. Page 458. I'll read the whole Psalm, but today I want to concentrate particularly on verses 5 and 6.

So Psalm 23, the Psalm of the shepherd king, King 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. 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.

Well, this is the word of the Lord, and may God add his blessing to it. I wonder how many people who are here today could honestly say, I am a very happy person.

[1 : 32] I guess that some would say that. Some would say that, but others might be a bit thoughtful. Happy, you might say. How is it possible to be really happy in a world like this where there's so much pain?

And is it possible to be happy when one's own circumstances are pretty tricky? Tricky at work, perhaps? Tricky financially? Tricky because of health problems? Tricky because of awkward people?

Now, the Bible doesn't say a great deal about human happiness explicitly. In fact, it paints a picture of the believer's life as being a combination of joys and sorrows.

Sorrows, because to be a believer is inevitably to invite opposition, perhaps even persecution. But also joy, because to be a Christian is to live under nothing less than the blessing of Almighty God. Now, King David, who wrote the 23rd Psalm, was a man who knew both extremes. And we can be very grateful for that. It's an eye-opener for us to have more than 70 psalms from his pen.

[2 : 40] In some of these psalms, he's in the depths of misery, almost despair. He's almost ready, as it were, to wrap his shroud around himself and take his leave of this life. But in others of the psalms, he demonstrates the immense happiness that a believer enjoys through living under the blessing of God.

And Psalm 23 is one of those joyful psalms. It is a happy psalm. In fact, I really think that if any person will read this psalm, take it on board, chew it over, digest it and live by it, that person will become a happy person.

This psalm is medicine for the troubled soul. If we will lift these verses, as it were, off the pages and stick them into our hearts and live them out, over time, they will transform us.

Try it, friends, and see if I'm not telling you the truth. This psalm will make you happy. And let me point out, before we get on to verses 5 and 6, let me point out a particularly lovely feature of this psalm, and one that contributes to our happiness.

There's not one phrase in the whole psalm that tells us to do anything. Not one phrase. Every phrase in this psalm is about things that the Lord God does or has done for us.

[3 : 59] Now, it's that feature of Psalm 23 which makes it good news rather than good advice. Just think of the contrast between good news and good advice.

Let me put it like this. Every morning of your life, you can report to one or other of two bureaus. You can either report to the Bureau of Good Advice for your daily instructions, or you can report to the Bureau of Good News for your daily good news.

If you report every morning to the Bureau of Good Advice, you will quickly become miserable and dejected. Because the Bureau of Good Advice will shower you with all sorts of advice, like this. Don't smoke. Lose two stone. Eat five fruits a day. Work harder, much harder. Join a gym. Insulate your loft. And joyfully give more money to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Now, you don't want to do any of these things, do you? The Bureau of Good Advice will make you miserable day after day. But if you go daily to the Bureau of Good News, you will hear each day that God is your Father, that Jesus Christ is your Saviour, and that God cares for you deeply, madly, and passionately.

[5 : 17] That is a better bureau to report to at nine o'clock every morning. And Psalm 23 is one of the leading publications of the Bureau of Good News. There's not a word here of good advice.

It's all good news. So in verse 1, the news is that I shall be content, because the Lord is my shepherd. In verse 2, the news is that the Lord gives me rest and quietness of soul. In verse 3, the news is that he is restoring my once ruined soul. He's taking the grimy and derelict thing inside me that passes for a soul, and he's recreating it, teaching me to view life as he views it. And then in verse 4, he faces me with my coming death, but he tells me that I need fear no evil as I look forward to my death, because he is with me, in fact, right beside me. And he will be with me and right beside me as I approach that dark little gate and prepare to go through it. Now this is a good news psalm. It's about the life-transforming and loving things that God is able and willing to do for any person who will put themselves under the care of the loving shepherd.

[6 : 31] This psalm describes the royal road to happiness. It's a good news psalm. Well now today, as I say, we're looking really at the final two verses. Verses 5 and 6. And these verses are just as much packed with good news as are verses 1, 2, 3 and 4.

So I want to point out three good news things which the Lord does for his servant David here in verses 5 and 6. But not only for David, indeed for anyone who is in the flock of the Lord.

