

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Teach Us to Pray: I Shall Not Want”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 23

June 12, 2022

We continue this week in our summer series “Teach Us to Pray.” We’re spending all summer in the Book of Psalms, this songbook in the Bible, but it’s also kind of an instruction manual of how to speak *to* God and how to speak *about* God, along the entire spectrum of human emotion. It really is a remarkable thing. This month we’re looking at how the Psalms teach us to pray, and then in July how the Psalms teach us to praise, to worship.

We’re loosely framing this look on prayer in the psalms by how Jesus himself taught his disciples to pray, a form of what we know now as the Lord’s Prayer, which we just read in Luke chapter 11. Prayer is one of those central practices of faith, but maybe it’s not something we’re all that comfortable with. So maybe if we’re honest, we join that disciple in saying to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Last week, we asked what does it mean to approach the Lord in prayer, to even be so bold as to approach that which is holy, or beyond us, like in the opening words of Jesus’ prayer: “Father, hallowed be your name.” This week, as we go to perhaps the most well-known psalm of all of them, we look at another important aspect of prayer: gratitude, thanksgiving. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Psalm 23

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

You know for a passage of Scripture that is so well-known, it sure has a confusing opening. All the more confusing since it more or less frames the rest of what the psalm is saying. It’s a sentence that you may have heard many times before, since Psalm 23 is probably the most read, the most well-known psalm out of all 150 of them, and of all the verses in Psalm 23, the first verse is probably the most well-known out of it, which makes it all the more puzzling that this opening sentence is a bit confusing. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

And if you know this psalm, it may have been explained to you what that’s supposed to mean, but if you’re not familiar with it, or even if you’ve heard it a hundred times, maybe you’re at a place you’d feel silly to even

ask. What's that supposed to mean? "The Lord is my shepherd, [that] I shall not want"? A bit odd to start a song talking about how God is this shepherd that you don't want.

Obviously that's not the message, but I've always thought the wording was a little weird. In any case, that opening sentence of this psalm first declares the Lord as my shepherd. So for a second, let us first take a moment to consider the power of that imagery. It's common imagery in the Bible, as sheep and shepherding were a common trade, but in particular it's imagery used to describe how God loves us. A shepherd is one who guides, who provides for, who corrects, who protects. There's a closeness implied here, of a shepherd's concern for the sheep.

But then the second half of that opening sentence, "I shall not want," is the part that's a little odd. The wording feels like it's missing a connector or two, and some translations render it a bit differently. But the long and short of it is that saying "I shall not want" doesn't mean "I shall not want the Lord as my shepherd," but a less common way of using the word "want," something meaning "lack." As in, "*because* the Lord is my shepherd, *because* the Lord is my guide, my provider, my corrector, my protector, I shall not lack for anything."

And then the psalm goes on to say precisely why. Why shall I not lack for anything: because of what the Lord has done, is doing, and will do for me.

If you've heard these words before, it's easy just to gloss over them, but these are beautiful words, part of a prayer, of thanksgiving and contentment in the provision of the Lord.

Giving thanks to God is another one of those core aspects of prayer. We go to God in prayer, and give thanks for how God has blessed us, just as the psalm speaks of being led to green pastures and still waters. Thanksgiving might be the aspect of prayer that's most easily taught and modeled.

When we pray with Jack at bedtime, it usually sounds like this. Dear God, thank you for blank, and for blank. I'll usually get him started with something like, "Thank you for Mommy," but then he'll take it from there, and often he'll say, "and for Chase, and for Marshall, and for Sky, and for Rocky. I love you Jesus. Amen."

Now some of you are thinking, "Aw isn't that sweet? Already he's praying for and thanking God for some of his friends." Some of you already know what's up. He ain't praying for his friends. Chase, Marshall, Sky, and Rocky are some of the names of the heroic puppies in the kids' cartoon show Paw Patrol. Those are the ones Jack is thankful for. You know we hope that his family or his friends or his teachers or, you know, real people might make it into the mix at some point, but you start somewhere, right? And I don't doubt that Jack grasps what it means to be thankful for those cartoon puppies.

Point is, being thankful and being thankful in prayer are expressions that we can grasp pretty early on, but that doesn't mean they're simple or of less significance. In fact, gratitude has been called the core Christian sentiment, the only appropriate response to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, which then pervades every other aspect of life. The Lord pours out grace, and our lives are expressions of thanks. As one theologian put it, gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightning.

And it's gratitude that seeps out of every word of this 23rd Psalm. Though the word "thanks" is never directly said, there's thanksgiving all throughout this. However many times you've heard this psalm before, whether it's hundreds of times or whether just the first time today, did you notice that it doesn't actually ask God for anything? You know, usually you might imagine that if you're going to give recognition or thanks, it might be as part of a lead-up to an ask, you know, butter someone up a bit.

