

## The Two Sheep Dogs that Always Pursue Me (Psalm 23:6)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on July 18, 2010

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John W. Peterson was thinking back to his days in WWII when he often gave thanks for the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep when he co-wrote the hymn “Surely Goodness and Mercy,” a song emphasizing God’s goodness and mercy, as well as God’s guidance through cold nights and lonesome valleys.<sup>1</sup> He wrote: “One day while improvising at the piano in my ... studio, Albert B. Smith, with whom I was associated at the time, walked in. For no particular reason that I can remember, we started to develop a new song. I would come up with a thought, then Al. In a short time “Surely Goodness and Mercy” was born. I had never worked with another writer in such a manner to compose a song ... Alfred B. Smith remembers more about the initial inspiration for the song. He adds ... “It was written after receiving a letter from one of the descendants of [Philip] Bliss telling of Bliss’s first, country school teacher, named Miss Murphy, whom he dearly loved. It told of her teaching the class (before they could read or write) to memorize the 23rd Psalm. When the part “surely goodness and mercy” was reached, little Philip thought it said “surely good Miss Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life.” This little incident focused our thoughts on the phrase which became the heart and title of the song.”<sup>2</sup>

There is something very sweet about children struggling to learn the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm ... there’s also something precious and profound about the fact that we adults can never stop learning the truths of Psalm 23 in greater depth. I hope this series has blessed you half as much as it has me. Many believers can testify how this first passage they memorized in the earliest years of life has ministered to them in their final days of life. I’ve been by numerous bedsides with elderly saints, some with memory loss, still reciting Psalm 23.

So let’s approach our text this last time with the simple faith of a child, with the full trust of a child, with the dependence of a child, from youngest to oldest among us, from earliest days to final days. This psalm is not only a psalm for funerals, as we’ve seen. It’s all about living, and not just any particular part of life, but as its last verse says, it covers “*all the days of my life*” and yours. This is our 10<sup>th</sup> and final message going verse-by-verse and phrase-by-phrase through this psalm - I wish we keep studying this in the house of the Lord forever, but there are other parts of God’s Word we can’t neglect. I pray these truths will follow us all the days of our life.

Joel Beeke writes: ‘Ps 23 can and has meant many things to God’s little flock. For some the Lord has caused Ps 23 to serve as their *pilgrim song* on their journey through the valley...below; it has been a song of courage to many of God’s inwardly oppressed pilgrims. In the hands of the Holy Spirit it has been a balm to some spiritually sick ... a consolation to others sitting spiritually captive in the dungeon of misery, and a tonic for soldiers dying on the battlefield ... It has broken the chains of numerous spiritual prisoners ...to the *reawakening* of love, *re-enlivening* of hope, and the *re-strengthening* of faith ...for God’s people it is a *creed of victory*. Every phrase, every word expounds richly that God *is* and *does* all that is required by man. Sovereign grace rings through every syllable, testifying of received truth, possessed experiences ... Ps 23 becomes more than a spiritual oasis in the desert, more than a refuge on which all the storms of life break into nothingness, even more than a rock of safety and blessedness ... not only a *soul-captivating* psalm, but a *soul-conquering* one ...

May you fall to God's side, lose your own name, be grounded on Christ as the only firm foundation, grow in the grace and knowledge of Him as the Great Shepherd of your soul, and experience foretastes of heaven on earth, enabling you to exclaim, "*The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.*" May the unconverted be given a saving impression of what they are missing on their journey ... while still attempting to shepherd themselves. May an unquenchable flame of yearning be aroused in their souls to become a subject of Jehovah's shepherded flock. May the Lord grant us [all] the light of His Spirit to lay out the great truths of this psalm ... with a deep impression that we are standing upon sacred ground at His mercy. May the exposition of this psalm serve to the welfare of the entire congregation, but above all, to the honor and glory of the Most High God.'<sup>3</sup>

To appreciate what v. 6 is saying in the flow of the whole psalm, biblical counselor David Powlison gives the opposite of Psalm 23 (he calls it the "antipsalm"), not the words we've memorized, but words in his experience many believe and live by instead of Ps 23:

**v. 1:** I'm on my own. No one looks out for me or protects me.

I experience a continual sense of need. Nothing's quite right.

