

THE SONG OF RENEWAL (The 23rd Psalm)

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I thought today I would somewhat stick with Rev. Maraj's Bible theme. For the last three weeks, he's been exploring Bible stories. I'm not going to explore a Bible story today but, instead, a Bible chapter that is probably the most well-known, often-quoted and beloved chapter in the Bible: The 23rd Psalm.

It's only six verses, but it packs a wallop of prosperity teachings; of strength teachings; of comfort teachings. Six verses, and that's all there is.

My Bible that I use is this one right here [holds up Bible], which was a gift to me when I became ordained. It's the Lamsa Bible; I don't know if you're familiar with the Lamsa Bible. But it is the direct Aramaic-to-English translation. Slightly different than the King James; really rich and beautiful. And this is a thick book, as you can see; it has 1,243 (words) in it. That's a lot of words!

I thought this morning before we go into the 23rd Psalm that I would give you an overview of this book. You got time for that? Just an overview? And then we'll specifically ... Well, guess what? My overview is going to take 50 words. You want to hear the Bible in 50 words? [Congregants: "Yeah!"] Okay! I'm glad you said yes, because I really do want to share this. Here it is:

God lit. Adam bit.

Noah paired. Abraham bared.

Joseph ruled. Jacob fooled.

Bush talked. Moses balked.

Pharaoh plagued. People fled.

Sea divided. Tablets guided.

Saul freaked. David peaked.

By the way, that's with an "a," not an "ee." As in peaked, not peeked!

Prophets warned. Jesus born.

Love walked. Truth talked.

Fear ruled. Anger fueled.

Jesus crucified.

Rose anew. Faith grew.

Spirit flamed. And God remained.

50 words right there! [Congregation applauds] All of this in 50 words! [Congregation laughs]

So I know that you all -- or most of you -- are familiar with the Bible, and probably many of us are familiar with the 23rd Psalm. But I want us to get us on the same page by reciting it right now, and then we're going to break it down verse by verse. There's only six of them, so I'm going to pack them in to our time together.

But here it is! If you know this, say it with me. And as you say it with me, say it with your heart. And start to realize -- and we're going to unpack these verses -- but just start to realize that there's some amazing spiritual teachings in these verses. So here we go:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;

He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth 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 Thou art with me.
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies
Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.*

[Sighs deeply] For those of you who are relatively young in the room, some of those words may seem have seemed a little old-fashioned, a little archaic. I want to put this prayer now -- really it's a prayer, a song: "The Song of Renewal," in fact. I want to put this song in words that perhaps you can understand. So here it is: the 23rd Psalm for today.

The Lord is my programmer, I shall not crash.

[Congregation laughs]

*He installed His software on the hard disk of my heart; all of His commands are user-friendly.
His directory guides me to the right selections for His name's sake.
Even though I scroll through a minefield of options, I will fear no bugs, for He is my back-up.
His password protects me.*

That's my favorite line! [Laughs]

*He prepares a menu before me in the presence of many hackers.
His help is only a keystroke away.
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life,
and my file will be merged with His and saved forever more.
Amen!*

[Congregation laughs, whoops and applauds]

So on that note ... Let's take a look at this really powerful, really inspirational "Song of Renewal," which is a guide to an inner life that creates outer experiences of joy and love and peace and prosperity.

So Verse #1:

***The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me to rest ...***

That's a slightly different word, because that actually is the Lamsa translation. The King James' says "lie down." But I like "rest."

He makes me to rest in green pastures.

These words are really all we need, aren't they? That's a prosperity teaching right there. How can I be in need? How can I be in want when I'm connected to the Source of all things? The answer is: I cannot! I may think I am, but I cannot.

I can rest and be at peace in knowing that the center of abundance is right here. And what better symbol of abundance than a green pasture? Since we're talking about a shepherd here taking his sheep to a green pasture. What is more of a symbol of abundance to a sheep than a green pasture? Nothing more than that!

