

“A Psalm for All Seasons”

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Psalm 23 is beloved for many reasons.

It offers comfort to the conflicted, hope for the helpless and trust for the troubled. It blesses journeys near and far, buries the dead with dignity and honors our military heroes.

It sings of peace, it rings with calm and it's a Psalm that brings a balm to our aching hearts. Who can forget its vivid images of lush green fields, still blue waters and overflowing cups of bounteous grace?

It restores hope, implores patience and explores peace.

It is *existential* – it speaks of eternity. It's *providential* – it talks of God's gifts. And it's *reverential* – it talks in awe of earth's beauty. It's *existential, providential and reverential!* 1

Yet it was never intended as a sign of death, decay and despair. It's a tribute to life, beauty and hope! And you thought you knew Psalm 23? Think again!

It's not about death – it never originally spoke of the Valley of the Shadow of Death – it's about life. As you just heard in five different versions of Psalm 23, only the King James Version spoke of a journey through “the Valley of the Shadow of Death.”

There are dozens more translations, too, that don't call that emblematic mountain pass a place of death. How could there be so many different versions of such a well-known Biblical passage? Why are these differences important?

They open us to look at all Scripture afresh. If God is still speaking, can we listen to new versions? We often hear that the Bible is God's inerrant word.

But let's admit that Psalm 23 has been a comfort for decades. Why? Because it's a mainstay at wakes, funerals and graveside services. It is a memorial, funeral dirge and sympathy card all rolled into one. In fact, it's an American cultural icon.

But it's just been an icon for about 135 years. It came into play at funerals in the late 1800s. Many folks credit its sudden rise from obscurity – after all, there are 150-plus psalms – to New England preacher Henry Ward Beecher.

Episcopalians only added it to their Book of Prayer in 1926.

OK, so WHY did we get so many translations? Three reasons: Culture changes, language difficulties and Biblical scholarship. REASON 1: Culture. The original text dates to King David around 1,000 BC.

It describes a journey by foot. Travel was slow, painful, risky. Storms, floods, heat or cold could kill you. Deadly animals, snakes or scorpions lurked nearby. Or roadside bandits.

Valleys posed a special menace. The sun rises later and sets sooner in valleys in a time when travel was dangerous enough during the day. So more darkness in valleys.

And human enemies could launch rocks, spears or arrows from way up high above the valleys. Do you avoid road trips today that traverse valleys? Not likely!

REASON 2: Language and translation obstacles. Think how vastly different speech and writing were then. Without modern translations, much of the Bible would be incomprehensible.

Yet something inevitably gets lost in all those translations.

And because language was based on common insights, the references today often baffle us. Back then, a shepherd was a wise leader. Who even knows a shepherd now?

RESEARCH: Carbon dating, X-rays rays and computer scanning are recent tools to locate, examine and date Biblical relics. If we know more about how folks lived then, we can translate better. Most of the Dead Sea Scrolls were only found in the past 100 years.

You heard me mention its popularity at funerals, wakes and graveside services. The original Hebrew said “*Even tho’ I walk through the darkest valley.*” (Glen of gloom, says another version)

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And not all references to death mean something fatal! When we say it’s “deathly quiet” out, that’s not meant literally. Bodies aren’t dropping when we get “deadly serious!”

And the use of walk in the psalm is a crucial context. That’s how the vast majority of folks traveled. Walking was dreary, dangerous and dreaded. It was a painful ordeal!

Psalm 23 originally was a comfort for travelers. It wasn’t about death, dying or funerals; it was about the rich, abundant life God offers us.

When we read “God restores my soul,” we mean God keeps me close! And Psalm 23 is a call to see God’s beauty in Mother Nature.

The hungry see nourishment in “you prepare a table within sight of my enemies” and the ill see healing in “thou annointest my head with oil.” It was a type of medicine.

The thirsty see refreshment in “my cup runneth over.”

Psalm 23 plays many roles, addresses many issue and serves many purposes. It truly is “A Psalm for All Seasons.” But Psalm 23 never promised absolute protection.

I will paraphrase Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.”

“The psalmist doesn't say, ‘I will fear no evil because nothing bad ever happens. He says, ‘I will fear no evil because you are with me in time of evil that will happen.’”

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Translate: God is with us in the best of times and the worst of times. Yes, Psalm 23 is an American cultural icon. But we folks of faith claim it as a clarion call to life, a reassuring passage in trouble and an amazing comfort for all times.

Despite all the variations, the closing line is a constant comfort. Yes, times, language and culture change, but this promise for the faithful holds steady. It's about eternal salvation.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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