



Order of Service

The Psalm 23 Garden: A prayer of blessing

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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.

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, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Amen.

Psalm 23: A prayer for two voices

- The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*
- God our Father, we thank you for your care for us throughout our lives. When we are facing hard times, assure us of your loving purposes for us.
 - He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.*
 - We thank you for times of refreshment, when we enjoy the world you have made, take pleasure in friends and family, and feel our souls restored.
- He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*
 - Faced with so many choices between right and wrong, we ask for wisdom to choose rightly. We pray that our choices may be in line with your own nature.
- 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.*
 - Keep us safe in the dark valleys, Lord. When we are grieving or afraid, help us remember your love and your power.
- You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*
 - We thank you for your table in the wilderness, where we find asylum and sanctuary; and we pray that those we call enemies might come to join us as your guests as well.
- Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*
 - When we don't see your goodness and mercy ahead of us, help us to trust that they follow us close behind and that we have an eternal home with you.

Amen.



Sermon resource

Gardens have a surprisingly important place in the Bible. There are three in particular that mark significant moments in the drama of Scripture.

- 1. In the very earliest picture we have of God, in Genesis 2, he is a gardener. He makes Eden for Adam and Eve as a perfect place for them to inhabit. They still have to work in it – the garden is to be productive as well as beautiful – but it is definitely a garden rather than a field.**

This garden stands for a place of innocence, in which human beings are at peace with God and with the creation – and the creation is at peace with itself. Wild animals eat grass rather than each other, and the human beings don't kill animals for food or clothing (1.29-30).

The sin of Adam and Eve, when they ate the forbidden fruit, resulted in them being expelled from the garden and excluded from the face-to-face relationship with God they had enjoyed before.

The ancient story is a picture of rest, peace and harmony. This garden is a good place to be.

- 2. The second garden is Gethsemane, where Jesus withdrew to be with his disciples before his trial and crucifixion. It is outside the walls of Jerusalem at the foot of the Mount of Olives, and its name means 'oil press' in Hebrew.**

Matthew tells us he was with Peter, James and John and they could not stay awake to pray with him, in spite of his rebuke. He also says that 'Grief and anguish overcame him' (26.37); Jesus prays that the 'cup of suffering' should be taken away from him, 'Yet not what I want, but what you want' (verse 39).

Luke tells us that his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (23.44) and that Judas came and betrayed him with a kiss (verse 47).

- 3. The third garden is in Revelation 22, though it is not called a garden: perhaps it's more like an urban park.**

The writer imagines a world in which God makes all things new. In the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, there is a river 'sparkling like crystal' flowing down the main street. And, he says: 'On each side of the river was the tree of life, which bears fruit twelve times a year, once each month; and its leaves are for the healing of the nations' (22.2); it's a picture drawn from Ezekiel 47.12.

Leaves were used for healing in early medicine, but this is more than just physical healing. The 'nations' are warring countries and empires. This is a picture of reconciliation at last.

The tree in the Garden of Eden brought alienation and sorrow. Perhaps a tree cut from Gethsemane provided the wood for the cross. But the tree in the New Jerusalem stands for the completion of God's purposes for humankind, with healing and restoration.

And what about Psalm 23? When we talk about these Bible gardens, we aren't just making interesting connections between stories. They say something about our own experiences today – and Psalm 23 reflects these too.

The green pastures and quiet waters are like the Garden of Eden, where everything's right and we are at peace with God. That doesn't always last – like Adam and Eve, we know what it's like to do wrong and feel we're shut out from God's presence.

The valley as dark as death, or the 'valley of the shadow of death' as some translations say, is like Gethsemane, where Jesus went through such spiritual agonies. The psalmist knew those valleys, and so do we.

But the last verse of the Psalm speaks of God's enduring goodness, when everything is right: 'I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life; and your house will be my home as long as I live.' The New Testament picture of that 'home' is the New Jerusalem, in a city park where Eden is restored.

The Bible's gardens and the psalmist's journey remind us that God is with us throughout our lives, and that our own stories are part of the great story of Scripture. 'The Lord is my Shepherd', now and in eternity.

