

## Journeying in Grace

March 15, 2026

### Psalm 23

*<sup>1</sup>The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. <sup>2</sup>He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters; <sup>3</sup>he keeps me alive. He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name. <sup>4</sup>Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff – protect me. <sup>5</sup>You set a table for me right in front of my enemies. You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over! <sup>6</sup>Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the Lord’s house as long as I live.*

### Ephesians 5:8-14

*<sup>8</sup>You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, so live your life as children of light. <sup>9</sup>Light produces fruit that consists of every sort of goodness, justice, and truth. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, test everything to see what’s pleasing to the Lord, <sup>11</sup>and don’t participate in the unfruitful actions of darkness. Instead, you should reveal the truth about them. <sup>12</sup>It’s embarrassing to even talk about what certain persons do in secret. <sup>13</sup>But everything exposed to the light is revealed by the light. <sup>14</sup>Everything that is revealed by the light is light. Therefore, it says, Wake up, sleeper! Get up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*



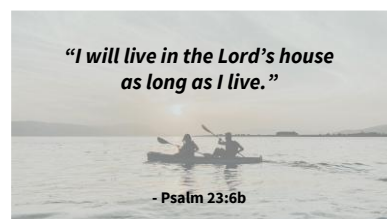
Today we delve into a very familiar passage and into a very familiar topic in our faith. In Psalm 23, we delve into a passage that most of us could recite or at least finish verses that are started. For example, if I were to say, “*Even though I walk through the darkest valley...*” what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_ And in Ephesians 5, Paul wrestles with the image of light and darkness, of pleasing God instead of pleasing the “sinful inclination” that we spoke of last Sunday.

In chapter 3 from *Stretched*, the title is “Trial.” Author Christopher Richmann dives deep into the temptations and trials that we face, wrestling with the sources, the outcomes, and the ways that we grow in our faith as we face the various trials that life brings our way. As we prepare to spend this time together, let us pray...

*God of light, we come to you in need of healing, for the eyes of our hearts are clouded. Walk with us, journey in grace with us, show us the way to humbly live as light in this dark world. Embrace us in your love, touch us with your Word, and transform us by your Spirit. Make us whole, so that we might live new lives. Bless us in our worship, that we may become children of light. It is with this simple request that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.*

Please turn with me to Psalm 23. The six verses that we find in this Psalm are a great summary for how to live a life of faith as recorded in the Old Testament. We begin with the first stanza, the first three verses. First, note that the nouns are third person descriptive: the Lord, my shepherd, he lets, he leads, he keeps, he guides.

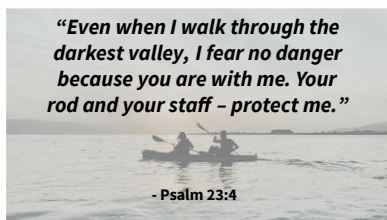
As we shift to the rest of the Psalm, starting in verse 4, the nouns shift to the second and first person. This brings a more personal, more intimate feeling. In the second person, God acts: your rod, your staff, you set, you bathe. In the first-person nouns, the psalmist speaks, we speak. In verses 4 through 6, we become involved: I walk, I fear no danger, my enemies, my cup, my life. And then the closer: *“I will live in the Lord’s house as long as I live.”*



Because God is our Lord, shepherd, guide, provider, sustainer, protector, yes, we walk with God all our days. Because God’s goodness and faithful love pursues us all of our days, yes, we will live with the Lord our God all of our days. My friends, this is a for-better-or-for-worse kind of love.

Psalm 23 begins with the psalmist, who we assume is David, telling us all about his Lord. David tells us all of the things that his relationship with God brings him. He lacks nothing. He finds rest and peace in grassy meadows and beside restful waters. God keeps him alive and guides him on *“proper paths.”* And then there is an interesting shift that occurs. It happens to us too when we do as David is doing. When we pause and take time to reflect on all that God has done and is doing in our lives, when we express our gratitude for the ways that the Lord our God touches our lives, for the blessings that God brings our way, we do what David does.

Beginning in verse 4 David breaks into praise and worship. In his praise and worship, he begins to speak to God instead of about God. David’s relationship with God comes to the fore. In this verse, David praises God for the presence he feels in the hardest moments of life:



*“Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff - protect me.”*

God’s presence is sure in difficult times, in seasons when we are grieving or suffering or are broken. God is the source of protection, sustenance, comfort, strength. God’s presence allows us to walk in the darkest moments of life, in moments that otherwise hold the power to crush or totally defeat us.

