

Imagine That

Scriptural Reference: Psalm 23

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I can walk into my living room on any given day and find a collage of sheets, books, pillows, blankets, shoes, and toys. "Girls, what is this?" I ask. "Oh, that's our house Dad," reply my daughters. One Friday afternoon, my wife took my oldest daughter to the doctor, leaving my youngest daughter and me at home. Thinking out loud, I asked, "What in the world are we going to do?" Without hesitation she replied, "I know what we can do Dad. Let's build a house!" Reluctantly, I gather the "materials" and begin building. When we are done, she looks at me and says, "Isn't this a great house Dad?" I pause before answering and then reply, "Yeah babe, it's a great house." In the pause of that moment, I realized two things.

First, I realized that my daughter's imagination enabled her to look upon a mess but see a masterpiece. Second, I realized that it had been so long since I allowed myself to freely use my imagination that I was suffering from a disease I will call *lost imaginatus*. This disease has become an epidemic in the body of Christ because many believers have been struggling with a particular issue for so long; they've lost the ability to imagine a life apart from the stresses of that issue.

If we as children of God are going to fully experience all that God desires, we will have to use our imagination. In other words, we will have to develop the ability to look upon a messy situation but see the masterpiece that God is working in us thru that situation. Consider this: the most influential people who ever live are those who take hold of an image or vision that they refuse to let go of regardless of what life sends their way. The apostle Paul puts it like this: "forgetting those things of the past, I press towards the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus!"¹

The ability to imagine is one aspect of the Civil Rights Movement that I cherish the most. Pioneers looked upon the messes of slavery, segregation, oppression and inequality but saw and stayed focused on the glorious masterpiece that God was etching into the pages of American history. One that would again declare His sovereign ability to loose the chains of bondage and set a people free!

¹ Phil 2:6 (KJV)

In the 23rd Psalm, David presents two images born out of his imagination that, for him, depict what it means to have an intimate relationship with God. The first image portrays God as a shepherd and David as a sheep, which exemplifies the Love of God in the relationship. The second image portrays God as a Host and David as an honored guest; which exemplifies the Grace of God in the relationship. In both cases, David's depiction of this relationship is an image of someone, not something. Unfortunately, many believers, if asked to depict their relationship with God via imagery, would illustrate money or something else that they believe God for. Many preachers exploit this, but I propose to you that any gospel with *something* at its center instead of *someone* is nothing more than theological "hogwash" designed to appease the itching ears of what has become, sad to say, a very materialistic culture.

David would be the first to stand up and say that things did not get him to the point where he could say, "I have been young, and [now] am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread."² Rather, David would declare that it was someone who had gotten him to that point. And when faced with one of the messiest situations of his life in the Bathsheba incident, David didn't cry out, "Take not my reputation, my crown or my things away from me." Instead, he cried out, "Take not thy holy spirit from me!"³

An intimate relationship with God begins with a heart that cries, "You can take the things of my life but whatever you do, Lord, take not your Holy Spirit from me...for 'If Thou withdraw Thyself from me, Ah! whither shall I go'?"⁴ Out of this passion, David presents three scenarios: a field, a valley, and a table. In each, he portrays at least one aspect of what it means to have an intimate relationship with God; the type needed for powerful ministry.

The first scenario is a field. If you are a child of God, then David suggests you have Provision in the Field. He opens, "The Lord [is] my shepherd; I shall not want."⁵ His emphasis is not on just knowing about provision; the level of intimacy with God must go deeper than that. If it doesn't, one may become like many believers who will say they have the provision of God but, in the same breath, can give you a laundry list of all the things they want, need, lack, and don't have. David presents a deeper level of intimacy when he goes on to say, "he maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."⁶

You don't want to "run past" Old Testament adjectives too quickly because, given the nature of the Hebrew language, they add a significant level of emphasis to the noun they describe. Here, David calls the grass green and the waters still, suggesting a provision of the highest quality. David then draws a

² Psalm 37:25 (KJV)

³ Psalm 51:11b (KJV)

⁴ Wesley, Charles. "A Collection of Psalms and Hymns", 1741.

