DON'T GIVE THE ENEMY A SEAT AT YOUR TABLE

IT'S TIME TO WIN THE BATTLE OF YOUR MIND . . .

LOUIE GIGLIO

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Don't Give the Enemy a Seat at Your Table

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ONE

NINE WORDS THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

I felt attacked. Misrepresented. Abandoned. Wounded.

Shelley and I were in the midst of a massive storm—one of the toughest seasons we've ever faced as leaders. Darts were flying at me from every direction. My heart was heavy and conflicted.

The moment we had decided years ago to plant a local church, a friend was chillingly clear in his assessment of the journey we were embarking on: *It will be the hardest thing you've ever done.*

At the time I brushed those words aside. *We've done some pretty difficult things,* I thought. But now, his words echoed in my mind. He was right. Building a kingdom family called the "local church" out of a tribe of mostly strangers was exposing

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my optimism (I thought we'd never have insider struggles like every other church), and, even at fifty years of age, I was facing challenges that were testing the limits of my experience.

Yet now the insider struggles were real. Intense. Personal. Bitterness and frustration worked overtime to get a foothold in my spirit. More than once I wondered if it was worth it and wanted to pack it in and quit.

One evening, a few months into that tumultuous stretch, I found myself at the top of our driveway furiously working away on a text message to a friend I could trust. Earlier in the afternoon I had found out about something that vindicated my case. I've always believed in the saying *You don't have to tell your side of the story; time will.* On this day it felt like time was telling the world that I was right, and obviously I wasn't going to sit on good news. I wanted other people to know I was right too. So I reached out to someone who had stood with me in the struggle, someone who had taken a few shots on my behalf.

Wow . . . what a text it was. A lengthy masterpiece of angst and vindication, the tone of which went something like this: *You're not gonna believe what just happened. I'm not saying I was right, but hey, it is what it is! Can you believe it? I mean, if you give things enough time, you'll see people's true colors, right? I mean, finally . . . blah, blah, blah.*

I pressed send and waited. Literally. I just stared at the screen, looking for support to arrive. I wanted a reply that resounded

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with a hearty, *Hey, Louie, I've got your back! I knew you were right all along!* I wanted a shoulder to cry on. A celebratory high five or fist bump. (*Not* the emoji kind.) I needed actual words in return, and lots of them.

A moment passed. Another. I waited.

Let's pause for a moment and let the focus swing to *your* story.

Have you ever sent a text like that?

You don't need to be planting a church to be in a hard place. Everybody experiences tense circumstances where your mind is heavy and you feel like you're under attack. Times when you want to swing big and fight back or you want to give up. What do you do?

How do you win the battle of your mind?

THE TEXT THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

When you're in a hard stretch filled with conflict and confusion, if you could just get your thoughts in order you could probably figure out a way to proceed, but keeping a clear head is more difficult than it sounds.

Maybe you're on the wrong side of someone else's harmful

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actions or hurtful words. Maybe the conflict comes from within. You feel abandoned. Falsely attacked. Hurt. Defeated. Tempted. Lost. Your mood is low. Your mind is stressed. You're weary from the endless conversations you're having inside your head with friends, coworkers, family members, accusers. Conversations where you're always vindicated and their faults are exposed.

It's easy at those times for fear or despair to set in. You find yourself constantly looking over your shoulder, wondering if someone's out to get you. You struggle with your emotions. You snap in anger. You break down in tears. It's not uncommon to give in to those dark thoughts, especially when you're staring at the ceiling at two in the morning, desperately trying to take control of the narrative and manage the outcome. You feel like your back is against the wall, and paranoia can become your unshakable companion. You keep your defenses high.

And you seek allies. You look for someone—anyone—who sees things your way. You gravitate toward anyone who will hear your side of the story and commiserate with you. That's the position I was in standing outside my house fixated on that little circle spinning around on my phone, indicating a reply to my text was on the way.

Remember, I needed my friend's reply to be commensurate with the effort that went into my message. I was anxious for something beefy and bold. Lots of affirmation and solidarity. Lots of words.

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And then it arrived. A one-sentence reply. Nine words to be exact. In dismay I blurted, "You've got to be kidding!" But when I leaned in and focused on the message, those nine words changed my life. The message read:

Don't give the Enemy a seat at your table.

I pushed aside my annoyance and let the message sink in. Quickly I saw that my friend had nailed it. I had allowed my adversary—the Devil—to influence the conversation inside my mind.

My struggle wasn't about fighting with people. People were involved, but the battle I was facing was against principalities and powers of darkness (Ephesians 6:12). My heavenly Father wasn't making me afraid or paranoid. My Shepherd wasn't putting thoughts of despair in my mind. The harmful thoughts were coming from someone else.

The Enemy had taken a seat at my table, and I was allowing myself to listen to a killer. Right there in my driveway, I determined to take back my table. The Devil would have to flee.

