

Psalm 23:4-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/ps/ps-23/psalm-234-6/>

No matter what circumstances abound, God transcends it all. He provides now and forevermore, to great affect in both this human life and the one to come.

Whereas verses 1-3 address God indirectly (with the third person “he”), verses 4-6 address Him directly (with the second person “you”). This marks a transition in the 23rd psalm. It is a sort of zooming in. The first half is a general statement of God’s protection and provision. It is about choosing a perspective, both about our circumstances and God’s provision that supersedes what we see and experience.

The second half is directed toward our view of God Himself. How we should view and interact with our shepherd. The proclamations are directed at God Himself.

It begins with, *even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.* All that was said in the first half (see notes on Psalm 23:1-3) is not conditional. Even in the worst of circumstances, God’s protection, peace, and salvation are apparent and available. This could be viewed somewhat as a recap of the first three verses. No matter what circumstances we encounter, God is providing our needs; we have all we need. God is shaping us into His image. In fact, whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, that is God’s best for us. Even when the circumstances are darkest and we are facing *death*.

The phrase *shadow of death* is used eighteen times in The Bible (half of those in the book of Job). It is a colloquialism used to represent the most dire of circumstances. The most dangerous.

The *valley* conjures imagery of being trapped, surrounded by obstacles. There is no easy way out.

These two together, *the valley of the shadow of death*, denote the worst that circumstance has to offer.

David says that *even though I walk through* these most terrifying of circumstances, *I fear no evil.* Why is David unafraid? Because the shepherd of peace is with him. *For you are with me.* God’s presence is the source of comfort, no matter the circumstances. God’s provision will cause all things to work for the good, and that good is to shape us into His image. No matter how bad, how dire, God’s redemptive purpose is always at work. God is always conforming us to His image, which is creating an eternal glory that will not pass away. The question is whether we will see this as a reality, and choose to *fear no evil.*

The *shadow of death* represents a circumstantial reality. Sometimes things are difficult, even tragic. But *the fear of evil* is a choice. David’s psalm delineates between the two. He may experience the *valley* but he will not let the circumstance lead him to *fear evil.* The tragic

circumstance, importantly, is not evil itself. It only tempts us to fear evil, because we are not in control, do not understand, or do not want the difficulty. Even within these realities, God is there. *You are with me*. And choosing this perspective over and against *the fear of evil* is (like we find in the book of Job) an act of worship. It is an acknowledgement and trust that the Lord is our shepherd and is guiding us into something that will work for our best.

God's presence is the great power, the great comfort, the great source of peace and rest. David reinforces this by saying, *your rod and your staff, they comfort me*. The circumstances are dire, but David is comforted by the ever-present knowledge that God is there. He is shaping all things to good, even if that is beyond our capacity to conceive.

The *rod* is often used in Scripture to illustrate a tool of correction (see Exodus 21:20, 2 Samuel 7:14, and Proverbs 22:15, 29:15 for just a few examples). Interestingly, the word for *rod*, "sebet," is also the word for branch (or tribe) and is what is used when the twelve *tribes* of Israel are described. So, the *rod* is a guiding, correcting, organizing tool in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The staff is often used to illustrate support. Like a walking stick (2 Kings 18:21, Zechariah 8:4).

So, the *rod* of correction and the *staff* of support are both used here as means of guidance. They lead us where to go/what to avoid (*rod*) and they help prop us up when troubles make it hard to stand (*staff*). Both of these are sources of *comfort* in *the valley of the shadow of death*, circumstances of tragedy, confusion, and pain. Both *rod* and *staff* are *Your(s)*, meaning God's. They are an extension of His presence. *You are with me*. No matter the circumstance, God's presence is a *comfort* when we choose the proper mindset. And not only in a metaphysical sense, but in a practical sense—God's *rod* and *staff* guide and support and comfort by showing us the way. This psalm guides us to choose a perspective that leads us into this *comfort*. When we choose to rely on our own "sheep-wit," we will be lost and vulnerable.

The word *comfort* is the Hebrew "naham," which can also mean "console" or "ease." God does not eliminate the circumstances, but through His presence the pain moves from unbearable to agonizingly manageable. His presence is *comfort*. *You are with me*. David's complete trust in the goodness of God allows him to see beyond the great valleys of life's circumstances. He knows there is something bigger at work, something that extends beyond this life. This is a great source of *comfort*, knowing that all things can be shaped by God to result in good.

Verse 5 elaborates on the goodness of God and the methods of His *comfort*. It begins with, *you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*. To *prepare a table* is pretty straightforward. One of the reasons this psalm is so popular is because of its clear, vivid imagery. The metaphors are clean and easily comprehensible. In this one, God is preparing a meal. A meal in which the singer of the song is the guest of honor. He *prepares the table* for *me*. This meal might even be prepared in the *valley of the shadow of death*.