**v. 2:** I'm always restless. I'm easily frustrated and often disappointed ... I feel overwhelmed. It's a desert — I'm thirsty.

**v. 3:** My soul feels broken, twisted, and stuck. I can't fix myself. I stumble down some dark paths.

Still, I insist: I want to do what I want, when I want, how I want.

But life's confusing. Why don't things ever really work out?

**v. 4:** I'm haunted by emptiness and futility — shadows of death.

I fear the big hurt and final loss. Death is waiting for me ... but I'd rather not think about that. I spend my life protecting myself. Bad things can happen. I find no lasting comfort.

I'm alone ... facing everything that could hurt me.

**v. 5** Are my friends really friends? [or enemies at my table?]

Other people use me for their own ends. I can't *really* trust anyone. No one has my back. No one is *really* for me — except me. And I'm so much all about ME, sometimes it's sickening. I belong to no one except myself.

My cup is never quite full enough. I'm left empty.

**v. 6:** Disappointment follows me all the days of my life.

... Will I be alone forever ...?

The antipsalm tells what life feels like and looks like whenever God vanishes from sight ... The "I'm-all-alone-in-the-universe" experience ... captures the driven-ness and pointlessness of life-purposes that are petty and self-defeating. It expresses the fears and silent despair that cannot find a voice because there's no one to really talk to ... Something bad gets last say when whatever you live for is not God ... But the antipsalm doesn't need to tell the final story. It only becomes your reality when you construct your reality from a lie. In reality, someone else *is* the center of the story [a glorious gracious Shepherd-King no one] can make...go away

... When you awaken, when you see who Jesus actually is, everything changes. You see the Person whose care and ability you can trust. You experience His care. You see the Person whose glory you are meant to worship. You love Him who loves you. The real Psalm 23 captures what life feels like and looks like when [our Shepherd-King] Jesus Christ puts his hand on your shoulder.

<sup>1</sup> *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.* <sup>2</sup> *He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.* <sup>3</sup> *He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.* <sup>4</sup> *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* <sup>5</sup> *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.* <sup>6</sup> *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.*

Can you taste the difference? ... The psalm is sweet, not bitter. It's full, not empty. Someone else takes you in His hands. You are not alone. Jesus Christ ... walked this Himself ... He said these very words, and means what He says. He entered our predicament. He walked the valley of the shadow of death. He faced every evil. He felt the threat of the antipsalm, of our soul's need to be restored. He looked to his Father's care when He was cast down — for us — into the darkest shadow of death. And God's goodness and mercy followed Him and carried Him. ... You, too, can walk Psalm 23. You can say these words and mean what you say. God's goodness and mercy is true, and all He promises will come true. The King is at home in His universe.<sup>4</sup> [and in v. 5-6 we're at home with Him]

He gives grace (as we saw last week) to those who see themselves:

- as hopeless and helpless spiritually as Mephibosheth was physically, as equally incapable and unable to do anything
- or as unworthy as the Canaanite woman to be at the table of the Lord but just humbly hoping the Master would give a few crumbs of leftovers to us like begging dogs on the floor even though we don't deserve even that, we beg Him for it
- like another woman who humbly was at the feet of Jesus as He had a table prepared before Him in the presence of His Pharisee enemies who were self-righteous and elevated in their own eyes, but this woman comes and makes herself as low as possible, and cannot raise herself above the feet of Jesus, but weeps over her sin, and humbly washes the feet of Jesus with her tears, and kisses them in her love for Jesus, anointing His feet with fragrant oil as she felt too low to anoint His head – *her* sins were forgiven by Jesus
- And this King Jesus said in the first line of His first sermon in the first gospel, "*Blessed are the poor in Spirit* [i.e., who see themselves as spiritually bankrupt / spiritual beggars], *for theirs* [= and theirs alone] *is the Kingdom of heaven.*"

If you don't understand or have that mindset or perspective, if you have not ever come that way to Jesus, heaven is not yours, according to the One who is the Door, the way, the truth, the life, and the only way to the Father. You're not in the Kingdom if Jesus is not your King, if you have not bowed in faith to Him. If He is not Lord (as Psalm 23:1), He is not yet your Shepherd (23:1-6). If you don't see yourself as a sheep (dumb, dependent, defenseless, direction-less, disobediently wandering if left to yourself) then the spiritual blessings in Psalm 23 aren't yours yet, in the days of this life (v. 6a) or in the house of the Lord forever, in eternity (v. 6b).

