

# *I Shall Not Want*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a three-week series on prayer

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*Psalms 23 (NRSV)*

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

*John 10:7-15 (NRSV)*

<sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.  
<sup>11</sup>"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

*How often do we stop and consider that the book of Psalms is the Bible's prayer book and, therefore, God's prayer book. How often do we pray the psalms as prayers? These prayers will unlock a deeper and more God-pleasing prayer life for us all?*

I was raised in the Episcopal church. When I was confirmed, I was given my own prayer book, the 1952 Book of Common Prayer with Hymnal. I still have it. The pages are yellowed and the binding is a bit weak, but I can remember laboring through the catechism classes. Back then, no one thought the Christian education of children was something to be enjoyed, even once in a while. My prayer book included what was called the "Psalter," all 150 psalms as translated in the Revised Standard Version. If nothing else, this arrangement reinforced the teaching that the psalms had always been the prayer book of God's people. In it you can pray of praise and comfort, request and thanksgiving. There are prayers filled with anger and others filled with tears. Thomas Merton, the American Catholic monk and writer had much to offer us with regard to the Psalms. Here are a few of his thoughts:<sup>1</sup>

...the Psalms are songs of men who knew who God was. If we are to pray well, we too must discover the Lord to whom we speak, and if we use the Psalms in our prayer we will stand a much better chance of sharing in the discovery which lies hidden in their words for all generations. For God has willed to make Himself known to us in the mystery of the Psalms....

To put it very plainly: the Church loves the Psalms because in them she sings of her experience of God, of her union with the Incarnate Word, of her contemplation of God in the Mystery of Christ....

(St. Augustine tells us) "the best way (to praise God) is to seek the way of praise in the Scriptures of God." (He) adds that God has taught us to praise Him in the Psalms, not

<sup>1</sup> From Merton's book, *Praying the Psalms*, Liturgical Press, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> In the west, shepherds drive the sheep using sheep dogs for horses, but in the Near East, now as then,

in order that He may get something out of it, but in order that we may be made better by it. Praising God in the words of the Psalms, we can come to know Him better. Knowing Him better we love Him better, loving Him better we find our happiness in Him.

The contemplation we learn from the Psalter is not mere “speculation.” The Psalms are not abstract treatises on the divine nature. In them we learn to know God not by analyzing various concepts of His divinity, but by praising and loving Him. The Psalms being hymns of praise, they only reveal their full meaning to those who use them in order to praise God.

To understand the Psalms, we must experience the sentiments they express, in our own hearts. We must sing them to God and make our own all the meaning they contain.... We must praise him as much in sorrow as in joy.

And of all the psalms, none is more well-known or beloved than the twenty-third, a simple prayer about a shepherd and his sheep.

### *Caring for the sheep*

Shepherds care for the sheep. They lead the sheep (v.2 of Psalm 23; 10:3 in John).<sup>2</sup> They provide food (v.1 and 10:9) and protect them (v.4 and 10:12-13). The shepherds do all this so that the sheep will live (v. 3, 10:10). Of the herd animals, sheep are in particular need of this care for they’ve lost the ability to defend themselves. Some shepherders have even taken to mixing llamas into the herds because llamas are tougher and more combative. The llamas will form protective circles in the face of a predator, or at least run away. Sheep do none of that. They are utterly dependent on the shepherd and, to quote Shakespeare, “there’s the rub.” All this shepherd imagery is wonderfully warm and comforting, but it leads us to what we most want to ignore: our dependence upon God.

After all, we think we’re the cowboys, not the sheep. We stand ready to feed ourselves, defend ourselves, and make our own way in the world. We were taught self-reliance. When facing a problem, we pick ourselves up, devise a solution and press on. In the stirring words of Henley’s poem “Invictus,” we are the captains of our fates and the masters of our souls. This is our way. This is the American way.

Understood correctly, self-reliance is a good thing. Paul supported himself with his skills as a tent-maker rather than relying on others for financial support. He was committed to his ministry and knew that he couldn’t stand by and leave it up to others.

