



R CROSSING

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Much Need? Much Fear? Much Doubt?

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**Welcome to a beneficial routine
for your spiritual health and growth.**

Much as my general physician recommends an annual physical and your financial advisor requests a yearly review, I propose a spiritual discipline for personal adjustment and life alignment: choose a word and verse(s) for the year and beyond (at any time of the year).¹

I practice this discipline myself. I reveal publicly what I conclude privately, but only after bouncing off my consequential decision with my inner circle. This annual routine encourages others, not only with truth, but also by modeling a deliberate process.



¹ The benefits of this spiritual discipline are simplicity, priority, clarity, intensity, activity, and tenacity. A neologism, I call(ed) it WAVFTY-AB: Word and verse(s) for the year and beyond. Here's my article on how to develop your own "WAVFTY-AB: A Beneficial Habit for Life."



Here's my stencil: prayerfully and carefully overlay my life with texts and characters of Scripture to discern principles and priorities for the current and coming spell. This pattern seems to equip lovers of the Lord Jesus to determine their own biblical-theological-spiritual-missional moorings. Filled with biblical perspective for personal guidance, they interpret recent experience, and they approach life with thoughtfulness, gratitude, and responsibility.

“ Any worthwhile word in this spiritual habit has to be about God! ”

A caution, however. Any worthwhile word in this spiritual habit has to be about God! His character, purposes, and actions in relation to us. Recognizing *God's* glory as the chief end of human existence, with God receiving glory, is the purpose of all His providence.² In fact, all of God's work always concerns His own name, and rightly so. As morally perfect and totally powerful, He is the only one who can legitimately claim that His best glory brings the most good for us.

When our planet began yet another revolution around its sun, I too, like you, was facing rapidly changing conditions and environments and needed much provision, comfort, and assurance.

“ There would be no better Scripture in which to devotionally immerse myself than the all-time favorite among God's sheep, Psalm 23. ”



² One of the main points of “Never Random: How God Manages the World,” my last spiritual-biblical-theological devotional, is the glory of God as the precise point of God's providence.

There would be no better Scripture in which to devotionally immerse myself than the all-time favorite among God's sheep, Psalm 23. I had studied the Savior Psalm (22) before and the Sovereign Psalm (24) since, but I required the divine Shepherd Psalm (23) at this inflection point.

As is my custom, I simply asked myself: *What biblical theme and thrust should influence this season?* And I was overcome by the trustful psalm and the abundant atmosphere of a thoughtful psalmist. I embraced the psalm to identify my word and verse(s), with appropriate hermeneutical care, of course, for application and instruction.

“ ...He is the only one who can legitimately claim that His best glory brings the most good for us. ”

David, the psalmist, begins and closes with naming the LORD³ as his forever-shepherd, on earth and into eternity. Between now and then, the rest of life happens. For all those experiences, I seized the muchness of this psalm for the psalmist, for me, and for you too. Thus, I chose a rather ordinary word to frame this sheep's life with the Shepherd: MUCH.

I shall not wholly expound the psalm below, but wish to build on and share its mood of muchness to prompt your own biblical and biographical reflection. (If you don't have an inspiring and integrating word and Scripture verse for your life at this time, you can certainly borrow mine!)

Sheep Life with the Shepherd Lord

Much overwhelms me during this season, not only because of ongoing challenges (like those

³ As you might know, LORD in English capital letters, refers to YHWH (Yahweh), the national name for Israel's eternal covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.

David faced as leader of God's people), but also undeniable abundance. The first five verses of the psalm are bursting in the first person—*me*, *my*, and *I*. They also feature the present tense to depict the Shepherd's continuous, intentional, and active engagement with the sheep—*makes*, *leads*, *restores*, *guides*, and so on.

Grammarians use *much* in many ways: adjective, adverb, noun, determiner, and pronoun. Even as “many”! But the grammatical nuances around my word *much* don't compare with the theological and experiential richness expressed in the psalm.

“ David calls Him also my personal shepherd, the dynamic source of much blessing and favor. ”

Ultimately a grand unknown future awaits us (v. 6). The psalmist believes that what is true in the present, which quickly becomes past, will surely be true all his life—forever. Until then, he declares three personal, ongoing certainties of an eternal, powerful, faithful LORD as his shepherd:

I lack no thing.

Much blessing and favor remain on me.

I fear no evil.

Much presence and comfort are received by me.

I have no doubt.

Much goodness and kindness run after me.

NO UNFULFILLED NEEDS: Much Blessing & Favor

I have sung Psalm 23, trying out several tunes and versions. Psalmody has never left Christian hymnody because we better remember biblical text through song. With newer Bible versions, newer tunes are constantly emerging. Type “Psalm 23 playlist” online and sing along (privately is okay!). Read on for some of my history.

