

All The Things That Weren't Supposed To Happen

1. Warm up: Jeff began Sunday's sermon by telling about a time when he and David surprised their brother-in-law by taking him for a birthday dinner at Chuck E. Cheese, instead of a really fancy restaurant. What's your all-time favorite restaurant?
2. Life is full of surprises. Just when we think we've got things figured out, it throws us for another loop. Things like divorce, a health diagnosis, a child with disabilities, loss of a job, or a vehicle that breaks down. So on Sunday we wrapped up our study of the Holy Spirit by exploring how the Spirit often uses circumstances to guide us to where we need to be in life. For insight, we looked to Psalm 23. Let's read it again, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Ancient Hebrew had no punctuation. So in its original form, verse 1 read as follows, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want," leaving it to the reader to decide how it should be punctuated. The ambiguity creates a thought-provoking double entendre. The statement can be read as meaning, "The Lord is the shepherd who meets my every need," or "The Lord is the shepherd I don't want." Have you ever found yourself in a circumstance so difficult, you were tempted to think, "God, if you're letting stuff like this happen to me, I'm not sure I want you in my life." If so, tell us about it.
 - b. The ambiguity of verse 1 seems to foreshadow the rest of the passage. Note the wording of verse 2. Instead of saying something like, "You invite me to lie down in green pastures," the verse actually says, "You *make* me to lie down in green pastures," indicating that God often has to use circumstances to *make* us go where we need to be. How do you feel about that? Do you believe God often works that way? Why or why not?
 - c. Jeff told about how God used circumstances to bring a brother-in-law into his life that he would have never chosen, but who turned out to be amazing. Looking back, Jeff found himself saying, "I had a plan, but God's plan was better." When have you had an experience like that? Tell us about it.
 - d. Read the quote found on p. 3 from a character named Jaber Crow in a Wendell Barry novel. Does this quote resonate with you? Why or why not?
3. Verse 5 takes us even deeper. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The significance of this verse also often goes right over our heads. We focus on the feasting part of the promise, but ignore the part about being surrounded by enemies even as we try to feast.
 - a. Picture yourself at your favorite restaurant, sitting down to enjoy your favorite meal, while five angry warriors are brandishing their swords and threatening you. Do you think you'd be able to relax and enjoy your meal? What do you think this verse is trying to tell us? And how do you feel about it?

- b. Psalm 27:3 echoes a similar theme, saying, “Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.” Have you ever found yourself in a time of great circumstantial stress, yet still able to enjoy “the feast of life” in the midst of it? If so, tell us about it, and tell us how you were able to experience peace and joy in the midst of it. What’s the key to being able to celebrate life even in the midst of great adversity?
4. Jeff summed up his understanding of Psalm 23 this way. When life takes you where you don’t want to go, **let go, let it be, and trust** that no matter how you got to where you are, the unseen hand of God (*i.e.*, the Holy Spirit) is at work in your life there. Trust that you are where you need to be, even when you have no idea why. Don’t waste energy bemoaning your circumstances; instead redirect that energy toward rising to meet the circumstances.
 - a. What factors keep us from “letting go” and “letting it be”?
 - b. Do you find it hard to trust that you’re where you need to be even when you have no idea why? What factors keep us from trusting?
 - c. Jeff gave a couple examples illustrating what it looks like to rise to meet our circumstances, rather than bemoaning them. He told about Paisley, the three-legged dog who loves to go for walks, and about Josh Turek, the Senate candidate in Iowa who has leveraged lessons from his life-long disability to become incredibly successful as a basketball player and now as an unlikely Senate candidate. Tell us about a time when you rose to meet a challenge, instead of bemoaning it. Do you think that made you a better person? Looking back, was it worth the struggle?
 - d. Chuck Swindoll once said, “The longer I live the more I become convinced that 10% of life is what happens to us, and 90% is how we react to it.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
5. Psalm 23 ends by reminding us that eventually the Holy Spirit will make all of us walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but promises that God’s Spirit will be with us on that journey and thereafter we will “live in the house of the Lord forever.”
 - a. One of life’s mysteries is why we have to die. Someone once said that death is meant to be the last great test of our discipleship – a test of whether we can surrender our life back to God with trust and confidence. Does that resonate with you as being true? Why or why not? What’s the purpose of death?
 - b. When someone dies young, we struggle to make sense of it. Jeff suggested that’s because we don’t know the rest of the story, which is taking place in heaven. In your life right now, you may find yourself in a circumstance whose purpose is not yet clear because the stories not yet over. Are you facing such a circumstance? What is it? Are you willing to confess by faith that the Spirit can and will work through that circumstance to create something meaningful and beneficial?

Psalm 23:1-6, a Psalm of David

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² You make me lie down in green pastures; you lead me beside still waters; ³ you restore my soul. You lead me in right paths for your name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I 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.

Excerpt from Jaber Crow, by Wendell Barry

“I can't look back from where I am now and feel that I have been very much in charge of my life. I've made plans enough, but I see now that I have never lived by plan. Nearly everything that's happened to me has happened by surprise. Often I've not known where I was going until I was already there. I've had my share of [plans], but my life has come to me mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I've received better than I deserved. I'm just an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I've been unable to shake the feeling that I've been led – make of that what you will.”