

The House of the LORD

Psalm 23:6

John Breon

Going home is a great experience for many people. You'll hear people say their vacation was great, but they're so glad to get home. Schools have "homecoming" when former students return to the place they knew and gather with old friends. I'm aware that some homes aren't good or safe places and the memories of them are painful. But for a lot of us, home is good. It's familiar; it's where we belong; it's where we've been nurtured and cared for. Even for those whose experience of home is negative, the longing for a good home, a true home, is strong.

I grew up in Appleton City, MO. It's a small town that you don't usually go to unless you intend to. But it was home. When I was in college, I would drive home on break and come into town from the west. There are a couple of hills just outside the town. As you top the second hill, you can see the town spread out in front of you. I remember coming over that hill and seeing the lights on Main Street, the water tower, and many familiar sights. I hardly go there anymore and I've found "home" in many other places. But there's still something about those images that says "home" to me. Maybe you have a place like that in your life too.

God wants to be at home with us. And, God wants us to be at home with him. God created the universe including this planet. God created human beings and intended to live with them. The description of creation in Genesis is similar to descriptions of temples in the ancient world. A temple was the house of a god or gods. Israel's temple was seen as the house of the Lord God. When the temple was destroyed, the people worried that God could no longer be with them. But the Lord showed that he could be with them even in exile away from their homeland. Then the people returned home from exile and built another temple in Jerusalem. God continued to make his presence known to his people in the temple.

Then God became human and was present in a unique way in Jesus. Jesus fulfills God's purpose in creation to be with, to live with people. Jesus fulfills the purpose of the temple to be the meeting place of God and

people, the intersection of heaven and earth. After his death and resurrection, Jesus was exalted as Lord of all. He poured out the Holy Spirit in the Church. Now, through the Spirit, God dwells in, makes his home in people who are his through faith in Jesus Christ.

God's aim is to flood all creation with his presence and glory, to fill the world with his love, to restore everything (Acts 3:21), to unite all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Ephesians 1:10). We anticipate God's new creation, the new heaven and new earth where we will truly be at home with God and God will make his home with his people for ever (Revelation 21:1-3).

Psalms 23 is about the journey home. We've seen that the Lord is our shepherd who provides a life without lack for us. The Lord provides all we need: sustenance, guidance, shelter, protection.

At the end of the day, the shepherd leads the sheep home. He knows there's the danger of a wolf or other predator following the returning flock. The predators hope a young or injured sheep might lag behind and become easy prey. If the shepherd has an assistant, he'll follow closely behind the flock to prevent young or injured sheep from becoming victims of predators. Sometimes a shepherd might have a dog that takes up the "rear guard" position. The shepherd himself might be the "rear guard." When sheep aren't lost, they know their way home.

Kenneth Bailey tells about meeting a man in Greece who had been a shepherd when he was young. One day, during siesta time, he fell asleep in the field where the sheep were grazing. When he woke up, the flock was gone. (We don't have to worry about that with our Shepherd. "Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" [Ps 121:4].) Terrified, he rushed back to the village and discovered to his delight that the flock had wandered home on their own. The homeward path from the "still waters" was familiar to them, and when the time came they followed it.

David likely had this kind of picture in mind in these last lines of the psalm. But instead of a wolf or lion following the flock on their way home, he sees the goodness and mercy of God following him all the days of his life (*The Good Shepherd* 60).

In Isaac Watts' hymn setting of Psalm 23, he says it this way:

Your sure provisions gracious God
attend me all my days;
oh, may your house be my abode,
and all my work be praise.
Here would I find a settled rest,
while others go and come;
no more a stranger, nor a guest,
but like a child at home.

https://hymnary.org/text/my_shepherd_will_supply_my_need

We're not just sheep following a shepherd. We're not just guests at the host's table. We can be children at home with the Lord. God invites us, calls us, leads us to be God's children at home with him.