I love the words of Unity minister and prolific writer Eric Butterworth. It's a little bit long, so don't fall asleep, okay? Because it's really juicy. I want to read the whole thing. He writes:

"The Lord is my shepherd ...' the Psalm begins. For you the harassed, the discouraged, the fearful, this opening sentence of the Shepherd's Song holds a precious message: the Lord is your source and your supply. Are you afraid of lack, afraid that you won't have enough to take care of your needs? Well then, follow this shepherd as he leads his sheep into place of plenty and you, too, shall not want.

In the Orient during a drought, the hillsides could become parched and dry. Many hungry sheep roamed the same pastures and nibbled close down to the roots for what little grass there was. The wise shepherd knew where, in these times of drought, the grass will still green. He would lead his charges past the hilltops to the valleys of green. Because of his wisdom, they never lacked.

The way may have been rough at times, but the sheep followed their good shepherd because they trusted him. Yes, the Lord of our being, the divine resource within, is a Lord of bounty, not of lack. It is His good pleasure to share that bounty with us. But we must trust him and follow him. His way may lead us away from familiar paths that have become barren to us. Though ahead may seem even more desolate than that which we leave behind, let us not doubt, for we are told, 'If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, then ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you.'

He brings us not only plenty, but relief from anxiety so that we may be at peace and rest in the blessings that are ours. Yes, 'He makes me rest in green pastures.' Our shepherd makes it possible for us to rest in the consciousness of abundance."

[Deep sigh] Eric Butterworth. Beautiful, powerful words. And I suspect we would all sit here and shake our head and go, "Yes! Yes! Yes! I believe that! I believe that!" But let me just ask this rhetorical question; don't want you to actually answer it. Don't want you to, you know, share your dirty laundry right here. I don't want that! But what I want to know is: Do you believe that when things are going well? When prosperity is flowing; when relationships are good; when my physical body is working like it should; when things are clicking and life is good? Do you believe it then? Yeah; we probably do! It's easy to believe it!

But how much do we believe it when things seem to go awry? When all of a sudden that big bill hits that you didn't expect? The job gets lost; the relationship falls apart; you lose a loved one; you get a diagnosis that's scary. Do we still believe it then? That's the question that I don't want you to answer, but I do want you to think about. That is when it matters that we believe it. That is when it matters!

I have a statement that I have used for years. I use it more often than I wish I needed to! But it's engrained in me; it's in me. So if ever I find myself getting into fear, lack, want -- anything like that, no matter what it's about -- my phrase is, and you're welcome to borrow this ... My phrase is -- and I say it with some enthusiasm and excitement and anticipation -- and it is, "*I can't wait! I can't wait to see how God works this out!*" [Congregation laughs] And the subtext of that is: "*I don't have a clue how this is going to work out. I have no idea! But I know that God knows.*"

And you know what? As I look back at my life, God has always, always -- and in all ways -- worked it out. "*I can't wait to see how God works this out.*"

Verse #2:

***He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.***

Or the old way:

He restoreth my soul.

These lines -- what a wonderful image that's universal in all religions. This image of the still water, the still pond. You know, when the water is still, it's like a mirror and it reflects the sky above. And the sky above is symbolic of infinite possibilities.

So when we are still; when our mind is still. When there is no ripple of anxiety and worry and upset and oh, fear, and all that stuff going on. When our minds are still, that is the best time where we can know God. When we can know the truth of these words of this Psalm. That we can be restored.

The Bible says, "*Be still and know that I am God.*" Be still and know that I am God ...

I just returned from Chicago -- just got back Friday night. And I was there for the Parliament of the World's Religions. It was an amazing experience. A little overwhelming. Eighty countries represented, 60 religions. Or it was the other way around. But anyway, a lot of people. Gigantic space; lots going on.