⁵ Psalm 23:1 (KJV)

⁶ Psalm 23:2 (KJV)

wonderful parallel in verse four, suggesting that just as this shepherd lays before his sheep a physical provision of the highest quality in green grass and leadership beside the still waters; so too does God lay before his sheep a spiritual provision of the highest quality in restoration and leadership in the paths of righteousness.

If you are a child of God you have a provision of God that is of the highest quality and meets all of your needs. Unfortunately, many believers never get to this level of intimacy because they tend to associate quality with comfort. God, however, is not concerned with our comfortability but with our conformability to his will. So a circumstance may not be comfortable but, if God has allowed it, it is just what we need to be conformed to His will.

David is able to say “I shall not want” in verse one because he is measuring his wants by the desire to be conformed to the will of God. If, on the other hand, you are measuring your wants by the desire to be comfortable then you will see all kinds of things you want, need, lack and don’t have in your life. If you are a child of God, however, be reminded that you have a provision that meets all your needs. The bible says, “My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory...”⁷

The second scenario is a valley and suggests that if you are a Child of God, by faith, you have Peace in the Valley. Verse four in Hebrew literally says, “Yea though I walk through the darkest valley.” Darkness and valley are each symbolic of danger so David declares that even in the most perilous of circumstance, he will not be afraid.

David’s emphasis is not on just knowing about peace; the level of intimacy with God must go deeper than that. If it doesn’t, you may find yourself becoming like many believers, who will say they have the divine protection and peace of God but, at the same time, begin doubting and fainting as soon as they enter into a darkest valley situation.

Once again, David takes the imagery to a deeper level of intimacy and goes on to say, “for thou [art] with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”⁸ The key to understanding the significance of this statement lies in the answer to this question: “If David is walking in the darkest valley, where he can’t see, how does he know God is there and how is he comforted by a rod and a staff?” Answer: David is not comforted by the sight of a rod but by his faith in God, the one who he knows is holding the rod and promised never to leave him. This faith in God is what gives birth to the Peace of God, which is why it can be had even in the darkest of valleys and worst of storms; why it surpasses all understanding.

Many believers fail to reach this level of intimacy simply because they are not walking by faith. Rather, they are walking by the sight of some “rod” that, for

⁷ Phil. 4:19 (KJV)

⁸ Psalm 23:4 (KJV)

them, represents the presence of God in their life. So as soon as they enter into a darkest valley situation where they are no longer able to see the “rod,” they begin doubting, fainting and questioning the reality of God’s presence in their situation. An intimate relationship with God, however, assures us that, by Faith, we can have Peace in the Valley.

The third scenario draws upon an image whereby God is a Host and David is the honored guest. This scenario depicts the Grace of God because, typically, the Host is the one being honored at such a gathering. Contemporary arrangements of similar fashion include birthday parties, anniversaries, graduations, etc. In the text, however, the one being honored is not the host and doesn’t deserve to even be at the table; much less be honored for anything at it! If you are a child of God then, by Grace, you have a Position at the Table.

David begins verse five saying, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...”⁹ The “preparest” in this verse may likely be future tense and parallel that used of Jesus when he says “I go to prepare a place for you...that where I am, [there] you may be also.”¹⁰ Thus, David may not be speaking of a present day preparation but a future one. Could he, then, be pointing to the glorious table that is reserved for those who will, upon death, hear the Lord say, “Well done my good and faithful servant; now come on in where the table is spread and the feast of the Lord is going on!”?

Parenthetically, the enemies that David speaks of are not seated at the table. Rather, I believe they can see the feast going on but are unable to interact with those who are feasting. This scenario is also depicted in Luke 11 when a rich man shuns a beggar named Lazarus. The bible says that they both die and the rich man can see Lazarus feasting at a table but is unable to interact with or take part in the feast.

