

Psalm 23 - Stages of Growth in our Christian Life

Preface

One morning, during the last week of Sept 2002, I prayed for the Lord to give me a revelation from the Bible. I didn't specify any particular scripture, only to ask for a revelation from the Holy Spirit. Immediately Psalm 23 came to mind. As I turned to this passage and began to read the Lord gave me a fresh new revelation of this Scripture that I had never seen before. I began to see Psalm 23 as an outline of the different stages to the Christian's life from our beginning when we're born again, to our growth and finally to our maturity in the fullness of Christ.

Before the Lord gave me this revelation, He said that I must "render" my heart, or open my heart to receive His word. I ask that you do the same and pray that you will be blessed and inspired by this revelation of Psalm 23.

Part 1

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd

Here is the opening statement acknowledging that God "is". All things were created by Him; without Him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:1-3). He is the Great "I AM" (Exodus 3:14). He is the Alpha and the Omega (Rev 22:13). He is our Father who created us and gave us life (Genesis 1:27). Jesus is the Good Shepherd who loves us and takes care of us and lays his life down for us (John 10:1-18).

"The Lord is my Shepherd" gives the answer to life's most basic questions: How can we have a relationship with God? Where must we look to find that which shall make us complete and whole, no longer wanting or lacking? Where do I look to find meaning in my life? It is in Jesus. He is our Shepherd.

I shall not be in want

It is in Jesus that we are made complete, whole, lacking no good thing. It is in Jesus that we receive eternal life. It is in Jesus that we receive life more abundantly here and now (John 10:10). It is in Him that our every need is supplied, whether basic or our deepest needs they shall all be met in Him (Luke 12:22-31).

He makes me lie down in green pastures

As we come to acknowledge God as our creator, Jesus as Lord and Savior, our response is to lay down our life before him. It is God who calls us and makes us to lie down our life before Him. No one can come to the Father except that they first be drawn (John 6:44). We are called to "lie down" our life at the foot of the cross and die to ourselves (Romans 6:11). When we are drawn our response is to lovingly lay down our life in His awesome presence, which is powerful and mighty and yet peaceful as a green pasture.

He leads me beside quiet waters

In Romans 2:4 we read that it is God's kindness leads us toward repentance. As we lie down our lives and answer His call the Holy Spirit fills us with peace, joy, love and gives us heavenly contentment. Just as Jesus, the Prince of Peace calmed the stormy Sea of Galilee as the disciples worried and fretted over the salvation of their lives, in the same way the waters of our lives will become calm and quiet in His presence as He leads us (Mark 4:35-41).

He restores my soul

Here in the Lord's presence we are restored. The wrath of God is removed, our sins are forgiven and we are restored to our Father (Isaiah 1:18). Jesus came to reconcile us to our Father (2 Cor 5:19). We are restored to our rightful place as children of God. Jesus comes to make His home in our hearts and brings healing and restoration to our soul (John 14:23).

He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake

As we are born again and restored to the Lord, at first we are as children. In time, God intends for us to grow up to become sons and daughters. He begins to lead us and instruct us in His ways (Psalm 32:8). As we grow up in Christ, we learn what is expected of us. We begin to work out our salvation (Phil 2:12). We attend church, Bible studies, we read books, in all this we learn and grow as the Lord guides us and teaches us. Jesus said in John 16:12, "The Spirit of truth will guide you in all truth". A desire grows in our heart to know Him and to study His word. His love compels us to obey His commands and walk as Jesus did (1 John 3:3-6). It is here we start our journey from children to growing up strong and mature in Christ that we might be filled with His wisdom and lack no good thing (Eph 4:15, 1 Peter 2:2, James 1:4)

Even though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death

As we begin to grow in Christ we become more aware of the sin that still remains in our life. Paul writes in Romans 7:14-25 of his observation of these sinful desires that still remained in him. He writes of his desire to do good and yet his inability to do good because of the struggle with sin that battled within himself. The Bible says that the Spirit and the flesh are in opposition to each other (James 4:4-5, 1 Peter 2:11). This battle is with the flesh that still remains in us consisting of pride, a stubborn, rebellious, independent will, and the sinful nature as described in Galatians 5:19-21. In its place Jesus Christ must live and be Lord of our entire lives. Paul arrived at this conclusion when he wrote "We must become dead to sin and alive to Christ" (Romans 6:11). It is in this Valley of the Shadow of Death that our flesh with all its sinful pride must die.

