

Personal Reality with the Living God

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[0 : 00] Well, this sermon is titled Personal Reality with the Living God. That's a phrase, a sentence that a pastor wrote in the States in an article recently, and it just gripped me, got a hold of me.

Personal reality with the living God. What would that even be like? We can be really good at theoretical, impersonal and theoretical reality.

With a distant God, right? We might go through the motions. We might know our Bibles really well. We might know our, you know, be diligent in saying our prayers. But we can do all of those good things without the risen Christ coming into our experience with all of his felt goodness and power. It can be impersonal and theoretical. But personal reality with the living God is actually what Psalm 23 is all about. There's nothing impersonal or theoretical here.

For instance, have you ever noticed how deeply personal this psalm is? It's very personal. As an example, God's covenant personal relational name, Yahweh, is used two times.

[1 : 19] Once at the beginning and once at the end. Now, in our Bibles, it'll be Lord, L-O-R-D, all in capital letters. And whenever you see that in the Old Testament, what lies below that, of course, is that Hebrew name treated with such reverence and respect, which is Yahweh, the personal name of God.

And that occurs once at the beginning, right? The Lord is my shepherd. And once at the end, where he says, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. It's like it's bookended with the personal name of God, as if to say everything within this psalm, everything between these bookends is about personal reality with a living God.

Now, reality is objective. It's out there. Reality just is, whether we like it or not, whether we notice it or not. But what I mean by personal reality is when the objective reality that just is breaks into our experience.

It breaks into our emotions. It breaks into our heart. That's what we're after today. So three points. One, what is the reality?

Two, how can I be sure? And three, where is it all going? So number one, what is the reality? Well, all of the comfort and all of the hope of this psalm flows out of this one glorious statement of reality.

[2 : 49] Right at the beginning. The Lord is my shepherd. And if that weren't true, none of the rest of it would be true either. But for the one who loves and trusts Jesus, reality is glorious.

Because our journey through life is a guided journey. Now, our life is not guided by impersonal principles. And our life is not guided by our hearts.

They're too fickle. Instead, we have a shepherd. Now, any other shepherd would leave us, you know, lost, lonely, unsatisfied, unfulfilled.

We would say, my heart is my shepherd. I will never have enough. But if the Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. It doesn't say the Lord is a shepherd.

And it doesn't say the Lord is kind of like a shepherd to some people. It says the Lord is my shepherd. Now we're doing real theology. Okay?

[3 : 53] Theology, which just speculates about who God is, is just a half theology. True theology is personal. True theology looks at two things. One, who God is, and two, who God is for me.

That's real theology. And there is no comfort and no hope in an impersonal God. It's one thing to know.

It's one thing to know who Bill Gates is, right? It's another thing to know that Bill Gates has written you into his will. God is so determined to be that kind of a personal reality to you.

That he enrobed himself in flesh. And Jesus of Nazareth, God incarnate, enfleshed, stood up on this good earth that we walk on.

And he cried out, I am the good shepherd. Jesus is your shepherd.

[5 : 03] That is who God is. That's who God is for you. That's personal theology. Because Jesus is your shepherd, he will meet your deepest needs. I lack nothing.

All your peace, all your rest, comes from him. And he leads you over those well-worn paths of the saints who've gone before.

So you can completely trust him with your future. The Lord Jesus is your shepherd. You lack nothing. He makes you lie in green pastures.

He leads you beside quiet waters. And he refreshes your soul. Like water in a desert. Now there are two images, two metaphors in this text, right?

There's the first half is the Lord is a shepherd. And in the second half, the Lord is our host. He says, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

[6 : 05] You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. We've moved from the Lord's flock to the Lord's house. The Lord is my shepherd.

I am his sheep. The Lord is my host. I am his guest. Now in ancient days, the days of King David, who wrote this psalm, hospitality, inviting somebody into your home, hospitality was really important.

And hospitality and travel went hand in hand. And the image that David is actually painting for us in Psalm 23, in the second half, is of a weary and harassed traveler being graciously taken in by a magnificent host.

Now, of course, in those days, you probably guessed travel was not a leisure activity. You know, there were no travel agents to go and set you on a nice holiday to the seaside.

Travel was done in dire necessity. And it was very, very dangerous. There were wild animals. There were bandits. There were, you know, waterless wastelands in the summer.

[7 : 13] There was, you know, scarcity of food. And other people groups, tribes, and nations were often hostile to you if you had to pass through their territory. So this preparing a table before me is so much more than just a meal.

This table was a feast amid famine. This table was shelter and protection in the midst of enemies.

This table was a feast amidst the peace of the world.

This table was a feast amidst the peace of the sea. To every force opposing you, seeking to do you harm, your gracious host says, let them rage outside.