So before we conclude, my plea to any unsaved is: be saved today from your self-righteousness and self-sufficiency and self-reliance, trusting in your own "being a pretty good person" or something you did or prayed long ago but you're really still the master and captain of your soul, your own shepherd and lord and king, and you don't trust or love or follow King Jesus.

If you have never truly come to the end of yourself, the emptiness of self, and come before the never-ending grace of an all-sufficient Savior who has all riches, all resources, all righteousness to meet all of your lack, friend, beg Him for grace today! I plead with you with all my heart: plead with Christ with all your heart for mercy.

And by God's grace, you'll never lack again your spiritual needs:

- You can say: *I shall not lack God's resources* (Ps 23:1b)
- *I shall not lack God's rest* (v. 2a)
- *I shall not lack God's refreshment* (v. 2b)
- *I shall not lack God's restoration* (v. 3a)
- *I shall not lack God's righteousness* (v. 3b)
- *I shall not lack God's rod and staff to comfort* (v. 4)
- *I shall not lack God's replenishment* (v. 5)
- *I shall not lack God's relentless goodness and mercy* (v. 6)

God's goodness and mercy relentlessly follow me. The Heb. word "follow" in v. 6 is actually almost always translated "pursue." It's not "following" in the sense of just passively casually trotting or tagging along behind somewhere to try and keep up, off in the distance, keeping an eye on. David is saying that God's goodness and mercy *actively pursue* me. The word is often used of soldiers or armies pursuing with all of the forces at their disposal. The word is also translated *chase* or *hunt*, like an animal chasing down another with all of its energy and exertion, like you see on TV.

But this is no earthly animal or human army that can fail in its pursuit, this is God's goodness and mercy that pursue His sheep all the days of their lives and will never fail. Even when the sheep fail or wander off, the infallible Shepherd and His attributes will seek and save the lost and carry them back on His shoulders. His grace will chase us, His power will pursue us, heaven's hounds will hunt us down like two hunting dogs, or better, like two sheep dogs. A Scottish preacher once said: "The Lord, aye, he has two fine collie dogs, goodness and mercy. They will see us safely home."

Job 30:1 gives insight that shepherds had used dogs for sheep at least 1,000 years before the time of David. I'm told that Western countries tend to have the shepherd driving the sheep from the rear with the help of dogs, whereas in Eastern countries they continue to shepherd as in Bible times, where the shepherd leads the sheep from the front. They hear His voice and follow Him as He leads, which is the language of both OT and NT. And as the shepherd looked ahead with the sheep behind him, some might use a couple sheep dogs on both edges of the herd behind him to help keep any wanderers in line, nipping their heels so they return to the flock.

One preacher who travelled around Bible lands said to this day you can see some shepherds who will use two dogs who will faithfully form a V-shape to keep the herd together as the shepherd leads from the front, which their tour guide explained. Once they saw a man driving sheep from behind rather than the front, and they asked their tour guide why. His answer was "him, he's just a hired hand, not a shepherd." A similar story a missionary told in Africa was to the effect that the man driving the sheep hurriedly from behind was leading them off to be slaughtered, not shepherded. But for the shepherd, his dogs follow to keep the sheep safe.

Dr. Jim Rosscup, a former beloved professor of mine, in his work on “Biblical Manners and Customs” writes how the sheep-dogs in Bible lands followed ‘alongside the flock on a trek to grazing, and [would] be with them at the pasture area or in the sheepfold enclosure. “Goodness and covenant loving kindness” [or *mercy*] are with the sheep, for God is present displaying these generousities ... In the spiritual analogy, God is the guide who leads His people (Ps. 73:24) and goes before them (Jn. 10:1-4). He also, in Scripture’s representation, is their rearward, is beneath them (Deut. 34), above them, beside them (Ps. 16; Acts 2), and within them.’<sup>5</sup>

God is even more than a mere human shepherd can be, and no human analogy can fully convey it, but they help us grasp a little.