One of the events that I went to was a documentary of the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. A powerful documentary! You can see it on YouTube, and it is called "A Cloud Never Dies." It's beautiful; it's worth watching. "A Cloud Never Dies." I probably should have known this, but honestly I didn't remember that he is the reason the mindfulness movement started in America. He brought that; he reinvigorated Buddhism and brought the practice of mindfulness to the West. He is the reason that mindfulness is a word that we use here. And mindfulness is, of course, the stilling of the mind.

So I want to give you a thought to ponder:

If only we could be still and get our "bloated nothingness out of the way of the Divine Circuits," which is a direct quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson, by the way ... right? [Laughs] I love that! "Get your bloated nothingness out of the way of the Divine Circuits"! If only we could do that, we would be restored. That's the message of this second verse.

Third Verse:

He leads me to the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

I think the word "righteousness" gets a bad rap. You know, we think it's like, oh, you're "holier than thou," or you're thinking you're better than me. That's not what righteousness actually means, and certainly is not what it means here.

In the dictionary -- Webster's Dictionary -- the first line of the definition of the word "righteousness" is: Acting in accordance with divine or moral law. Righteousness: Acting in accordance with -- now I'm going to use it for our purposes -- divine law.

So what does it mean to act in accordance to divine law? Well, Divine Law says that what you plant in it, you reap. Jesus said that: "*As ye sow, so shall ye reap.*" Living in accordance with that Divine Law -- living righteously -- is to plant seeds of love, of peace, of prosperity, of joy, of harmony: things that are of the nature of God. And when the verse says, "*He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake,*" name means nature. For His name's sake: In God's nature. So we use Divine Law righteously when we plant seeds of love and abundance and power and peace.

What a great message -- what a great roadmap for living -- that tiny verse has for us!

Number #4:

This one is so powerful for me! And I used it in a time of deep need, which I'll tell you about in a moment!

***Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.***

Hmmm. What are our enemies? Hmmm. Here's a clue. Not people out there. Our enemies live right here [points to her head]. Our enemies are those thoughts that put us down. Our thoughts that say, "*I'm not good enough; I'm not worthy.*" The thoughts that say, "*Oh, I shouldn't ... don't be too big.*" Our thoughts that say, "*This is never going to work out.*" Our thoughts of lack. Those are our enemies. And maybe we might even say that these conditions "out here" that I'm liking; we might consider that an enemy.

But in the presence of my enemies, God is with me.

So I don't walk around quoting the Bible. I just don't do that. And I just don't often ... I use affirmations all the time, but I don't often use Bible verses when I need an affirmation. But I walked on fire. Many, many, many, many years ago, I went to a workshop by Edwene Gaines. Some of you know this wonderful prosperity teacher! And she had a center in Minton, Alabama. And I went there for a workshop/retreat, and the culmination of that was a fire walk, which I knew I wanted to do; I knew I was called to do; and I was utterly knees-knocking terrified to do it. Terrified!

So we did all this mental/spiritual preparation for it. We took our shoes off and we had to walk from the meeting room down a grassy knoll [laughs]. Down a little hill, down to the runway of hot coals. I am so scared; I knew I was to do this. I knew I had to do it. That doesn't sometimes ... A little side note here. Even though you are called to something and you have no doubt that you are called to it, you still may be terrified. Just so you know! That doesn't mean you won't be terrified. It does mean: Don't stop. Use this verse!

Because as I was walking down this hill, I started saying out loud, "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me! Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me!*" [Laughs] And I said it, like, five times as I'm walking down this hill. And it did give me the strength to walk on fire ... which I did successfully! My feet are fine; they would not be in these shoes today if I did not have a successful walk on fire. [Congregation laughs]

Beautiful verse. Powerful verse! That God is our security. God is our support. God is our strength. And God is our comfort.

Number #5:

***Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.***

I already talked about enemies. I think I talked about them a little too soon! This is where I should have talked about them. But I already said it, so you heard it. Good!

There's a table of plenty in front of us. A friend of mine once said, "*Life's a banquet; why do we settle for the salad bar?*" [Congregation laughs] I really don't get that. Really!