So here's the first. He gives us a place seated at his table. Here's verse 5 again. Now I know it's only mid-November.

It's a bit early to be thinking about Christmas. But when you read a verse like this in November, I think it's hard not to be thinking, at least to some degree, about the preparations for Christmas dinner. At least some of you have started thinking about those preparations.

In my own household, I do a number of things like the garden and so on, but my wife is the cook exclusively. So when it comes to the preparations for Christmas dinner, my wife and I don't look at it from precisely the same point of view.

[7 : 47] I mean, she quite enjoys Christmas dinner, but it's a lot of hard work, especially when you've got perhaps 8 or 10 or 12 sitting down to dinner. Whereas for me, all I have to do is to enjoy it. All I have to do is to carve the turkey and then smile benignly at the children and the in-laws and outlaws that are sitting around the table at Christmas.

It's pure joy for me to come to the table and to find all the preparations have been made already for me. The glasses are shining. The cutlery is looking bright. The candles are ready to be lit.

The crackers are laid beside every place. The only contribution I have to bring to the table is my appetite. Now this is the way, more or less, that David views, with astonishment, a table or a feast that the Lord is preparing for him.

Verse 5, you, Lord, prepare a table before me. How do you see how this is such good news? Not good advice at all. The master is preparing a table for the servant.

That's the reversal of what you'd expect. Yet you, master, have gone to the trouble of rolling up your sleeves and getting a banquet ready for the likes of me. Now we'll come back in a moment to the second line of verse 5.

[9 : 00] But just look onto the third line there. You anoint my head with oil. Now this is not the anointing that Samuel gave to David to make him the king of Israel. That was a one-off anointing.

This is more the regular practice, the regular anointing with oil, which was a normal part of festive behavior in the ancient world. If you went to a banquet in the ancient Middle East, the normal thing would be that as a guest you would sit down at the table and a servant or a slave would come up to you, carrying a bowl of olive oil, and then he would put some of this olive oil onto your head and your face to make it shine.

That was the normal procedure. So your face would light up like George Square in December. Do you remember, just to give a parallel example, in Luke's Gospel, chapter 7, Jesus was invited to have dinner with a Pharisee whose name was Simon.

And he had to rebuke this Pharisee, Simon, for his cold, unwelcoming manner. And he said to Simon, You did not anoint my head with oil, but this sinful woman who's come in, she's been anointing my feet with ointment.

It just shows it was a normal courtesy in those days, normal hospitality, to put oil on the heads and the faces of your honored guests. It was a festive, welcoming, happy kind of gesture.

[10:19] I suppose a little bit like an equivalent today would be that you perhaps at the end of a meal take out a box of Belgian chocolates and you pass it around to your guests as a treat to show them how much you love them.

So David is saying to the Lord, not only do you invite me to your table, but you go beyond the call of duty. You show your pleasure in me by anointing my very head with oil.

And look at my cup, the last line of the verse. That's flowing over, so full it's running over. So the Lord is lavish with his gifts. He's extravagant in his hospitality.

He wants his people to eat with him. To eat with him. Now it's one thing to relate to people on a fairly formal level. So in business relationships, for example, you might communicate with people by phone or by email.

And if you actually met them, you'd still perhaps be rather formal. Mr Snodgrass, good morning, I'm Mr Lobb. Et cetera. So you might sit down and have a cup of coffee, maybe a rich tea biscuit.

[11:22] But you're not going to be sitting down to a banquet together. You're on a more formal level. Well, this here, this is a demonstration of real and loving friendship. But let's notice the second line of verse 5 as well.

Because that line shows us that this feast is more than a Christmas feast type of an occasion. This is a feast that celebrates a military victory in the presence of my enemies.

Now this was natural language for King David to use because he was an experienced soldier. He'd quite often returned to Jerusalem after a successful campaign and he would bring captured enemy commanders with him and he would feast with his own commanders in their presence.

So you can imagine this taking place. The enemy commanders might be sitting right over at the back of the hall. If they were lucky, they'd get bread and water. Whereas David and his friends would be sitting feasting at the top end.