If I updated the analogy to the city, goodness and mercy are like 2 CHP cars behind me with K-9 units ready if needed. They follow to protect me as an escort to make sure I get to my destination. But if I try and run, they will chase me down. There actually should be a safety and confidence in knowing the cop cars behind are there as an escort to bring safely home, officer Goodness and officer Mercy

Charles Spurgeon said it this way: “Just as when great princes go abroad they must not go unattended, so it is with the believer. Goodness and mercy follow him always.”<sup>6</sup> In another book he compared them to ‘two guards, [who] have followed us from day to day, bringing up the rear even as grace leads the van [think of a King’s caravan or a military escort or a presidential motorcade].’<sup>7</sup>

You could think of goodness and mercy as special service agents who are always present, always protecting the president or VIP.

F. B. Meyer: ‘there never will come a day throughout all the future in which we shall not have the two guardian angels [Ps 35:6 uses same Heb. word: “the angel of the Lord *pursue* him”], heavenly escorts, and God-sent messengers, Goodness and Mercy, who have been told ... and commissioned to attend the believer during all the days of his earthly pilgrimage ... But here is something better than angel help: the personified attributes of God, His goodness, His mercy; that is, Himself, in all the tenderest manifestations of His love and pity towards men.’<sup>8</sup> Others call v. 6 God’s “twin graces.”

Whatever analogy you use (I like the sheep-dogs which fit with Ps 23), the relentless pursuit of them both, goodness and mercy, gives confidence and security to the Lord’s sheep. Notice the assurance:

- David says they “*will follow*” – not “can” or “might.”
- He begins v. 6 with “*surely*” – not “maybe” or “hopefully.”
- He says “*all of my days*” not only “on my *good days*.”
- That’s because the goodness in v. 6 is God’s, not David’s.
- David doesn’t say “*they follow if I do \_\_\_\_\_*” and that’s a very good thing because I’m known to be prone to wander by nature. If the writer of Psalm 119 felt it at the end of writing that passionate psalm of his love for God’s Word, then who am I to think I would or could keep myself safe if it was up to my goodness, not God’s?

Ps 119:176 *I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant*

Psalm 119 prays to God: *seek me, pursue me*. Ps 23 says *God does and He will*.

David lives by faith in future grace, future goodness and mercy.

‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far and **grace will lead me home**

Psalm 23:6 tells us how grace will lead you and me home as well:

1. The Lord’s Goodness
2. The Lord’s Mercy
3. The Lord’s House

### 1. The Lord’s Goodness

The first means of grace that God uses to bring us home is His own goodness. And the first thing to realize is: you don’t have any real goodness of your own, only badness. You’re not good. You don’t have any goodness, and you can’t and don’t do anything good by God’s definition. Look back a few pages at Psalm 14. And as you turn there you might be thinking, “But hey, I’m a good person.” But hey, Jesus says in Mark 10 “*No one is good but God alone.*”

Psalm 14:2 *The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there are any who understand, Who seek after God. <sup>3</sup>They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; **There is no one who does good, not even one.***

You say that doesn’t sound too hopeful? It’s not. But look at Ps 27 where David writes why he doesn’t lose all hope: <sup>13</sup>*I would have lost heart, **unless I had believed That I would see the goodness of the LORD In the land of the living*** [faith in future grace/goodness]

Look at Psalm 25:7 for how a man who is not good should pray: *Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; According to Your mercy remember me, For Your goodness’ sake*

It wasn’t based on David’s goodness, even though he was the man most after God’s own heart. His hope was *not* in his own perfect goodness (which he didn’t have) but in God’s pursuing goodness. Now we do need to do good (Ps 34:14 commands “*do good*”) but man’s good works and goodness do not save or sanctify or make us more like Christ. It’s Christ who is our salvation, sanctification, and it’s Christ in us and through us that produces good works. It doesn’t cancel out our *responsibility* to do good, but it clarifies the source of our *ability* to do good as from Him, through Him, to Him