When I was a schoolboy in Chennai (then Madras), India, a daily short chapel at the Madras Christian College School brought in a small crowd to hear a somewhat disinterested headmaster recite liturgy from his tiny pocket book. He often led us with Psalm 23 in the *Crimond* tune (late 1800s), accompanied by a two-pedal, tinny-sounding box organ:

*The LORD's my shepherd, I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie,
In pastures green he leadeth me,
the quiet waters by.*

Overwhelmed with *much* blessing, the psalmist presents a metaphor, an analogical fount to support what follows (vv. 1–2). Limited by words, memory, space, and time, he writes poetically while thinking and living *theologically*. He starts, bases, and ends his life with his Shepherd-Lord. The Shepherd of Israel (see Ps. 80:1) “is” (23:1), as he was in the past and will be in the future. David calls Him also my personal shepherd, the dynamic source of much blessing and favor.

While in Trinidad & Tobago years ago, Bonnie picked up a phrase—the local people's



customary response to a simple “How are you?”—and uses it to end her annual routine, the Richard family letter: “Blessed and highly favored by the Lord God Almighty.”

On the island, the customary response often descended into cliché, losing its intended meaning and effect. Some turned “favored” to “flavored” to claim tasty spicy charm about themselves! More humorous was “Blessed, highly favored, and plumb worn out,” meaning they possessed spiritual blessing, but were physically fatigued.

“ Because the LORD is my Shepherd, no unfulfilled needs. ”

Even still, this normalized comment of “blessed and highly favored” in a religiously Christianized but economically challenged setting originally expressed the sincere gratitude for spiritual and material blessings.

Eternal riches in Jesus? Yes! See Ephesians 3:16. The Good Shepherd’s divine orchestration of my eternal rescue from a transgression-prone life (e.g., Luke 15:1–4) has permanently established a personal saving relationship with my Shepherd-Lord Himself. I’ll not lack anything when it comes to eternal salvation—and *also* earthly provision.

Isn’t much earthly blessing and favor remaining on us? *Much* not only denotes quality (its wonderful extent), but it also describes quantity (in plentiful amount). In this psalm, “not lacking anything” rehearses earthly blessings—green pastures, still waters, soul-restoration, a banquet table, and an overflowing cup.

The people of Israel elsewhere asked for all manner of blessings and favors based on a covenant relationship with their loyal God and for the purpose of spreading His salvation to the ends of the earth (Ps. 67:1–2). It’s not improper for us to be blessed by God. It’s only incorrect to ask for blessings and keep them to ourselves. Never stop tallying God’s blessings. You will be overwhelmed by much.

Because the LORD is my Shepherd, no unfulfilled needs.

“ The Good Shepherd’s divine orchestration of my eternal rescue from a transgression-prone life has permanently established a personal saving relationship with my Shepherd-Lord Himself. ”

NO UNHEALTHY FEARS: Much Presence & Comfort

Last January in St. Kitts and Nevis, at a time when I had finding my annual word and verse(s) in mind, a Caribbean worship team rocked out to “I Am Not Alone” (2018, by *People and Songs*) just before I spoke. I sang my heart out then, just as I am now while listening to it as I write this article.

David fearlessly walks the paths of danger and the valley of the shadow of death. “I fear no evil,” he asserts, “for You are with me” (23:4 NASB). The LORD keeps him company and gives him comfort with His rod as defense and His staff for direction.

Several of you have persevered through the pain and grief of illness or loss. Others mourn loved ones gone through mistakes, sin, or death. And yet you are around. You had nothing and no one but God to deliver you through “many dangers, toils, and snares.”

The LORD has undergirded and escorted me through much over the past four years. I barely knew the seriousness of my situation and how desperate it was or could have been. The LORD carried and comforted me through them. I show my friends a picture taken while in cardiac rehab. One vehemently denies it is me! Earlier this week, another said I look much younger than my biological age. He shall remain my friend.

“ Because the LORD is my Shepherd, no unhealthy fears. ”

I am here, having received much presence and comfort from God. He has blessed me with much and carried me through much, so I seek to turn scars (some literal) into platforms for service. David wrote this psalm not only for himself. His experience perennially encourages those who need (t)his particular Shepherd.

Tenderized by distress, I reach out even more and faster to others with similar conditions. First to listen, and if necessary, to humbly offer credible assurance, much as the LORD showed up in my life through others at the right time.

A doctor friend has suddenly been rendered a death warrant with a disease he understands better than I ever will. He messaged me this morning: “Cancer is said to be the great exfoliator. It takes away everything and leaves you at the core of yourself to see what is there. And in that place, you find out what you truly believe about God. Is He everything to you? For me, I’m finding out that He is.”

I wrote back, “Deep self-understanding, dearest friend. And when we are down to God, we

find that He is down there at the core after all. Praying for you and it to be so.”

