

WEEK OF NOVEMBER 20, 2022

LESSON AIM: **Wait in faith on the Lord;
be of good courage, and he
will strengthen your heart.**

UNIT: Psalms (Part 2)

THEME: Godly Heart

LESSON TEXT: Psalm 23; Psalm 27

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Joshua 1:9; Hebrews 11:6, 32-36

A HEART THAT IS STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

BY MARK SCOTT

When we think about being strong and courageous, our minds of course drift to Joshua, the faithful spy and successor of Moses. As he took the baton of leadership from Moses, God reminded him more than once to be strong and courageous in leading Israel (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9, and 18). But King David also challenged Israel to be like Joshua—without naming him—and he did so in two very familiar Psalms (23 and 27).

A Heart That Is Strong and Courageous Lacks Nothing *Psalm 23*

Thanksgiving week is a good time to affirm that many of us lack nothing. We have so much. And beyond that, we have a good God who acts as a shepherd and a gracious host. That is what this most famous of all psalms celebrates. At least three things make this psalm so familiar and popular. First, it pictures God as a shepherd (an image familiar to King David). Second, the psalm is used in all circumstances (including funerals). Finally, the psalm underlines David's confidence about gaining victory over his enemies and experiencing enjoyment in the presence of God.

The shepherd made sure his sheep lacked nothing. The verbs (*makes, leads, refreshes, guides, prepares, and anoints*, along with the implied verb, *protects*) underline the thoroughness of the shepherd to provide. Interpreting the imagery of those verbs demonstrated how the shepherd nourishes, restores, leads, honors, protects, and inspires confidence.

Green pastures are hard to come by in Israel. When the shepherd found such a pasture, he ensured that his sheep would enjoy the rest and nourishment they needed. Rushing waters from vicious rivers or flooded wadis could endanger the sheep. This shepherd ensured his sheep could safely drink and not be washed away in strong currents. Taking the right paths to the next feeding ground mattered in Israel. The *darkest valley* (i.e., valley of death) was a frightening valley west of Jerusalem. This shepherd led his sheep out of scary places. The *rod and staff* are the shepherd's tools to guide the sheep in those paths.

The shepherd of the psalm also is a host. He prepares a table (a most natural result of living in a shame and honor culture that cared deeply about hospitality) and shows the common courtesies of anointing the guest's head with oil (though David may have been thinking of

Samuel anointing him as king) and making sure his cup is always full (another common ancient Near East custom). David existentially felt God's *goodness and love* (*chesed*). This made his desire to be in God's presence (*house of the Lord*—tabernacle and/or heaven?) all the greater. Dark valleys, evil, and enemies cannot deter David being strong and courageous for his shepherd.

A Heart That Is Strong and Courageous Is Fearless *Psalm 27*

In this Psalm, David was fearless over his enemies and his troubles, fearless over his future, and bold enough to ask God for favor. God is not only a good shepherd, but he is also a *light* and a *stronghold* (fortified place). David was confident of that, so he was not fearful. In the first verse, two different words are used for fear. The first means "terrible" or "dreadful." The second (*afraid*) means "to be in awe" or "to shake."

David was fearless of his *enemies* (a form of the word for *evil*, thus *evildoers* in the *English Standard Version*). These enemies were called by other names in the psalm (*evildoers, foes, army, and false witnesses*). These enemies did everything in their power to destroy David. They advanced against David to devour him. They besieged (pitched a tent against) David. They brought war against David. They spouted *malicious accusations* (breathed violence) against David.

But David knew his enemies would *stumble and fall*. His heart would not fail, and David would be confident. Even though his enemies would *surround* him, David would *sacrifice with shouts of joy and sing and make music to the Lord*.

David also fearlessly pleaded with God for things (cf. Mark 11:24; James 1:6). More than anything, David wanted to be in God's presence (dwell in the house of the Lord, gaze on God's beauty in God's temple, be sheltered by God in his *sacred tent*, and secured by him on a rock). To be in God's presence meant to *seek his face*. David desired God to be his *helper* (a form of the name Ezra). He desired not to be forsaken.