But as we are inclined to do in all things, too often we turn a healthy self-reliance into an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We forget that we actually need others. We forget that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. We are not independent of others, we are dependent upon them to help us realize our purpose and to teach us about love. God does not call us to some sort of self-sufficient isolation, but to community and fellowship.

Indeed, much of the biblical story is devoted to shaking us out of our misguided self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. The long story of God and his people makes us realize that we are dependent upon God, that it is he who strengthens us and enables us to accomplish all that we do.

We know that in the end our self-reliance will fail us; in the end we are really no more than sheep. We can’t accumulate enough wealth to forestall sorrow. There is no doctor who can prevent our death. We can’t have enough police to stop crime or armies to prevent war. We think we don’t need a shepherd when, in truth, we do. We imagine that the wolf is our problem, when it is actually the shepherd’s problem.

### *The Good Shepherd*

In the tenth chapter of John, Jesus takes on himself the mantle of the Good Shepherd, an image that for any Jew belonged only to God. As the good shepherd, Jesus leads his flock

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<sup>2</sup> In the west, shepherds drive the sheep using sheep dogs for horses, but in the Near East, now as then, shepherds actually lead the flocks, using their voices to call the sheep forward. The shepherds of Jesus’ named every sheep in their flock and called them by name.

into the safety of the pen (10:2). But unlike any other shepherd, Jesus is the very gate to the pen. He and no other is the way into the safety of the pen (v. 9a) and out to the luxurious forage of the pasture (9b). He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). The world is filled with many who want to steal and to kill and to destroy. But Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, is the bringer of life, abundant life, life that can be given me by no one else.

I’m not sure what counts as an abundant life for sheep. It is probably just getting fat and being safe. But for us, this abundant life – life lived to the full -- that Jesus offers us is life at its barely imagined best.

How is this abundant life to be ours? Who can ensure that it will not be snatched away?

Good shepherds are willing to defend their flocks, even putting themselves at some risk. But I doubt that many shepherds have died defending their sheep and even those that did, never intended to die. Yet, as God’s anointed shepherd, Jesus does not merely risk his life for his flock, he willingly lays it down for us, saving us because we cannot save ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we can rest in knowing that our Good Shepherd restores our soul and leads us down the right paths. In him, we shall never want.

In closing, consider the following from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This seems a fitting way to close out our brief series on prayer, especially the last sentence, which I’ve highlighted.

“If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible and especially the Psalms, therefore, we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ. We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God’s Word, and then we shall be able to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. If we were dependent entirely on ourselves, we would probably pray only the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer.

But God wants it otherwise.

*The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer,  
not the poverty of our heart.”<sup>4</sup>*

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is so familiar to us it can be hard for us to read it with fresh hearts. You might try gathering five or six different translations of the psalms (many are available online), including Peterson’s *The Message* paraphrase. Read through each translation slowly and aloud, breathing slowly, meditatively. Then come back to the translation that most touched your heart. Has the reading and speaking brought you comfort? Peace? Did you hear the psalm in new ways? How can this brief psalm help us to place our heart where it belongs and where it wants to be? How can this prayer help us to pray?
2. Try praying the Psalter. One psalm each day, prayed aloud, striving to help our hearts conform to God’s word, letting each prayer reshape our hearts as we enter into a deeper conversation with God. Are we really willing, as Bonhoeffer put it, to pray contrary to our own hearts. This simple yet powerful thought is our heart’s path to its true home.
3. Who wants to be your good shepherd? There are always lots of folks lobbying for the job. Who tells you that they want to protect and provide for you? To show you the way to the life you’ve always wanted? You might share some stories of times in your life when a seeming “good shepherd” let you down, when you discovered that the shepherd wasn’t as good as you thought or as able.

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<sup>3</sup>The “for” in “lay down my life for the sheep” emphasizes Jesus’ sacrificial death, as this word construction does every time in John’s gospel (see 6:51; 11:50; 17:19, and more). It isn’t that Jesus’ death is an example for his flock. Rather, the sheep are in mortal danger and Jesus intentionally sacrifices himself in their defense, for there is no other way (from Don Carson’s commentary on John).

<sup>4</sup> From Bonhoeffer’s book, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*. Augsburg Press. 1974.