Ps 16:2 *O my soul, you have said to the LORD, “You are my Lord, **My goodness is nothing apart from You.**”* (NKJV, NASB “*I have no good besides You*” or ESV “*I have no good apart from You*”)

So there is God-produced goodness possible for a believer, but there is nothing inherently good in me, nothing intrinsically good, internally good in my fallen humanity. It’s God’s goodness and mercy that enables me to do good things, but all goodness and righteousness I have is not from me, it’s from outside of me. Paul in Romans quotes from the psalms to demonstrate man has always since creation been this way and has always needed a salvation and goodness outside himself, a foreign righteousness, alien to us sons of Adam until the last Adam, Jesus Christ, has mercy on us and makes us sons of God, new creations in Christ with all-new nature.

A real righteousness then is given at justification, not based on my life but the life of Christ, it's then imputed to me as a gift by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and it's a work of God alone and for His glory alone. Plus nothing, minus nothing. Period!

How do I stay saved? It's never based on my goodness; it's always based on the Good Shepherd and His goodness. The confident faith of Psalm 23:6 is only possible when I come to realize there's no goodness *from me*, I need *God's goodness following me* or I'm lost.

David says goodness pursues all of his days, and Paul in Rom. 8:28 says this includes all things that God causes to work together for good for God's children. Good by God's definition includes trials: Ps 119:71 *It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.* [affliction is God's sheepdog to drive us back]

## 2. The Lord's mercy

You won't have assurance and confidence like David had in Ps 23:6 if it is ultimately up to your goodness or your merit or your life, it has to be the Lord's goodness *and the Lord's mercy* all the days of your life.

Ps 23:6 has same Heb. word "mercy" as the Mephibosheth story, a rich word translated *lovingkindness* or *steadfast love* or *loyal love*, a love that is based on a covenant commitment, not based on the one you're showing love to. It was covenant love to the father of Mephibosheth that motivated the mercy David gave him, it wasn't based on the worthiness or works of the recipient of mercy. That may be the ultimate picture of human mercy, covenant love in the OT (or near the top of the list) but ultimately that pictures the ultimate mercy from the ultimate Merciful God who produces it. When we come to the gospels, the greater Son of David Jesus is the ultimate reflection of this mercy David showed, and it seems that true faith in the Messiah often reflects this in some expression:

- Matthew 9:27 *As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"*
- Mt 15:22 *And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out ... "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David"*
- In Mt 20:30 more *"blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"* <sup>31</sup>*The crowd sternly told them to be quiet, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"*
- In Mk 10:47, Bartimaeus hears Jesus the Nazarene is coming by and *"... he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* <sup>48</sup>*Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"*

David knew of the Lord's mercy and spoke much of His mercy. In the NKJV, goodness and mercy often join together as twin graces:

25:7 *Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; According to Your mercy remember me, For Your goodness' sake* [parallel to God's name sake in 23:3] ... <sup>11</sup> *For Your name's sake, O LORD, Pardon my iniquity* ... [not according to me, but mercy]

Mercy and goodness is rooted in the very name and character of God, and this is rooted in how God first revealed Himself to Israel. In Exodus 33:19 when Moses boldly asks God to show His glory: <sup>19</sup>*And he said, I will make **all my goodness** pass before thee, and I will proclaim **the name of the LORD** before thee [character and very essence]...I will ...shew **mercy** on whom I will shew **mercy** ...*

**34:5** *And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and **proclaimed the name of the LORD**. <sup>6</sup>And the LORD passed by before him, and **proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, <sup>7</sup>Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ...**” (KJV)*

In Psalm 31:16, David prays in light of this truth: *Make Your face shine upon Your servant; Save me **for Your mercies’ sake**.*

Psalm 44:26 *Arise for our help, And redeem us **for Your mercies’ sake**.*

And because it’s not based on me ultimately, but is based on God’s mercy and goodness, I can have great confidence like David in Ps 23:6 that mercy and good will pursue me all the days of my life. In combining the two terms *good and mercy* there is double assurance