In the days that followed, my mind was riveted on those nine words. As negative thoughts would enter my mind, I'd say to myself, *Don't give the Enemy a seat. Don't entertain his ideas. These thoughts are not from a good and trustworthy Shepherd. Move on.*

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THE ENEMY HAD TAKEN A SEAT AT MY TABLE, AND I WAS ALLOWING MYSELF TO LISTEN TO A KILLER.

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Soon after I was led to study Psalm 23—a text that has comforted and steadied God's people through the ages as they have navigated troubled waters. Now I was seeing it through fresh eyes. Especially the line that reads, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (v. 5).

I could see myself sitting at a table, with the Good Shepherd across from me. He had led me through dark valleys to reach the table, and I didn't need to be afraid, even though the fiery trials weren't all resolved. My place at the table didn't mean that my enemies would be removed from the equation. In fact, the table was set right in the middle of my enemies. That captivated my imagination and held my attention.

I didn't need to vindicate myself. I didn't need to clear my name. I didn't need to control this equation or work overtime to improve it. My task was to concentrate on the Good Shepherd, the One who owned the table.

My invitation was to put my trust in the One who prompted me to lie down in green pastures, the One who led me beside quiet waters and restored my soul. The Good Shepherd was guiding me along the right paths for His name's sake. Dark valleys and hard times were part of those paths, yet He would be with me and see me through every threatening night. The Good Shepherd would anoint my life with His favor and my cup would overflow. My promise—goodness, mercy, and love—would escort me every single day of my life.

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My destiny was set. I didn't need to be afraid. The Shepherd was at the table, and He would see to it that I was going to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Day after day I sat with the truth of Psalm 23, letting it burrow its way into my soul. From 1 Peter 5:8, I knew that a major tactic of the Devil was to prowl around my life. So maybe I couldn't stop the Devil from prowling around my table, but in Jesus' name I definitely did have the choice whether I allowed the Enemy to sit down.

God's Word was transforming my thinking and having a powerful impact on my state of mind and peace of heart. *Don't give the Enemy a seat at your table* was quickly becoming more than a helpful quote. These nine words were becoming a weapon that was setting me free.

MOMENTUM GATHERS

A few weeks later, I was leading a morning Bible study for the coaches of a professional sports team. The team's season had been characterized by struggle and defeat, and the mood in the room felt low. Their critics were circling. I would guess there was a measure of internal suspicion and strife. I could see the angst and despair on their faces. The coaches were in a similar place to where I'd been the night I first texted my friend.

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Midway through my message I felt a nudge from the Spirit to pivot my talk toward what God was teaching me through Psalm 23 and what I'd been learning about the table God prepares in the presence of our enemies. I described to them how I'd sent my friend a lengthy "woe is me, back me up" text and what he had replied to me.

When I uttered the phrase *Don't give the Enemy a seat at your table*, the atmosphere in the room shifted. The expression on many of the coaches' faces changed. Later I heard from several of them that those nine words landed just as powerfully for them as they had for me.

That same day I headed back to Passion for our scheduled all-team meeting. As I returned to Atlanta I called and asked for a table to be set up in the middle of the room with basic snacks and water glasses on the table. I expanded on what I had shared that morning with the coaches and morphed the message into a visual experience, where I sat at a table with food on it and spoke on the promise of Psalm 23.

Again, the message landed with power. So much so that we fleshed it out into a full talk that I shared with our church the following Sunday. The food was a bit more sumptuous this time and the place settings a tad fancier. We had bountiful fruit and cheese plates. Cold cuts. Bread. Dessert.

Bam! Those nine words hit home again . . . deeply, profoundly. A mom of three who was in the midst of a contentious

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separation told me those words were exactly what she needed to hear. A college student wrestling with thoughts of suicide echoed her response. It was clear I wasn't the only one struggling, and the message wasn't just for me. It was meant to be shared with as many people as possible.

In time I had the privilege of sharing the message around the world, and the experience became refreshingly interactive for me as a communicator. I would start the message onstage but soon end up at the table, which had been situated beforehand in the midst of the people. At some point I'd pass food down the rows, encouraging people to enjoy a croissant or brownie or carrot stick and then pass the tray of food on to their neighbors. Delectable-looking desserts always got the biggest cheer.

But it wasn't about a potentially gimmicky illustration. The landslide of power was the realization that the King of the universe is inviting you and me to sit with him at His table. Those nine words were memorable, but even more, they were packed with proven power. The story they conveyed was freeing and had instant application.

It's the story of a Good Shepherd who sees you and walks with you through the valley. It's about God setting a table of nourishment and refreshment in the midst of trouble. This message lets you see how you don't need to let the thoughts in your head run wild. These nine words are ultimately a message of victory.

