

Guardian of the Soul

April 30, 2023

Psalm 23

¹ *The 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. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

1st Peter 2:19-25

¹⁹ *For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*



As we begin today, we start by acknowledging that talking about suffering is never easy. It is a difficult subject whether you are suffering or if you are walking with one who suffers.

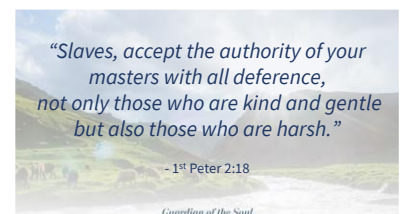
Suffering is one of the themes that connect Psalm 23 and 1st Peter 2. This theme bridges our two primary scriptures for today. Yes, everyone has experience with suffering. Even though it is a universal experience, we struggle talking about suffering. We can feel guilty talking about it, about naming our pain. We can fall into the old comparison game – evaluating our suffering against other people’s suffering, deciding maybe ours isn’t as bad or deciding that ours is worse. Neither is healthy.

The reality is that our pain is our pain. It is real. It shapes who we are, and it impacts how we see and respond to the world. This is one of Peter’s main points today. How we live with and through our suffering and how we see and acknowledge God’s presence in the suffering – this is what helps us through. There is a presence, a *“shepherd and guardian of your souls”* that brings us and gives us hope. In Christ’s presence we find one who has suffered, one who is familiar with our suffering. And because of this, Christ understands. He has been where we are. David echoes this in Psalm 23, verse 4: *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”* As we begin this time together, let us pray...

In our world, there is just and unjust suffering. Turn with me to 1st Peter 2 as we begin to look at suffering. We begin in verse 18, backing up one verse to better understand our passage for today. In verse 18 we read, *“Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh.”*

Here Peter is addressing those who are household servants

– teachers, cooks, farmers. While these jobs seem normal, servitude is not a condition any would have voluntarily chosen. They were not free; they were under the control of the master of the household.

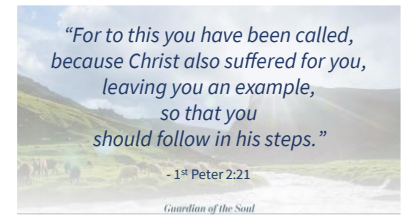


It is important to note that by addressing these lowest members of society, Peter was acknowledging their worth before God. This was completely countercultural.

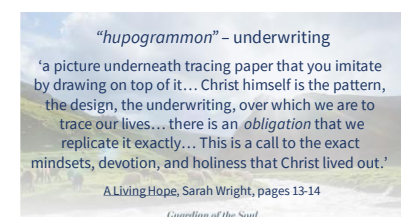
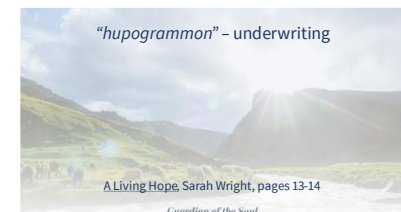
In verse 19 Peter acknowledges that at times these servants will suffer unjustly. In these instances, Peter names it as a “*credit to you.*” Peter intends for every member of the household to hear these words. Being read in a public space, there is also an unspoken message to the Christians who has servants in their homes. Being kind and gentle to those under your authority would be the implied choice for those masters hearing these words of Peter.

But then he flips the scenario, in verse 20, where he speaks of just suffering. When we suffer for doing wrong, we are, in essence, getting what we deserve. Returning to unjust suffering, still in verse 20, Peter states that when we “*endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval.*” Being a servant in a culture where the master held all the power, one could find oneself in an awkward place. A servant could be directed to cut a corner, to betray a customer, to tell a lie. When they chose to not comply because God calls them to something better, they could face a beating, for example. We too may face a similar choice at work or at school. Our boss or our friends can ask us to do something unethical, something unjust, something that runs counter to our faith. In these cases, we too can suffer unjustly for being faithful. Just as it was with Peter’s readers, suffering for the sake of doing what is right and just is a sign that God’s grace is active in our lives. While this Godly approval for unjust suffering makes sense to us, so to speak, I think in the general sense we would all avoid suffering if it were up to us. That’s why verse 21 is hard.

In this verse we read these words: “*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.*” Yes, I am grateful that Jesus suffered and died for me, for my sins, to provide a way to life eternal. Absolutely. 110%. Peter tells this to his readers, to those suffering unjust persecution, arrest, and even death. He tells them that they have been called to suffer. He tells these elect exiles that they are to follow Christ not just in how they love their neighbors and in how they are obedient to God, but also in their willingness to suffer. Peter calls them and us to this because when we follow in his steps, we gain a small understanding of his suffering for us.