Psalm 69:16 *Hear me, O LORD, for Your lovingkindness is **good**; Turn to me **according to the multitude of Your tender mercies**.*

Psalm 109:21 *But You, O GOD the Lord, **Deal with me for Your name’s sake; Because Your mercy is good**, deliver me.*

God’s good character and merciful nature is not just true “all the days of my life” as Ps 23:6 says, but also extending into forever

Psalm 100:5 *For the LORD is **good**; **His mercy is everlasting** ...*

Psalm 106:1 <sup>1</sup>*Praise the LORD! Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for **He is good! For His mercy endures forever**.*

Psalm 107:1 <sup>1</sup>*Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for **He is good! For His mercy endures forever**.*

Psalm 118:1 <sup>1</sup>*Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for **He is good! For His mercy endures forever**. ... <sup>29</sup>Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for **He is good! For His mercy endures forever**.*

Psalm 136

<sup>1</sup>*Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for **He is good! For His mercy endures forever**.*

<sup>2</sup>*Oh, give thanks to the God of gods! For His mercy endures forever.*

<sup>3</sup>*Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords! For His mercy endures forever:*

<sup>4</sup>*To Him who alone does great wonders, For His mercy endures forever;*

<sup>5</sup>*To Him who by wisdom made the heavens, For His mercy endures forever;*

<sup>6</sup>*To Him who laid out the earth above the waters, For His mercy endures forever*

<sup>7</sup>*To Him who made great lights, For His mercy endures forever—*



<sup>8</sup>*The sun to rule by day, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>9</sup>*The moon and stars to rule by night, For His mercy endures forever.*  
<sup>10</sup>*To Him who struck Egypt in their firstborn, For His mercy endures forever;* <sup>11</sup>*And brought out Israel from among them, For His mercy endures forever;* <sup>12</sup>*With a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>13</sup>*To Him who divided the Red Sea in two, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>14</sup>*And made Israel pass through the midst of it ... His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>15</sup>*But overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, For His mercy endures forever*  
<sup>16</sup>*To Him who led His people through the wilderness, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>17</sup>*To Him who struck down great kings, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>18</sup>*And slew famous kings, For His mercy endures forever—*  
<sup>19</sup>*Sihon king of the Amorites, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>20</sup>*And Og king of Bashan, For His mercy endures forever—*  
<sup>21</sup>*And gave their land as a heritage, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>22</sup>*A heritage to Israel His servant, For His mercy endures forever.*  
<sup>23</sup>*Who remembered us in our lowly state, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>24</sup>*And rescued us from our enemies, For His mercy endures forever;*  
<sup>25</sup>*Who gives food to all flesh, For His mercy endures forever.*  
<sup>26</sup>*Oh, give thanks to the God of heaven! For His mercy endures forever.*

### 3. The Lord's House

The “forever” language of God’s mercy and “goodness” (136:1) is echoed by David at the end of Psalm 23:6 to the end of his days:

*Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

‘the “*house of the LORD*” is God’s tabernacle. Later it became the temple built in Jerusalem by Solomon ... “*Forever,*” literally “to length of days,” means through all the days. For the Hebrews, eternity is not a timeless state, but endless days.’<sup>9</sup> The phrase does ‘not suggest (or deny) immortality, but [rather emphasizes] that the welcome and feasting will not be withdrawn while life lasts.’<sup>10</sup>

‘For the rest of his life (lit., “length of days”) he would enjoy full communion with the Lord. In fact the Hebrew verb translated “I will dwell” conveys the idea of returning; the same verb is translated “He restores” in 23:3. Perhaps the psalmist was in some way separated from the sanctuary and full enjoyment of its spiritual benefits ... communion with the Lord in His presence.’<sup>11</sup>

*Bible Background Commentary:* ‘The house of the Lord is used as a term for the temple but never [in the OT] for the heavenly dwelling place of God (very clear in 27:4) ... [he says the Hebrew text means he will] find here the anticipation of enjoying many future opportunities to worship at the temple (“time and again”).’<sup>12</sup>

This is the one thing David asked of the Lord in Ps 27:4, *that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold ...*

Being in God's house around God's people is a means of grace. The worship of God in this life sustains us till the next. If we don't have this longing to be in God's house now and continually, we're missing one of the longings that helped believers in past centuries.

