

The Great Feast

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[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon, friends, and a very warm welcome to our Wednesday lunchtime Bible talk here at the Tron Church. It's lovely to have you all here with us, especially if you're new.

There may be one of you who haven't been here before, but we're especially glad to see you and do come and shake hands afterwards. We're going to be continuing with Psalm 23 today, and if you have your Bible, you might like to turn to that on page 458 in our hardback Bibles.

And today we have the last study in Psalm 23, and I'll be taking verses 5 and 6. But let me first of all read the whole Psalm so that we get it fresh into our memories.

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.

[1 : 14] 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.

Let's bow our heads and we'll have some moments of prayer before we turn to the Psalm. The Apostle Paul wrote, This saying is sure and trustworthy, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

We thank you, our Lord Jesus Christ, that that was your great purpose and intention as you came into the world.

You came to teach. You came to dwell with humanity. You came indeed to be yourself a human being. But above all, we know that you came to rescue the lost, to save sinners.

[2 : 23] And we confess to you today, gladly, Lord Jesus, that we are sinful men and women. Gladly, not because we're glad about our sin, but so glad that you have come to save sinners.

And so we turn afresh to you. We turn to you out of the busyness and the pressures and the difficulties of our lives. And we thank you so much that you yourself are seated at the right hand of power in heaven, seated because your work is done.

The salvation work of laying down your life for us on the cross is complete and never has to be repeated. And we ask, therefore, that you will put into our hearts a wonderful assurance of the saving effect of all that you have done.

We thank you not only that you died on the cross willingly, but also that you were raised from the grave in the power of God the Father, that death no longer has dominion over you, and that you live to welcome all your people into your heavenly abode forever, so that we should see you and be with you, so that we should behold your glory and rejoice in you.

So, dear Lord Jesus, please build us up in our trust and our faith and our joy today and help us to continue to walk with you and to serve you.

[3 : 46] And we ask it for your name and for your glory. Amen. Well, let's turn, friends, to this 23rd Psalm. And as I said a moment ago, verses 5 and 6 are particularly our verses for this afternoon.

Now, I wonder how many people here today would be able to say, I am a really happy person. I guess that some of you would be able to say that, but others might be a little bit thoughtful, a bit hesitant.

And you might say, happy? Is it possible to be really happy in a world like ours where there's so much suffering? Is it possible to be happy when one's own circumstances are rather tricky?

Tricky at work? Tricky perhaps financially? Tricky because of health problems or difficult relationships or whatever? Now, the Bible certainly doesn't say a great deal about happiness

explicitly, but it paints a picture of the believer's life as a combination of sorrows and joys. Sorrows, because to be a believer is to invite opposition and even persecution, and because we live in a broken world. But joy also, because to be a Christian is to live under nothing less than the blessing of Almighty God.

[5 : 07] Now, King David, the man who wrote Psalm 23, he was a man who knew both of those extremes, both the joys and the sorrows. And it's such an eye-opener for us to have more than 70 psalms in the book of Psalms written by David.

In some of them, as you know, he's in the depths of misery. He's almost ready to wrap himself in a shroud in some psalms and take his leave of this life altogether. But in other ones of his psalms, he demonstrates the immense happiness that a believer enjoys through living under the blessing of God.

And Psalm 23 is one of those psalms. It is a very happy psalm. In fact, I really think that if a person will read this psalm and chew it over and digest it for long enough, that person will become a truly happy person.

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

Try it, friend, if you never have done. This psalm will make you happy if you think often about it and live in the light of it. Now, let me point out a lovely feature of this psalm, and one that contributes to our happiness.

[6 : 24] There's not one phrase in this whole psalm in which we're told to do something. Not one. Every phrase is about something that God does for us.

And it's that feature of Psalm 23 that makes it good news rather than 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, or you can report to the Bureau of Good News. If you report to the Bureau of Good Advice, every day you will quickly become miserable and dejected.

