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Extraordinary Blessing

Psalm 23

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Psalm 23... there's a good chance that many of you know these words. They've been set to music, recited often in worship, printed on t-shirts, made into posters, tattooed into body art, and read during memorial services for the Queen of England, US Presidents and maybe at the memorial service for someone who knew and loved. These words are in you, more than you realize!

So, let's give that a try. I'll say the first part of the phrase and you just respond with what comes next:

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.*
Even 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.*
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...
forever.

Well done!

We're coming to the end of our worship series called "Extraordinary." We've been exploring what it means to worship an extraordinary God who calls us to live extraordinarily. Over the past several weeks we've been exploring what it means to live in response to all that God provides for us. We've looked at seven extraordinary responses – forgiveness and praise, gratitude and generosity, joy and love. Today we'll learn about extraordinary blessing – God's extraordinary work of blessing in our lives. Now, it's important to understand what blessing is and what it is not. Blessing is not a bunch of things on our "Wish Lists." Blessing is not part of some cosmic transaction where, if we do the right number of good deeds, God's rewards us with blessing. It's not like standing in front of a

heavenly vending machine putting in our offering expecting that God will deliver goods in the form of everything from the closest parking space in front of the store to good heart health. I mean, we can't very well eat a steady diet of bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches, with extra bacon and mayo and expect God to keep our arteries clear. It doesn't work that way.

Blessing is something else entirely. Blessing is gift. Blessing is pure grace. Blessing is unearned, unexpected love from God that reminds us that we're completely taken care of. It's a powerful thing to be able to say "I shall not want" in light of God's extravagant blessing in our lives. That doesn't mean that all our wants are fulfilled. It means that God provides for our deepest needs, often through the gathered community, the body of Christ. According to the psalmist, goodness and mercy doesn't just follow us; it pursues us, chases us down and will not let us go. Such extravagant blessing invites us to be a blessing to others. If you've been around Prince of Peace for any amount of time you've probably heard me say that when we ask God to bless us, we're not asking to be blessed simply to be blessed. Rather, we're asking God to bless us so that we can bring blessing to someone else.

Psalm 23 is an ancient Hebrew prayer of trust and confidence. A choir would most likely have led a congregation in singing it. In this Psalm there are 5 movements. What I'd like to do is just briefly walk us through each of those five movements. I'd also like to challenge you to use the Daily Reading Plan for this that I've created for you to use as a meditation practice this week.

So, let's look at each section in the context of God's Extraordinary Blessing in our lives.

First, the extraordinary blessing in verse 1 is this: "We Can Trust God to Meet Our Needs." Let's read verse 1 together: "The Lord is my shepherd, so I have all I need."

To be able to say with confidence that "The Lord is our shepherd, we have all we need" is to come to grips with our relationship with scarcity and abundance. There is a big difference between living with a "scarcity mindset" and an "abundance mindset." The path that our lives take depend, in

large part, on the mindset we adopt. To a great extent, we can choose to view our experience of the world as either abundant or scarce, but they cannot co-exist. The scarcity mindset is the belief that there will never be enough, we're always wanting more, resulting in feelings of fear, stress, and anxiety. The abundance mindset, on the other hand, flows out of a deep inner sense of personal worth and security. This is a paradigm that is grounded in the belief that "there is more than enough" for everyone. Verse 1 of Psalm 23 reminds us of the most basic fact that because the Lord is our shepherd, (one who leads, guides, mentors, protects, etc.) we have everything we need. It's an invitation to stop putting our security in the things that we can lose. God, the shepherd provides all we need. Let me challenge you to spend some time this week thinking about two questions: First, do you see your life mostly as a glass half full, or a glass half empty. That will stir some thinking. The second question is even more important. Because the Lord is your shepherd, 'How much is enough?'

The extraordinary blessing in verses 2-3a is this: "We Can Trust God to Recharge Our Souls."

Let's read verses 2 and 3a together: "God lets me rest in green meadows; God leads me beside peaceful streams. The Lord renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name."

If you were to read through all 150 Psalms paying close attention to broad themes, you would quickly see that God is actively renewing, recharging, restoring, refreshing, recreating, and rebooting. Interestingly, all of that has roots that go back the ancient practice of Sabbath. In Genesis, God set aside the sabbath and rested. God did this to model a deeply healthy practice for us. In the book of Exodus, the command is simple: "Six days are set aside for work, but every seventh day is a sabbath – you must rest completely, even during your busy seasons, you must observe a Sabbath day of rest." (Exodus 34:21) Practicing sabbath allows us to rest our bodies and refocus our spirit. Practicing sabbath allows us to simply empty out so that there's room to refill when the time comes.

