

Psalm 23:6

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[0 : 00] In Psalm 23, in verse 6, we read, Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forevermore.

Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forevermore. What is the meaning of being a Christian?

In a society which dismisses Christian belief out of hand, and where we as Christians so often feel isolated, we need to have very strong reasons to stand out from the crowd.

Arguably, Psalm 23 is not merely the most comforting of the Psalms, but it's also the one which gives us the greatest of reasons why and how to live as Christians in today's Scotland.

Perhaps tonight, you see yourself as struggling to keep a hold of your faith in Jesus. The world is pulling you back to itself, and you're losing your grip on the central realities and the basic truths of the Christian faith.

[1 : 24] In a word, you've forgotten what it means to be a Christian. You've forgotten what it's like to have the Lord as your shepherd, to experience the satisfaction of Him providing for you when you need Him most, to know the presence of the living God in the valleys of the shadow of death.

If this is you, and let's face it, all of us at one time or another can recognize ourselves in this picture of losing our grip, we need to get back to the core of our faith.

We need to start being Christians again. Because it's only when we live as Christians that we'll have confidence to stand out from the secular crowd, and in so doing, to draw those from the crowd who talk big.

But in their heart of hearts, know that there's more to life than money and career and pleasure. In Psalm 23, verse 6, we have what are perhaps some of the most comforting words in the whole Bible.

These words are so filled with comfort and hope for us as Christians, but they also help us to understand the meaning of being a Christian and how to live as a Christian.

[2 : 49] And as we study these words together tonight, feel your assurance in Christ grow. Feel the desire you had for Christ once, course back into your veins again.

These words tell us that being a Christian means four things. First of all, it means living in the meaning of God. Living in the meaning of God.

Then it means experiencing the love of God. And then it means being the children of God. And then it means hoping in the promise of God.

As we come to the end of our communion weekend, let these be your oath before God, that no matter how hard the world tries to pull me back to itself, I'm going to hold on to Jesus, no matter what it costs me.

Being a Christian means, first of all, living in the meaning of God. Living in the meaning of God. There are so many aspects of our secular, antitheistic society which clean draw the spiritual life from us.

[4 : 05] Never mind the intellectual, or as I see it, the anti-intellectual arguments from the secular position. The most worrying is the blatant and unashamed declaration by our educators and our media that there is no meaning in life.

Scientists have discovered that the universe is far bigger than ever we have thought before. It takes light one second to travel the distance between here and the moon and halfway back again.

And it takes light 200,000 years to travel from one edge of the Milky Way, our galaxy, to the other. And we are just one of billions of galaxies in the universe. The earth really is an insignificant speck of dust in the seeming infinity of space.

There are nearly 8 billion human beings on our planet right now. 8 billion. Think of a full Pottery Stadium, 20,000 people.

[5 : 19] If each person at that game represented another 400,000 people, the entire population of the city of Glasgow, a full crowd in Pottery would represent all 8 billion human beings on earth.

When you think of the vastness of the universe, and when you think of the size of the human population, the question we ask is this, what do I matter?

What is the meaning of my life? Is my life worth more than an ant? Or a worm? Am I of the same value and worth as a virus?

Now, although perhaps they wouldn't say it as directly as this, secular antitheism states we have no meaning and that we, as human beings capable of the art of da Vinci, the medicine of James Simpson, the compassion of Florence Nightingale, the literature of Leo Tolstoy, the science of Lord Kelvin, the music of Mendelssohn, the intelligence of St. Paul, we as a human race are of no greater worth than a jellyfish or a fly.

Against such hopeless nihilism, Psalm 23, verse 6, insists that human beings have worth and value because they're dear and precious to God.

[6 : 56] King David sings, look at the text in verse 6, he says, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. Me, as an individual.

The individual is of worth to God. Each of the eight billion human beings on this insignificant speck of dust in the universe are precious to God. What is the meaning of my life?

Of what value am I? Without God, the answer is nothing. But with Psalm 23, verse 6, the God whose goodness and mercy follow me, the answer is, you mean everything.

Think again of society's fascination with genealogy. You see this by watching telly shows like Who Do You Think You Are?

where famous celebrities trace their ancestry all the way back. People are fascinated by their roots. They want to know where they came from. But let's look at this clinically for a moment.

