

CHAPTER ONE

# WHY PRAY PSALM 23? DEPENDENCE ON GOD!

*The Lord is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside the still waters.  
He restores my soul;  
He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil;  
My cup runs over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
All the days of my life;  
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
Forever.*

—Psalm 23

I'VE QUOTED THIS COMFORTING LYRIC beside hospital beds and gravesides and shared it with stressed friends. As I get older, I yearn more for its soothing truths.

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I surrendered to Jesus at six, started preaching at sixteen, and began pastoring at twenty. Yet today, it's emotionally harder to follow Jesus. It demands more determination to renew my mind, more discipline to pray, and more strain to obey. I thought it got easier with each birthday, but at times, it's harder.

I'm strangely comforted, however, in the discomfort of others. I remember reading about Martin Luther<sup>1</sup> and Charles Spurgeon's<sup>2</sup> battles with depression and missionary Adoniram Judson's dark night of the soul.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Mother Teresa's hidden anguish surfaced with the publication of her private writings.<sup>4</sup>

Seeing the hard seasons of others following Jesus, I realize we should expect our own. God purposes painful seasons to keep us dependent on Him. Through dependence, God keeps us close. And while dependent, we learn God's amazing attributes—those things that make Him our Good Shepherd.

### PRAYING PSALM 23 ADDRESSES OUR TENSION

Depending on God taxes us. The *English Oxford Dictionary* explains why dependence is difficult. It first defines *dependent* as “contingent on or determined by.”<sup>5</sup> We hear this every day when we say, “Well, it depends.” We can't answer because of too many uncertainties. It's so frustrating, and we all feel it. How can we make decisions and set plans when it always depends on something beyond our control?

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1 Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), 359-363.

2 Richard Ellsworth Day, *The Shadow of the Broad Brim: The Life Story of Charles Haddon Spurgeon Heir of the Puritans* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1934), 171-179.

3 “Missionary Biographies: Adoniram Judson, A Baptist Page Portrait,” 1997-2001, The Baptist Page online, <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/bjudson20.html>.

4 Shona Crabtree, “Book Uncovers a Lonely, Spiritually Desolate Mother Teresa,” *Christianity Today* online, August 30, 2007, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/augustweb-only/135-43.o.html>.

5 *Oxford English Dictionary Synonyms, and Spanish to English Translator*, Oxford Lexico, s.v. “dependent,” accessed May 1, 2022, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/dependent>.

Being dependent is also defined as “requiring someone or something for financial or other support.”<sup>6</sup> Tax forms reveal this when asking how many dependents we have.

Combining these definitions, we can see why faithfully following Jesus requires dependence and why dependence over time is so draining. We become God’s dependent and depend on Him for everything every day.

If someone asks us about our plans for the rest of our week, year, or life, we can truthfully say, “It depends on God.” He can change our circumstances, direction, and plans at any time. That’s why being in control of our resources and plans actually feels easier, while depending on God for these leaves us tired and frustrated . . . until we see the benefit.

David shares the benefit of depending on God: over time it produces experiences with God and a knowledge of God that leaves us in awe of Him. Throughout his psalms, David calls God the following:

Elohe Chaseddi—“God of Mercy” (Psalm 59:10)

Elohei Tehillati—“God of My Praise” (Psalm 109:1)

El Hakabodh—“God of Glory” (Psalm 29:3)

Elohim Machase Lanu—“God Our Refuge” (Psalm 62:8)

Eli Maelekhi—“God My King” (Psalm 68:24)

El Nekamoth—“The God Who Avenges” (Psalm 18:47)

Elohim Ozer Li—“God My Help” (Psalm 54:4)

Elohim Shophtim Ba-arets—“The God Who Judges in the Earth” (Psalm 58:11)

Elhohe Tishuathi—“God of My Salvation” (Psalm 51:4)

Elohe Tsadeki—“God of My Righteousness” (Psalm 4:1)

Jehovah Gibbor Milchamah—“The Lord Mighty in Battle” (Psalm 24:8)

Jehovah El Emeth—“Lord God of Truth” (Psalm 31:5)

Jehovah Elohim Tsaba—“Lord God of Hosts” (Psalm 59:5)

Elohim Chasidi—“God of Loving Kindness” (Psalm 59:17)

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6 Ibid.

