

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

September 27-October 3, 2020

Sermon Series: A Method to Your Madness

Week One: “Comin’ at Ya”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, in whom we find life, health, and strength, and through whose mercy we are clothed and fed, grant unto us thankful and faithful hearts. We pray in the name and spirit of Christ, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

The ministry of the church is all about helping you be what you were created to be. There are ways to make that happen on purpose. Methodists are all about purposeful process.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

The “Means of Grace” are ways God is moving toward you.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Psalm 23 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What metaphor does the psalmist use for the LORD? (23:1a)

What does this imply about personal needs? (23:1b)

What two metaphors are used to portray the restoration of one’s soul? (23:2-3a)

What does the psalmist say God does “for the sake of His name”? (23:3b)

What two metaphors are used to describe fear and comfort? (23:4)

What two metaphors are used to describe God’s blessing on one’s life? (23:5)

What attributes of God does the psalmist say will be with him forever? (23:6a)

What final metaphor is used to describe the presence of God in one’s life? (23:6b)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

We might ask whether God really intends for us to never “want” anything.

We probably wonder how God actually “restores our souls.”

Similarly, we probably wonder how God actually “guides us” in an everyday, practical sense.

We might wonder if it is really possible to overcome fear, especially “of evil.”

We probably wonder how a rod and staff, which seem like harsh images, are meant to provide us comfort.

We might wonder about the idea of sitting down to a banquet with your enemies watching – what is that supposed to imply?

We might also wonder about the implications of being anointed with huge quantities of oil in ancient times.

Finally, we might ask what we can really expect with regard to “goodness and love/mercy” following us “all the days of our lives.” Does that mean everything will always be perfect?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Psalm 78:70-72; Jeremiah 23:1; Matthew 9:36; John 10:11; Genesis 49:24; Isaiah 40:10-11; Psalm 7:5; Hosea 8:3

The 23rd Psalm is certainly one of the most loved, and most popular, poems in the entire Old Testament. The psalm is frequently used in funeral rites, due to the fact that mourners often find consolation in the way the psalm evokes God’s compassion. The hope and confidence in eternal life is expressed powerfully in the concluding words – “I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

The entire psalm is constructed as a succession of metaphors – a common way for poets (and psalmists) to convey a depth of meaning difficult to express otherwise. In a metaphor, something is said to be something *else*, that it obviously and literally *is not*. When metaphors are used for religious expression, we need to be careful to understand what is being said about God. By its very nature, a metaphor is not as precise a description as perhaps a lengthier discourse could be, but it draws on the varied experience of its readers, and allows those readers to use their own imaginations to provide meaning for the metaphor.

For Psalm 23, then, the metaphor that gives structure and meaning to the entire psalm comes in verse 1 – “The LORD is my shepherd.” This metaphor is immediately followed by the implications of this

metaphor in the life of the psalmist – in traditional language, “I shall not want,” but in more current vernacular, “I lack nothing” (“want” in the traditional language does not contain the meaning of “desire” that we associate the word “want” with today, but rather, the ancient meaning of “to be lacking in”). While we may not fully understand or appreciate the role of a “shepherd,” in ancient Israel, it was familiar to everyone. The primary duty of a shepherd was to provide for, and to protect, the flock. The shepherd would lead the flock to pastures where they could easily be fed, led them along a safe route when they had to move, and fended off predators – all of which are described and ascribed metaphorical meanings in the psalm. The shepherd had the primary responsibility for the sheep’s welfare and safety.

This, of course, made the actual *metaphor* of the “shepherd” a primary way to describe ancient Israel’s leaders, whether that were political leaders like the king or religious leaders like the priests and rabbis. The rod and staff, both of which are referred to in the psalm, were often part of the official symbols of such leadership because of this association. In Psalm 78:70-72, the psalmist describes how God “chose David His servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep He brought him to be the shepherd of His people Jacob,” while Jeremiah, in condemning the evil kings and false prophets of his time, proclaims on God’s behalf, “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture” (Jeremiah 23:1). Jesus lamented that the crowds of Israel were like “sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36) and identified Himself as “the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). In fact, Jesus’ claim to be the Good Shepherd was perceived as blasphemy among many of Israel’s leaders, due to the long history of Israel’s use of the metaphor of shepherd in reference to God Himself – as in Genesis 49:24 and Isaiah 40:10-11.