Eating a meal is an exercise in intimacy; it is familial and relational. Perhaps the most relational activity humans participate in—which is likely why Jesus talks about Himself as the bread of life and uses the last supper as a message to His disciples. It is why Jesus tells us that the way to purchase all the gold we want from Him, all the treasure we desire, is to listen to His voice, and

invite Him in to dine with Him (Revelation 3:18-20). It is why Christians practice the taking of communion, which is an excerpt from the Passover meal, and a discipline familiar to church history, as is the practice of praying before a meal. There is something very sacred about eating together. The picture here is of God preparing a meal, and sitting down to have an intimate dinner, in the very presence of the dark circumstances, in the very presence of *enemies*.

Also, the word *prepare* is a present tense verb. Meaning, it is not something that is past (prepared) or future (will prepare); it is now. In other words, this is something continuously being done while facing *enemies*.

The word *before* in the phrase *you prepare a table before me*, is the Hebrew word “panim,” which literally means *face*. It is used to reference the front of a person, where you are facing. (The same word is used in Exodus 20:3: “thou shalt have no other gods before me”, meaning you should not face toward any other than the Lord). The Lord is preparing the *table* in the *presence of enemies*, but doing so in David’s presence, face to face. David does not *fear evil* because of the intimate presence and provision of God, rooted in David’s choice of perspective, rooted in his trust in the character and essence of God as a benevolent shepherd, who seeks David’s best.

The phrase *in the presence of my enemies* harkens back to verse 4 and *the shadow of death*. The word translated *enemies* here is the Hebrew word “sarar.” It can mean *distress, bind up, vex, afflict*, etc. The root of the word means “to cramp.” So, the word is used for those things that suffocate us. *Enemies* here is defined as those things which threaten to choke the life out of us. In the *presence* of these forces, God *prepares a table*, postured to give us hope and life even in the midst of the threat of the most dire of circumstances, or the most formidable of opponents. Even in the face of *death*.

God, according to David’s song, does not remove the affliction/enemy/distress. He *prepares a table* in its *presence*, while it is still there. God is certainly capable of moving circumstances, but this psalm is about His incredible power to comfort even in the midst of difficulty. The psalm anticipates that God’s purpose for us is not to remove us from difficulty, but to see us through it. In doing so, God is shaping us, molding us into His image (Romans 8:28-29).

Next, David speaks to the effect of this omnipresent comfort of God. *You have anointed my head with oil*. To *anoint* literally means “to make fat.” It is a sign of favor and prosperity. To *anoint with oil* was an outward sign of a spiritual reality. The kings of Israel were anointed with oil to signify their high and holy calling to lead. “Christ” means “The Anointed One” and indicates Jesus’ high and holy calling. What is described here is a sign of favor and calling. David was anointed with oil as king by the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 16:12-13). But here David speaks of being anointed by the Lord, his shepherd. This is a spiritual anointing.

This could reflect David’s understanding of humanity as being called to be servant-kings over all creation, as reflected in Psalm 8. Psalm 8 states that humans were crowned with the glory and honor of being placed over all creation, in order to silence Satan, God’s enemy. A more complete picture here might be God elevating humans to their proper place of reigning as servant-leaders over creation through the suffering of death (Hebrews 2:6-9).

David continues with, *my cup overflows*. Another simple metaphor of abundance. The *cup* represents life. It is a vessel, as we are. Made useful/meaningful by what fills it. And the anointing means we are filled with God's presence. The word for *overflows*, "rvaya," only appears twice in all of Scripture. Here and in Psalm 66:12, where it is translated as "wealthy." The message is clear: even in the presence of distress, under duress from *enemies*, in difficulties as great as the *valley of the shadow of death*, we have an abundance, because we have the Lord as our shepherd.

The presence and provision of God is our comfort in all circumstances. God has a plan for all things and will redeem all things, even suffering. He will cause all things to be for our good, to conform us to the image of His Son (Romans 8:28-29). He will redeem all things, and through the suffering of *death*, bring many sons to glory (Hebrews 2:10).

The send off of Psalm 23 is verse 6. It works as a sort of conclusion and benediction. It begins with *surely*, a word used for emphasis. It is meant to accentuate a reality inherent within the words that preceded it. We might say something like "of course!" or "indeed" to indicate the same thing this word is meant to convey. It almost suggests that in light of the evidence above, it would be absurd to reach any other conclusion than the one to follow.

The conclusion begins with this: *goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life*. The word for *follow* is "radap" and it means "pursue." What David is suggesting is that *goodness and loving kindness* (or "mercy") will chase after him. "Radap" literally means "to run after." *Goodness and loving kindness* follow after God's presence. They are like the tail of a comet, gravitationally attracted to their source. It is absurd to look for *goodness and loving kindness* without acknowledging God's presence. They go where He is.