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TAKE BACK THE TABLE PREPARED FOR YOU

That's why I've written this book. I want to help you see that you have power, through Jesus Christ, to take authority over who sits at your table—over who influences your thinking. You can take back your freedom and control your thoughts and emotions. You don't need to be trapped by fear, despair, or rage. Your mind doesn't have to be stressed. You don't need to wrestle anymore with harmful thoughts. You are invited to an intimate relationship with the Almighty. The table He's prepared for you is one of peace, clarity, and abundance. You don't have to give the Enemy a seat at your table.

To be clear, the nine words that arrived on my phone screen are what God used to set in motion the chain of events that led to this book. Yet the potential that waits for you in these pages is rooted in something far greater than a text message from a friend. The promise of this book is anchored in a message from your Creator. His words to you in Scripture are alive and powerful. His words can break the strongholds that have held you captive for years. They can help you think clearly again. His words will give you brand-new sight.

In the pages to come, we'll crack open Psalm 23 in a fresh way. And we'll particularly highlight verse 5: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." I'll address the lies

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the Enemy feeds you as he weasels his way into a seat at the table that's intended for you and your King. I'll outline ways to defeat those lies and help you find victory, peace, and security in the midst of any challenging circumstance or situation. And I'll give you practical, helpful encouragement to stand firm in Jesus and take control of your thoughts and fears.

The Devil wants nothing more than to crush you. He wants to steal from you everything you value. He wants to kill everything in your life that's good. Ultimately, he wants to destroy you. If he can claim the victory over your mind, he can eventually claim the victory over your life.

But the message of Psalm 23 is that the Good Shepherd prepares a table for you. It's a table for two, and the Devil is not invited to sit. This book offers an all-encompassing message that can be applied to any number of hard situations. It will help you find encouragement, hope, and strength in the midst of your valley. You don't need to listen to the voices of fear, rage, lust, insecurity, anxiety, despair, temptation, or defeat.

I'm in this battle with you. I preach this same message to myself again and again, and I am confident that our Good Shepherd will be glorified as He leads us to win the fight for our minds. So let's go there together. Me and you. It's time to take back what the Enemy has stolen. Let's turn the page to take a closer look at what the Good Shepherd's table is all about.

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TWO

THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM—REMIX

Our good friends Jay and Katherine Wolf met years ago as freshmen at Samford University and soon fell in love. He was heading for a career in law. She was literally crowned Miss Samford—smart, beautiful, and confident.

In 2004, newly graduated, they married and vowed to love each other in sickness and health. They soon moved from Atlanta to Malibu, California, where Jay entered law school at Pepperdine University and Katherine pursued a career in acting and modeling. For a couple of years everything went smoothly. In 2007, they had their first child, a boy. All was going well.

One afternoon six months after Katherine had given birth,

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she felt dizzy and sick to her stomach. Her hands, arms, and legs went numb. She walked into the living room to turn down the TV. She wobbled once, twice, and then suddenly collapsed. Jay was home and called 911. Katherine was rushed to the hospital and diagnosed with a massive brain stem stroke. She wasn't expected to live. To save her life, more than half of her cerebellum was removed. The surgery took more than sixteen hours. Katherine was twenty-six.

Miraculously, Katherine survived the sudden ordeal, yet the story of their "new normal" was only beginning. For two months, Katherine lay unconscious. For forty days she stayed in intensive care. She had to relearn how to talk and eat. It took eighteen months to walk again. Years of rehabilitation and recovery followed, along with ten more surgeries. Katherine's body would never fully heal from the stroke.

Today, Katherine lives with long-term limitations. She is partially deaf and can't swallow normally or see well. Part of her face shows the effects of paralysis. Her speech is slurred. Mostly she uses a wheelchair to get around. Yet Katherine and Jay exude a remarkable kind of faith. It's a faith deeply rooted in the confidence that there's purpose in pain. As a result, they are a huge force for the kingdom of God. Through their books and messages, they bring much hope to suffering people everywhere.[1]

Few of us have been through the depth of what Katherine and Jay have experienced. But all of us have experienced a life

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less than perfect. When it comes to not giving the Enemy a seat at your table, we have to start by wrapping our minds around this difficult truth: life is hard, yet Jesus invites us to follow Him anyway.

AN "EVEN THOUGH . . . I WILL" FAITH

On page after page in Scripture, we find people in situations where life has closed in on them. It might seem logical for them to chuck their faith. We wouldn't be surprised if they turned away from God in the midst of difficulty, or if they leaned toward their favorite addiction in an attempt to feel better. Unfortunately, that's what too many people do when the going gets tough.

See, when life turns hard for us, we're almost always tempted to welcome the Enemy at our table. But when we realize that Jesus invites us to follow Him *even though* life is hard, we discover the foundational truth for winning the battle for our minds.