Come on in. I've prepared a feast for you. It's the second glorious reality of the psalm.

The Lord is your host. The Lord is your host. Excuse me. Now, before we move on, there's something else we need to see in these two realities.

[8 : 21] Now, we know this really well in these days of social distancing and isolation. It's that to have personal relationship, you really need personal proximity.

In other words, God isn't just for us, but from a distance. Verse 4 says, I will fear no evil. Why?

For you are with me. Personal proximity. The shepherd has not left you to fend for yourself.

He's there to comfort you by protecting you, guiding you, disciplining you. That's how you know he's near. And the divine host hasn't just ordered, you know, Uber Eats to get some takeaway delivered to your door.

He's lovingly prepared the feast himself. He's poured his bountiful wine into your cup. He's personally seen to your refreshment and your security. Personal proximity.

[9 : 22] That's actually the great thread that runs through the psalm. It's the theme of Psalm 23. God is with us. Isn't that what we really long for?

Way deep down. Isn't the real and felt presence of God the thing that we really want when we feel spiritually dull or listless or empty?

There's a beautiful song called To the Dawn by Sarah Groves. The version I have is by Sarah Groves. And there's a line that goes like this. There's a hush of expectation and a quiet in the air.

And the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of prayer. For the suffering, dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne. And the hearts of men are stirring to know they're not alone.

We want to know when all else fades that we're not alone. When we are suffering, when we're weary, we need to know that there's a king on the throne who's for us.

[10 : 35] And us poor sheep need to be able to take our anxious gaze off of our unknown tomorrows and fix our eyes on our mighty shepherd and just breathe and just follow him.

We can do that with his help. We can follow him. He'll help us. Personal reality with the living God begins with knowing that the Lord is my shepherd, my host.

And he's right here. He's so near. Now, if you are a follower of Jesus, this is objectively true about you. Whether you think it is or not.

Whether you feel it to be true or not. That's a comfort we can get our minds on, sink our teeth into, and take with us like water in that cactus.

For those days when we just don't feel that God is near, he is. That's the reality. Now, number two, how can I be sure?

[11 : 43] If that objective reality about who Jesus is does not break into my experience, if I don't feel that Jesus is for me, can I really be sure it's true?

Well, thank God that our comfort and hope is rooted in something deeper and more substantial than our feelings. Our emotions, they just go up and down all the time, right?

We're about as emotionally unsteady as me trying to walk on the ice outside the other day. But God is who he is. God is the I am.

He is steady. He is unchanging. And personal reality with God must be rooted in not how I feel or what I perceive to be true, but in the bare facts of who Jesus is for us.

That's our foundation. And in that objective reality, we can have some certainty. Now, there's a couple things to notice here. First, it says, the Lord provides for us and leads us for his name's sake.

[12 : 55] It's small, but it's important. For his name's sake. In other words, it's God's reputation on the line, not ours.

God's glory is what's at stake here. And he cannot be untrue to himself.

Just let that soak in. That's something to meditate on as you go about your day.

So what does it look like that God acts, that God is for me, that God is near, that God protects me for his name's sake? Some of the greatest intercessory prayers in all of the history of God's people by Moses and Abraham and David were prayers for his name's sake.

Furthermore, we can look back on the life of Jesus. We have this benefit now being New Testament Christians. We get to look back on Jesus' life on earth and have even more certainty.

[14 : 07] You can be certain of green pastures in Christ being fed and nourished by him because he was hungry in the wilderness for you.

You can be certain that you can drink from the quiet streams of the Holy Spirit of God and find true rest because Jesus croaked, I thirst, from a cross 2,000 years ago for you.

You can enjoy the cup of God's good wine overflowing in your heart because Jesus drank the cup of the wrath of God that was meant for you down to the dregs.

You can know that he will lead you through that deep, dark valley because he went into the darkest valley of all and he died there. And then he came out the other side more alive than we could ever know.

Or at least in this life. Now, I do want to talk about that valley for a moment. The phrase in verse 4, the darkest valley, is just two little words in Hebrew, the valley of deepest darkness or something like that.

[15 : 19] It's a really interesting little phrase and it can be translated or understood in two ways.

Either, as the NIV has it, the darkest valley, or as the ESV and other translations have it, the shadow of death.

Now, I'm sure you've heard this before. You know, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. I think even the King James has that version. Now, David knew what he was doing.

He was a master poet. He was incredible at this. He chose these words on purpose. He knew it could have both meanings. He had to have, and I'm really convinced it's a play on words, that he wants to evoke both of those images in our minds.

So, first, we all know that there are seasons of life. There are valleys that are deep, that are dark, and it's easy to feel isolated and alone and overwhelmed and hopeless about the future.