The Bureau of Good Advice will shower you with good advice, which you won't be able to keep or you won't want to keep it. For example, don't smoke, lose two stone, eat five fruits a day, work 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 those things, do you? The Bureau of Good Advice makes you miserable day after day. But if you go to the Bureau of Good News, you will hear each day that God is your Father, that Jesus is your Savior, your eternal Savior, and that God cares for you deeply, madly, and passionately.

[7 : 48] 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 of good advice here. It's all good news. So in verse 1, the good news is that I shall be content, for 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 is recreating it, teaching me to view life as he views it. Then in verse 4, he faces me with my coming death, but he tells me that I need fear no evil as I contemplate my death because he is with me.

He's right beside me and will be with me as I approach that dark little gate and prepare to go through it. 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 himself under his shepherdly care.

[9 : 00] This psalm does describe the royal road to happiness. Well, today we're looking at the final two verses of the psalm, verses 5 and 6. And these verses are as packed with good news as the first four verses.

So let's notice three good news items that the Lord does for his servant David, but also for anyone who is a sheep in his flock, anyone who is a Christian. Here's the first thing.

He gives us a place seated at his table. Verse 5. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Now, it's only September, I realize, a bit too early to be thinking about Christmas. But when you read a verse like this, it's hard not to think about the

preparations, at least I find it hard not to think about the preparations for Christmas dinner. In my household, in my setup at home, I'm the one that does the garden, and my wife is the one that does the cooking. Different marriages work differently, but that's the way things work out in our house.

[10:08] I do the garden, she does the cooking. So when it comes to the preparations for Christmas dinner, my wife and I don't look at things from quite the same point of view. She enjoys the Christmas dinner very much, but she has a lot of hard work to put in to prepare for it.

I, on the other hand, simply enjoy it. It's all I have to do. All I have to do is to carve the turkey and smile benignly at the in-laws and the outlaws and all that people sitting around the table. It's pure joy for me to come to the table and find that all the preparations have already been made. The glasses are shining, the candles are ready to be lit, crackers are laid at every place. The only contribution that I have to bring to the table is my appetite. Now this surely is the way that David views the matter with astonishment in verse 5.

He says, You, Lord, are preparing a table before me. Do you see how that's such good news? Not good advice, is it? It's good news. The master is preparing the table for the servant.

[11:10] And that is a reversal of what you'd expect. 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 to the second line about the enemies in just a moment.

But look at the third line. You anoint my head with oil. Now this is not the anointing of David to be the king of Israel. That was a once-off business and Samuel anointed him.

This is different. This is the regular anointing with oil, which was a normal part of festive behavior at banquets in the ancient world. If you went to a banquet as an honored guest in the ancient Middle East, you would sit down at the table, apparently, and a servant or a slave would move around the table carrying a large bowl of olive oil.

And he would put some of this olive oil onto your head and face to make it shine. Slightly odd idea. But, I mean, do you want to have your face shining? Nobody wears brill cream even these days, do they? But this is what happened in those days.

Your face shone. It lit up. And it was part of the joyful occasion. Do you remember there was that incident in Luke chapter 7 where Jesus goes to dinner with a Pharisee called Simon.

[12:19] And Jesus has to rebuke Simon the Pharisee for his cold, unwelcoming behavior. And he says to him, you did not anoint my head with oil. Which is what you should have done.

But this sinful woman has anointed my feet with ointment. So it was normal courtesy. It was normal hospitality to put oil on the head of your honored guests. It was a festive welcome.

It was a happy gesture. Perhaps our equivalent today would be to pass around a large box of Belgian chocolates at the end of a meal as a kind of final treat to show your guests that you love them.

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

And look at my cup. It's so full, it's running over. The Lord is lavish in his gifts. He's extravagant in his hospitality. He wants me to eat with him.

[13:21] Now that means something, doesn't it? If you sit down and eat with somebody. It's one thing to relate to people on a fairly formal level. In business, for example, that you might communicate with people by letter or by email.

