

Peaks and Valleys

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Psalm 23 is not long, yet takes us on quite a journey.

It takes us from peak, to valley, and home again.

We start with familiar, soaring imagery. Beside still waters, in green pastures, our spirits refreshed, our souls restored.

This is the peak. The best of what life with God can be. God our ever attentive, ever-present shepherd, who supplies our needs, in whom we find, healing, wholeness, love, and grace.

Our life of faith has moments like these, moments where the love and presence of God dawns on us unmistakably.

The peak.

Then we move to the valley.

And I always like to point out that the Psalm does not say if I walk through the darkest valley. It says, even when.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley.

Or you might remember the more embellished King James Version, Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil.

That's what it says. Amidst after the peak. After the beautiful words of promise.

The valley.

Even when I walk through the valley.

It tells the hard truth, tucked right there among all those comforting words. We will all walk through valleys, where the bright light of God's love seems far off.

The faith that we carry with us through life does not inoculate us against the reality of grief or sorrow.

Our life of faith has moments like these, moments where the bright light of God's love seems far off.

The valley.

And then, we are back!

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

The Psalm lands us in these images of home. Anointed with oil. Offered an overflowing cup.
Sitting at a table, prepared by God.

Here too we are back at the peak, surrounded by an embrace of God's love, this time symbolized
by simple acts of hospitality.

Where the Psalm began imagining God as a shepherd, sustaining us in tranquil fields.

The Psalm ends by imagining God hosting us in God's own home. Making sure we are
comfortable and well fed.

Our life of faith has moments like these, moments where resting in God's presence we find just
what we need to carry us forward through all life brings. Where we find a kind and ready
welcome in the waiting arms of our loving God.

Home again.

From the peak, to the valley, and home again.

I think this is one of the reasons why this Psalm has always been a favorite across generations. I
think this is one of the reasons so many family members request this Psalm at Funerals. I think it
is one of the reasons that my church growing up had us memorize it in Sunday School.

Because it traces the broad contours of the life of faith, each of us in each moment of life can
find ourselves in the journey sketched by these words.

And. Most importantly. The Psalm reminds us that God is with us every step of the way.

God is there at the peak, when we are awed by the wonder of creation, when our hearts cannot
help but sing my God, how great you are.

God is there.

God is there in the valley, when we are bent low by life's burdens, when our souls cry out how
long O God.

God is there.

And when we come home again, to the routine parts of life that sustain us. When we sit at the table, and reach toward the simple abundant gifts of our life.

God is there.

This church now, and indeed our whole world, is in a period of transition and transformation.

What this Psalm reminds us is that no matter where we find ourselves on life's journey, there is one thing that we can be certain of.

God is there.

God is here. With us. Always.

It can be very tempting to look to God to rescue us from life's valleys. To pluck us out of the challenges of life, the unwelcome change, the uncomfortable conversion, the grief, the fear.

It can be very tempting to look to God to smooth out the journey of life into a simple pleasant path.

But that is not the promise of this Psalm.

The promise is presence.

It is not a God who makes life simpler, or even easier.

It is a God who is with us, no matter what life brings.

For us, the key is learning where to look. How to hone our hearts so that they can experience the ways that God is present in the midst of all that life brings.

It is true that we can look up to God as our rescuer. And I do not want to be heard saying that God has never pulled anyone out of a valley. God can. God has. And God will.

But God's presence can look like other things too.

The shoulder that you find to lean on when your world shatters in a moment.

The community that shows up when you feel alone.

The familiar refrain that whispers in your heart and gives you enough courage for the next step.

Those that first loved you, and what they instilled in you.

A sacred place, beside which your spirit can find a little rest.

An unexpected bounty, when things seem bare.

Shelter in the storm.

This Psalm reminds us that God's presence can look, and feel a lot of different ways. A pasture, still water, a staff, a table, a cup, a home.

So whenever you find yourself in a moment where it feels like the familiar ways that God has been present in your life are not showing through, look again, and maybe remember the familiar words of this Psalm.

They promise.

I promise.

God is there.