Psalm 23 AND ME

We all experience moments when the transcendent, the divine, breaks through the mundane.

Weddings and births. Laughter and friendship. The sun setting behind a mountain peak, reflecting off the still, silent lake. An answer to a seemingly impossible prayer request. A personal breakthrough that can only be traced back to a loving and powerful God.

Yet we all face the reality of living in a broken world, longing for Jesus' return. The heart-wrenching cancer diagnosis of a mother of three. A long season of sleepless nights, wondering whether God sees you and is present. The strained relationship with a family member.

Following Jesus is learning how to hold the divine and devastation, the holy and heartbreak, the laughter and lament—and honestly bring it all to the God who truly cares. God sees it all, knows it all.

Psalms is a collection of 150 prayers and poems, organized into five books with a clear introduction and conclusion. There is intentionality and design in the order, with beauty and wisdom in each psalm—often expressing worship and praise alongside grief and despair.

As BibleProject notes, "Psalms is the prayer book of God's people who are striving to be faithful to the Torah and waiting for the Messianic Kingdom."

It is a glimpse into what it looks like to honestly navigate the wandering and eventful journey of following Jesus.

TRANSFORMING FRIENDSHIP

When we read the Psalms, we find words for our own feelings.

When we read the Psalms, we join the chorus of saints throughout history.

When we read the Psalms, we are reminded of who God is—the powerful Creator and loving Savior who grants us access to His Presence and cares deeply about our every thought and emotion. He desires a transforming friendship with us, which is overwhelmingly humbling and speaks to our shocking value as His image-bearers.

We often approach God out of duty or performance, shaping our prayers to sound holy and pleasing. Yet the Psalter invites us to shift our perspective—to have an authentic relationship with the Triune God.

Although the Psalms are poetic and beautiful, they are also honest and messy. What if we brought our authentic selves to God—sharing exactly how we feel?

Are you in a season where fear, anxiety, and stress are more prevalent than you desire? Do you feel isolated, discontent, or uncertain? Or are you simply longing to experience the presence of God?

Psalm 23 is for you!

Over the next several weeks, we will learn about an abundant God committed to our greatest joys. We will encounter a God who is consistent and faithful even when the world around us is unpredictable and broken.

We will honestly examine whether we trust God.

This journey is an invitation to be fully known and loved by God. And to live each day in response to that reality.



Slow down. Even stop. This step may feel uncomfortable and inefficient, yet it is vital to disrupt our default mode of approaching Scripture for our own gain.

Preparing for spiritual reading requires a willingness to acknowledge and put down our concerns or distractions and be fully attentive to how God wants to meet us. Sometimes it's helpful to write them down to release them.

Find a time and place in your day that is free of hurry. Spiritual reading is about encounter—a sacred event that unfolds slowly and cannot be rushed.



Read through Psalm 23. Pay attention to the emotions, verbs, pronouns, and themes. Notice which phrases and words catch your attention. David, who was a shepherd, fugitive, warrior, and king, wrote this psalm. Although it is unknown when he penned this poem, what can you perceive about his relationship with God? Simply observe without analysis.

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.
3 He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.

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 lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.



HOW PSALMS ARE UNDERSTOOD & ORGANIZED

"be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Eph. 5:18-20)

The psalms are prayers, meant to inhabit the hearts of those who love God. Through them, the Spirit enables us to express the full range of our emotions before God and one another, and has done so for over 2,000 years. But how do we understand an ancient prayer? The book of Psalms is a poetry collection located in the Old Testament. Those two facts can cause us to pause. Ancient Hebrew culture is not a common subject in school, and poetry can feel foreign with its emphasis on images instead of a straightforward story.

The Psalms Have Specific Formats

One way to engage with a psalm is to recognize its form or type. Biblical scholars have categorized the Psalms into two basic types of prayer: praise and lament (a cry for help). All other forms fall into one of these two categories. The most common forms include laments, praise, thanksgiving, wisdom, and royal.

Laments/A Cry for Help (can be individual and communal)

These psalms are recognized by a direct call to God. The psalmist is in crisis and cannot cope through human efforts. The psalmist has a complaint about life, about being oppressed, or about God directly, and petitions God for relief, often giving reasons for God to step in. What makes laments distinctive is that *they go on to express confidence and trust that God will answer*. These psalms usually end in praising God, or with promises to praise God, for the help the psalmist believes is coming. Psalms of lament include 10, 13, 44, 88, and most famously, 22.

Interestingly, the trust psalms are psalms of lament.

While the details of the crisis are not always clear, the psalmist's expression of faith and hope in God is unshakeable. These include 23, 63, 124, and 131.

Praise (can be individual and communal)

These psalms are a call to praise God. The reasons for praise are listed and focus on God's character as well as his actions on behalf of his people. They were frequently used in communal worship. Additional subcategories for this type of prayer include:

- historical psalms (God's actions on behalf of his people) - 73, 78, 95, and 105;
- creation psalms (God's work in creation) - 8, 104, 139, and 148;
- enthronement psalms (God as King, emphasizing that God reigns) - 29, 47, and 93;
- psalms of Zion (praise for God's dwelling in the Temple) - 46, 84, and 125.

Thanksgiving (can be individual and communal)

Thanksgiving prayers are a type of praise psalm, written *after a crisis is over*. The individual or community praises God for stepping in to save them, and the psalmist now seeks to fulfill the promise to praise God for being rescued. A unique part of these psalms is the inclusion of the crisis. Part of remembering what God has done for the psalmist is to *describe the crisis **and** the prayer for help*. These prayers end with a call for others to join the psalmist in praising God. These psalms include 34, 92, 100, 111, and 147.

Wisdom

These psalms are poems of instruction and are grouped with praise poetry. The psalmist compares the righteous with the wicked, the wise with the foolish, and God's way with the way of the world. Everything aligned with God's way is considered *happy* or

fortunate. These psalms frequently praise the Torah and speak of the joy of living out God's laws. These psalms include 1, 36, 37, 112, 119, and 128.

Royal

Royal prayers are lofty praise psalms. Royal psalms are composed for the monarchy or for specific events in the king's life. They include prayers for the king to pray or prayers on the king's behalf. Many of the royal psalms express the people's hope for a Messiah, the ideal King. These include 2, 45, 72, 101, and 110.

Understanding a psalm's type and purpose is a vital way to engage with the poetic prayer. The psalms are not providing thoughts and feelings for us to emulate as the ideal, but as the psalmist expresses images and emotions, we recognize our shared humanity as God's people. We are invited to express our experience honestly, knowing that God will redeem and restore. We reach for the psalms in anguish and joy, in fear and hope, and when we don't know what we're feeling at all. The psalms allow us to express ourselves to God, even when the words are out of reach.

For a full explanation of the thoughtful and theological arrangement of the Psalms, explore the BibleProject summary video in our additional resources.

Sources Consulted

- deClaissé-Walford, Nancy, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner. *The Book of Psalms*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Eerdmans, 2014.
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Psalms is an invitation to transparency. If you were fully honest with God, what would you pray? Share your frustrations, longings, questions, and praises. Whether in a bulleted list or a creative poem, write down your honest thoughts.

How would your life look different if you fully trusted God? What areas do you think would be most impacted? What would change?



One of the greatest hindrances to an intimate relationship with God is being unavailable. What is one step you can take to create the margin to truly encounter God through Psalm 23?

What must you surrender to be open to what God may want to show you?