[8 : 06] Let's hold the same dispassionate, critical attitude as our secular, antitheistic society. In 150 years, you will be dead.

And your children will be dead. And your grandchildren will be dead. And your great-grandchildren will be dead. Your tombstone will be covered with moss.

And the lettering will begin to fade away. And then another 150 years after that, your body will have dissolved into the earth. And there will be nothing left of you.

Your answers won't know and by that time probably won't care who you were, what you did. Your life will be forgotten.

There will be nothing left of you. Then, in a couple billion years, when the sun begins to run out of energy, it will expand and expand.

[9 : 07] And it will consume the earth. Everything will be gone. The seas, the hills, the mountains, all life.

It will all become a mass of hyper-molten sun. There shall be no trace of anything which was ever done on this earth. No memory of the way you loved your wife.

No memory of the way you bounced your children on your knee. Nothing. No one to remember the sacrifice of those who died in the world wars.

No one. Nothing left. Nothing. All that will be left will be a grinning skull at the edge of an ever-expanding universe laughing at you and calling out to you, did I not tell you that life was meaningless?

That is this logical end point of secular antitheism. If anyone really believed this, the sheer despair of existence would drive them to suicide.

[10 : 30] Against all this hopelessness and vanity and meaninglessness, Psalm 23 cries out, Psalm 23 verse 6 cries out to us over the years, Surely mercy and goodness shall follow me.

The individual so mortal, so frail, you mean something to God. You're of value to Him. He loves you. You matter. Psalm 23 verse 6 you see is a call to live in the meaning of God. You have meaning and you have worth because God loves you and God values you.

He demonstrated His love for you by giving His one and only precious Son upon the cross for you. So hold your head high and do not be intimidated by the society in which we live.

Pity them, their despair and cry for their hopelessness. Live in the purpose which God gives you and the value He places upon you as an individual.

[11 : 41] Don't despair. Live in His meaning. That's what it means to live as a Christian. Living in the meaning of God.

Secondly, experiencing the love of God. Experiencing the love of God. My wife is a nurse and she travels over the whole of the south of Scotland working with very sick children and with their parents.

And she often comes home and though she didn't go into details it would be a breach of an employment to do so. She'll tell me about the dedication of parents for their children. She'll tell me how there's nothing these parents won't do for their sick children.

The child's got cancer. It's going to die. But there's nothing these parents won't do for that child. She's so often awestruck by the love and commitment she sees from these parents.

These examples of love they're so inspiring. But they're just faint pictures of the intensity the inventiveness and the unchangeability of God's love for us.

[12 : 55] The most basic covenant in the Bible the one that God made with Abraham has as its central feature the promise God made saying to Abraham I will be your God and you will be my people.

What God promises God delivers He is our God who loves us who's passionate about us who's committed to us.

This is as it were the most distinctive truth of the Christian faith the truth that God is love and if ever we had doubted the love of God then looked no further than the bloodstained face of Jesus Christ on the cross and looked no further than His loving cry Father my God my God why have you forsaken me?

Although Psalm 23 finds its context in the love of God it's seen most powerfully here in verse 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.

The love of God here translated by the NIV is the steadfast love of God it's the committed covenant love of God the promise that He shall be our God and we shall be His people He'll be our God through the thick and thin in the up times of the still waters and the down times of the valley of the shadow of death He'll never stop being our God He's going to love us always The innermost motivation of His heart toward us is that of intense passionate love but it's not hard to forget that is it?

[14 : 44] In fact I wonder whether Satan's primary method to prise us away from Christ and draw us back into the world is to give us amnesia concerning this very thing the love of God perhaps there are some of us here going through difficult circumstances in our life right now the shadow of death is darker than it's ever been in your experience you've got a broken relationship you're hurting you're lonely you're grieving you're not well your kids are going the wrong way in life whatever you whatever it is whatever whatever you are you feel as if you're flying into the teeth of a gale it is in Satan's interest to use these circumstances and to place the suggestion into your mind that what you're going through right now whatever it is is a sign to you that God does not love you he'll try to convince you that if