This is the depth of faith we see throughout the Bible. Three Hebrew young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, worshipped God in an era when King Nebuchadnezzar had commanded everybody to worship only a huge, gold statue of himself. The goal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was to be obedient to God's call on their lives. When the music played (the signal for everybody to fall down and worship the golden

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statue), Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained standing. Because of their righteous actions, they wound up being thrown into a raging fire. What was God thinking? Surely that made no sense. They didn't do anything wrong. Shouldn't they be rewarded for their righteous living? Wasn't God for them and not against them?

The faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego didn't deflate. Instead, their faith inflated. Even on the edge of a fiery furnace, they were able to say to the king, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:17–18). Rescued out of their circumstances or left to go through the fire—either way—they would stay true to God.

Or take a look at Paul and Silas. They found themselves in prison. Their crime? They set free a female slave from demonic oppression. They did the right thing. Even then, the citizens of the city of Philippi gathered in a furious mob and dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities. They were severely beaten and thrown in jail. Paul and Silas were trying to honor God. They'd been on a mission trip, and this is what they got? Nobody would have faulted them if they had abandoned the faith, or whined and complained, or turned to some sort of an addiction in an attempt to quell their pain. But no. It was midnight. Their feet

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were fastened in stocks. Their backs were bloody and raw. And Paul and Silas were praying and singing songs of praise (Acts 16:16–40). That's a faith that inflates during difficult times.

I look at Paul and Silas, at Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and at all the people throughout Scripture who encountered times of intense trouble yet went bigger with their faith, and I marvel. The prophet Habakkuk stated it clearly when he cried out:

> Even though the fig trees have no fruit
> and no grapes grow on the vines,
> even though the olive crop fails
> and the fields produce no grain,
> even though the sheep all die
> and the cattle stalls are empty,
> I will still be joyful and glad,
> because the LORD God is my savior.
>
> (HABAKKUK 3:17–18 GNT)

The last two lines indicate huge faith. And did you notice the two phrases repeated three times in Habakkuk's prayer?

Even though . . . I will . . .

Habakkuk basically said, "*Even though* there's no harvest, and *even though* crops fail, and *even though* the fields are desolate, and *even though* the stalls of provision are empty, *I will* still be joyful and glad because the Lord God is my Savior. I have not

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lost my faith. In fact, my faith is even greater. I'm still going to rejoice in the Lord. I'm still going to worship God. I'm not going to get sidetracked by attitudes or actions that harm me. When I encounter hard times, my faith inflates."

Those two phrases lay out a powerful cause-and-effect relationship as an example for us to follow. *Even though* bad things happen, *I will* still praise the Lord. *Even though* bad things happen, *I will* not let my mind be lost to the Enemy.

That's the kind of faith I see in Jay and Katherine Wolf. As I wrote this chapter, they received word that new tests were needed to clarify a previously undetected set of neurological challenges. Depending on the results of those tests, they could be facing more challenging headwinds. They asked Shelley and me to pray for them before the scans were performed. When we finished praying, Katherine prayed for us about a storm that Shelley and I were navigating. In Katherine's prayer, she quoted Habakkuk 3:17–18. We said our amens, and I told her I was just going to be writing about those exact verses.

She said, "I love the last verse: 'God the Lord is my strength; He makes my feet like those of a deer; He makes me walk upon the heights!' I clung to those words when I was learning to walk again" (v. 19 BSB). Back in 2009, having received less than optimistic diagnoses from doctors, she personalized the passage for her situation:

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Though I cannot walk,
And I am confined to a wheelchair;
Though half my face is paralyzed,
And I cannot even smile;
Though I am extremely impaired,
And I cannot take care of my baby;
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior!

This is not the faith of a Christian who believes in God only when the sun shines. This is not a faith that wilts under pressure. This faith flourishes even though the pressure is on. This faith says, *Even though bad things are happening, I will praise the Lord.*

How might you personalize Habakkuk's prayer?

Even though I am under intense financial pressure . . .
Even though my spouse is with another person right now . . .
Even though we are in a global crisis . . .
Even though _____ . . .
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.
I will be joyful in God my Savior!

Developing this kind of "even though / I will" faith changes the temperature and trajectory of your life. When the pressure

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GOD ALMIGHTY—YOUR GOOD SHEPHERD—IS RIGHT THERE IN THE MIDST OF THE DIFFICULTY WITH YOU.

mounts, this kind of faith doesn't deflate. Instead, it actually inflates. It becomes bolder. More resolute and undaunted. More robust.

The development of an "even though" kind of faith has a lot to do with where we position our focus. We can develop this kind of faith, in Jesus' name, and the development of this faith is the foundational principle behind not giving the Enemy a seat at our table. To do that, we need to root our thinking in a well-known but widely untapped biblical promise.