The body of the psalm after verse 1 elaborates on the statement “I lack nothing” by providing its own agenda of what exactly God does to fulfill every need. The LORD provides me with the sustenance of food (“to lie down in green pastures”). The LORD “leads me beside the still waters,” enabling me to drink from the water safely, without fear of being swept away. The LORD “restores my soul,” enabling me to maintain my strength. The LORD “guides me in paths of righteousness,” or more precisely, “the right paths,” implying the avoidance of wrong, or dangerous paths. And all of this is done “for His name’s sake” – in other words, as a way to proclaim to the world God’s ability to provide for and to protect His people Israel, perfectly fulfilling the role of shepherd!

While verses 1 through 3 have looked at God’s past and current providence, verse 4 turns toward the future. Because of the Shepherd’s history of providence and protection, the psalmist can proclaim the deepest trust in Him. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” Even in the worst conceivable danger, the psalmist will set aside fear because God, like any good shepherd, is *always* there, present with the sheep. To further understand the metaphor of the shepherd, we must also understand the purpose of the shepherd’s rod and staff – the rod was a club for beating away wild animals, and the staff was a rod to gently keep the sheep on the path and to prevent them from wandering off. Is it any surprise that a properly armed shepherd would make the sheep feel secure? No, indeed, “Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

The imagery becomes even more grand in the final verses, where the Shepherd “prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” God’s providing sustenance is no longer merely a green pasture, but a sumptuous banquet – a banquet held in full view of my enemies. Again, the imagery suggests a public proclamation of God’s overflowingly abundant providence for all the world to see,

even those who do not follow God. The picture may suggest the context of sitting down to a covenant meal with one group in the presence of another, as a way to emphasize the special, covenantal relationship God has with God's people, the context for God's shepherding behaviors. The anointing of the head with oil, and the overflowing cup, further escalate the image of abundant blessing described by the psalmist.

The psalm ends with the psalmist's emphatic assertion of God's unwavering loyalty to the covenant relationship thus established - "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life." Here again, the English translation does not fully convey the significance of this statement. In Hebrew, the word translated "follow" is normally used of a hostile pursuit, as in both Psalm 7:5 ("let my enemy pursue (follow) and overtake me" and Hosea 8:3 "But Israel has rejected what is good; an enemy will pursue (follow) him." Here, in Psalm 23, that language is turned upside down, and proclaims the abiding faith that our Shepherd God will pursue us throughout our lifetimes, never abandoning us. Could Jesus have had the psalm in mind when he told the parable of the lost sheep, and the shepherd who relentlessly pursues (follows) the one lost sheep until it is found? While the closing statement "And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" is part of the reason the psalm is used at funerals, with the hope of eternal life it provides, it seems clear that in the context of the psalm itself, it is as much about God's commitment to His covenant people *in this lifetime* as it is a promise of eternal life. The Good Shepherd will never abandon His flock and keep them safe and secure in His house.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Do you trust God to provide the essentials of life? If you answer yes, how does your life give evidence of that trust? If you answer no, why do you think the psalmist would express such confidence in God's providence?

Do you think it's really possible to "fear no evil"? When have you had to utterly depend on the promise that God will be with you even in the darkest valley? How did you experience that presence?

If the rod protects you from enemies, and the staff guides you on life's journey, what form have the metaphorical rod and staff taken in your life? What did they look like in the real world?

What examples of the goodness and love of God "pursuing" you could you give witness to? How do you experience God's pursuit of you?

Part of the Christian understanding of God's pursuit of us is that God has intentionally provided ways for us to experience God's grace. These "means of grace" include things like prayer, study, worship, Holy Communion, acts of service, and generosity, among others. Are you placing yourself in a position to receive these means of grace? If not, are there changes you can make to avail yourself of them?

When you hear the words "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever," do you think primarily of an afterlife in heaven, or of abiding in God's presence even here in earth? Do you have a sense of living in God's house today?

How do you express appreciation to God for the fact that God will never withdraw God's love from you, that you will always have a home in God's house?

The 23rd psalm is often used to provide comfort in times of difficulty – but the psalm itself draws that comfort from a long history of God's proven faithfulness in both protecting and providing for His flock. How might you use the psalm not only to receive comfort from God, but to praise God for His providence and protection even when things are going fine?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy and Loving God, we give You thanks that You are our Shepherd. We give you thanks for protecting us in times of trouble, and for providing for us in times of plenty. Help us to recognize You when Your goodness and love pursue us, so that we might continue to walk in paths of righteousness. We pray in the holy name of our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.