In our discipleship study, Sarah Wright gives added depth to this verse. Peter tells us that in Christ we have an example to follow. It is to what we have been called as followers of Christ. When we delve into the original Greek, we get a much better understanding of what this call means. The original Greek word was *hupogrammon*. This word literally translates “underwriting.” She describes this underwriting as ‘a picture underneath tracing paper that you imitate by drawing on top of it... Christ himself is the pattern, the design, the underwriting, over which we are to trace our lives... there is an *obligation* that we replicate it exactly...’

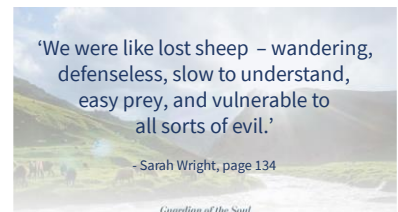
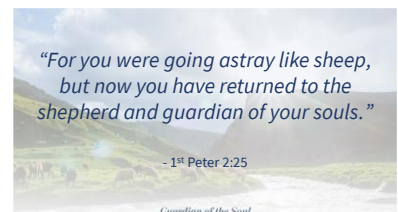


This is a call to the exact mindsets, devotion, and holiness that Christ lived out.’ Sit with that for a minute. ‘A call to the exact mindsets, devotion, and holiness’ of Jesus. What would it look like in your life, in my life, for us to really follow Christ’s example?

In verses 22 and 23 Peter reminds his readers and us how Jesus, the innocent, perfect one was abused but did not return abuse, of how Jesus suffered but did not threaten back. In the same book, Wright reminds us that ‘the all-powerful Lord Jesus didn’t fight back, defend himself, or repay evil for evil. Instead, he showed mercy and trust.’ When we are mistreated because of another unkindness, fear, or hatred, don’t we want to fight back, to defend ourselves, to get back at them? But here we see that Jesus was silent. His silence was mercy. Jesus could have instantly given them the justice that they deserved. Instead he trusted in God’s plan, in God’s sovereignty, and in God’s justice. Instead he humbled himself, dying the death that we deserved.

In the next two verses Peter reminds them of the “why” – why Christ was willing to suffer for us. Christ bore our sins so that we could be freed from our sins. He freed us from our sins so that we could “*live for righteousness*,” so that we could be healed from the guilt and shame that came from our sins.

And the biggest “why” comes in verse 25: “*For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*” Without Christ, we were lost. Without Christ we were wandering in the wilderness. Wright puts it this way: ‘we were like lost sheep – wandering, defenseless, slow to understand, easy prey, and vulnerable to all sorts of evil.’ Sounds about right, doesn’t it? Without Christ, there was no hope. But with this guardian, with this shepherd, with this one who knows our struggle, we are protected, we are guarded, we are not alone.

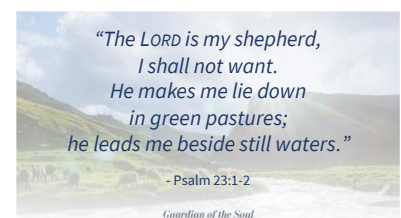
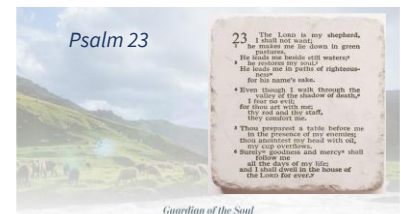


This shepherd guardian walks into the suffering with us.
 This guardian is a close companion. This one is right there with us. This one knows us. This guardian of our soul cares for us.



Peter the fisherman, he also identifies Jesus as the shepherd. It is an image that his readers would be familiar with. It is an image that we are pretty familiar with. The best-known shepherd in the Bible was probably David. David was the king of Israel – widely considered the greatest ever. He was a war hero and the builder of an amazing palace. David was a famous writer of psalms. And before that he was a shepherd.

As a writer of Psalms, David's most famous is probably the one that we have before us today. In the 23rd Psalm, David draws heavily on his personal experience – as a shepherd yes, but also as a warrior and as a king. Turn with me to Psalm 23 as we explore these well-known and beloved words. These words speak to us, they resonate deeply within our souls. The opening two verses connect an ideal shepherd and his or her flock with the Lord and the people of God: *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters."* Just as a shepherd would care for and lead and guide and provide for the flock, so too does the Lord provide for us, the people of God. As he writes these famous words, this has been David's most recent experience with God.



But for much of his life, you might recall, David was a lot like you and me. He let his human desires and his pride get in the way of his connection to and relationship with God. So we need to keep in mind that this poem was written after a long and often rocky walk with the Lord. It took many years for David's faith to spill out in these words. Here we find a relationship goal. We hope that this is the desired outcome of our walk of faith.

