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Psalm 23:5-6, ESV

- ⁵ *You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies; you
anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*
- ⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.*

Pursued by God and a Turkish Carpet Salesman.

Psalm 23 is commonly used at funerals and memorial services. This is for three reasons.

First, it is indeed one of the most beautiful pieces of poetry in Scripture, and it reads elegantly, even in English; it stands as a stunning work of verse independently of being biblical. Second, it has a very hopeful, optimistic tone, something that is very soothing when considering the loss of a loved one. Third, Psalm 23 does briefly refer to a life with God for all of eternity. But because of the way we use this Psalm, it is often misunderstood. It's not about death. It's not about honoring someone who has left this life. We're also going to consider a subtle mistranslation in this Psalm that we see in most common versions of the Christian Bible. By taking this single word mistranslation into account and looking at Psalm 23 carefully, we'll see what it's truly about. I'm going to go ahead and spoil the end of the movie. Psalm 23 tells us just how aggressive God is when

it comes to taking care of us here on Earth.

But let me start with something that happened in Istanbul. A few summers ago, Wendy and I were in Turkey. There is an ancient church in Istanbul called the Hagia Sophia. It was built in the year 537 A.D., when the city was called Constantinople, and it was the center of Eastern Christianity. It is by far one of the largest of the ancient churches in the world. Interestingly, recently, Turkey has turned it into a mosque, but it remains open to non-Moslem visitors; I'm sure that part of the reason for this is that Turkey badly needs tourist dollars. It's a stunning building. The inside is dominated by two levels of tall archways on either side, with a dome overhead and a dome over the altar. Eastern churches were often decorated with mosaics, as opposed to frescoes and statues, as we see in western, Roman Catholic Churches. Inside the church is a very famous mosaic of Jesus Christ, one that has been photographed endlessly. The background is gold, and Jesus appears with a solemn face, and his right hand is uplifted, seemingly to bless us. The name Hagia Sophia means "Holy Wisdom", and the full name of the church is the *Holy Wisdom of Christ in God*. Thus, the church was named after Jesus Christ. One day Wendy and I were on our way to see the Hagia Sophia. As we were walking along a street in Istanbul, a young man came walking up to us rapidly, a big smile on his face. He turned out to be a carpet salesman. Turkish carpets are a big thing in Turkey, as you might guess. They are made in remote, rural tribal areas, and the truly valuable carpets are made by hand, and bear intricate, brightly colored designs. A rug for a medium sized living room might take two women a couple of years to make and cost ten or

twenty thousand dollars in the West. But the Turkish economy has been in bad shape for several years, with a sharp decrease in tourism, because of terrorist attacks there, but also because of its authoritarian president locking up thousands of political opponents and repressing the minority Kurd population. The corona virus pandemic did further harm. Added to this has been economic mismanagement by the government, including the rapid expansion of foreign debt. At the time we were there, there were virtually no tourists, there had been a terrorist attack the day before we landed, and there was tremendous conflict between conservative Muslim backers of the president and the more secular people who make up the bulk of the business community. The shops and restaurants were almost empty, and retail store owners were desperate. That's why there was a carpet salesman hanging around one of the biggest tourist sites for westerners in Istanbul, hoping to find older, American-looking people who might have the cash to buy a hand-made rug. He energetically gave us his plug, that he and his father owned a small three-story house packed with rugs and they were selling them for a fraction of their true value. He offered to take us there, give us free tea, and show us their rugs. When we declined, saying that we were going in to see the church, he pretty much begged us to consider coming and seeing the rugs. As politely as possible we told him that we were not interested, and then reluctantly, he wished us a nice visit to the church. We went inside and I took a few hundred photographs. I will get back to this.