The “I” and the “you” add a conversation feel to this song of praise and worship. It is hard to talk about God without talking to God, to describe God without praising God. While the Psalm is more about the relationship with God than the benefits that this relationship brings, it is important to note the benefits before moving on to Ephesians 5. While Psalm 23 is a call to engage with and to connect to God, to journey daily in God’s grace, it also speaks to what God has in store for those who seek to live in the Lord’s house all of their days. There is first a very personal accounting. The Lord is MY shepherd, he makes ME, he leads ME, he restores ME. Second, there is a communal or corporate accounting of what a relationship with God brings to us as a whole.



To pick up on this, as some Biblical scholars argue, the “I” and “my” can and maybe should represent the community of faith as a whole. Faith is, after all, meant to be understood and lived this way. We see that clearly evident in the early church. When David writes, “*I lack nothing*,” the implication is that individuals lack nothing because the community of faith cares for and loves and provides for one another. This was evident in the early church when individuals sold property or belongings so that the community of faith could help one another in moments of need. The protection, the overflowing cup, the anointing oil – none for personal gain but all for the wholeness and wellness of the community.

As we close our time in Psalm 23, we need to pay attention to the verb tenses. In the first five verses, they are all present tense. This relationship, this connection with God, this provision and protection and guidance and blessing – all in the here and now, all in the daily living of our faith in this world. This is what God offers to those who choose to live as ones created in God’s image. In the last verse, there is a shift to the future tense.

This shift is an expression of trust – of a trust built through a long walk with God. David expresses his trust and faith in God’s continued presence, blessing, provision, protection, peace, rest... into eternity.

As we turn now to Ephesians 5, we find the same call to live with an awareness of God’s presence in our lives and in our world. But Paul approaches this a little differently. Paul emphasizes the choices we make as we journey in grace. Using the biblically familiar metaphor of light and dark, for Paul, to walk and live in the light is to seek God’s presence through the things that represent God. Conversely, to walk and live in the dark is to seek those things that deny God’s presence.

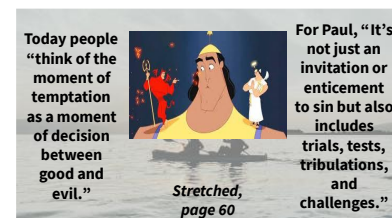
On page 59 of *Stretched*, author Christopher Richmann offers a somewhat light-hearted reminder of the old yet familiar trope of two supernatural beings, one perched on each shoulder. A devil sits on one shoulder and an angel on the other, each making his or her case. As entertaining and silly as this image is, this is how many 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans view the battle between light and dark, between good and evil. Kronk’s struggle in this cartoon scene is played out daily in people’s lives. In this scenario, Richmann argues that today people “think of the moment of temptation as a moment of decision between good and evil” (page 60.) For believers, this is a narrow definition of temptation and the spiritual battle between good and evil. For Paul and for others in the Bible, the idea of “temptation” and the resultant choice to live as light or darkness in the world had a much broader understanding.



For Paul, Richmann notes, “It’s not just an invitation or enticement to sin but also includes trials, tests, tribulations, and challenges.”

Initially, as we start to journey in grace, it is the battle between light and dark where Christians begin to choose between the will

and way of God and the will and way of the world. We who were in darkness learn to walk in the light.

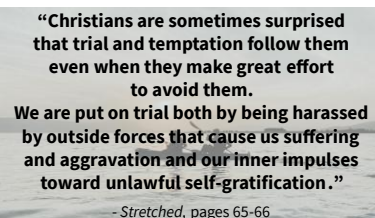


While Paul loves his light/dark, good/evil, heaven/world dualities, they are simply metaphors. Paul never meant to imply a starkly black and white understanding of faith. He knew that there was a

continuum upon which he himself and all believers lived our lives of faith. Paul did not intend to imply that there was, for example, nothing good in darkness or in the flesh or in the world. By using these sharp contrasts, though, Paul reminds us that there is good and not-so-good all around us. And he wants to be clear that we have a choice. To that end, our journey of faith often involves a never-ending process of determining what is pleasing to God (and not), or discerning between what is of God and what is not.

Returning to our Lenten book, Richmann offers these thoughts on pages 65 and 66: “Christians are sometimes surprised that trial

and temptation follow them even when they make great effort to avoid them. We are put on trial both by being harassed by outside forces that cause us suffering and aggravation and our inner impulses toward unlawful self-gratification.” While we would never choose to face temptation or trial – if it were left up to us – that is simply not how this world works. Trial and temptation are part of this life. I believe that is why Jesus taught us to pray, “*lead us not into temptation*” in the Lord’s Prayer.



