

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I

shall not want.

He makes me lie down in

green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

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.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

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.

Part 1: The Sheep and the Shepherd

The first time I recall hearing Psalm 23 was at my great-grandmother's funeral. I was 7 years old at the time, and my dad played on a cassette "The Lord is My Shepherd" by Keith Green. From that song I was able to remember most of Psalm 23 throughout the years.

Psalm 23 is often associated with a funeral psalm due to one of the verses referencing death. When looked in its entirety, it mentions death once out of the six verses and is full of imagery about living. It focuses on shelter, guidance, water, restoration, security, love, and overflowing abundance. There are joy and happiness with getting to live under the care of the shepherd.

Today I will be focusing on the first three verses of Psalm 23:

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake."

Lesson 1: God is the ultimate secure attachment figure

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth are psychologists who pioneered attachment theory during the 1950s and 1960s. They extensively studied relationships of early bonds between infants and their caregivers and created the concepts of "internal working models". Internal working models shape how we view the world and ourselves. If we have consistent loving and responsive caregivers during the first few years of our lives, we can develop a "secure attachment style", or a sense of feeling worthy of love and trusting of those around us. Likewise, if caregivers are cold, unresponsive, or inconsistent, we can develop an insecure attachment style where we view ourselves as unlovable and untrusting of others. These attachment styles tend to follow us throughout our lives, influencing the type of friends and partners we choose, and impacting the

way we parent our own children. Secure people tend to enter relationships with other secure people, and vice versa.

While research finds that the first couple of years of life are the most critical, attachment is shaped throughout the lifespan and can be changed through new experiences. We can develop a secure attachment through therapy and self-work, entering relationships with secure and safe people, and active effort.

An attachment figure is a specific person or persons who provide us with security and comfort that we can lean on. Our attachment figures start as our early caregivers and can eventually be our romantic partners as adults.

Even the most healthy and secure attachment figures, whether it be our parents or our partner or other important people, fall short. No one person can meet all of our needs all of the time. We are fallible, we tire and become depleted and have other demands. Yet God is infallible, has the greatest sense of love, and does not need us to get by.

Because God provides all of our needs without tiring, and loving us through all of our shortcomings, He is the most secure and perfect attachment figure we can have.

Alexander Maclaren states, "Because we live, we die. In living, the process of going on of which death is the end. But God lives forevermore. A flame that does not burn out; therefore, his resources are inexhaustible, his power unwearied. He needs no rest for recuperation of wasted energy. His gifts diminish not the store which he has to bestow. He gives and is none the poorer. He works and is never weary, He operates unspent, he loves and he loves forever. And through the ages, the fire burns on, unconsumed and undecayed."

Last week during silent worship, I had the image of sitting next to a stream and plucking petals off a flower. I was playing that childhood game of "he loves me, he loves me not". I was reflecting on God's love for me, there was no room for "he loves me not", because He always loves me. Every petal was a "He loves me"; never is there a moment where God's love is not

present. If I go my own way and become lost, Jesus will leave the 99 to find me and will rejoice when He does. My own failings and inadequacies do not make me unworthy of being found and rejoiced over.

When we have attachment wounds, we can believe that we are too much or that we are not enough for others. We can project these attachment wounds on God, wondering if we are too difficult, needy, inadequate, broken, or unlovable. We may view God as angry and ready to punish us when we fall short or is distant and withdrawn. If we had loving and patient figures and a lack of religious trauma, we may be better able to view God for who He really is. It is important to challenge our narrative and internal working models of who God is based on how mankind has been to us.

God is a shepherd who endlessly gives. He never tires of loving us; we never can be too much and too needy. We can rest knowing that we don't have to be "enough", because we all fall short, and He loves us anyways. God chose you even when He knew ahead of time every mistake you will make. He loves you now knowing what sin you're going to commit in ten years and still wants to shepherd you.

Gibson states, "The self-sufficient God is not the self-absorbed God. The self-existent God is not the self-centered God. Rather-wonder of wonders-the God who is strong clothes himself in a picture of the closest tender care for those who are so weak. It is a way of saying that he puts all the resources of his infinite fullness at the disposal of finite creatures. He is a shepherd."