AN ANCIENT SONG BRINGS NEW STRENGTH

If I asked you what the most well-known passage of Scripture is, maybe you'd say John 3:16. Sure, you've seen it scrawled on signs and held up at sporting events. But I think Psalm 23 might be even more famous. You hear this passage recited at weddings and funerals. It's been preached about, painted about, and sculpted. It's on memes scattered across social media. You'll find snippets of it in movies such as *Pale Rider* and *Titanic*. It's found in any number of songs—classics by Bach and Schubert, countless hymns and worship songs, and even Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise."

Psalm 23 is woven into the very fabric of our culture, yet if your church background is similar to mine, we both need to clear

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away the cobwebs. Because when I say Psalm 23, it's too easy to rattle off those famous words without even thinking.

> *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .* No problem there. *Green pastures. Quiet waters. The valley of the shadow. The rod. The staff. The table. The oily head.* Sure, I know what you're talking about.

We need to erase any tame and churchy thoughts about this psalm because it's highly relevant to what we're experiencing in our culture today. Right here, right now. We need to ask God to help us throw away the imagery of Grandma's needlepoint bookmark with the shepherd's crook and help us see how this passage packs an unbelievably powerful promise for us.

This passage depicts God as a personal and attentive Shepherd, One who intimately cares for the sheep yet is tough enough to defend them against attacks. This Shepherd will make sure you are rested and well fed. But He'll also beat back all those who threaten your safety and well-being. In time, we see this Shepherd most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ.

In John 10:1–21 Jesus outlined how He Himself is the Good Shepherd. Jesus knows His sheep—us. He protects us from thieves and robbers. He laid down His life for us. He guides us, and we are able to listen for His voice and know His voice. John 10 personifies Jesus as the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23. And in

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Psalm 23, the attributes and actions of the Shepherd-God are true of the Shepherd-Jesus. We know this because Hebrews 13:8 states plainly that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Here's the incredible invitation: Jesus is saying, *I want to be your Good Shepherd.* He is a personal, involved God who wants to shepherd your life. Can we just stop and breathe in this reality? The Good Shepherd, who also happens to be God, is offering to lead you through every moment of your life!

The key for us, then, is that we allow Jesus to shepherd us. See, all of us are shepherded whether we realize it or not. Your shepherd might not be Jesus. But something is going to lead you. Second Peter 2:19 says, "People are slaves to whatever has mastered them." So maybe the culture is going to lead you. The anthem of the world is going to lead you. You're going to go with whatever the social media flow is, and that's going to lead you.

Some of you are saying, *Nah, I don't have a shepherd. Nobody leads me. I call the shots. I make all the decisions around here.* Great—then you are your own shepherd. You're leading yourself. You're depending on yourself to guide you to still water and green pastures. One thing is for sure: if you are your own shepherd, it is likely you *are* in want. Unfortunately, when people take the reins of their own lives, they end up paraphrasing Psalm 23 into something like this:

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I am my own shepherd,
and I'm a mess.
I don't have everything I need. That's for sure.
I wouldn't know still water if it were staring right at me.
I haven't taken a rest in a green pasture for quite a while now.
I don't walk along paths of righteousness, but I know what fear and evil are.
I seek comfort wherever I can get it.
I can't stand my enemies. I want to hurt them.
My cup definitely overflows—I'm full of angst, consumed by anger and sorrow and rage. I'm so full I easily spill over. I'm packed so tight, it doesn't take much for me to explode.
I don't know what's going to follow me all the days of my life, but I can tell you this one thing:
My soul? Not so great.

When you allow Jesus to be your Shepherd, He steps into this stressed-out culture and becomes your replenishing guide. He leads you, watches over you, and gives you rest. Jesus gives you purpose. He shows you how to deal with your enemies so they don't tear you apart inside. Jesus gives you a hope and a future, and He'll restore your soul. He'll give you goodness and love for

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today, for tomorrow, and for every day for the rest of your life. Jesus will even give you an eternity with Him in paradise.

All of that is found in the promises of Psalm 23. If you haven't allowed Jesus to lead your life, why not do so right now? If you let Him lead you, you're not going to lack a thing. And your life will change for the better.

But there's something else: when you allow Jesus to lead you, it's not simply about Him giving you good things or doing helpful things for you. In Psalm 23 we see the first way the Good Shepherd is going to lead you will require Him making you do something.

WHY IT'S GOOD TO BE LED

No way, you're saying. *I'm getting off the bus right here. We're not even two chapters into this book yet, and already Jesus is going to make me do something.* Hold on. This mandate is foundational to how Jesus cares for you. He loves you enough to make you do something vital that you are not inclined to know how to do (or choose to do) on your own. But you're going to like it—because He makes you lie down in green pastures.