Now moving from thanks into supplication isn't such a bad thing, and plenty of other psalms do it. It's a movement from "Thank you God for all you have done for me," into "Lord, I cry out for your help." And we'll get into prayers of supplication, or bringing your burdens before God, in a couple of weeks.

But this psalm, this most well-known of psalms, doesn't ask God for a thing. In fact it does the opposite: it talks about how "I shall not want" [or lack or need] for *anything*. It talks about all the ways the Lord provides and protects and sustains. "He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." And then later, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." And then finally the psalm talks about the confidence and hope of all that God *will* do: "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." This psalm is overflowing with gratitude for how the Lord has provided and protected, to the point that there is no need to want for anything.

And so you might think, "Well, pretty cushy life, then." Is that the secret sauce? Just be thankful then you'll get even more and you won't have any problems and all the sources of stress and hardship will melt away from your life? It can be tempting to think that. It can be tempting to read verses like this and think, "Oh, well God will lead us beside still waters, and everything will be easy."

But here's where the beauty of this psalm comes through, and how it shapes the very way we come to the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving. This psalm isn't speaking of an easy life. Yes, it speaks of green pastures. Yes it speaks of still waters. Yes it speaks of restored souls and goodness and mercy and overflowing cups. But it isn't speaking of an easy life.

V. 4 reads, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley," and this is one of those instances where I think bringing in the King James really brings it home, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil;" and why? Because actually the valley of the shadow of death is no big deal after all? No, of course not. So why? "For you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me."

This psalm doesn't give thanks for an easy life. It gives thanks for the faithful presence of God precisely when life is not easy, recognizing that having the Lord by your side, guiding you, protecting you, brings more peace and more blessing than whatever road we might consider "easy."

And that, to me, brings up the challenge for some to be thankful. Not that there isn't much to be thankful for, but that we seek too readily after things that bring us comfort, after things that make it all easy. And don't hear me wrong; this isn't a call to scrap all your air conditioners; it's that all the things we seek after to make our lives easier or more comfortable or more enjoyable more often than not don't actually do that, because that kind of life always leaves you wanting whatever it is that could bring about a little more ease, a little more comfort.

That kind of life always leaves you wanting. And the whole point of this psalm is, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." And this psalm is modeling something so important for us as we consider a life of prayer.

Praying to God in thanks isn't about buttering up the Lord for whatever it is we might ask of him later. It changes us. Tell me, if every day, you prayed to God, sincerely prayed, with thanks in your heart for all the ways God has blessed you, would that just have no effect on you? No, the very act of recognizing how very much we have that comes from some source other than ourselves changes what we want. The psalm speaks of God leading me to green pastures. If every day you give thanks for the green pastures God has brought you to, whatever they

may be, how much are we going to be looking out for greener pastures? If every day, we give thanks to God for our daily bread, how much are we going to be praying for a new iPhone?

There's a movie from the 80s called *The Princess Bride*. Kind of a post-modern, tongue in cheek, self-aware fairy tale sort of thing if you're not familiar with it. But toward the end, there's one part where the hero Wesley and his two sidekicks are trying to save the princess in the castle guarded by lots of soldiers. Trouble is, Wesley has been hurt badly and can't even stand. But he asks his sidekicks, "What are our assets?" One of them says, "Your brains, his strength, my steel [his sword fighting]." "That's it? Impossible. If I had a month to plan maybe I could come up with something, but this? What I wouldn't give for a wheelbarrow and a long black cloak." "Oh will this do?" The other pulls out a long black cloak, and they remember a wheelbarrow sitting by a tree. Then Wesley says, "Then why didn't you list it among our assets in the first place?"

Point is, there may be more to be thankful for when we take a moment to consider it. So I encourage you this week, friends, continue going to God in prayer, and share how you are thankful, for how you already see God providing and guiding and protecting. And when you do so, things will look different.

Even when the road is hard, when the pastures don't seem so green, and when things look more like the valley of the shadow of death, there is always more to be thankful for than we may realize. And it's not just a "Look on the bright side" sort of thing. It's legitimately going to God in gratitude for all he has given, for all he promises to do, and for all he will do, taking stock of all of it, and doing so changes the very nature of what we want.

So maybe if you've found yourself always wanting more, or feeling like what you wanted always felt a bit out of reach, maybe the solution isn't to keep reaching for it. Maybe it's to step back, take stock of all God has already given, and then see how green the pastures start to look.

And maybe then our hearts will be changed enough so that we can join in the words of the psalm by saying "Because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want for anything."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.