Today we are looking at a poem from the Book of Psalms. Here is the entirety of

Psalm 23, as we read in the English Standard Version translation of the Bible:

- ¹ *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*
- ² *He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.*
- ³ *He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*
- ⁴ *Even 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.*
- ⁵ *You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies; you
anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*
- ⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.*

This Psalm is extremely famous and certainly one of my favorites. We associate it with funerals and memorial services. The Psalm talks of lying down in green pastures by still waters, under the protection of God, and it ends by stating that we will live with God forever. There's more to this Psalm though, than having no fear as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, something that seems fitting when saying goodbye to a loved one. The Psalm begins with comparing God to a shepherd. To fully appreciate that, we need to note that in the ancient world, good kings, ones who truly cared about their people, were known as the shepherds of their people. If we call the Lord our good shepherd, we are saying that we are committed to living under God's reign, and that God is

a just and gentle king. The Psalm says that if we accept God as our shepherd, if we agree that God is our king, we don't have to worry about needing anything. This promise from God evokes beautiful images of pastoral life. The Psalm communicates a sense of peace and tranquility. The Psalm's promise of comfort doesn't consist simply of vague imagery. It uses concepts that would strike very deep within the hearts of ancient Israelites. For sheep – and remember the Psalm is about a shepherd and his sheep – being able to lie down in green pastures means to have food. To be beside still waters means to have enough to drink. Just as sheep were the lifeline of many Israelites, and a critical source of food and clothing, and thus must have consistent food and water, we, as God's sheep need the same. To be in the path of righteousness means that danger from predators who prey on sheep is avoided. Importantly, it is the good shepherd who ensures all of this.

But while we associate Psalm 23 with funerals, that's not what the original author had in mind when writing this poem. The true purpose of the Psalm is to express confidence in our relationship with God, and in our belief that God will always be with us and will never abandon us. Psalm 23 wasn't even used broadly in funerals until the twentieth century. It is in truth a celebration of the true nature of a Christian life: an earthly life *devoted to* God and an eternal life *spent with* God. The Psalm is about a dedicated shepherd looking after us, and the "*shadow of death*" refers to those times in life when we are reminded of our mortality, of our vulnerability, of our need to

have God in our lives protecting us. It speaks of our Father's House, a place where we are protected from evil, from harm, and from fear.

Here's a line in the Psalm that I'd like to focus on closely: *Surely, goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

There is a bit of a translation error here. It doesn't truly say that goodness and love will follow us. The Hebrew word that tends to be translated as "follow" in most English translations comes from the original scriptural Hebrew word "*radaph*"; it is a more powerful word, closer to our word "pursue". Another reasonable translation is "chase". This verse tells of God chasing us like a hunting dog after its owner's prey. What this says is that God pursues us aggressively. God isn't passive, far from it. God doesn't hang around on the perimeter of our lives, hoping we notice him and that we will bother to reach out. From our perspective as Christians, we might put it this way: God puts the Holy Spirit within us. That is why we have a third member of the Trinity: The Holy Spirit is the active presence of God in our lives, something that is hard to ignore if we have any faith at all. The Holy Spirit within us is God pursuing us, chasing after us. God wants us to live in the Kingdom of God, not in the Kingdom of People, and so, to draw us in, God sends goodness and love (translated as "mercy" in other English Bible versions) to follow us doggedly all the days of our lives.

Let's get back to the story of the rug salesman. Wendy and I enjoyed visiting the

ancient church, the Hagia Sophia. It was the most important thing that I had wanted to see in Istanbul. Then, when we came out of the church a few hours later, Wendy leaned toward me and said, "Look who's been waiting for us." Yes, the salesman was there, looking energetic and hopeful. He had waited there the entire time, just in the offhand chance that this one older American couple might be encouraged to buy a rug from him. He was incredibly persistent and determined. It was actually a bit weird. We felt as if he had been stalking us. But that's another reasonable way of translating that line in Psalm 23: *Goodness and mercy shall stalk me all the days of my life*. That carpet salesman strode up to us and once again asked us to please come to their shop and see their thousands of rugs. In truth, we were thinking about buying a very small rug, to hang on our living room wall above the fireplace, and so we went ahead and accompanied him a block or so to their house-turned-shop. The house was tall and narrow, and made of wood that seemed to be rotting. The outside paint was largely peeled off. The place was an obvious firetrap. But, indeed, the house-turned-shop was quite literally packed with many thousands of rugs. Every room was piled with them. They were in rolls, in stacks, on shelves, and in the closets. There was hardly any place to walk in the house. If the shop had been in the U.S. and a fire marshal had inspected it, they would have condemned the place. The salesman and his father did indeed serve us tea, and the only place to sit was on a stack of rugs. We looked at several rugs. We were the only customers in the shop, and we saw no other shoppers out on the street. In the end, we somewhat guiltily told them that no, we did not want to

buy a rug.