God as shepherd is our greatest secure base to lean on.

Lesson 2: We can live simply because He provides for all of our needs

In Psalm 23, we get a green pasture to lay in, still waters to drink from, a rod to protect us, a staff to guide us, a prepared table to eat from, God's favor with anointed oil in front of our enemies, an overflowing cup, goodness, mercy, and God's comfort. This psalm does not talk

about abundant materialism. Yet all of our needs are provided because we don't want for anything. 2 Corinthians 6:10 says that we can have nothing and yet possess everything.

In our capitalistic and highly consumer-driven culture, our wants are advertised as felt needs. We can feel a desire for more and more, never appreciating what is in front of us. We become distracted and disconnected from the gifts that God has given us. Gibson refers to Psalm 23 as "an oasis in our materialistic wasteland. It invites us to stop and rest awhile and consider afresh who God is for us in the simple plentitude of his being and the endless riches of his covenant love" (p. 28).

If we are too focused on the next thing to buy or consume or the next experience to have, always looking for greener grass, we miss the green pasture that God wants us to be present in. Because God is a shepherd who looks out for us, we can trust that He will not have us resting in a place that doesn't have exactly what we need. If we don't lay in the place God has for us, we may wander to somewhere desolate and unfulfilling. It is near still waters and in green pastures that God wants us to be present so that we can find our rest and not lack anything. It is better to be fully in the here-and-now than it is to daydream our life away, constantly seeking more.

This place of resting is subjective and symbolic, and guidance from Spirit is important to listen to, what we need in order to rest.

Some of us may benefit from taking this verse literally. There is a reason why so many relaxing meditations are centered around being in nature. Being outside can bring so many health benefits in reducing cortisol, hypertension, depression, anxiety, improving immunity, memory, creativity, focus, and more. Kushner states, "God's world, decorated in blues and greens, calms us, gently bathing our eyes with quiet, low-intensity colors. We spend so much of our lives in a man-made environment, with its artificial lighting and artificial cooling and heating, bright neon signs and color television programs, that when we get a day off...we instinctively feel the need to find our way to God's world with its more restful palette."

Resting may also be leaning in and trusting that God will provide for us in a hostile world, remembering He has a history of taking care of people in wildernesses, and can do the same for

us. If David can beat Goliath, and Moses can stand against Pharaoh, why can't we? How can we tap into restoration as individuals and as a flock amongst the Goliaths and Pharaohs of today?

Lesson 3: Quiet rest helps us discern God's path for our lives

God leads us into righteous paths, for his name's sake. How do we know what that path is?

Discernment is central to Quakers. It can also be referred to as "being called" or "having a leading".

By cutting back on distractions and taking time to deliberately rest in God's presence through quiet contemplation and prayer, we can have increased discernment to better understand how to act, refrain from acting, speak or be silent. Without this continual and intentional rest, it is hard to determine what is God's will rather than our own.

Thankfully He has a staff to bring us back when we start to wander. Imagine what could happen if a sheep goes astray. We could wander into places with drought, wolves, and other dangers that deplete and harm instead of heal. God wants to lead us to a place of righteousness, a place that calms our nervous systems. Being a calm presence calms others. The pasture that Jesus resides in is the greenest one we can encounter.

When we are living a life that God wants for us, it can bring healing for the world. The way we live our lives is a testament and example to others. Imagine a world where everyone sat in quiet contemplation and listened to that still, small voice, and then followed it with actions. It is when we don't listen and aren't aligned when we create the problems we see, individually and collectively. Listening can help us to see that of God in us and that of God in others. We must be present and have ears to hear.

The world needs restoration, and it can start with us by allowing ourselves to rest and be guided. We can fine tune our ability to hear at any time.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” John 10:27-28

Psalm 23 is not only about life after death but living for today. It is more than just survival, it is about thriving in contentment, safety, satiation and gratitude.

What might happen if you allow yourself to be present in this place?