He replied simply “Loved.” The weight of my experience with God’s presence and comfort encourages me to strengthen others with God’s presence and comfort. It diminishes their fears and bolsters their fortitude. My isolated physician friend is finding out that God is carrying him through this dangerous moment. (Would you join me in praying for him too?)

The LORD has overwhelmed me with much and undergirded me through much. This article itself attempts what I’ve learned above—minister to others on the platforms of stress and distress. The Shepherd has carried me through, and so my ministry today includes you!

Because the LORD is my Shepherd, no unhealthy fears.

NO UNENDING DOUBTS: Much Goodness & Mercy

Among 20th century hymn writers, John W. Peterson developed his version of Psalm 23 with his friend Al Smith and placed the burden of his chorus on the “surely” of verse 6. I’ve strummed and mouthed its “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days, all the days of my life” on repeat. But I sing in high volume when the song peaks with “And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever, and feast at the table spread for me.” Surely. The psalmist has no doubts about an eternal future of much.

David is blessed with much—(nothing is needful) and carried through much—(nothing is fearful). At the pinnacle, he confidently proclaims an in-depth bond with his Shepherd-Lord, as he contemplates fulfilling the rest of his life dwelling in the house of the LORD immediately, always, and for evermore. Nothing is doubtful.

“ Because the LORD is my Shepherd, no unending doubts. ”

The tasks of life don't cease. The earth didn't halt turning and the world didn't stop churning for David after he probed the Shepherd-sheep metaphor. Though nothing was and is lacking because of the Shepherd's blessing and favor, and nothing is and will be fearful because of the Shepherd's presence and comfort, David still needed to navigate his royal, junior shepherding of God's people. Threatening situations were and are external constants. Where, when, and how will he (and we) find internal fortitude?

The psalmist moves into a *future* tense as he assuredly declares that goodness and mercy will actively run after him for the rest of his days. He finds courage and purpose for the future. Surely. No unending doubts. Cumulatively and comprehensively, in every want and circumstance, all the time, and in any place and responsibility, he will find goodness and mercy.

Goodness immediately looks back to an extravagant table, his privileged anointing, and a brimming cup presented by his Shepherd-host, and that, too, in the presence of his adversaries. His enemies were left out but looking in from outside the Shepherd's banquet hall.

Mercy, the second word in this pair, looks forward to fellowship, privilege, and service in the LORD's house forever. It reinforces goodness and means "lovingkindness." The word even more fully portrays loyal love, unconditional and unbreakable. Someone said, "If you receive a piece of bread when you're hungry, it's goodness; with butter it turns into mercy; and adding jam to it becomes lovingkindness!"

“ ...he assuredly declares that goodness and mercy will actively run after him for the rest of his days. ”

If you can manage ten minutes of quietness (i.e., without distraction, especially of your cell phone), I invite you to ponder God's un-limits, to the power of in-finite: goodness + mercy + loyalty + love + kindness + grace + + + + pursuing us all the days of our lives. An inner certitude will possess you. You will no longer doubt that you will make it till the end and through death into heaven.

Yesterday, at the beginning of a 45-minute phone call with a seminary classmate of 50 years ago, a faithful servant of Christ, he used the phrase "goodness and mercy."

Both of us have faced significant heart disease, and now spared from death, we affirmed what almost everyone obviously remarks: "God has a purpose for sparing us!" He went on to use intentional words like "urgency" and "priority." I ended our prayer time with the Chief Shepherd following us all the days of our life, and *as well as through each part of every day*, with goodness and lovingkindness.

“ I am overwhelmed by blessing and favor, that's well-feeling; much undergirded by presence and comfort, that's well-being; and accompanied by goodness and mercy for well-doing in the house of the LORD till there are no days left. ”

As long as the Great Shepherd outfits me and infills me for every good thing (Heb. 13:20–21)—with health and strength, resolve and activity, opportunities and resources by His Holy Spirit who powers, escorts, and follows me—I will fulfill the purpose and responsibilities which He has prepared and assigned for me.

So I intend to use my life much for God—fully, wisely, and boldly—since He has done so much for me. I am overwhelmed by blessing and favor, that's well-feeling; much undergirded by presence and comfort, that's well-being; and accompanied by goodness and mercy for well-doing in the house of the LORD till there are no days left.

During my teen years with aspiring singing buddies, we tried out an a cappella version of Ralph Carmichael's, "The New 23rd." "Because the LORD is my Shepherd," we sang, "I have everything I need." We climaxed with "blessings overflowing, and goodness and unfailing kindness, shall be with me all of my life, and afterwards, I will be with him forever, forever, forevermore."

Musically, we ended off-key, but didn't stray theologically.

Because the LORD is my Shepherd, I lack no thing; He is with me, I fear no evil; He follows me, I have no doubt. *Much* and Psalm 23 is my WAVFTY-AB forever. What's yours? For now, you can borrow mine. And all that is mine will be true of you. In unique ways, of course. The same LORD is your Shepherd.



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