God stalks us with the Holy Spirit, like a desperate, aggressive carpet salesman. Each and every one of us is as important to God as a single potential customer is to a Turkish carpet salesman who hasn't had a viable customer in weeks or months. God does not give up easily, far from it. God never gives up at all. Remember that God is our creator who created us simply to pour out his love on us; Jesus brought us a personal relationship with God and the promise of eternal life with God; and the Holy Spirit within us is that dogged salesman refusing to let us walk away from a life with God.

In truth, while the Hagia Sophia has recently been turned into a mosque, the Hagia Sophia was a mosque in the past. Constantinople fell in 1453, about nine hundred years after the Hagia Sophia was built, and the Hagia Sophia was made into a mosque at that time. It wasn't turned into a publicly accessible museum until 1934, five hundred years later. So, for half a millennium it was only a mosque. As it turns out, Islam forbids religious images, so when it was a mosque, the stunning Christian mosaics were covered with quotations from the Quran. The Muslims added minarets, tall narrow towers, to the church, significantly changing its outside appearance. The minarets are now again being used to call Muslims to prayer five times a day. A Muslim side altar, called a *mihrab*, was added inside the church during those five hundred years when it was a mosque. In short, its external and internal appearance was significantly altered to accommodate Muslim worship. Yet, five hundred years after it was taken over by Muslims, the church

emerged, changed, but still quite recognizable. The mosaics were uncovered. I photographed them.

The Hagia Sophia is like God. The Hagia Sophia is like that carpet salesman working so hard to earn a bit of money to take care of his family. The Hagia Sophia did not give up. It had to wait five hundred years at one point - and is waiting again. There is no reason to believe that the Muslims in Istanbul will aggressively remodel the Hagia Sophia once again. True, it is owned by the Turkish people. They have a right to do what they want with it. Right now, it is both a mosque and a publicly accessible building that anyone can visit.

Wendy and I grew to deeply respect the people of Turkey. They are not responsible for the actions of their extremely oppressive and economically incompetent president. They are a hard-working people who are suffering. The President of Turkey was playing to his strong support from religious Muslims when he turned the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque. But the salesman was a good man caught up in a political and economic climate that he could not control. He treated us with respect. He was polite and friendly. He served us tea and showed us rug after rug. We both hope that he and his father and their family are all doing okay. In this country we are indeed far more blessed than the average person struggling to survive in Turkey.

Never forget that God is like the Hagia Sophia. God is like a desperate Turkish rug salesman. God is three Gods in one: God the Father who created us in God's image, God the son who came to Earth so that we could live in the Kingdom of God now and

forever, and the Holy Spirit who burns inside of us, never leaving us alone for an instant. No matter where we go, what we do, or what we think, God is there, pursuing, chasing, stalking us. We don't believe that God lives in a church. We believe that God is everywhere, and that when God is welcomed as our good shepherd, we are led down the path of righteousness and into a life of calm. God is always there, even during times of fear, loss, and desperation.

We are also told in Psalm 23 that God prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. This is a Psalm traditionally attributed to King David. This verse harkens to the many times in David's life when he was sought by those who wanted to kill him. Our enemy isn't a jealous King Saul. Our enemy is evil, created by humans. God gives us the option of avoiding evil by sitting down at a holy banquet with him. That is what Psalm 23 tells us, and that is why God relentlessly pursues us: so that we will choose to be anointed with oil rather than fall to lives of evil.