One of the greatest demonstrations that I saw of this -- "*there's a table before me,*" this banquet before me -- was at the Parliament. Not only was there a banquet of food before us, but a banquet of sacred service and sacred experience.

The Sikh community, which many of you probably know what the Sikhs are. It's a beautiful offshoot of Hinduism. Their whole thing in life is to serve. They serve. And they feed people. So there are 3,000 to 5,000 people at this Parliament. That's a couple of three people! Every single day there was a tent outside, and anyone -- anyone! -- who wanted to eat lunch, they served it for three hours, could come in and eat. For free! For free! You walked in; you took your shoes off. They put a little head scarf on you ... Very attractive, by the way ... You washed your hands, and then they led you through, thanking you for being there. When I would say to them, "*Thank you so much for this!*" they said, "*No; no; no! Thank you for letting us serve you.*"

We sat on the floor. Had our little plates. And they came with buckets of food: rice, Nan, yogurt, tofu curry. Unbelievably delicious, by the way, food! And the second your plate was semi-empty, they were back: "Would you like more? Would you like more? Would you like more? Would you like more? Would you like more?" It was an unending bucket of food! A bounty before us! A bounty of sacred service. A bounty of worshipping and honoring God through that sacred service. It was an amazing experience. Our cups were definitely running over with abundance as we had that beautiful experience. And we felt anointed by that whole, whole opportunity.

The last verse. Finally, the last verse:

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

There really isn't a lot of explanation needed for that one. But I want to read a passage -- a comment -- on this from Arthur Chang, a beautiful spiritual leader. He wrote:

"There is no question about it. Goodness is Life's flowing river ... [It is] wherever we are, because it is not based upon our having to earn it, but on the nature of the Universe itself. That is why it says 'goodness and mercy,' not 'goodness and justice.'"

I love that! I love that! And, of course, the very last line is a beautiful promise of eternal life:

I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

We are infinite beings. Infinite beings! Never, ever, ever separated from the God of our being. So surely, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

Life wants you to win. Life wants you to be abundant. Life wants you to be at peace and to be secure in the midst of anything that might be happening in your world. That's what this "Song of Renewal" is all about. It gives us a road map, but it's an internal road map. It's an internal road map; the journey is inside.

But the funny thing is that, when we take the journey inside, the outside ... Hmmm ... just seems to always work out. Even if we took a snapshot, it feels like it isn't. As it unfolds, it always does. Because God always has our back. And that's what this "Song of Renewal" promises us.

So I want us to one more time go over those verse. We're going to go over them. I'm going to read it again, and then I'm going to offer you some affirmative words that I invite you to say to yourself after me. Alright? So if you feel comfortable, close your eyes. [Deep breath] Take a breath.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to rest in green pastures.

My needs -- all my material, emotional, mental and spiritual needs -- are ever met as I turn to the Shepherd within. Today, I rest and am at peace in the center of abundance ... in the assurance of the abundant goodness that surrounds me. In this I trust.

He leads me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul.

In this moment, I move into the still waters of pure awareness. In this moment of mindfulness, I am aware of my true nature and of my Infinite Source. In this still moment, my soul is restore.

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

I plant the seeds of peace, love, joy and vitality in my heart and in my mind. I live from the nature of my true being ... the nature of goodness and love.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.

Wherever the challenge, wherever the pain, wherever the fear might be in this moment, so is the presence of God, and I am comforted in and strengthened by God's power and God's might.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

God is the Source of my bountiful supply; no one and no-thing can interfere with it. I am full and overflowing.

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

I am confident that my life is unfolding in good, and it is my divine right to live in peace and joy and love and prosperity now and forever more. As an eternal being, now and forever I am one with the God of my being. Now and forever, I am one with the God of my being. And so it is and so we let it be. Amen.

And that, my friends, is the "Song of Renewal." Namaste.

[Congregants applaud]

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