

On the 23rd Psalm
Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church
Wichita, Kansas
May 7, 2017

Psalm 23¹

A Psalm of David.

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Every time a Christian, or a Jewish, person commits the act, so filled with promise and possibility, of picking up a Bible and undertaking to read a passage there he or she will almost always be assuming one of two very large risks. The first risk is that we will be reading a passage that we have no acquaintance of or familiarity with; and we will, therefore, find it difficult to come to some understanding of what the Biblical authors wished to communicate to us. For those of us who have grown up in certain segments of North American Christianity there is a school of thought that maintains that the words of the Bible need no study or commentary to enable the Christian reader to grasp them; and if you are a reader who takes this approach, that is certainly fine. We can do that within the Protestant, and Mennonite, traditions of Biblical interpretation. Biblical interpretation being a matter that is left to the conscience and understanding of the individual believer. But some others of us would have some problem with it.

As a personal experiment in preparing today's sermon, I randomly opened my Bible and put my finger on whatever passage I might happen to come to. For whatever omen it might be I chanced upon the first chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, verses 16 and 17. It reads: "And I will

¹ All Biblical citations from: New Revised Standard Version. Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. 1989.

utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you down before them.” Well...it *is* the Book of Jeremiah, so we might be able to tell that a Hebrew prophet is expressing disappointment with a certain people. But a reader will still have questions; who are “them” that are engaging in wickedness? Who are “you” that must not break down, lest they be broken down? Is this written with the same view of God that we might observe in the New Testament, or in other parts of the Old Testament? If I were to determine that I would follow the instructions to “gird up my loins”, what, exactly, would I then do? Although I might grasp certain portions of the reading; I can still suspect that my lack of deeper acquaintance with it is causing me to miss something in the total picture of what the writer of Jeremiah is presenting me. That is the first risk.

The second risk is that a certain Bible passage will be so familiar to us, and will be something we have heard quoted so many times, that we will come to take it for granted, we place it in a position where we can no longer learn from it, we effectively prevent it from being able to challenge us. And for most of us who have grown up in an environment of Christian activity and belief the 23rd Psalm stands out as one passage that has this particular risk inherent in it.

If you are young enough, or new enough, to encountering the Bible that reading the 23rd Psalm is a new experience for you then I am gratified for you because you will be doing what all of us should be doing when we read the Bible; no matter how old we are or on how many occasions we have been in its presence. The Bible should be read, when we read it, for the first time. Like an actor that may have portrayed a role many hundreds of times, or in our

celebrations of the communion supper, or in certain aspects of human intimacy; each succeeding time we have the experience it should have in it a real sense of happening for the first time. In this way we can avoid reducing the Bible to clichés and buzzwords; and we can retain the Bible's ability to surprise us, to inspire us, to disturb us, and to instruct us.

What might strike us in a “first” reading of the 23rd Psalm? Most of us, I think, reach the same conclusions as the late South African commentator on the Psalms, Willem Prinsloo, who said “There is no doubt about the main thrust of Psalm 23. It is a psalm of trust or confidence which has as its central theme that, in the midst of all problems encountered in life, one can be assured of lasting security, intimate communion, abundance, and happiness in the presence of the Lord.”²

But for the Psalmist who expresses such confidence, the feeling of lasting security hasn't come cheaply. When we are told “I shall not want”, we should understand that the Psalmist has experienced want. When it is said of the Lord “he restores my soul”, we might wonder how the Psalmist has needed for the soul to be restored. There is the strong suggestion that the Psalmist has, indeed, walked through the darkest valley (or as it is more familiarly translated; the valley of death). This is someone who has lived in fear of evil. Rather than being someone who is in a state of great serenity, the Psalmist may well have been someone in a situation of crisis. Many writers agree with the commentators on the Psalms, Patrick Miller, when he says “What the crisis of need was we can never know, though it may have been the plea for help by a person wrongfully accused of a crime, followed by a banquet or celebration after acquittal.”³

² Prinsloo, Willem S. “The Psalms”. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*. James D.G. Dunn & John W. Rogerson, eds. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003. 382.

³ Miller, Patrick D. *Interpreting the Psalms*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986. 117.

It is commonly noted by scholars of the Psalms that they contain no musings of how many persons there are in the nature of God, they develop no intricate notions of how salvation works, they say little or nothing about institutional expressions of spirituality. Their concern is not theology, in that sense. Their concern is worship. The British commentator Christopher Rodd tell us “The psalms are the poetry of prayer and praise, not the prose of dogma. The attraction and power of the psalms lies in imagery and language, rather than in a set of theological ideas. They kindle religion rather than define it.”⁴ If we want to form an image of the Psalmist, we might not think in terms of someone addressing or singing to, an audience; or a teacher instructing the unlearned; or an authority in relation to the ruled. We might better think of the Psalmist as someone who occupies the same pew in worship with us. Whatever our differing experiences of life and perceptions of God might be we have – together – the touchstone of the worship of God.

The person in crisis has somehow been restored by the comfort that can be found in the fear of - the regard of – God. And this, for me, is the great lesson of the 23rd Psalm from my most recent first reading. We may not always perceive that we are lying down in green pastures in this life, but we can always dwell in the house of the Lord. And if we have that in whatever valleys we walk through, a God who is beyond our understanding, will follow us with goodness and mercy.

Pete Emery

⁴ Rodd, C(hristopher). S. “Psalms”. *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. John Barton & John Muddiman, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 365.