I suspect David knew more about the afterlife than many writers give him credit for, but however developed the OT theology of heaven was, we who have the NT fully see how Christ's goodness and mercy in the gospel gets us to the house of the Lord forever. As we look back at v. 4 of Ps 23, our NT glasses can't help but see the King who left His house and throne above to go through this valley of death for His sheep, to bring them to Himself.

Joel Beeke sums it up well: 'Christ has traveled before His flock ... every step of the narrow way from Bethlehem to Golgotha ... He has journeyed the way and endured the cross before you. There is no sorrow of soul ... there is no trouble of soul, or turmoil of heart, free from sin, with which your Shepherd is unacquainted ... child of God, behold your royal High Priest in death's gloomy valley. There He is, thorn-crowned, blood-soaked, spit-bedraggled, soul-pierced, rigidly nailed to Golgotha's accursed tree, above all, forsaken by His own Father ... Christ journeyed ... in this God-decreed narrow ravine to unsting death for His people, and cast it into the flames of His sacrifice. Truly, He trod the ... valley alone, subjecting himself to far more shadows than can ever fall upon His people. Such sore encounters with death valleys make Him eminently sympathetic and fit to handle His valley-journeying sheep. Can you not see, tossed with tempest souls, that the Great Shepherd does not ask you to tread any path which has not already been trodden by Himself? Seek then the grace of faith to believe that He has conquered all shadows on your behalf ... He continues to apply His protective and saving merits to me, though I remain helpless to appropriate to myself the smallest of His benefits. The nails, the blood, the slappings and scourgings, yes, all the thirty-three years of His traveling before me—all this He suffered because of me, endured for me, and applies within me, out of pure grace. Eternally incomprehensible love: Christ willingly forsaken of God, that I might never be forsaken of Him; Christ willingly left Himself unprotected to protect me! ... what an unspeakable table lies in Jesus Christ for sin-sick souls! ... He is the treasury of grace's all-sufficiency; of Him all true sheep receive grace for grace. Christ is an incomparable feast! In Christ God's people find everything for time and eternity. In Christ they find:

- a salvation that can never be thwarted
- a righteousness that can never be tarnished
- a title that can never be clouded
- a judgment that can never be repeated
- a justification that can never be reversed
- a position that can never be invalidated
- a seal that can never be violated
- an inheritance that can never be annulled
- a wealth that can never be depleted
- a bank that can never be closed
- a possession that can never be measured
- a portion that can never be destroyed
- a peace that can never be fathomed
- a love that can never be abated
- a grace that can never be arrested

- a strength that can never be exhausted
- a forgiveness that can never be rescinded
- an access that can never be discontinued
- a comfort that can never be scrapped
- an Intercessor who can never be disqualified
- a Victor who can never be vanquished
- a resurrection that can never be hindered
- a hope that can never be disappointed
- a glory that can never be dimmed!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Petersen, Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns: Inspiring Stories about 600 Hymns and Praise Songs*, p. 407.

<sup>2</sup> Osbeck, K. W. (1985). *101 more hymn stories*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, p. 253.

<sup>3</sup> Joel Beeke, *Jehovah Shepherding His Sheep*, p. 2-4.

<sup>4</sup> David Powlison, "Sane Faith, Part 1," *Boundless Webzine* article published on Boundless.org on August 26, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> James Rosscup, TMS "Manners and Customs" Syllabus. Unpublished.

<sup>6</sup> *Treasury of David*, 23.6.

<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon, *Faith's Checkbook*, Feb. 29

<sup>8</sup> Meyer, *The Shepherd Psalm*.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, D., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1986). *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 13 : Psalms 1-72*. . Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc, p. 196.

<sup>10</sup> Elwell, W. A. *Evangelical commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House (1989).

<sup>11</sup> *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (1:812). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>12</sup> Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary : Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>13</sup> Beeke, 230-31, 303.