One of the best, but most challenging ways to practice sabbath is to disconnect from the noisy chatter, the fast pace, the demands of our over-

scheduled schedules. One of the mentors in my life decided with his wife to practice sabbath by disconnecting, unplugging from technology. I'll tell you right now that I got a little twitchy when I considered his modeling. He goes off the grid from Friday afternoon after work until Sunday afternoon. No screens. No internet. No email. No technology from Friday, late afternoon, until Sunday late afternoon. At first, he and his wife said it was horrible. Nearly impossible. Of course, they didn't just nail it on week one and go from there. It took months of working the process, a little at a time. But at some point, they discovered that they had far more capacity and margin for creativity when he did that. Trust God to recharge your soul. So, here's a challenge for you this week. Write the "God leads, renews, guides, gives me rest" in your journal and each day pay attention how God fulfills those promises.

The extraordinary blessing in verse 4 is this: "We Can Trust God in the Dark Valleys."

Let's read together verse 4: " "

It's safe to say that everyone goes through some dark valley at some point in their life. For some, the dark valley is related to our physical health. For others, it's the health of a loved one. That's why Psalm 23 is so important for us. We've all been in "The Valley of Shadows." Maybe your Valley of the Shadow of death had something to do with debt, or relational conflict. Maybe it was discouragement or depression. Maybe it was just a deep sense of being stuck. That's a scary place, for sure. Shadows can be frightening. We learned that as kids! As we got older, we learned that we mostly fear what we don't know and can't see. It's shadowy; we can't quite make out what's up ahead, or down that road. But here's something to keep in mind: shadows are mostly larger than the source. Our fear is usually greater than the actual event. Shadows are mostly bigger than the source which makes them look bigger than they really are. But here's the good News! Where there's a shadow there's also light. You can't have a shadow without a light. So, the key to not letting fear overwhelm us when we're going through the valley of the shadow is to turn our backs on the darkness, on the shadow and look at the light. The promise from verse 4 is that as long as we keep our eyes on the light, the

shadow can't overwhelm us. We are in the season of Epiphany. The message is that Christ is the light of the world. And as we go through the valley of the shadow of death, Christ is our light.

The extraordinary Blessing in verse 5 is this: "We Can Trust God's blessing."

Let's read verse 5 together: *"You prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies, you anoint our head with oil; our cup overflows."*

A really common source of stress is wondering if we're "enough" if we're "good enough" if there's a place for us at the table. And one of the most insidious voices in all of this is the voice that says we're not; we're not good enough. This is the voice that tells us that we haven't measured up, shown up, or made the grade; we haven't arrived, haven't done well enough. We all do this. And we all long for the affirmation that we're enough.

I have a good friend who tells the story about a moment he had with his dad not long before his dad died. He was sitting with his dad at a dinner table. His spouse and their young adult kids were also there. The dinner conversation was rich, filled with remembrances of past holidays, family gatherings and celebrations. His dad was sitting at the head of the table where he always sat and he was looking at him - just looking at him. He was quiet, still, solid. My buddy noticed his dad's focused gaze. And then his dad spoke. As he looked at his son, he just said, "You've done really well. I'm proud of you. I love you." It was an amazing moment of blessing. The parent blessing the child. That's what's going on here in this verse: God is reminding us that we are enough. God is saying to you, you've got a seat at the table – at my table, God says. The blessing in verse 5 is God saying to you, "You are enough. The oil of blessing, the presence at the table is God saying to us, "you are enough just the way you are. In my love and grace, you are enough. And because of that "enough-ness" of God's love for you, you can know that you have everything you need.

The Extraordinary Blessing in verse 6 is this: "We Can Trust God's Faithfulness."

Let's read verse 6: *"Surely, certainly, without a doubt, the goodness and love of God will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

Verse 6 tells us that we'll never, ever, ever be alone, ever.

If there's anything I want our five grandkids to know absolutely, certainly, surely, without a doubt, it's that they are loved and treasured, and that God will follow them all the days of their lives. And I want them to come to know that through me. I want them to know that they, having been created by the Creator of the universe, and that they will always have just what they need just when they need it. We tend to make this very complicated. It's not.

I think it was in a children's book that we either read to our own kids when they were little, or we more recently read to our grands. I couldn't put my finger on the book, but I remember the sweet paraphrase of Psalm 23.

God, we are your little lambs; you give us all we need. You always keep us in your care; we'll follow where you lead. Wherever life may take us, one special thing we know: our shepherd's love and goodness will never let us go.