We're at home with the Lord now as we are in Christ. We're also on a journey with the Lord to our ultimate home. And on that journey, God's goodness and mercy follow us every day of our lives. This assumes that there's movement. You can only follow someone who's on the move. Sometimes the sense of being followed may not be pleasant. Whether being followed is a good thing or not depends on who's doing the following (Bailey 60).

I remember a TV commercial that was on when I was a kid. It showed an elderly person walking down a dark street. They could hear footsteps coming up behind them. The person was getting nervous, wondering if they were about to get mugged or something. Then two Boy Scouts walked up alongside, gave a friendly greeting, and went on.

When Nancy was four years old, her family lived in Liberal, KS. She has a vivid memory of getting lost there one day. Her oldest brother was supposed to be holding her hand. He says she let go and ran off; she thinks he let her go. Either way, she was lost and scared and started running down the sidewalk. As her parents frantically looked for her, her other brother kept saying, "We're sure going to miss Nancy." As she ran, she saw that a car was following her, so she kept running. Finally, she stopped and the car pulled up. A woman and her children were in it. They took Nancy to the police station where she was reunited with her parents and brothers.

I've heard that sheep can "nibble" themselves lost. They put their heads down, start munching grass and walking along. When they finally look up, they don't know where they are.

Whether we're on a familiar path toward home or we're wandering around with no idea where we are, we're being followed. Enemies could pursue, but this psalm tells us that God's goodness and mercy are following us.

The word for follow here is a stronger word that means to pursue. We said earlier in this series that God not only leads us and goes before us, but God is also behind us. Instead of enemies pursuing us, God, in goodness and love, chases us. He goes after us down the paths of righteousness where he leads us. He pursues us through the dark valleys. Even when we go astray, he keeps after us. He intends to get us home.

Goodness and mercy are qualities of God's character, God's nature. Like it says earlier, God leads us "for his name's sake." Name is nature, character, reputation. God's always revealing himself, showing himself to be good. And the word translated mercy or love here is a word we've talked about before. It's the Hebrew word *hesed*. It can mean faithfulness or loyalty in a covenant. It can also mean grace that's freely offered to the underserving.

Michael Card wrote a book about this word, this idea of *hesed*. In *Inexpressible: Hesed and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness*, he lists dozens of ways to translate it and concepts that it conveys. His initial, incomplete working definition of *hesed* is this: "When the person from whom I have the right to expect nothing gives me everything" (p. 5).

Michael Card is also a songwriter and he recorded an album about *hesed*. In one of the songs he quotes what's almost the national motto of Israel in the Old Testament (2 Chronicles 7:3; Psalm 100:5):

For the Lord is good and his love is everlasting
Oh the Lord is good and his mercy never ending
("Come as You Are," from the album, *To the Kindness of God*;
https://www.lyricsfreak.com/m/michael+card/come+as+you+are_21652241.html)

This good and faithful and loving God pursues us “all the days of my life.” We have life with God every day. Not once in a while. Not just on special occasions. God is with us and we live in the Lord every day from now into eternity.

The psalm’s final line expresses that commitment and confidence. “I will dwell in the house of the LORD for length of days.” Originally this was a commitment to be in the temple, in God’s presence. Every day of our life God is with us, guiding us, providing for us, pursuing us. If we will, we can live all of life in God’s presence.

Can we turn our thoughts to God frequently throughout every day? Can we increase our awareness that God is with us every moment? With God’s help, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can. We have to want this, we have to decide to do it, and we have to try it.

At some time, the last word here got translated as “forever.” The Hebrew scholars say it’s literally, “length of days.” Does that mean all of our days or all of God’s days? Both translations are possible, so why not see both here? (Bailey 62). The relationship of knowing the Lord as shepherd doesn’t end with physical death. It carries us into eternity. So it’s right to use this psalm at funerals. These are words of trust in the face of the final enemy, death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

We hear an echo of the psalm in Jesus’ words on the night before his death when he told his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:1-2). In biblical times, a father’s house would have been a compound where an extended family lived in several tents or houses. That’s the picture behind what Jesus says. There’s plenty of room with the Father for all who will come, who will trust him to be their Shepherd and King.