Sure, you can lie down on rocky ground if you want to. You can lie down in the heat and the dust. But Jesus says, *Lie down in green pastures. Get some rest. Stop trying to manage all the*

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outcomes. Take a break in the midst of the craziness of your day and acknowledge that I'm a Good Shepherd and I have your best interest at heart. By the way, while you're resting, go ahead and eat some green grass. Allow Me to nourish your soul. That's how I operate. I love you and take care of you, and any directive that I give you will be for your own benefit.

See, when God refers to us as sheep, it's a reflection of how we are wired, although it's not necessarily a compliment. Sheep need leadership. God's not saying that we're cute and cuddly. He's saying it's far too easy for us to have the wool pulled over our eyes. We don't see with as much discernment as we should. We don't even rest when we need to. When it comes to making decisions about our well-being, we're not always überintellects.

Any guesses why the water that the Good Shepherd leads His sheep to is specifically described as "still"? It's because sheep lack self-awareness. If a sheep sees a roaring river, it thinks that's a good place to get its thirst quenched. Never mind that sheep are covered with five sweaters' worth of wool. The sheep gets so jazzed at the sight of any water that he sticks his head straight down into that rushing river. All fifteen pounds of wool become soaking wet. *Kersplash.* The sheep gets sucked straight into the roaring river. Now he's heading for the rapids, looking back for a bailout from the shepherd . . . *baaaa!*

Fortunately, the Good Shepherd carries a crook—a long, sturdy stick with a hook at one end. Whenever we start heading

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toward things that initially look good but ultimately lead to our destruction, Jesus pulls us back to safety. Provided, of course, we let Him lead. God doesn't force us to follow Him. Sometimes only our noses become wet in the rushing water and Jesus catches us quickly. Sometimes we fight the Shepherd's crook and dive straight into the river. We're in the rapids now, heavy, soaked, and waterlogged, getting dragged under by the weight of our foolish choices. We've thumbed our sheep-noses for so long at the Shepherd that the river is washing us away to our destruction. We're headed out to sea.

I know I need a Good Shepherd. I've been a Christian for many years, yet I'm keenly aware of my need to constantly surrender the leadership of my life to God. I'm far too prone to stick my head into any rushing stream that looks good. I'm not as adept at making intelligent decisions as I think I am. I don't naturally lie down in green pastures, so I welcome this command. I need the Good Shepherd to be near, and I need to listen for His voice when He says, *No, Louie, we're not drinking there. We're not going up to the edge of Niagara Falls looking for our thirst to be quenched. Come over to this quiet little pool instead. Drink up at the quiet waters—and live.*

Leading us to still water is a foundational activity of a shepherd, and as such, it's essential to what I want to talk about in this book—you winning the battle of your mind. That's why I mention it in this early chapter. In a word, the Good Shepherd is . . .

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good. Because of His great love for us, Jesus always acts with our ultimate well-being in mind. The goodness of God can be found in all He is and says and does.

Yet the emphasis of the mid-to-later portions of Psalm 23 is what I want us to focus on because these verses point us to the "even though" type of faith I've mentioned. When we develop this kind of faith, it helps change our lives for good. In Psalm 23:4 we find these words, and they set up the context of the verses to come: "*Even though* I walk through the darkest valley, *I will* fear no evil."

Did you see the "even though / I will" in that famous verse? It's amazing that the Good Shepherd walks with us right through the valley of the shadow of death. God is there with us through real hardship. He's with us when a loved one gets sick. He's with us when we bury someone we care for. He's close when our heart is shattered. When we lose some sort of good thing we'd hoped for. Maybe you're experiencing the death of a relationship or the loss of a dream. You tried to get into a certain program, but it didn't work out. You were heading for a certain job but didn't get it. You were positive a certain person was interested in you, but it turned out that person wanted to be only friends. Maybe you and your spouse were trying to conceive a child, but that window has closed.

We can experience any number of losses in the valley of the shadow of death. Loss is a part of our story as humans. We all

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walk through grief, disappointment, and discouragement. That's why it's so key that *even though* King David walked through such great difficulty, he declared, "*I will* fear no evil." The Good Shepherd was there to guide and comfort him. Just as we did with Habakkuk's prayer, we can make this psalm personal in our lives.

How can you honestly say you're not afraid? The answer is shown in the second part of verse 4. We won't solve all the problems around us. We don't avoid every problem that comes our way. Yet we don't need to fear any evil, because the Good Shepherd is with us. His rod and staff comfort us. Let's not rush by this truth. Look at it slowly. Carefully.