Knowing that we will face trial and temptation, the question is simple: What will we choose? Paul encourages us to “*live your life as children of the light.*” Paul encourages us to choose and to do and to be good. Living in ways that are pleasing to God, we produce fruit or bear witness to our faith in the world by acting, speaking, and being in ways that “*consists of every sort of goodness, justice, and truth.*” To me, this is a personal call to develop and maintain and strengthen our relationship with God. John Wesley would call this “personal holiness.”

We began this Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday with a call to live with a clean heart. The practices of introspection and reflection, of confession and repentance guide us to keep our heart clean or right with God. In our Wesleyan understanding, this is how we “stay in love with God.” Staying in love with God leads us to seek to “do good” in the world. This is where Paul’s call to be goodness in the world and to work for justice comes into play.

For Wesley, for Paul, and for Jesus, there was also a “social holiness” that is an important part of our faith. This is partly Wesley’s admonition to “do good” in the world, but it is often more so that call to “do no harm.” When we struggle with temptation and fall into sin, it is then that we do harm to self and to others. For Paul, in verse 11, he called these failings and sinful behaviors the “*unfruitful actions of darkness.*” In *Stretched*, writer Christopher Richmann gives us some real-world examples of our trials, temptations, and sinful choices.

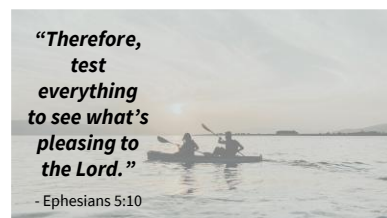
On page 72 Richmann notes that our tendency towards darkness and sinful actions often comes when we’ve “tasted wealth, power, and feelings of importance.” He gives a few examples. We land a great job, but pretty soon we’re looking for a promotion.

We buy a beautiful new house, but pretty soon we wish we had our neighbor's front porch or big garage. We find ourselves in a position of authority on a volunteer project and soon enough we're scheming to cut others out of the decision-making process. These are but a few of the ways that we get a taste of what the world identifies as "success" and soon find ourselves craving more.

In verse 10 Paul addresses what to first do when these temptations rise up in us or when we encounter them in the world. He writes,

*"Therefore, test everything to see what's pleasing to the Lord."* To

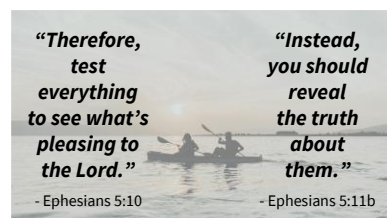
test something, to make a Biblically and spiritually informed decision, we must ask ourselves, is this pleasing to God? If we are unsure after studying the scriptures and spending time in prayer seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction, then we should seek the wisdom of others who we know that are devout and faithful and spiritually mature.



Then, once we've decided that the words or actions are sin or darkness or evil, we cannot simply decide not to do or say that thing. Here is where our social holiness kicks in. Here is where doing no harm kicks in. At the end of verse 11 Paul asserts,

*"Instead you should reveal the truth about them."* Faith lived out often leads us to taking action, be that in word or deed. Revealing the truth is shedding light on an injustice or another evil in our

world. This may be through expressing our thoughts on social media. It might be by showing up at a protest or a rally standing for the vulnerable or the marginalized.



Our faith grows and deepens when we exercise it, when we put it into practice, when it feels like our mission, or when it becomes our passion. *Stretched* writer Christopher Richmann refers to this growth and deepening of our faith on page 76, writing about the outcomes of our trials, testing, and temptation, noting, “God tests you to strengthen your faith.” In the exercising of Paul’s faith through trials and temptations, he was reminded of the necessity of relying on God’s grace alone in these times of difficulty. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 2, Paul reminds us that when we are weak in ourselves, we are strong in the Lord.

When we turn to and trust in God instead of self, journeying in God’s grace alone, we find the strength, provision, protection, and peace, that David found and knew in Psalm 23.



When we walk closely with the Lord, with the good shepherd, we do experience God’s grace in abundance. When we let our light shine, when we seek to do good and stand against the harm being done in the world, we expose the darkness and evil of this world not by pointing fingers or by being negative or judgmental about other’s choices and actions, but by our witness to God’s grace and love. We expose the darkness by being light. As we seek to journey in grace, may we do what is pleasing to the Lord as we ourselves strive to be, to do, and to live as light in the world. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. What have been the most difficult “wilderness” moments of your life (trial, temptation, suffering)? Looking back, how did your faith deepen and/or grow?
- 2) *Pray*. Sometimes it is hard to determine what is pleasing to God. What is one area that you are struggling with discernment in? Spend some time seeking the Spirit’s wisdom.
- 3) *Study*. Read Ephesians 5:15-21. What additional ideas or practices does Paul offer in terms of living as the light? How can you put some of these into practice?