The psalm ended similar to how it began—with great confidence in the goodness of the Lord in *the land of the living* (current or future?). David called his people to *wait and be strong* in the Lord. ■

APPLICATION

THE STRANGEST VERSE IN THE 23RD PSALM

BY DAVID FAUST

The 23rd Psalm is a well-known chapter of the Bible. Ministers quote it during funerals and musicians write songs about resting in green pastures.

One part of the 23rd Psalm puzzles me, though. It's the verse that says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (Psalm 23:5a). Who wants to sit at a table surrounded by enemies? How can you enjoy your food? If threatening onlookers glare at you while you eat, wouldn't that cause indigestion?

The Enemies

For the author of Psalm 23, enemies were not just a hypothetical idea. David fought opposing armies like the Philistines and imposing adversaries like Goliath. He faced unfriendly fire from foes who should have been on his side . . . like jealous King Saul, who tried to kill him, and his own sons, Absalom and Adonijah, who tried to overthrow his government.

David also faced the internal foes of his own frailties and the temptations that accompany power, pride, and position. His own lust and lies nearly ruined him.

What enemies do you face? What dangerous ideas are you trying to combat? What temptations are you struggling to resist? Are there individuals who make it difficult for you to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44)? Are you battling physical problems like cancer or the negative effects of aging? Do you wrestle with worry and despair?

Remember, we also contend with "spiritual forces of evil" that try to destroy our relationship with God (Ephesians 6:12). Peter warned that sinful desires "wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). On this side of heaven, God doesn't eliminate all our enemies; but in the presence of adversity, he invites us to take a breather and enjoy a meal that will strengthen us for battle.

The Table

Jesus often ate with people. He dined in the homes of new followers like Matthew, longtime friends like

Mary and Martha, skeptics like Simon the Pharisee, and seekers like Zacchaeus. Critics mocked him for eating with tax collectors and sinners, but the Lord used the dinner table as a classroom, teaching ordinary people while they did ordinary things: eating, drinking, and conversing.

After he rose from the dead, Jesus fed his disciples bread and some fish he cooked and turned their seaside breakfast into a learning opportunity (John 21:9-14). He told the lukewarm believers of Laodicea that he was eager to eat with them if they would open the door (Revelation 3:20).

Whenever the Lord prepares the meal, truth is on the table and grace is on the menu. He invites us to his table, saying, "Do this in remembrance of me." Sure, there are enemies around, glaring ominously while we rest and refuel; but they can't prevent us from enjoying what the Lord has prepared.

The Oil and the Cup

Sometimes we arrive at the table broken and bleeding, but the 23rd Psalm continues, "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows" (Psalm 23:5b). The Good Shepherd's oil reminds us of the comforting Holy Spirit who soothes our pain and heals our wounds.

David already said, "I lack nothing" (v. 1). A few verses later he added, "my cup overflows" or "brims with blessing" (*The Message*). The Lord gives us more than a mere sip or half a cup. He supplies more blessings than we can contain or personally consume. The cup overflows so we have enough to bless our neighbors . . . and even enough to share with those enemies who have been watching us eat.

Personal Challenge: List some "enemies" you are facing right now: people who are hard to deal with . . . physical challenges . . . emotional weaknesses and worries . . . spiritual trials and temptations. Pray about each of these "enemies," asking the Lord for courage to face them. ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICAH ODOR

1. Whom did you tell about God's glory and majesty last week?
2. What are you thankful for this year?

Ask two people to read aloud **Psalm 23** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask the same two people to do the same with **Psalm 27**. Finally, ask a third person to paraphrase both psalms.

3. First, look at Psalm 23 through the lens of God's *protection*. In the psalm, where do we see God protecting us?
4. Next, look at Psalm 23 through the lens of God's *provision*. In the psalm, where do we see God providing for us?
5. Psalm 27 is much more focused on God's protection than his provision. Where do you see God's protection in this psalm?
6. How has God protected you over the past year?
 - How has he provided for you?
7. What do you know is true about God by reading these two psalms?
 - What do you know is true about yourself?
8. Do you find it easy to be thankful, or does your mind go more quickly to problems?
 - What could you do to practice thankfulness this week and throughout the year?
9. For what people in your life are you particularly thankful?
 - How will you tell them that this week?
10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Psalm 100** and **Psalm 150**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. 📖