If you meet them, it would be Mr. Smith and Mr. Lobb and should we have a cup of coffee and a Jaffa cake? Perhaps as far as that. But you're not going to be sitting down to a banquet together. That's a demonstration of real love and real friendship.

Now let's also notice this second line here in verse 5. Because this shows that the feast of verse 5 is more than a Christmas feast type of occasion. It's a feast that is celebrating a military victory.

And this was natural language for David to use because he was a military man. He was an experienced soldier. And he had quite often returned to Jerusalem after a successful campaign.

And he would bring with him captured enemy commanders.

And he'd be feasting in their very presence. If they were seated in a big hall like this, perhaps the enemy commanders would be at the far end eating a dry crust and water. Whereas David with his victorious commanders were eating from the fat of the land at the other end of the hall.

[14:31] So verse 5 hints at a sense not just of David being a victorious general in his own day. There's a sense of ultimate victory over the Lord's enemies even in the world to come in the long distant future.

Let's not forget that David is writing not simply as a private individual but as the king of Israel. He is the Lord's anointed. He's the forerunner of Jesus himself.

So if he is able to celebrate his victory over his enemies in the dining hall in Jerusalem, he also helps us to picture his great successor, Jesus, the king of Israel, the son of God, triumphing finally over his enemies and celebrating his triumph at the messianic banquet in which all who belong to him will share.

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

Do we deserve to be treated like this? We don't. It's good news that we shall be. We don't deserve any of it but it's lavish blessing. So there's the first thing.

[15:46] He gives us a place seated at his table. Now secondly, we're looking on to verse 6 now. He gives us a life dogged by his mercy.

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 is used here which is normally translated follow.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. But follow is apparently a bit tame according to the Hebrew experts. They say that this verb has the force of pursue.

Chase after. Surely goodness and mercy shall chase after me, rush after me, follow right on my heels purposefully. So it's not simply follow on behind and lagging behind at some distance. It's not like the last person in the London Marathon to cross the line half a mile after everybody else. And then collapse in a heap. It's not that sort of thing. This is active pursuit. This is the Lord's goodness and mercy vigorously tracking David's every step.

[16:53] And the word translated mercy there is the word for God's steadfast love. The love promised by God to the Israelites in the covenant. The love to which the Lord God commits himself and from which he will never withdraw.

Now there's something very surprising about this when you think of what David's actual life was like. When you read the story of David in the books of Samuel you realize what a very difficult life he had to lead.

Now at one level this is going to be true of any national political leader. Think of our prime minister or our first minister in Scotland. Think of the president of the USA.

Anybody who finds themselves in that sort of position, the top political job, is bound to be opposed and roughed up every day. And David was the king of Israel for 40 years.

40 years. If Mrs. May was prime minister for 40 years she'd look pretty rough at the end of all that wouldn't she? It'd be too much. Now think of David of what David went through fighting with bears and lions when he was a young lad as a shepherd protecting his sheep.

[18:02] Taking on Goliath and killing him. Then being employed by Saul when Saul was king. Saul, as you know, grew very jealous of David because David was a better soldier than he was and Saul twice tried to pin David to the wall by throwing a spear at him when they were at dinner because David shared the table with Saul.

And after that Saul relentlessly pursued David around the deserts of Judah still trying to kill him because he knew that David was destined to replace him as king and he didn't want to hand over his own power.

And then think later into David's life as well as all the battling against various enemies. David, by his own folly, his own sin, had to endure the consequences of murdering Uriah the Hittite and stealing his wife Bathsheba.

And the worst of those consequences was that his own son Absalom conspired and rebelled against him and drove him out of Jerusalem and threatened to take the kingship from him. So to put it mildly, David's life was wracked with trauma.

He had as much pain and trauma to deal with as ten ordinary mortals, I guess. And yet, at the end of all this pain, he is able to say, surely, all the days of my life, God's goodness and steadfast love will keep dogging my every step.

[19 : 26] Now, do we write this all off as fantasy and hopeless optimism? Well, of course not. David is nothing if not honest. What this first half of verse 6 shows us is that those who belong to the Lord gradually have their view of life's difficulties transformed.

