

Psalm 23 in the Matthew Bible: See what's changed since we received the original English translations in the Reformation!

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When I first came to the Matthew Bible, I was surprised by Psalm 23. It was Coverdale's 1535 rendering, which John Rogers brought into the Matthew Bible. It seemed strange; these were not the familiar verses I had learned! But upon investigation, I discovered that the Matthew rendering is faithful to a long-held but now largely forgotten understanding that this Psalm is about God's word. It is about the word of God as our very food and sustenance. It really is very different from the rendering that we moderns know, because later translations followed the Geneva revision.



For starters, check out verses 1 and 2 in the Matthew Bible, together with John Rogers' commentary:

Psalm 23:1-2

Matthew Bible The Lord is my shepherd; I can want nothing. He feedeth me in a green pasture, and leadeth me to a fresh water.

Rogers' note: This fresh water is the healthful water of the word of God.

This teaches us that the word of God is like healthy and refreshing water, as well as a green pasture. This was also the understanding of St. Augustine and Martin Luther. According to them, the whole Psalm is mainly about God's word, which quickens the soul to life and brings us forth into the way of righteousness (v. 3). It is also the table that is set before us in the presence of our enemies (v. 5).

Myles Coverdale made minor revisions to these verses in the Great Bible, but in the Geneva version there were sweeping changes, and the Geneva notes reinterpreted the Psalm. Following is a comparison, and then a brief discussion:

Psalm 23, Matthew Bible	Psalm 23, Geneva Bible
<p>Summary: He describeth the wonderful surety and great grace of a faithful and sure confidence in God.</p>	<p>Summary: Because the Prophet had proved the great mercies of God at divers times, and in sundry manners, he gathereth a certain assurance, fully persuading himself that God will continue the very same goodness towards him forever.</p>
<p>1 The Lord is my shepherd; I can want nothing.</p> <p>2 He feedeth me in a green pasture, and leadeth me to a fresh ^(a)water.</p> <p>3 He quickeneth my soul, and bringeth me forth in the way of righteousness for his name's sake.</p> <p>4 Though I should walk now in the valley of the ^(b)shadow of death, yet I fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy staff and thy sheep-hook comfort me.</p> <p>5 Thou preparest a ^(c)table before me against [in the presence of of] mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, and fillest my cup full.</p> <p>6 O let thy loving kindness and mercy follow me all the days of my life, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord forever.</p>	<p>1 The Lord is my shepherd, ^(a)I shall not want.</p> <p>2 He maketh me to rest in green pastures, and leadeth me by the still waters.</p> <p>3 He ^(b)restoreth my soul, and leadeth me in the ^(c)paths of righteousness for his name's sake.</p> <p>4 Yea, though I should walk through the valley of the ^(d)shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me: thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.</p> <p>5 Thou doest prepare a ^(e)table before me in the sight of mine adversaries: thou doest ^(f)anoint mine head with oil, and my cup runneth over.</p> <p>6 Doubtless kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall remain a long season in the ^(g)house of the Lord.</p>

Matthew Bible Notes:	Geneva Bible Notes:
<p>(a) v.2 This fresh water is the healthful water of the word of God, of which is said Esai lv.a*</p> <p>(b)v.4 Shadow for darkness and affliction, as [at] Esai li.e</p> <p>(c) v.5 Look the Psalm lxxviii.c. (Rogers' note on Psalm 78:19 says, "By the 'table' is understood all sorts of victuals necessary for man, yet it is often taken for the bread and water of the wisdom of the word of God, as in the Psalm xxiii.b. [Psalm 23:5]")</p> <p>*At Isa. lv (55), Rogers says the Scriptures call God's word wine, water, and milk, reflecting its different works in man.</p>	<p>(a) v.1 He had care over me & ministreth unto me all things</p> <p>(b) v.3 He comforteth or refresheth me.</p> <p>(c) v.3 Plain, or straight ways.</p> <p>(d) v.4 Though he were in danger of death, as the sheep that wandereth in the dark valley without his shepherd.</p> <p>(e) v.5 Albeit his enemies sought to destroy him, yet God delivereth him, & dealeth most liberally with him in despite of them.</p> <p>(f) v.5 As was the manner of great feasts.</p> <p>(g) v.6 He setteth not his felicities in the pleasures of this world, but in the fear and service of God.</p>

Some differences:

(1) In the Matthew Bible, the emphasis is all upon the word of God, and its work in us to give health, feed, refresh, comfort, and sustain, even in affliction. The Geneva version refers to rest, stillness, and so forth, but, as is evident, without the word. Further, the Matthew Bible does not promise rest or stillness, but food and comfort in tribulation. This is a very different focus, and creates different expectations.

(2) At v. 3, the idea of the new birth through the word is not in the Geneva Bible. (The old English 'quicken' meant more than it does now: 'quicken *to life*' or 'give life'.)

(3) At v. 6, eternal life is clearly taught in the Matthew Bible. However, the Geneva Bible refers only to "a long season," and in note (g), the reference is to serving God in this world; the Church as the 'house' is in view.

The changes seen here reflect a pattern of revisions in the Geneva Bible, which, among other things, shift focus to the work and vision of the Church on earth. We will see this more clearly in Part 2 of *The Story of the Matthew Bible*.

The concept of eternal life was recovered in verse 6 in the King James Version, but it remains difficult to discern teaching about the word of God. To my mind, the Geneva translation was a regrettable influence upon the KJV here.

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