So verse 5 hints at a sense of ultimate victory over the Lord's enemies in the world to come. Let's not forget that David is not writing here simply as a private individual.

[12:27] He's writing as the Lord's Messiah, the King of Israel, the Lord's anointed. So if he is able to celebrate his victory over his enemies in the dining hall in Jerusalem, he helps us to picture his great successor, the King of Israel, the Lord Jesus, who triumphs over his enemies finally and celebrates his triumph at the messianic banquet in which everyone who belongs to him will share.

So if we're Christians, we can look forward to taking our seats at the great banquet. We can look forward to cups that run over, to heads that glisten with olive oil and to the eating of food which the Lord himself has prepared for his servants.

Do we deserve to be treated like this? Of course not. But it's a terrific thing. It's good news that we shall be if we belong to him. So there's the first blessing.

He gives us a place seated at his table. Now secondly, he gives us a life dogged by his mercy. Have a look at the first half of verse 6.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. Now I say a life dogged by his mercy because of the verb that's used here which is normally translated follow.

[13:48] But the Hebrew experts will say that follow is a rather tame translation. And apparently this verb really has the force of pursue. Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me, shall rush after me, follow right on my heels with great purpose.

So it's not following on in a sense of lagging behind at a distance. Not like the last person in the London Marathon to cross the line who staggers over the finishing line 20 minutes after the person before him and lands in a heap.

No, this is active pursuit. This is the Lord's goodness and mercy vigorously tracking David's every step. And that word translated mercy is the word for God's steadfast love.

The love promised to the Israelites in the covenant. The love to which the Lord commits himself and from which he will never withdraw. Now there's something very surprising about this when you consider David's actual life.

Just think of the kind of life that he led. When you read the story of David in the books of Samuel you realize that he led a very difficult life. Now at one level this is going to be true of any national political leader.

[15:01] David was the political leader of Israel. You think of our prime minister and the difficulties he has to face every day. Think of the president of the United States. Anybody who finds themselves in the top political job in their country can expect to be opposed and roughed up just about every day.

And David was king of Israel for 40 years. Think of Gordon Brown. He's only been prime minister for two and a half years hasn't he? Imagine what he'd look like in another 38 years. A bit rough at the edges I would have thought.

Now just think of what David went through as the leader of his country. As a very young man when he was shepherding his father's sheep near Bethlehem he had to fight with lions and bears.

Then he had to take on Goliath and kill him. And then David still a very young man was employed by King Saul. And Saul as you remember grew very jealous of David because David was such a skillful soldier.

Much better soldier than Saul was. And do you remember how twice Saul tried to pin David to the wall in the dining room with his spear hurled his spear at him out of jealousy but David evaded him.

[16:09] And then for months or even years Saul was pursuing David around the wildernesses of Judah again trying to kill him because Saul knew that David was destined to be the next king of Israel but Saul didn't want to lay down the kingship he wanted to keep his own hold on power.

And then think of David as a more mature man much later on through his own folly his own willful perversity and sin he had to endure the consequences of his murder of Uriah the Hittite and his adultery with Uriah's wife Bathsheba.

And the worst consequence of that was that his own son his beloved son Absalom rebelled against him and sought to take the kingdom from him and eventually Absalom was killed. So to put it mildly as you look at David's life told in 1st and 2nd Samuel that was a life full of trauma he had as much pain and trauma to deal with as most ordinary mortals would have well perhaps 10 ordinary mortals would suffer the same amount and yet at the end of all this pain and difficulty he's able to say in verse 6 surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

So God's goodness and steadfast love he is convinced will keep on dogging him at every step. Now do we write all this off as fantasy as a kind of hopeless optimism?

Of course not. David is nothing if not honest. What this first half of verse 6 is showing us is that those who belong to the Lord gradually have their view of life and life's difficulties transformed.

[17:51] It's not that their difficult times cease to be difficult times. Trauma remains trauma.

Christian people shed real tears and sigh real sighs and have to go through very painful struggles with the world the flesh and the devil.

But the Christian learns to perceive the good hand the very good hand of God in the midst of all the trials. We come to see how God's goodness and mercy pursue us and surround us and sustain us. Look at the very first word of verse 6. Surely. It's a moment of triumph and confidence. Surely. I'm sure. It's like those moments in Paul's letters when Paul cries out I'm convinced.