And if God's presence is with David, or with us, the manifestations (the New Testament might call them fruits) of God's presence are sure to follow as well. So we have here the full picture of the perspective David is choosing, and through this psalm inviting its singers to choose. Life is full of difficulties. There are *enemies*. There are *valleys*. But David trusts that the Lord, as his shepherd, only led him into this circumstance because His intent is *goodness and loving kindness*. The essence of this Psalm is David's ability to look at any circumstance, no matter how dire, and say "That must be just what I needed." It is a total trust in God's benevolent intent in all things.

This brings to mind a verse penned by Jeremiah, some 400 years after King David's time:

"For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11).

This is God's statement of benevolent intent toward Israel, and it is spoken into a circumstance that is about as dire as can be imagined. God tells Israel that the Babylonians are about to invade their land, and a large percentage of its population killed. Most of the rest will be exiled to Babylon. But even in this most dire of circumstances, God has an intent that is wholly benevolent.

David's expression of trust in God's benevolent intent is generic. His use of the picture of *the valley of the shadow of death*, and *the presence of his enemies* are categorical descriptions of the worst circumstances imaginable. David's assertion is "No matter how bad things appear, God is still in control and has our best interest at heart."

Just like God's preparation of the table, these consequences of the presence of God will be pursuing David *all the days of his life*. There is no end to God's benevolent intent toward us. It never stops. It is not conditional. It is all-encompassing, and never-ending.

It would be pretty amazing to stop there. But David adds, *and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*. Here, *forever* is a translation of two words: "orek" and "yom," the first meaning "length" and the second "days" ("yom" is the same word used for *days* in the previous phrase, *all the days of my life*). So, the length of days is translated *forever*. David's confidence in God's benevolent intent extends to the fullness of his life on earth. And it extends to his confidence that God will have his best interest at heart for all of eternity (this day and every day).

This is worth noting, since the Bible is clear that God will judge the deeds of believers and hold them to account for what they did during their life on earth (Ecclesiastes 12:14; 2 Corinthians 5:10). An application of David's assertion here is that even in this judgement, God's intent is benevolent. It makes sense that God burning away all the rubble not purged during our lives would prepare us for a better eternity (1 Corinthians 3:11-17). This judging by fire would refine believers, and finish the conforming to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). However, scripture is quite clear that it is infinitely better to be conformed to the image of Christ through living by faith in this life (Romans 8:17, Revelation 3:21). Adopting David's comprehensive and unconditional trust in God's benevolence toward us, no matter the appearance, is an essential tool in living the sort of life that gains the greatest rewards from God and pleases Him the most.

These phrases (*all the days of my life* and *forever*) have a clear alignment with the name for God here, "Yahweh," which means "Existing One" (see notes on Psalm 23:1-3). God Himself is eternal, so being comforted, anointed, and shepherded by God unites us with that which transcends time.

The last of the clear images here is *dwell in the house of the Lord forever*. It is exactly as it sounds. Live where God lives. Be where He is. In His *house*, His home. And if we *dwell* in God's *house forever*, it is not just His home; it is ours.

Jesus stated to His disciples:

"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."
(John 14:1-3)

Those who believe in Jesus can have complete confidence that they will *dwell* forever with God in eternity. All it takes to be born again is enough faith to look, hoping for healing. As Jesus

stated in John 3:14-16, He was placed on a pole (cross) just as the brass snake was placed on a pole in the wilderness. When Moses held up the pole, anyone with enough faith to look upon it, hoping to be healed, would be cured of the poisonous snake venom with which they were afflicted.

In like manner, the human race is afflicted with the venom of sin. This sin separates all of us from God (Romans 3:23). But Jesus took every sin upon Himself. Every sin that was or ever will be committed was nailed upon the cross (Colossians 2:14). If we have sufficient faith to look upon Jesus, hoping to be healed, we will be saved. This is how much God loved the world.

Being saved from eternal separation from sin, we are now born into God's family. We are then predestined to be conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). However, we remain with the ability to make choices. We get to choose whom to trust. If we trust that the Lord is our shepherd, we can embrace any circumstance as "just what I needed." If we do this, we can live a life where we have complete confidence and trust in God in all things. We can "cast our cares upon Him for He cares for us" (1 Peter 5:7). We can have the faith of Job, who learned through great difficulty that knowing God by faith was the greatest of all human experiences.

To the extent we fail to adopt the perspective of Psalm 23, we miss out on the great benefit of life, to know God, and one another, by faith. This life will be our only opportunity to know by faith. When we reach heaven, we will know by sight. Adopting and applying the perspective David shows us in Psalm 23 opens the door, and guides us in the path to experience the greatest possible fulfillment in this life. It is a beloved psalm that has provided comfort through the ages. But it is also an opportunity for action, to choose a perspective of God that allows us to trust Him in all circumstances.

Biblical Text

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

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 have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.