

In the name of our Good Shepherd, Happy Mother's Day! Mother's Day is a great day because we all get a chance to remember or thank and honor our mothers. And you have two choices for how you're going to do that. I could live in a fantasy world where I always loved her perfectly, always remembered her birthday, always totally agreed with the number of days she grounded me after I set off the fireworks in my room. Alternatively, I can honor mom with honesty. If I'm honest about my mother, I've got some apologizing to do.

We have the same choice in Psalm 23. Psalm 23 takes you to a literary height so that you can appreciate the view. You can see green pastures, quiet waters. You recognize those great days. You can see the paths of righteousness, by God's grace, you know what those paths look like. And, there in the middle, the darkest valley you've ever seen. You've spent time there too in guilt or grief, after some diagnosis or some depression. The Bible doesn't shy away from the valleys. One Christian writer said that the spiritual life does not take us out of this world of trouble but drives us deeper into the real world and shows us how to speak to God from there¹. But the psalm goes on. There is the Lord's table, and a cup with the blessings always rising always filling till a bit of the stuff spills over the rim. And in the distance, that house belongs to the Lord, and you too someday. This panoramic is the sort of thing people write poetry about.

As your mind's eye sees all the images of Psalm 23, your mind's ear hears the Lord's commentary. A single phrase in the middle of this poem sweetens every one of these scenes, the poet lifts his eyes off the landscape and looks to the Lord with a whisper, "You are with me." In the green pastures, it's the Lord who makes me lie down. In the dark valleys, it's the Lord who comforts me. At the table, it's the Lord who fills my cup. And someday, it's the Lord's house. I've become convinced that this is why people love Psalm 23 because it injects this truth into each moment of the human experience, "You are with me." We're going to read it together now, and this time through, enjoy the scenery, because as soon as we finish, I'm going to ruin it for you.

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

**² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul.**

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

**⁴ 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.**

**⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.**

You anoint my head with oil; My cup overflows.

**⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

See I wish I could just picture it with my mind's eye. But in every scene, you hear someone offering commentary. In the pastures, "I lack nothing." In the valley, "I will fear no evil." At the table, "My cup overflows." And that commentary gives us two choices, just like the two choices we have for

¹ Henri Nouwen <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/276512-the-spiritual-life-does-not-remove-us-from-the-world>

celebrating Mother's Day. I can sing Psalm 23 in a fantasy world. I could paste on a smile and nervously assert that I never want anything, I have never been afraid, I never feel like God has let me down. My life is perfect because the Lord is with me! You can claim you've never wanted anything, but how's that going to affect your brother who's trying to be honest about his greed? You can claim that no dark valley has ever made you flinch, but you'll be mocking your sister who's suffering. As beautiful as these word pictures are, I feel like I have to say them with my fingers crossed.

The other choice: we can honor the Lord with honesty. Did anyone else feel like a hypocrite when we sang the last hymn? "I nothing lack if I am his." "In death's dark vale I fear no ill" "your goodness fails me never." That is the song of a better man than me. If this is how it sounds to know God, if this is what it sounds like to trust him, then I've got some apologizing to do, some weeping to do. Good Shepherd have mercy on your half-hearted sheep!

It makes me think of something Dietrich Bonhoeffer said. Here's the first half of his quote: "A psalm that we cannot utter as a prayer, that makes us falter and horrifies us, is a hint to us that Someone else is praying, not we." When Psalm 23 says "I shall not be in want," who is the "I"? The human author was David, who wanted Bathsheba so much that he killed her husband. "I fear no evil," who is speaking? David, who spent his youth dodging the spears of his predecessor and spent his adulthood running from the sword of his son? No one is good enough to pray this way!

Unless the Good Shepherd is also the Lamb of God. What if Revelation chapter 7 is right and the Lamb at the center of the throne who looks like he's been slain, what if he is our shepherd? What if "I shall not be in want" comes from the mouth of the one who perfectly trusted his Father's plan? "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil" what if that was spoken by the one who did not lift himself out of this world of trouble but went deeper and deeper into suffering, and spoke to God from there?

The second half of Bonhoeffer's quote goes like this: "The one who in the Psalms is protesting his innocence, who is invoking God's judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself."

These are Jesus' words. In fact, the only way I can sing Psalm 23 honestly, is if Christ sang it first. Jesus has passed through the green pastures, through the valley of the shadow of death, to the table in the presence of his enemies. He made it back to the house of the Lord, and he did it perfectly. In every scene of Jesus' life, he prayed perfect words to God from there. Then he did the unthinkable—he gave that perfection to you. It turns out Christian living isn't about trying so hard to be perfect, but about finding our perfection in him. In Christ, we can dare to be sinners. We can give up the pretense that any of us are qualified to talk to God like Psalm 23. This is his song, and now he invites us to sing along.

I was talking to a friend of mine the other day. She'll celebrate Mother's Day today. She was telling me how in church she likes to sing the harmony parts to the hymn. And at first, her child thought that was weird. But then one day mom heard the kid singing harmony. "And you know what," she said, "that's exactly how I learned to sing. I'd sit in church and listen to my parents." Moms are great at modeling all sorts of things for children. Doing something alongside mom is great because even if we should find we aren't strong enough, wise enough, good enough, we lean on the experience and the strength of mom. She's been there before and knows how this goes. Friends, that's why if the words of Psalm 23 are honestly going to be mine, first they have to be Christ's. As we learn to be

content, to walk righteous paths, to go through the valleys, we do it honestly, just how we are because there is a better Singer, one who's been here before. He knows how this goes, and he covers us.

I'd like you to imagine yourself back on that literary height with the Lord, overlooking the pastures, the valleys, the table, the house, but this time between you and the Lord stands your Good Shepherd. As you begin, "The Lord is my shepherd" you look up at your Savior "I shall not be in want?" And he nods. "That's right. My life counts for you, and I never doubted." "He guides me in paths of righteousness?" "That's right, I always did the right thing." "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... I fear no evil?" "That's right." The fancy church word for this is that Christ prays *vicariously*, that means in our stead. Who can claim to be perfectly content? Who can claim to be fearless in the dark valleys? If Christ is praying for you, then you can honor God with honesty today. You can let go of straining to be perfect and simply cling to him.

Holding onto Jesus' perfection, then you can honor your mother with honesty too. There's just no longer a need to pretend you're the perfect child. There's no longer a need to pretend you're a perfect mom! Jesus was perfect so that we can be honest and spend today celebrating moms who teach that truth to their kids. Moms how cool would it be if today you saw your kids for exactly how they are, complaints and mischief and everything, and without ignoring any of it, you loved them because your Good Shepherd laid down his life for those rascally sheep. Kids, how cool would it be if today you saw your mom how she truly is, mistakes and unfairness and un-coolness and all, and without ignoring a thing, you loved her and hugged her because the Good Shepherd laid down his life for her too. How cool would it be if today we let the Good Shepherd be perfect, and we just be his sheep?

Amen.