And, you know, that idea certainly fits in the imagery of sheep who, you know, sometimes are wandering over sunny hills and sometimes they're in deep, dark valleys.

[16 : 33] David tells us that the Lord is with us even in our darkest seasons of life. Maybe especially in our darkest seasons of life. Isn't that comforting just now?

Consider the other angle. The shadow of death. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, now there's a beautiful reality.

There's comfort here, too. But forgive me the use of a sad story to illustrate it. There was once a little boy who was nearly hit by a truck.

And at the very last moment, his mother ran into the road and threw him out of the way. But she was hit by the truck instead. The boy was only hit by the shadow of the truck as it passed.

His heroic mother was hit by the truck itself. Jesus was hit by death. Death itself. It's self.

[17:41] So that you could only be hit by death's shadow. That's why, after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the New Testament writers almost exclusively refer to dead Christians as those who have fallen asleep in the Lord.

That's why Paul can just almost sing as he writes, death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

The sting of death has been taken away because Jesus really died. And Jesus was really raised from the dead. And in Acts chapter 2, Peter says that God raised Jesus up, loosing the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

So you can be certain, you can be sure that all the comforts and hopes of Psalm 23 are yours in Christ because it is sealed as a promise with the death and resurrection of your shepherd and your host.

So, last point, number three, where is it going? Well, like all of us, David had seasons where he longed for personal reality with the living God.

[19:08] I think, actually, the more time I spend in Psalm 23, I think this was his heart cry for that reality. I suspect that he probably wrote this from a season of darkness, of enemies and deep, dark valleys.

He begins speaking about God. There's a distance. The Lord is like this to me. He is this, right? He leads me. I'm speaking about God. And it moves to speaking to God, doesn't it? You prepare a table.

By the end, it's almost like he's speaking to his own soul and rejoicing in the felt presence of the Lord when he says, surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

Now, surely is an exclamation of certainty. In the Hebrew, it's literally the word ach. So, you can hear the vigor in it. It's ach, surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me.

[20:16] He's, the Lord got real to David. Then he says a curious thing. He says, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

So, first, David found this truth, God with me. I will not fear for you are with me. Then he found this truth, me with God forever.

shepherd. If the Lord is your shepherd, you can know he's leading you to eternally green pastures. And if you, if the Lord is your host, then you can know that his feast is eternal, his kingdom is unshakable, and his home will be your home.

No longer just a guest, but now part of the family. As I said earlier, in the ancient Near East, where and when this was written, hospitality was hugely important, massively important.

Now, every culture has its own rules of hospitality that are written into kind of the fabric of a culture. Now, when we moved from the Seattle area to Nashville, Tennessee, in the south of the U.S., we had to learn new rules of hospitality.

[21:36] Certain expectations are on a host, right? So in the south, it has to do with sweet tea and porch swings. And then when we moved from the south in the States to Scotland, hospitality has more to do with hot tea and a tray of biscuits.

There's expectations on the host. And the same was true in David's day. So when a traveler was taken into someone's home and that host showed hospitality, there were concrete expectations on the host.

Namely, it was the host's honor to provide the very best that he has for his guest. And it was the host's honor to offer absolute protection of his guest for a period of time.

So the host would say, you know, please come in, dine with me, you look tired, stay in my house, all that I have is yours, and for perhaps two or three days, you have my absolute protection from anyone who would seek to do you harm.

Now, occasionally, when we were in the States, Becca's grandmother would come and visit us from the farm in Kansas, and we could never convince her to stay more than three days. You know, often we'd say, come stay with us for a couple weeks, we get to spend some good time.

[22 : 52] And she would always say, no, no, guests are like fish. After three days, they begin to stink. Here's what's remarkable. The Lord is our host.

He offers us that absolute protection from anyone who would harm us, and he offers us a rich feast right in their presence. And how long does his offer of protection extend? I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Jesus does not get tired of you. You cannot encroach on the hospitality of Christ. Jesus is not bored with your company.

You will never stink to Jesus. That's where this is going. If the Lord is your shepherd now, this is your future.

You will never be alone. You will never feel alone. One day, this foggy existence will fade away, and you'll be face-to-face with your risen Savior.

[24 : 00] No shame, no loneliness, pure joy. I love how Gandalf puts it in Lord of the Rings. He says, the gray rain curtain of the world rolls back and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it.

White shores beyond, a far country under a swift sunrise. Better yet, I'll close with this. here's how the apostle John put it in Revelation 7.

Therefore, they, Christians, are before the throne of God. Serve him day and night in his temple, and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore. The sun shall not strike them nor any scorching heat, for the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Amen.