It is by no coincidence that the Valley is called a valley of death. It is here that we become dead to sin and alive to Christ. The Bible tells us that we must deny ourselves and our flesh and take on the life of Christ (Matt 16:24). It is here in the Valley we learn to say, as with John the Baptist, "He must increase and I must decrease" (John 3:30). In 1 Peter 4:1-2 we read "Therefore, since Christ suffered in the body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God". We need to be rid of everything that is not holy in our lives. God wants us to be holy, just as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16).

God has designed a Valley of Death for each one of us, that we might be purged of the old sinful nature. God lead His people through the desert for 40 years for this very purpose. Their Valley was designed to discipline them, to test them and teach them to observe the commands of the Lord and to obey them that all may go well with them (Deut 8:1-9). It was a time to refine and purify His chosen people (Zech 13:9, Isaiah 48:10-22). It's no different for us. We must each walk our own divinely appointed Valley. In the valley we may face situations that we are unable to change. Our part is to surrender and cooperate with God. It may seem outwardly as if we are wasting away, but inwardly we are being renewed (2 Cor 4:16). It is here that we surrender our will to His will. It is here that we learn obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8). It is in this

Valley that we die to our will and say with Jesus “not my will but Yours be done” (Mark 14:36). It is here that we say as with Job, who endured in his Valley “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15). Job knew God allowed his Valley. Job trusted in God and His goodness knowing that he would be blessed by the Lord’s correction and he wrote “Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty (Job 5:17).

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert (Mark 1:12). It was here Jesus had His Valley experience being tempted by Satan. Jesus had no sin that He needed to be purged from, rather it is in this Valley that He proved Himself by overcoming the temptations of the devil. It is in this Valley that Jesus conquered and defeated the devil. Jesus later refers to this when he speaks of overcoming the devil in Mark 3:20-30. In Mark 3:27 Jesus says “No one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man”. In the Valley Jesus tied up “the strong man” or the devil. It is here in the Valley that Jesus had to walk before beginning His earthly ministry.

In the Valley we are prepared for the Master’s use. As the clay is molded on the potter’s wheel, so are we formed and made to fit God’s perfect plan for our lives to be used for good works (2 Tim 2:21). As we are drawn closer to Him in the Valley, He reveals to us the areas in our lives that prevent us from living for the will of God and receiving more of Him and His blessings. It is in the Valley we are prepared to receive the good things, the blessings and the inheritance God has promised to those who persevere (James 1:12). Abraham, Joseph, Job and King David are just a few of God’s people who were led into a Valley to be prepared for the responsibilities of leadership and to receive greater blessings (I give examples later when speaking of the blessings received in “You prepare a table before me”).

The Bible says if we are willing and obedient we will eat the good of the land (Isaiah 1:19). In the Valley we surrender our will to His, and thus become willing. In the Valley we learn obedience through suffering, and thus become obedient. In the valley we are prepared to eat the good of the land.

I will fear no evil, for You are with me

As we walk through the Valley our limited understanding may entertain doubts and fear, as part of our flesh is appointment to die and this may not be a pleasant thought for any of us to endure. The Lord promises to be with always (Isaiah 41:10, 13-14). We are comforted knowing that it will not be more than we can bear (1 Cor 10:13).

As Jesus walks with us we have His anointing to equip us to handle whatever we shall face. As we pass through the fires and the waters of the Valley, the Lord promises they shall not overtake us and that He shall be with us (Isaiah 43:1-2). The battles we face are for the Lord to fight by His Spirit working in us and through us (2 Chron 20:15). It is not by our power or might, but by His Spirit that the Valley shall be overcome (Zech 4:6). The Lord promises to fight the battle in the Valley for us (Exodus 14:14). We can be comforted, strengthened and encouraged as we fearlessly face our Valley.