I know this. You see David knows beyond any doubt that through all his trials and amidst all the pressures he has to endure the sheer goodness of the Lord and the steadfast mercy of the Lord have been driving him forward are always there at his heels.

Now this means just to make one application this means that when I'm lying in a hospital bed during my last illness surrounded by chrysanthemums and grandchildren and feeling as rough as a dog as I certainly will even then I shall be able to say surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life which includes the last few days of my life all the days of my life.

[19:24] So he gives me a place seated at his table he gives us a life dogged by his mercy and now finally he gives us a dwelling reserved in his eternal home.

Look at those final words of the psalm and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Now friends if the first half of verse 6 is surprising so is the second half of verse 6 David is convinced that he will dwell in the Lord's house forever but can a man dwell with God?

Isn't it presumptuous for a grubby sin stained man remember David had a murderer's blood on his hands from years before can such a man dwell with God live with him?

Will God welcome such a person into his eternal home as a permanent guest? Just put this on a very homely level for a moment if the Queen now this has never happened to me and I'm sure it wouldn't but if the Queen were to invite me to have tea with her at Buckingham Palace I think I would probably manage to hold up my end in conversation for maybe half an hour I'd just about get through I guess but if somebody if one of the Queen's attendants then suggested to the Queen that she and the Duke of Edinburgh might invite me to take up residence permanently as a permanent guest in Buckingham Palace I think that the Queen might turn to the Duke of Edinburgh and she might say Philip dearest it's been quite nice to enjoy Mr. Lobb's company for a little conversation over a cup of tea I particularly enjoyed his description of the sun sinking over the river Clyde like a hobnob biscuit being dunked into a cup of coffee wasn't that charming I wonder if the Clyde is really like the colour of a cup of coffee makes me want to visit Glasgow again doesn't it launch another of those ships you know but you know having Mr. Lobb here as a permanent resident

I think dear Philip that would be more than my nerves could bear don't you agree yes dear I do certainly see of course the Queen wouldn't want to have me living permanently at Buckingham Palace but the Lord God wants the forgiven murderer David to live with him forever do you remember how Jesus expressed the great desire of his soul he prayed John's Gospel chapter 17 he prayed this Father I desire that they also whom you have given me that's all Christians may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world now isn't that surpassingly wonderful that Jesus the sinless perfect son of God should want the likes of you and me and King David grubby and sin stained before our cleansing he should want us to live with him forever and to see the radiance of his glory once we've been cleansed of our sin by the power of his blood shed on the cross he wants nothing more than to welcome people like us into his heavenly dwelling so that we should sit at table with him we should look at him in his glory because when we see him as he really is we shall know then that this is the thing that we were made for when we see him we shall have the fulfillment and the satisfaction of everything that we've desired

[22 : 58] I shall dwell in the house of the Lord says David forever so if we're Christians we can be confident of these things let's eat this psalm up let's get it into the deepest insides of our hearts and minds because it will bring us great security and great happiness it's a psalm that is bursting with good news of course our lives will have their ups and downs and their sharp traumas that's part of living in this broken world but if we allow Psalm 23 to reshape our mental furniture we shall know just what David meant when he said the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want let's bow our heads and pray our wonderful Lord God we thank you indeed that you're the shepherd of your sheep that Jesus himself is the good shepherd too that he knows those who belong to him and we in return are able to know him we thank you for this lovely psalm and we pray indeed our dear father that you will write it deep into our hearts and bring to us through the years of our life great comfort from it because it is the truth and because it is good news so we pray for each person here today that you'll strengthen us fill us afresh with your joy and help us to live our lives in a way that draws others to the Lord Jesus too a life that honors you and indeed serves you and we ask these things through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen that he's with you as we're laughing as we know sometimes we pray that we're going to be for the Lord in a return and we pray all the way and I look for it for the Lord we pray and Jim for with you and I see he's his friend that he's a good diary and I see and I see all the way and I see all the words he's got some other words in a return and I see everything and I know and I see what Küff and I see