Again, David’s emphasis goes beyond just knowing. If your level of intimacy with God does not move from your head to your heart, then you may find yourself becoming like many believers who will say they have an eternally satisfying position at the table but never seem to be content or satisfied at the moment. David, however, moves into a much deeper level of intimacy when he goes on to say, “thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”¹¹ The Hebrew word translated “anointest” here is in the present tense and is not the same word that typically refers to the smearing of oil on an individual’s head (*mashach*). Rather, this word (*dasher*) is used much less often and refers to a filling or a fattening. Thus, it can also reference the cup and is why I believe David later says, “my cup runneth over.”

Interestingly, David moves from a future preparation of the table to a present filling from the table, which may suggest you don’t have to wait until you

⁹ Psalm 23:5 (KJV)

¹⁰ John 14:2b, 3b (KJV)

¹¹ Psalm 23:5b (KJV)

pass away to experience its eternal satisfaction. Rather, you can experience the joy and satisfaction as a result of your position right now! Like Paul, we too can embrace a contentment that is not a function of our circumstances and declare, "for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, [therewith] to be content!"¹²

Many believers never reach this level of intimacy for one key reason. At feasting tables, cups were typically brought to the table empty and filled while at the table. Dirty cups, however, were not filled. I am convinced that many believers are not being filled simply because they are bringing cups to the table that are dirty and full of self: selfish hopes, wishes, dreams and desires. When God doesn't fill them, they begin looking for more "stuff" thinking that lack of stuff is why they are not content. They acquire more stuff but remain empty; without ever realizing that the only way you can have God fill your cup is by presenting it to him empty. As the songwriter says, "I have emptied out my cup, So that You can fill me up..."¹³ Out of this overflow, David concludes goodness and mercy shall follow him always and declares he will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Knowing that, as a child of God, you have a provision in the field that meets all your needs, a peace in the valley that surpasses all understanding, and a position at the table that brings eternal satisfaction. Isn't it a little easier to imagine that maybe you aren't as bad off as you might have thought? Isn't it a little easier to imagine that maybe your home can be a place of peace, your mind a place of rest or your future a place of hope...regardless of how messy things look right now. Can you begin to imagine all the blessings God has laid up for you; blessings just sitting there with your name on them?

As I close, please remember that David's image of intimacy with God is not one of something but of someone: One who had promised never to leave him or forsake him; who became bread when he was hungry, water when he was thirsty and a friend when he was friendless. Can you see this someone? Sure, your image might look a little different than David's, but can you see him? Wounded for our transgressions? Bruised for our iniquities? Can you see the chastisement of our peace being laid upon him as he hung his head on Calvary's cross and died for our sins? Can you see him rising again early that third day morning with all power in his hand? Can you see him? If you can't see him, it's okay, just call his name: JESUS; the only name that has the power to save, heal, deliver and restore the hope of your imagination. Through an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, son of the Most High God, you have Divine Provision in the Field, Sovereign Peace in the Valley, and Eternal Position at the Table. Imagine that.

¹² Philippians 4:11 (KJV)

¹³ Brunson, Rev. Milton. "Lord I'm Available to You." Available to You. World Records, 1988.

Biographical Sketch: Min. Derrick M. Hammond, M. Div., MBA

Derrick M. Hammond was born and raised in Birmingham, Al. He comes from the typical at-risk background facing many of our youth today: a single-parent household headed by a woman. He formed a close relationship with God at a very early age as he remembers his mother crying at night to God under the false assumption that he and his brothers were asleep. He accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior at the age of six with a sound understanding of the decision he had made.

In 1999, he graduated from Auburn University with a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering. Later that year, he accepted the call to ministry and returned to Birmingham where he served as the youth minister of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church under his father in the ministry, Rev. Earl Harry, Sr. In 2006, he became only the second person in school history to graduate from the Master of Divinity/Master of Business Administration dual degree program at Samford University. He received the 2006 Biblical Languages Scholar Award of Beeson Divinity School as well as honorary memberships to the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature.

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