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Jehovah Mephalti—“The Lord My Deliverer” (Psalm 18:2)

Jehovah Metsudhathi—“The Lord My High Tower” (Psalm 18:2)

Jehovah Sali—“The Lord My Rock” (Psalm 18:2)

Jehovah Ori—“The Lord My Light” (Psalm 27:1)

Jehovah Uzzi—“The Lord My Strength” (Psalm 28:7)

Ab’—“Father” (Psalm 68:5)

Jehovah Rohi—“The Lord My Shepherd” (Psalm 23:1)<sup>7</sup> 8

Psalm 23 rehearses what David learned about God from his seasons of dire dependence. For us, it produces a timeless and encouraging prayer. It not only encourages us to trust God with the unknowns but also surfaces an eagerness that seems out of place.

Praying Psalm 23, we face our moments of dependence and wonder what great experiences with God and amazing truths about God we will discover. Our tension from dependence on God is replaced by anticipation of experiences with God.

### PRAYING PSALM 23 ADDRESSES OUR NEEDS

Our tension from depending on God comes from several pulls. David may have written Psalm 23 near the end of his life.<sup>9</sup> Those draining tugs influenced his thoughts when penning the psalm. Those same taxing tensions affect us. They include heavy responsibilities, wrong expectations, sinful consequences, and exhaustion.

#### HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY

In 1 Samuel 16, David feels Samuel’s oil dripping from his head. God’s revered prophet may have leaned in and said, “Young man, you are God’s

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7 Tony Evans, *Praying Through the Names of God* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2014).

8 John Phillips, *Exploring the Psalms: Psalms 1-88* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1988), 14. Phillips lists the Psalms ascribed to David. They include Psalm 3-9; 11-32; 34-41; 51-65; 68-70; 86; 101; 103; 108-110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138-145.

9 Kyle M. Yates, *Studies in Psalms* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1953), 35.

future king of Israel.”<sup>10</sup> Around the age of a high school freshman, David had only known shepherding sheep. Yet for the rest of his life, he would carry the responsibility of leading Israel.

Many, like me, surrendered to Jesus as a child. Some mistakenly thought that was all God asked. In their mind, their baptism was one-and-done. They were saved from Hell. All they needed to do from then on was go to church and be good.

At some point, God makes us aware of our heavy responsibility to follow Jesus’ lead in all things. We must follow wherever He leads and obey whatever He purposes. We must submit our will and resources to Him. We should honor Him through our role in our family, at work, and in relationships. We are to continue Jesus’ mission in living, speaking, and spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Feeling the tension from our responsibility in following Jesus, we acknowledge it’s impossible to do this without God’s help. We depend on Him.

#### *WRONG EXPECTATIONS*

Fifteen years lapse between David feeling the oil and his wearing the crown.<sup>11</sup> During that time, he lives in caves with others as a fugitive from his father-in-law, King Saul, who wants him dead. As nomads, David and his supporters try to survive in enemy lands. David can easily lament, “Did I hear right? Wasn’t I anointed to be king? Yet I’m not respected as one, nor do I have any of the perks of being king.” Still, David is faithful to God and eventually becomes king. He relies on God, especially when confused by God’s activity or inactivity.

As Christ-followers, we set ourselves up for difficulty. We expect—and sometimes are taught—that Jesus blesses and protects His followers. Therefore, we should experience promotions, not job loss; good health, not cancer; and a loving family, not a family at odds with each other and God.

<sup>10</sup> F. B. Meyer, *Great Men of the Bible, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Duane A. Garrett, *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), 395.

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Like David, though, we are called to a purpose, not a bubble. David would serve God by serving the people as king and honor God with whatever God purposed. Remaining faithful in moments when our expectations of life and God are not the same as God's requires dependence. God knows what He's doing, even though it's not what we expected.

### *SINFUL CONSEQUENCES*

Finally wearing his crown, David enjoys the benefits of his obedience. He builds a palace and sends generals to fight his battles. Feeling entitled as king, David has an affair with Bathsheba. When he learns she's pregnant, he arranges her husband's death. This allows David to marry her to hide his sin. But the rippling consequences of his sin divide his kingdom. David's son Absalom leads a coup to overthrow him. David narrowly escapes but once again is a fugitive.

There is a difference between David's two seasons as a fugitive. The first time, he did nothing wrong but, rather, suffered because of King Saul's jealousy. Although Absalom is not blameless, this time, the real blame is David's. Psalm 51 records David's prayer of repentance. Still, David needed to depend on God to help him weather the consequences of his sin.