God really did love you then life would be plain sailing for you you'd never have to walk in the valley of the shadow of death you'd never have to cry one tear you would never have to experience the breaking of your heart is that where you are right now you're listening to the sibilant whispers of the serpent as he whispers into your ear God does not love you or are you listening to the plain teaching of scripture and to what you know of the ways of God he loves you he will never stop loving you in love and wisdom he's placed you in this dark valley so that you may learn how deeply he loves you and how completely you may rely upon him if God does not love he's not God for this is what he has promised and covered untoed when he said I will be your God and you will be my people this is what he's proved to us by the death of Jesus

Christ on the cross he will love you longer and he will love you deeper than you can love him or you can possibly begin to imagine but this steadfast covenant love of God is displayed to us in our day-to-day lives by his goodness his goodness his love is the fountain from which flows his goodness because God loves us he's good to us his goodness is the providing guiding comforting protecting blessing restoring and shepherding of us and for us his goodness is the still waters and the green pastures his goodness is the way of righteousness in which we walk his goodness is his presence with us in the valley of the shadow of death with his rod and his staff his goodness is his banqueting table in the wilderness his anointing oil and his cup which overflows for us in a word his goodness covers all the blessings and the benefits of the gospel of Jesus Christ all those things

which are ours by virtue of what Jesus did on the cross for us that's his goodness but again perhaps you're going through tough times in your life right now and you're listening to that voice of the serpent in your ears telling you

God is not good to me God is harsh God is unloving and God is mean how could he do such a thing to me one of the things I'm often told about Glasgow is that the sun never shines in Glasgow now it's true we don't often see the sun in Glasgow but the truth of the matter is that the sun always shines in Glasgow always it's just that most of the time you can't see it either because it's blocked out by a big cloud or the rain is falling down now sometimes we can't see the goodness of God as clearly as we can at other times our vision's clouded by our own personal stresses but it doesn't mean to say that God's not good to us or that all the blessings and benefits of the cross are ours any the less we are still forgiven we are still adopted we are still righteous we are still empowered by the cross if anyone doubts the goodness of God then it should have been his own son

Jesus who endured a deeper darkness on the cross than any of us will ever know our creed tells us he descended into hell but never once did Jesus doubt the goodness of his father never once did he doubt God's good intentions for him God's goodness never fails he just keeps on comforting he keeps on giving he keeps on loving and protecting in this verse the goodness and steadfast love of God are spoken of us following us all the days of our lives I've always thought of this translation as a little bit passive it's not so much that we should read that the goodness and steadfast love of God follow us rather they pursue us they chase us we lie down in green pastures and they pursue us there we walk in the valleys of the shadow of death and they chase us when we're in there they pursue us they chase us they hunt us out we can't escape from the goodness and love of God we can't hide from them or run faster than them they're not so much sheepdogs tamely following a shepherd as much as they are the hounds of heaven powerfully pacing after us this is what it means to be a Christian it means to experience the love of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ to allow yourselves to be caught by and caught up with the goodness and the mercy of God

[21 : 02] I'm not saying that we're always going to be in the mountaintops of the experience sometimes we'll be in the valley our feelings will be very different but you'll know you'll know even when you don't feel you'll know that God loves you and you'll know that the gospel of Jesus Christ is yours in all its fullness let's hold our heads high we are loved by the God who made the vastness of the universe and he's good to us this is what it means to live as a Christian to experience the love of God thirdly to live as a Christian means living in the meaning of God it means experiencing the love of God it means being the children of God being the children of God the second part of verse 6 the imagery of the psalm changes thus far we've been lying down in the fields of the shepherd we've been walking in the valley of the shadow of death we've been seated at a table in the wilderness but now at the end of verse 6 we're in the house of the Lord now in the last point we looked in our last point we will look more deeply at what is meant by the house of the Lord but the question is this for us at the moment who belongs in the house of the Lord now perhaps we could answer that by thinking of our own houses who belongs in our houses is it not our own family our own household who belongs in the house of the Lord it's his children who belong there his sons and daughters are they not the family who live in the house of God you see in verse 6b

King David is making this astonishing claim concerning the status of every believer not just that they are members of God's covenant not just that God is their God and he is their people and as such the love and goodness of God's covenant community pursues them all the days of their lives not just that David's making this astonishing claim they're members of God's family he's telling us here that if we have the Lord as our shepherd we're not to be thinking of ourselves so much as his sheep not even as his servants but as his children because they're the people who will dwell in the house of the Lord and you know when we begin to think about that our eyes begin to open with amazement at the privilege we have as Christian believers those for whom the Lord who is our shepherd laid down his life we're not merely covenant members we're not just citizens of God's kingdom we're not merely his servants who do his will we're not even his friends as Abraham was we're his children we are the spiritual heirs of the God of infinite power and love and holiness united to Christ by faith in him we are adopted into the family of God we've got a new father we've got a new home and we dwell in his house in Romans 8 remember the apostle