Jim Buskirk is one of my ministry mentors. He told a story about his grandfather that I heard years ago. I was unclear on the details, so I emailed Jim’s son, Chris, and he told me the story.

Jim's grandfather, Emmerson Buskirk, was a Mississippi farmer with five sons: Clint, Roy, Bob, Vic, and Taylor. Bob Buskirk, Jim's father, wasn't the oldest but he tended to be the most responsible of the bunch. Emmerson was short but stout and working in the fields he'd outpace his boys about 2:1. He'd finish harvesting his rows of cotton first and head for the house in the late afternoon, but before he left the field he would call out to Bob saying, "I'm headed for the house. You know you can find me: by the picture window with my Bible and with the Lord. Before you leave the field make sure all your brothers are headed for home too!"

Many years later, Jim was with his father Bob when they went to visit Emmerson, the old patriarch, who was near death. They found him weak but still able to talk. They spoke of many things, but some of the last words Jim Buskirk remembers spoken by his grandfather were to his own dad, Bob. "Bob, I'll be going home soon. You made the preacher in the family. I'm counting on you. Go visit each of your brothers and make sure they are headed home too."

Bob did just that. And each of his brothers affirmed their faith in Jesus as their Savior—all but Vic. He was a bit of a rascal, but he had integrity and a streak of stubbornness. Eventually, Taylor and Vic were the last two alive. Taylor had become a strong Christian, and Vic was near the end of his life in a nursing home. Jim was visiting his Uncle Taylor in Tupelo and Taylor suggested they go visit old Uncle Vic.

They went. In Vic's room, Taylor asked his last remaining brother, "Vic, you know who we are?"

"Sure, Taylor, I know you and that's Bob's boy."

"Uncle Vic," Jim began, "you know we love you, and we don't want to be in heaven without you. Uncle Vic, Jesus loves you. He died to forgive your sins so you can forever be with him and Clint, and Roy, and Bob, and Papa...and everyone else that's received his gracious offer of eternal life. Uncle Vic, you reckon you want that for yourself?"

Uncle Vic teared up, then choked out, "Yeah, I do." Jim led him in a prayer of salvation and they all celebrated with hugs and happy tears shared on whiskered faces. As Jim and Uncle Taylor walked toward the nursing home exit, Taylor was so struck with what had just happened that

he crumpled into the wall and looked to heaven. Jim heard him say, "Papa, Vic's coming too. Vic's coming too!"

Chris concluded his email to me: "God bless you as you share it. Papa Emerson would be pleased with the continuing harvest!"

Let me pause here and ask, "Are you headed home?" Can we say about you, "She's coming too. He's coming too"? You can pray a prayer for salvation right now. The simplest is one Jesus included in one of his stories. A man prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Will you ask God to forgive you and give you new life? Will you receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior, put your trust in him, and commit to following him?

We find another echo, maybe the fulfillment, of the twenty-third psalm in Revelation. John reports this vision:

They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:15-17)

And so we will be at home with the Lord forever.

I've mentioned that this series was inspired partly by Dallas Willard's book *Life Without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23*. I want to conclude the series with Willard's conclusion.

He reminds us that we're created for life with God. He goes on with this encouragement:

As you practice living your days in the sufficiency of the Good Shepherd, you will make tremendous progress in experiencing the Psalm 23 life that Christ came to provide. You will see remarkable growth, and all the good things Jesus desires to give us—a rich life full of joy and power, abundant in supernatural results, with a constant, clear vision of your never-ending life in God's world and an

abiding sense of your work day by day—will become the common, yet extraordinary, realities in your life.

To that end, I pray for you in the words of Saint Paul:

That you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. (Colossians 1:9-12)

In other words, may you know increasingly, *by joyful experience*, a life abundant in rest, provision, and blessing—a life without lack. (213)