

How many times have you read Psalm 23? Once, never, 31 times in a week? It is the most commonly turned to passage of scripture during dark times, and for centuries now, it has somehow offered a hand of comfort to hold onto when things look most bleak. In a small group called “Companions in Christ” a while back, we looked at this Psalm and examined its familiarity. One group member pointed out that since it is frequently one of the first passages we learn to memorize as Christians, that it may need to be broken down for us, in order for it to give us fresh comfort.

Like a relationship that is taken for granted until the threat of its loss casts it in a new light, we tried a very peculiar exercise with this Psalm. Instead of reading it once again, per usual, we each endeavored to do a reverse re-write, going line by line and capturing how we would understand the opposite of each line and its message. In this way, we were left with a snapshot of what it would mean to walk *without* God, abandoned and alone. Seeing that landscape allowed us to *then* hear the 23rd Psalm with a fresh message of grace and that mysterious concept of God’s “steadfast love” that appears again and again throughout the Psalter. Hear this new interpretation of the Psalm, and what we are left with when we take out the power of its message.

1. The Lord has left me directionless. I am constantly wanting more.
2. God has put me in dark alleys, abandoned me to the shrill noise of everyday life.
3. I am broken, unwhole. God gives me no guidance. I am left in the shallowness of my own ways – for no purpose.
4. I walk amidst darkness and my fears overwhelm me, for I am alone. You have given me nothing to comfort me.
5. You prepare a table in the presence of mine enemies, and they advance with hatred in their hearts. I mean nothing to you; my cup is empty.
6. Fear and loss will hound me, in the shell that was to be my life, and I will not know where to find the Lord.

And now hear anew these ancient words of comfort.

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name’s sake.

⁴Even 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.

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 forever.

Did it change the way you heard the familiar words?
Did it offer a fresh perspective on the comfort they give?

Try your own hand at writing Psalm 23 in your own words. Here is a reflection by Idelette McVicker to get you started.

Many years ago I came across an exercise to write my own Psalm 23 in a study called “Disciple’s Prayer Life” by T.W. Hunt and Catherine Walker. David could relate to God as shepherd, because that was who David was. So he sang, “The Lord is my Shepherd.”

What if we wrote our own Psalm, expressing the intimate, love relationship we have with our God? Just like David did.

First, think of who you are and how God relates to you in your current season in life. Who do you *need* God to be for you at this moment?

David expressed his relationship with God out of what he knew and practiced. This exercise is simply meant to take us closer to God, drawing on the relationships we understand and draw us closer to the heart of God.

One of my favorite responses ever came from a sixth-grader in Sunday School, a hip-hop dancer, who immediately clued in to the exercise and said: “**The Lord is my Choreographer!**”

I watched the lights go on inside of her. I saw how God, the Shepherd—a role she could love and appreciate—came close and became *her* Lord, her Choreographer. In those few moments I saw a shift in her understanding of who God was and the precious intimacy God was looking for in their relationship.

We know that God seeks a relationship that is unique and very personal with each one of us, so how would *you* express it?

Some of my own Psalm 23 first-liners have included:

- The Lord is my Publisher. (as a writer, trying to navigate the world of publishing)
- The Lord is my Doula. (when I was pregnant, desperately needing God close for the birthing process.)
- The Lord is my Life Coach. (whenever I need help with where I'm going in life)
- The Lord is my Editor. (when I need God really close for the words I try and write)

Depending on the season of our lives and the circumstances we find ourselves in, our personal Psalm 23 might change. The beauty is, we can write many Psalms, pouring out our hearts for God, expressing who God is for us and why it matters. Just like David did.

So, who do *you* need God to be for you today? Social worker, teacher, photographer, counsellor, activist, midwife, trainer, executive producer?

Why not fill in *your* word? The Lord is my [.....]

I'd love to hear the start of your Psalm...

Sample for writing your own Psalm:

(use imagery and examples that are personal and real in your life)

1. The Lord is my _____, and God does/provides _____[a need that God fulfills].
2. A concrete/personal place of peace that God brings you to.
3. A word of praise for God's good character.
4. Name a difficult time you have been through, and name what God has provided you with in those times.
5. Gifts that God has given you.
6. The joy/peace/fulfillment/hope you experience out of your relationship with God.

Enjoy!

And I look forward to hearing any next week, if you feel so moved to share.

~Pastor Abbie