God Almighty *is with us.*

No matter the troubles you're walking through right now, the good news is not simply that God will help you. That's not the whole message. The message is that God *is with you.* He's with you in the sickness. He's with you at the grave. He's with you when the job opportunity doesn't come through. He's with you when you receive hard news. He's with you in the chemo ward. He's with you in the storm, and in the wind, and in the trial, and in the valley. God Almighty—your Good Shepherd—is right there in the midst of the difficulty with you. This is a game-changing revelation, and it shifts your prayer life. Because you don't need to pray anymore, *God, I'm in a storm—help me.* Instead, you pray: *God, I'm in a storm. Thank You for being in this storm with me. You've got my back. How are we going to get through this together?*

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Peace and victory and freedom don't come from sitting around wishing we didn't have any problems or pain. No, the reality is that we all will be led through the valley of the shadow of death in some way, shape, or form. Jesus promises in Psalm 23 that peace, victory, and freedom will come *in the midst of* problems, pain, and loss. That's how we develop an "even though" kind of faith. We live by knowing that, in the midst of a broken world, God Almighty is with us.

A TABLE IN THE CONFLICT

Verse 5 of Psalm 23 is one of the most powerful verses in all of Scripture, and we're going to dwell on this verse in expanding circles for much of the rest of this book, so I wanted you to see some of the truths that led to this point in the psalm first. A beautiful twist is found in this verse. Remember how it says that *God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies*? Let that sink in.

I'm sure if I'd written that verse, I would have written it differently. If God is going to prepare a table for me, well, that's awesome. But I think it should be a table for me in *God's presence*. Not the presence of my enemies. Hey, come on, God—if I were writing this, I'd have You reserve a table by the window so while we eat together I can watch You smoke my enemies! Get them out

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of here. I don't want the enemies anywhere near me when I eat a meal—much less have dessert.

But that's not how Psalm 23:5 was written. God has prepared a table right in the middle of the battle. That table is laden with the richest of fare—and it's all good food for us to eat—yet that table is set right in the middle of the chemo ward. God has set out the silverware, and He's invited us to come and dine with Him—yet that table is right in the middle of our family being pulled apart. That table is right in the middle of job stress. It's smack-dab in the middle of relational tension. It's directly at the center of the hardships and arguments, the misunderstandings and persecutions, the depression and the death. Whatever we are battling, internally or externally, the table is right there in the middle of the trouble, at the epicenter of conflict.

Can you picture that table right now?

Sometimes the Bible uses the term *table* as a figurative expression for God's salvation, peace, and presence. Every Jewish listener would immediately know the significance of being invited to sit at someone's table, especially the table of the Lord. In days of old, before Jesus was incarnate and personally knowable as Savior and Friend, God's presence was represented in various ways. A cloud. Fire. Smoke that filled the room. As the story of God's people unfolded, God gave instructions for a tabernacle to be built. This was a place where sinful man could meet with holy God. One of the items to be placed in the tabernacle was a

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table, and on that table was to be placed the bread of the Presence. "Put the bread of the Presence on this table to be before me at all times" (Exodus 25:30).

Today, the same holy God invites us to dine with Him, and the invitation comes at a high price: Jesus. Redemption is completed when rebels are now in fellowship with God, enjoying God's feast. Notice Isaiah 25:6, where "the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples." Or Luke 13:29, where "people will . . . take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God."

All are welcome at the table of God's salvation. But the table described in Psalm 23:5 is a table of fellowship. It's an invitation-only table meant for you and the Good Shepherd. Don't worry; it's not exclusive in the sense that only one person is ever invited to this table. Rather, it's exclusive in the sense that everybody who is led by the Good Shepherd is invited to dine at this table with God. The Enemy is not welcome to sit here. If you are following Christ, then God has prepared such a table for you.

Okay, so let's picture this table together. Two seats are placed across from each other. The Good Shepherd stands on one side of the table. You stand on the other. Before you both sit, you first take in the feast that's set before your eyes. The specifics of your table will look different from mine. It's the Lord's table, to be clear, but He is setting the table with you in mind. On the table are all the foods you love to eat. Good food. Healthy food. Bountiful food. More than enough. You don't have to eat it all—it's not an

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invitation to gluttony. It's a true feast that satisfies your deepest longings. On the table is the kind of meal that makes you feel full and free at the same time.

Maybe the tray closest to you is laden with fresh fruit. A starter course. You see sun-warmed strawberries. Seedless watermelon. Ripened grapes. Crisp apples.

Another tray offers salads. There's crunchy romaine lettuce topped with extra-virgin olive oil, finely grated parmesan cheese, kosher salt, and freshly ground black pepper. Crunchy croutons are cut from hearty bread. Don't like a Caesar? How about a house salad, topped with fresh tomatoes and cucumbers? Off to the side is an epic charcuterie sampler.

A heavenly aroma wafts upward and catches your nose. Upon another tray sits the main course. For you meat eaters, it's grilled steak, golden brown and slightly charred on the outside, medium-rare and inviting inside. Or freshly caught brook trout, if you'd prefer. For vegetarians, it's orecchiette pasta with broccoli sauce. Or roasted chiles rellenos. Or delicious black bean enchiladas. Piping hot. Beautifully garnished.