Paul emphasizes this for us when he says for those who are led by the spirit of God are the children of God the spirit you received does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again rather the spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship and by him we cry Abba Father the spirit

himself testifies with us that we are God's children now if we are children then we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ yes you meaningless speck of dust on this insignificant planet in this infinitely huge universe as the anti-theists would tell us you're a precious child of God I'm proud to be known as a child of my father and my mother I guess when you're a teenager you don't really want to be seen with your mom and dad because that's not cool but as you grow up as you mature you want to be seen with them because you're proud of them and you're proud of being known as their child if that is true of our weak and sinful parents how much more true is it of our heavenly father we are children of God let me challenge each one of us here are we ashamed of our spiritual parentage are we ashamed to be seen with our heavenly father to be known as a Christian are we ashamed if we are then it's a sign of deep spiritual immaturity and a lack of awareness of how proud we should be of having such a father as we have in him are we ashamed to tell our friends about our father what does that say about us but if we flip the coin from challenge to comfort being a child of God means that in the same way that our parents love us and therefore if anything concerns us we can take it to them and we know that we can take all our anxieties and fears and worries to them and they'll do whatever they can to deal with them we know in the same way that we can take everything which concerns us in our lives to our heavenly father and we can cry out to him saying Abba father and we can find all the strength and comfort and wisdom we need to face every challenge which comes into our way do you think that a heavenly father who loves us so much could leave us to the wolves and to the wilderness of the valley of the shadow of death and not be with us there to comfort us and protect us and guide us by his presence if you're a Christian then through the death of Christ united by faith to him the spirit of God has made you a child of God hold up your head high you're not a molecular machine you're a child of God the God who made the seas and the sky he's your father this is what it means to be a Christian means to be a child of God the last aspect of what it means to be a child it means to live as a Christian is to hope in the promise of God to hope in the promise of God you'll recall that this morning we spoke of the ultimate context of Psalm 23 found in God's redemption of his people from their slavery in Egypt and his loving care for them as they travelled their way through the wilderness until they reached the promised land of Canaan we talked last evening about how there were times in the experiences of these wandering Israelites when they were walking in the valleys of the shadow of death but through each experience God was with them to lead them protect them and guide them we saw how the presence of God was with them in that God commanded that a tent of meeting be erected and into this tent be placed a golden box called the Ark of the Covenant this tent this tabernacle so called was the earthly presence of God where he dwelt in the glory cloud called often the Shekinah glory cloud for hundreds of years the Ark of the Covenant hidden in this tent of meeting represented the presence of God on earth the Ark was not in a fixed building or temple it was in a moving tent whatever the people moved the tent with the Ark moved with them it could have been written of the presence of God on earth it is of no fixed abode he is homeless when David was king we learn that he wanted to change all that he wanted to get rid of this temporary tent of meeting and he wanted to build in its place a great temple to house the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem but he never got to do it his son Solomon did and yet here in verse 6 can't you see the depth of David's desire when it seems to me that almost in a daydream in a duan he speaks of the house of the Lord he's got a picture in his head here of the temple he wants to build for the Ark of the Covenant he wants to build it not because he wants to make a name for himself or because he wants to win merit before God but because he wants the presence of God to be near him always his passion for God is such that he can't bear to be apart from God he wants fresh outpourings and fresh experiences of the nearness of God in his life and so he wants to build a temple where God will dwell with him there's more to it than that if you recall under the conditions of tabernacle worship only one man the high priest could enter into the most holy place where the Ark of the Covenant was the presence of God was and he could do it only once a year only one man once a year could get up close and personal to the presence of God that's the way it was under the covenant