We need to persevere that we may receive the promise (Heb 10:35-36). We are even told to consider it all joy when we face this Valley knowing that God will develop in us perseverance which leads to spiritual maturity (James 1:2-4). We can be encouraged as we know that God called us to go through the Valley and as we endure, God shall use the experience and work it together for our good (Romans 8:28). As we begin to see God’s plan we come to the place where we consider the sufferings of the Valley are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

Your rod and your staff they comfort me

In the book of proverbs the rod is referred to as an instrument of correction (Proverbs 10:13,). As we walk through the Valley our flesh is put to death by use of The Lord's rod of correction. We are taught by the Holy Spirit through the rod of discipline and correction as our pride and foolishness are driven out (Proverbs 22:15). We are comforted knowing that God disciplines us because He loves us and wants to see us blessed (Proverbs 13:24, Heb 12:7-11).

The staff in scripture is depicted as an instrument of comfort, strength and a symbol of leadership. The Lord commanded Moses to raise his staff over the Red Sea to divide the water so that God's people could pass through safely. God also directed Moses to use the staff as an instrument to provide the needs of His people by bringing water from the rock at Meribah. The staff is the instrument shepherds have used for centuries to lead and protect their flock.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies

It's by no coincidence that the table of blessings and the fulfillment of the promises come after the time spent in the Valley. It's after we have been tried and tested and proven to be willing and obedient that we are invited to eat the good of the land at the table prepared for us. All God's promises come with a condition. "If" you are willing and obedient. "If" you obey my commands...then you shall be blessed and receive the promise given. It's after the condition is met in the Valley that we are allowed to enter into the fulfillment of the promises. It's after we die to ourselves that we live unto the Lord and become sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father and receive the inheritance in the good of the land.

We see this depicted in the lives of many great men and women in the Bible as they endured their Valley. The Lord blessed Job with twice as much prosperity as he had before his experience in the Valley (Job 42:10, 12, James 4:10-11). God blessed Joseph through his Valley (Genesis 41:52) and later exalted him in the presence of an entire nation by placing him second in command next to Pharaoh and saving his entire family (45:4-11). King David wrote in Psalm 40 of his transition from the mud and mire of his Valley to a place high upon a rock where he stood firm in the presence of many, with a new song in his mouth, a hymn of praise.

Hebrews Chapter 11 speaks of many great men and women who endured their Valley and received the fulfillment of the God's promises. Further in Hebrews chapter 12:11 we read "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it". First we face the discipline in the Valley, which seems painful. Then as we overcome victoriously we receive the harvest, the blessings, the fulfillment of the promises which far outweigh any troubles we may have endured.

You anoint my head with oil

Oil is used in the Bible to anoint someone with a special blessing. After we have died to our sinful nature in the Valley of the Shadow of Death and begin to live and walk in the Spirit, we receive "The Blessing" or the "Anointing". This is the Blessing Abraham received when he entered the Covenant with The Lord (Genesis 22:17-18, Hebrews 6:14). This is the Blessing spoken of in Deuteronomy 28:1-14. It is here in the "Anointing" that we stand ready to receive the promises of our inheritance (Hebrews 10:35-36). It is here that we are able to stand before God "Anointed" as sons and daughters, strong mature and complete, lacking no good thing, made fit and ready for use (James 1:2-4).

My cup overflows

After receiving “The Blessing” we begin to see the fruit and manifestation known as “the blessings”. The cup of our lives begins to overflow with all the good things God has promised us in His Word. The blessings of Deuteronomy 28 along with the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) begin to overflow into every area of our lives.

God intends for us to share these blessings with others. This is why our cup overflows, that it may overflow into the lives of others. We are made rich in every way so that we may be a generous and cheerful giver on every occasion (2 Cor 9:10-15). We are blessed when we give (Acts 20:35). Jesus instructed us to give (Luke 6:38). Abraham’s blessings overflowed into the lives of many as God promised that he would be a blessing to all peoples on earth (Genesis 12:2-3).

It is in the nature of God to give and as we become more like Him we take on that same nature of generosity freely giving what we have been given (Romans 8:32). We become imitators of God and live a life of love because God is Love (1John 4:16). Love is expressed by giving, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us (Eph 5:1-2, 1 John 3:16-18).

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life

As we continue to walk in obedience we continue to receive the outpouring of God’s goodness as shown by His mercy and by the giving of good things into our lives. The Bible says in Psalm 84:11 “The Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless”. In Psalm 73:1 we read “God is good to those who are pure in heart”. Jesus Himself tells us in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). It’s the goodness of God that we shall see as we walk in obedience with a pure heart, a humble and contrite heart (Isaiah 66:2).