It's not that difficult times cease, cease to be traumatic. No, trauma remains trauma. Christian people shed real tears and sigh real sighs and have to go through painful struggles with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But the Christian learns to perceive the good hand, the very good hand of the Lord God in the midst of all those trials. We come to see how God's goodness and mercy pursue us, chase us, and surround us and sustain us.

Look at the first word in verse 6, surely, surely. It's a moment of triumph, certainly. It's like those moments in Paul's letters when he cries out, I am convinced, I know this.

David knows beyond any doubt that through all his trials and amidst all the pressures and tears that he'd endured, the sheer goodness of the Lord and the steadfast mercy of the Lord have been driving him forward.

[20 : 45] Now this means for the likes of you and me that if I am lying in a hospital bed during my last illness, surrounded by chrysanthemums and grandchildren and feeling as rough as a dog, at that moment I shall be able to say, surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life, including the last few days of my life.

That's the picture there, isn't it? So he gives us a place seated at his table, he gives us a life that is dogged by his mercy, and now finally he gives us a dwelling reserved in his eternal home.

Look at the final words of the psalm, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Now if the first half of verse 6 is surprising, surely this second half of verse 6 is surprising as well.

David is convinced that he is going to dwell in the Lord's house forever. But can a man dwell with God? Isn't that a surprising thought?

Is it not presumptuous, you might say, for a grubby, sin-stained man? Remember, David had blood on his hands, didn't he? Is it possible that a man like that could dwell with God, could actually live with him?

[22 : 07] Would God welcome a creature like that into his eternal home? Put this on a homely level. If the queen invited me to have tea with her at Buckingham Palace, she hasn't, I don't think it's likely, but if she were to invite me to have tea with her at Buckingham Palace, I would probably manage just about to keep up my end of the conversation for about half an hour, I guess.

But if somebody then suggested to the queen that she should perhaps have me come and live and stay at Buckingham Palace as a permanent guest and eat at her table with her three times a day, I think she might turn to the Duke of Edinburgh and say, Philip, dearest, I have quite enjoyed Mr. Lobb's conversation over a cup of tea, especially his descriptions of those lovely northern cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh, terrific places, I must visit them at some time. But you know, the idea of having him here as a resident permanently would be more than my delicate nerves could possibly bear.

Don't you think she'd say that? I think she would. She wouldn't want me living there in Buckingham Palace. But the Lord God wants the forgiven murderer, David, to live with him forever.

Listen to these words that Jesus prayed just before his death, prayed to the Father. Father, he says, I desire that they also, whom you have given to me, may be with me where I am to see my glory, the glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

[23 : 43] Isn't that amazing? That Jesus, the sinless Son of God, should want the likes of you and me and King David, grubby and sin-stained, to live with him forever and to see his radiance and glory and to share that glory with him.

Once we have been cleansed of our sins, you see, we still feel grubby, but by the cross of Jesus, by his blood shed on the cross, we've been cleansed. And because of that cleansing, we're now pure in his sight, and he wants nothing more than to welcome people like us into his heavenly dwelling so that we should sit at table with him and look at him in his glory, because when we see him finally, we shall realize that this is the very thing that we have been made for, and this is the satisfaction of all our desires.

Surely, says David, I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. So, if you're a Christian, eat this psalm up and keep eating it up.

Get it into the deepest inside part of your heart and mind, because it will bring great security and happiness to us. It's a psalm that bursts with good news. Of course, our lives will have sufferings and sometimes 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 what David meant when he said, the Lord is my shepherd.

[25 : 10] I shall not want. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray again and thank him. thank you, our gracious God, for being the shepherd of the sheep.

And thank you for sending your son Jesus as the good shepherd, the one who knows his own, who calls them and loves them and looks after them, knows them each by name. And we pray, dear heavenly Father, that you will write this psalm deep into our hearts and help us to believe it, to rejoice in it, and to trust its message.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.