[31 : 33] God made with Moses you see here in verse 6 David says I want to be that man I want to be the one who goes into the inner presence of God but not just once a year I want to be there all the time I want to live where God is I want to be in the house of God always can you see and can you hear his daydream here you can taste almost his hope that the day is going to come when he's going to build God a temple and he'll be able to come near to God and live with God ultimately this is a hope that David reserved for eternity because he knew in his heart of hearts it would never happen in his lifetime and yet goodness and mercy were pursuing him all the days of his life here on

earth but David pictures heaven as being the constant and uninterrupted presence of God in his heavenly temple almost a thousand years later as Jesus was dying on the cross the curtain of the temple which kept sinners from the most holy place from the presence of God was ripped top to bottom signifying that what David had hoped for in his wildest dreams was now a reality that sinful men and women like us through the shed blood of Jesus can have access into the very presence of God himself we can dwell with him in his heavenly temple and yet even this is a shadow of the true reality of heaven the heaven which is the ultimate fulfillment and realization of David's daydream in verse 6 for there where the dwelling of God is with men we shall dwell forever in his house as his children unlike the terms of the covenant

God made with Moses all who trust in Christ all and not just one person the high priest all will not just have a one day per year temporary access to the presence of God we will be with him forever and unlike what we have now where we only experience the presence of God by faith in him but our eyes cannot see him there in the heavenly temple we'll see Christ with our eyes and we'll touch him with our hands these hands you have you will touch Christ with these and these ears you have you'll hear his voice we'll be with him forever there in heaven will be the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 23 for we read in Revelation chapter 7 verse 17 the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd he will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eye we shall be forever with the Lord now surely this hope should strengthen us to persevere in our faith in Jesus Christ to keep on going on standing for him in the midst of an apathetic and hostile society after all if we are to believe in the in the lessons of secular antitheism in ten thousand years there'll be nothing left of us not even a memory not even a gravestone to mark where your mortal remains lay but our hope tells us the Bible tells us our faith tells us that in ten thousand years because of the amazing grace of God we'll be bright shining as the sun and we'll have no less days to sing

God's praise than when we first begun what does it mean to live as a Christian what does it mean to be a Christian it means first to live in the meaning of God it means secondly to experience the love of God it means thirdly to be the children of God and it means fourthly to hope in the future of God if you're a Christian tonight you have a privilege beyond all reckoning to hold all these things hold your head high keep going do not be intimidated by the world stand your ground whoever you may be and whoever you may be with but if you are not a Christian if you don't yet trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and think of what you're missing by the standards and thought patterns of our antitheistic society ultimately you are worth nothing you are cared for by nobody nobody cares for you there's no future for you is this not enough to drive you to despair by contrast listen and respond to what you know in your heart of hearts is true you were made for better things than they're telling you you were you were made to live in the meaning of God you were made to be a child of God you were made to experience the love of God you were made to live eternally in the presence of God you have everything to gain and you have nothing to lose by coming to

Christ let us pray we are astonished oh Lord when we read that we are your children that we who are told so often that we are insignificant worthless parasites exploiting the resources of our world mercilessly we who have no worth or value and yet your word tells us that we're worth something to you that we're precious to you as individuals and that you loved us so much that you sent your one and only precious son to give himself for us oh take pity on our nation oh Lord take pity on those we go to university with take pity on those we work with take pity on our friends who have been suckered in by this lie but Lord we pray that you would bring us to a fresh awareness of the privilege we have as Christian believers help us oh Lord then today and every day to live for Christ and to love

Christ in Jesus name Amen we shall close now by singing Psalm 23 in the Scottish Psalter Psalm 23 in the Scottish Psalter the tune is St. Columba the Lord the Lord my shepherd I'll not want he makes me down to line pastures green he leadeth me the quiet waters by Psalm 23 from verse 1 to verse 6 page 229 the tune is St. Columba to God's praise St. Columba the Lord God ik I shall learn ad leader I vida I bless me down so

[39 : 39] I am and As era was distraught, Because we knew that first two Were yet rose aside, And so could mark the kingdom But distraught our enemies You never thought was And he to all the pain Within the paths of righteousness He for his own sin

Yet though I walk in death's dark hill Yet will thy fear not ill For thou art with me and thy Lord And shall be done for soon I tell thou thou hast furnished In present song my foes

My head blabbed us With the heart that roars And by the border flows Goodness and mercy of thy
life Shall surely follow me And in the stars forevermore My dwelling place shall be
Now may grace, mercy, and peace From God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God, rest and
remain upon each one of you Now and always.
Amen. Amen.