When our relationship with God goes unbroken, we walk with the living water of the Holy Spirit flowing in us and through us (John 7:38-39). His unfailing Love toward us is new every morning. His unfailing love shall not be shaken and His peace and compassion shall not be removed (Isaiah 54:10). As we live for Him, with His Spirit working in us both to will and do His good pleasure, then we shall live in the fulfillment of the promised good things following us in abundance all the days of our lives.

And I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever

Having been born again by the Holy Spirit we dwell in the Lord’s presence. We are aware of His presence as He has revealed Himself to us (John 14:20-21). God’s goodness shows itself in our lives as we bask in His presence. Heaven begins the moment we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (John 3:36). Jesus said in John 14:23 “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”. We are God’s temple which He comes to dwell in (1 Cor 3:16). The very presence of God lives in us. We live a new life in Christ and dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

Part 2

God's Part and Our Part

The Lord began to show me what His part is through the promises and verses in Psalm 23, and what our part or responsibility is.

God's Part:

He makes me lie down

It's the Lord who calls us (John 6:44). In the glory of His revelation our reasonable response is to lay down our lives and accept Him as the one true God, our Lord and Savior.

He leads me

It's the Lord who leads us and guides our steps (Proverbs 16:9). The Bible says in Romans 8:14, "Those who are lead by the Spirit of God are sons of God".

He restores

God created us in His image. Because of our sin we have fallen and become dead in our sins (Romans 3:11-12, Ephesians 2:8-10). God has a plan to restore us to our right place as His children in His creation. Only Jesus can restore our relationship to the Father (2 Cor 5:18-19). It does not depend on man's effort, but on God's mercy (Romans 9:16). Only Jesus can restore us (John 3:16).

He guides us

The Lord guides us, instructs us and teaches us in the way we should go (Psalm 32:8, Isaiah 48:17).

He is with us

He remains with us, never to leave us or forsake us (Matthew 28:20).

He comforts us

Our Father comforts us and keeps us in His perfect peace (2 Cor 1:3-4, Psalm 71:20-21).

He prepares

He has gone before us to prepare the way (John 14:2-3). He prepares the table of blessings for us, filled with the promises and rewards which await those who love Him (1 Cor 2:9). As the author and finisher of our faith, He prepares us to receive Him in our heart, soul, mind and spirit (Hebrews 12:2).

He anoints us

He Anoints us and Blesses us with all good things (James 1:17). Our anointing and reward is in the Lord (Isaiah 49:4). He equips us and enables us with His grace working on our behalf to do all things by His strength and anointing (Phil 4:13) . He empowers us with the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:9-13).

Our Part:

I shall not be in want

Our part is to acknowledge that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, that apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). Our part is to acknowledge that in Jesus we lack nothing. In Jesus we are saved, born again and made complete. Our part is to confess that when we are born again all our sins are forgiven and we receive the fullness of His life into our lives as we are restored to God our Father (John John 3:36).

I walk

We follow Jesus and become His disciples. We begin to walk in His ways and we grow and we learn as He teaches us. Our part is simply to walk, to follow Jesus and imitate Him (Ephesians 5:1).

I will fear no evil

As we walk, wherever we are lead, we are not to fear. We must remember that He is leading us and fighting the battles for us (2 Chron 20:15). All throughout the Bible we read the words "Fear not" spoken by God or His Angels to His people. God's perfect love for us casts out all fear (1 John 4:18).

I will dwell

Our part is simply to dwell in God's presence to enjoy fellowship with Him. Jesus said that as we invite Him into our heart, He will come and make His home there (John 14:23). We simply live, day to day in unbroken fellowship with God.

In John 15:1-8 Jesus speaks of our life in Him as he said, "I am the branch and you are the vine". We are to simply abide in Him. We enter a life without struggle as we dwell in His peace (John 14:27). We live a life sustained by His strength, never growing weary or faint (Isaiah 40:29-31). It is here that we cease from our works and enter into His rest (Heb 4:8-11) and dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

AMEN>

Note: All scriptures taken from the NIV Bible.

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