God's forgiveness is merciful and complete, but we still must face sin's fallout. We must repair relationships, restore trust, regain health, change habits, address finances, and confront bitterness and grudges. Sometimes, sin's impact feels overwhelming. That's when, like David, we fall before God in prayer and rely on His strength and help.

### *WORN OUT*

After a while, depending on God can wear on us—the burden of all He asks, the confusion over His activity, and the pain of trying to climb out from the consequences of our sins. We feel we have nothing left. Our prayer sounds like David's desperate plea in Psalm 142:1-3:

*I cry out to the Lord with my voice;  
With my voice to the Lord I make my supplication.  
I pour out my complaint before Him;  
I declare before Him my trouble.*

*When my spirit was overwhelmed within me,  
Then You knew my path.  
In the way in which I walk  
They have secretly set a snare for me.*

David prayed this prayer while hiding from Saul in the Cave of Adullam. Tired of being chased and weary from trying to stay godly and obedient, David was drained. Although Scripture does not record it, I wonder if David thought, *God, I'm done. I want to do what I want to do the way I want to do it whenever I want. Get someone else to be king. Let someone else depend on You.*

David prayed this before he was crowned king. Near the end of his forty-year reign (1010-970 B.C.), David penned Psalm 23. In it, he reflects on God's faithfulness to him long after he cried to God in the cave.

David didn't quit. He didn't walk away from what God asked or allowed. He didn't even walk away when he blew it with Bathsheba. He continued to depend on God because he kept praying, and his prayers were direct.

As a pastor, I've taught from passages because they addressed my need. Sometimes, I preached texts knowing they met the needs of others. This time, it's both.

We can all learn from David's life and prayers because we know how it feels to depend on God. David also shows us the beauties of God's nature—beauties we can only see when depending on Him. That's why God purposed David's experiences and preserved His prayers in Scripture. They not only lead us to stand in awe of God, but they also lead us to pray specifically.

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### PRAYING PSALM 23 IS SPECIFIC

Many are familiar with the Psalms, but few see them like Thomas G. Long. He calls them “poetic liturgical prayers.”<sup>12</sup> H. C. Leupold says David took his poetic prayers and handed them to the choirmaster to be used in public worship.<sup>13</sup> Once used in worship, the people remembered them, and they became a part of their devotions and prayers.<sup>14</sup>

These psalms are still powerful devotional pieces because they are emotionally raw and genuine. John Calvin called the psalms “The Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul” and said they address “all the griefs, sorrows, fears, misgivings, hopes, cares, anxieties; in short, all the disquieting emotions with which the minds of men art wont to be agitated.”<sup>15</sup>

Like the perfect Hallmark card, the Psalms seem to say what we feel and request of God what we want. That’s the beauty of Psalm 23.

Because Psalm 23 is Hebrew poetry, rhyme is not present. However, like all poetry, every word is packed with imagery and meaning.<sup>16</sup> That’s why each verse points to a moment of David’s extreme dependence on God. They magnify attributes of God as seen through dependent eyes and also inspire us to pray.

A slow walk through Psalm 23 will help us to endure those seasons when we can’t make it without depending on God.

### PRAYING PSALM 23 WORKS

In the heart of the twentieth century, notable pastor and author Charles Allen frequently prescribed Psalm 23. To anyone stressed, hopeless, and drained, he wrote on a piece of paper, “Take Psalm 23 five times a day for seven days.” Like a detailed prescription, he instructed them to read it slowly

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12 Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 44.

13 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1959), 9.

14 Long, 44.

15 G. Campbell Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1947), 6.

16 Long, 44-45.



and to meditate on each word and phrase when they woke up, ate each meal, and went to bed. They were not to stop after three days if they felt better. For the greatest benefit, they had to finish the prescription.

Allen explains why his prescription worked: “It contains 118 words. One could memorize it in a short time. Most of us already know it. But its power is not in memorizing its words, but rather in thinking the thoughts.”<sup>17</sup>

I’m not prescribing Psalm 23 to re-orientate our thoughts but to re-shape our prayers. I did the same thing with the Lord’s Prayer, and to this day, it remains a valuable tool to realign my life. By praying Psalm 23 slowly, it will do what it says midway: restore our souls. Only then can we pray and depend on God to the end—and along the way be amazed by His kindness and strength.

So, let’s get started.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles L. Allen, *God’s Psychiatry*, reprinted (New York: Jove/HBJ Books, 1978), 15.