The 23rd Psalm speaks of a time when our relationship with God and with one another will have grown to the point where our deepest longings and our strongest desires are satisfied by our relationships with the Lord and with one another. But to get to this place where Jesus is the guardian of our souls, well, it takes time, and it takes work. We live in a world driven by wants and desires. In this world that seems to have all we need and tons more, we can easily come to believe that this thing or that thing can fill that aching need. Maybe the ache is in our heart. Or maybe it is in our mind. Or maybe it is in our wallet. Or maybe it is there in our online social media account.

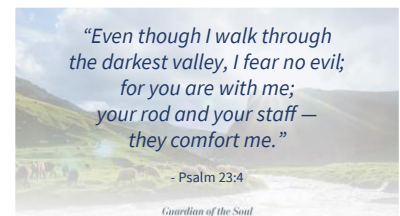


We get sucked into society's lie that if we just had one of those or if we just looked like him or her or if we just had a thousand followers, then our wanting would be done. Except it never is. The fixes that the world offers are only short-term. For example, the newest, latest, greatest isn't the newest, latest, greatest for very long. It might be for a little while, then we feel that we need to upgrade. We need the next new thing. And soon enough we again discover that new thing doesn't really bring the joy or satisfaction or contentment that the commercials promised. After enough laps on the treadmill of life, we tire and we settle.

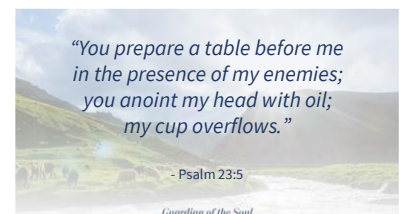
We choose to settle for less because nothing the world had to offer ever satisfied our wants. We tell ourselves that we can be satisfied with good enough. We learn to live with what is. But that is not God's plan for you or for me.

Turn with me to verse 3 to hear God's plan for you and for me. Here we read, "*He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*" God brings us rest and nourishes us and then the Lord cares for our soul. The Lord restores our soul – replenishing it from all that worldly living drags out. The Lord guides us to walk in his ways – in ways that bring joy and blessing, in ways that are righteous and fulfilling.

And even on those darkest days, in the deepest valley, the Lord is right there with us. Imagine what these words would mean to Peter's audience, to those living in exile, to those enduring some really dark valleys. "*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me.*" Fear cannot exist in the presence of the almighty. When the Lord is with us, guiding and comforting us as a shepherd does with the flock, we are safe, we are secure, we are not alone. In moments of grief, in moments of suffering, in moments of persecution or trial, these words are like balm to the open wound.

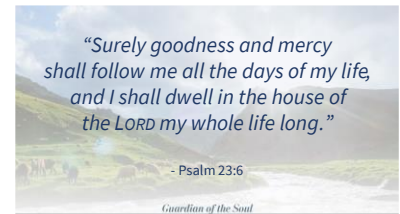


In verse 5, even though in the presence of enemies, the picture becomes bountiful and generous. Even there, with enemies present, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*" The banquet table is set. It is abundant and amazing. The oil of anointing, of blessing, flows down over the forehead and onto the face. Again, abundance.



The cup, it too overflows. In the presence of the Lord, there is no wanting. There are no desires to be felt – there is only abundance and blessing and love. In the presence of the divine, you are filled to the top and spilling over.

The green pastures, the still waters, the restoration of the soul, the guardian in the darkest valley, the overflowing and abundance of blessings – they culminate in verse 6: *“Surely 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.”* Once we enter into this deeply personal and intimate relationship with the Lord, it feels like we are ever being pursued by goodness and mercy. However, it is not a one-way street. We must pursue and desire God too. Once our connection to God is here, within this beautiful relationship, we long only to dwell in the house of the Lord, right there forever in God’s presence.



Yes, the suffering will still come. The pain will still visit our lives. The trial and the struggle will come upon us. It did for David. It did for Peter’s audience. It will for us. But when the

Lord is the guardian of our souls, when the Good Shepherd is our constant companion, when the Holy Spirit is ever present to us – then we walk through each day with a living hope, an everlasting joy, and an unwavering trust and faith. May it always be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. In times of suffering or trial, what parts of Psalm 23 have you personally experienced? How did these experiences affect your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Are you or is someone you know suffering unjustly? How can this situation be addressed or relieved? Being by praying for God's direction.
- 3) *Study*. Read 1st Peter 2:13-18. After reading this passage, what words or behaviors might need to change for you to better reflect Christ to the world?