Did I mention dessert? On the table is a delectable New York cheesecake. Hot apple pie with the smoothest, creamiest ice cream. Red velvet cake. Gooey brownies. Glazed donuts. Coconut cream pie.

Ready to eat?

You're a moment away from diving in, but suddenly—while

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you and the Good Shepherd are still standing behind your chairs—you notice you're not alone. Nobody is at the table except you and the Good Shepherd, but encircling you is a throng of people. You see them now. They're part of what makes this table so unique, because your enemies are still in view. The folks surrounding the table aren't happy you're here. They're scowling. Calling you names. Criticizing you, saying things about you that aren't true. They're out to undermine your efforts. They're filled with hate. Some want to stab you in the back.

The folks encircling you are representative of your troubles. Your problems. Your stressors. You're surrounded by calamity, pressure, anxiety, addiction, divorce, depression, family collapse, all sorts of pain. And then the unthinkable happens. Right in the middle of all the calamity and strife, the God of heaven calls you by name and says, "Please, sit down."

At this point you'd think it would be obvious that you would take the Good Shepherd up on His offer. But in today's fast-paced life, you and I can't be sure. It's more likely that we might stage a great social media photo, one that requires us to stand on our chairs to get just the right angle, and quickly post it to our feeds with the caption, "Unreal meal today with my King." We only have time to snap the pic as we grab a to-go cup of coffee and dash off to our next appointment. "Thank You so much, Jesus! You are the best, man. I love You for it. This is all too much, really! I've got to jet to a meeting, but I'll definitely catch You later. For sure."

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Or things could go quite differently. You and the Good Shepherd could both sit down.

"Are you thirsty?" He asks as He fills your glass with the freshest water.

Stunned and amazed, you try to process what is happening. *Is the God of the universe actually pouring me a glass of water?* You bite into a strawberry. You ladle up some hot buttered mashed potatoes. You sink your teeth into the juiciest of steaks.

This is the picture of "even though / I will" faith. *Even though I am surrounded by enemies, God has prepared a table for me, and I will sit down with Him.*

God's not chintzy. He doesn't have a scarcity mentality. He has a generosity mentality, and everything tastes as wonderful as it looks. You eat and you eat and you eat, and it's a wonderful meal. It's an experience that happens continually, moment by moment, for the rest of your life. This meal is at the core of your intimate relationship with God Almighty. He doesn't promise to eliminate the conflict. He hasn't removed you from the reality of trouble. But He has promised to prepare a table for you in the presence of your enemies.

Keep in mind, also, that in spite of all the delicious food you're diving into, the true importance of this table is not what's on it. The wonder of this meal is not the food.

It's about who you're at the table with.

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A MEAL WITH ALMIGHTY GOD

We will talk in the pages that follow about the life-changing benefits that come as we recognize and embrace all that God is providing for us at His table. Benefits that are real and important, such as victory over sin and an unmuddied mind; freedom from bondage and the ability to take control of our fears. Yet it's important to see from the start that the ultimate benefit for us all is not something God gives us. It's God Himself. That's the powerful message at the heart of this book. God is sitting at the table with us. God is walking with us through the valley of the shadow of death. We are invited to have a relationship with Almighty God.

This is not a self-help book where I'm giving you three steps to a pain-free life. It's a book of worship, where we see Jesus in new and biblical ways, and then respond in awe to Jesus the Great King. We see our identity rooted and established in Jesus, and our lives change because the Good Shepherd leads us every step of the way.

How easy it is for us to forget—or never fully know—who our dinner companion truly is. Do you know who's at the table with you? Let's just linger over this a minute so we catch its weight, because in 1 Timothy 1:17, God is described as "the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (ESV).

That's who's at the table with you.

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The apostle Paul, in Romans 11:33 and 36, described your dinner companion this way: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (ESV).

That's who's at the table with you.

The ancient spiritual leader Job described your dinner companion in comparison to the vastness of space, how earth is suspended as if over nothing, how God wraps up waters in His cloud and can cover the face of the full moon. God marks out the horizon and causes the pillars of heaven to quake; He can churn up the sea or blow upon the skies so they become fair. "And these are but the outer fringe of his works," Job said. "How faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?" (Job 26:14).

That's who sits at your table with you.

Your real reward is being at dinner with Jesus. The wonder and power of Psalm 23:5 is that it's not simply a nice passage of Scripture to embroider and stick on a wall. Seated at your table is God Almighty!

Okay. The meal's going great. It's just you and Jesus. You're feasting with Him and enjoying an unencumbered relationship together. You know that across the table is the Great King, and that He and He alone is your true and best reward. You know He loves you. But as I mentioned earlier, someone else—your

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greatest Enemy—wants in and is working persistently, stealthily, to sit at this table with you. That person is definitely not invited, but he knows that if he can win the battle of your mind, he can destroy you.

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