

# Restoration for the Soul

## A Reflection on Psalm 23

Psalm 23 John 10:11-13, 22-30  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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**How are things with your soul?** I ask that as an honest and authentic question. The world we live in, though created by God and filled with wonder and beauty, can also be detrimental to our state of well-being – sometimes to our very lives. The world has a way of draining our energy, robbing us of the joy of living, and depleting our sense of wonder. Perhaps that's why scripture instructs us to be *in* the world, but not of the world.

Who among us doesn't need rest, renewal and restoration for our bodies, minds, and spirits? Anxiety, fear, confusion, anger, worry, stress and the like, all contribute to one of our deepest desires – to find some peace and quiet, and a sense of healing and wholeness in our hectic lives. I posted on Facebook earlier this week a series of questions:

- What does rest look like in your life?
- What could rest look like in your life?
- What do you want rest to look like in your life?
- What practices feed your soul?
- What things bring you life and help you rest?
- What if you actually gave yourself permission to rest, rather than perform?

In that post was a gif of a quote from remarkable author Anne Lamott. "Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes... including you! That's good advice. So, let me ask the question again: What brings peace, calm, renewal, and rest to your life? Or perhaps I should ask that from a spiritual perspective: **Where has God led you to find rest, refreshment, and restoration – those green pastures and still waters?**

A theological understanding that the Sacred Presence of God is present beyond, with, and within all of creation, means, of course, that we can connect with that Presence through any and all activities, at any time and at any place. So yes, for many of us restoration can come in and through our faith and spiritual journey.

I would add that even with all our intellectual debates over how to interpret of the Bible, the scriptures themselves remain a source of comfort and strength for many. One of my favorite passages to recall when life is tough is **Matthew 11:28-29** (NRSV).

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

Another favorite passage, from the Hebrew scriptures, which we call our Old Testament, is **Psalm 23**. Countless people over thousands of years have found comfort in the words:

*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.*

You may have noticed that both of those passages refer to our **soul**. I want to take a brief detour at this point to talk about the biblical understanding of the word "soul." The English translation of *soul* is from the Hebrew word, *nephesh*, and from the Greek word, *psykhe*. Most folks identify with the way *Webster's Dictionary* defines soul: The spiritual nature of humans, regarded as immortal, separable from the body at death. Well I hate to mess with your understanding of the term soul (or maybe I don't) but our modern western perspective has it wrong when we go back to the original languages.

In the Old Testament, and somewhat in the New Testament, **the soul refers not just to the spiritual, but also the physical and emotional as well. The Bible consistently refers to the soul as the entirety of a living being** (and in Genesis that includes animals as well as humans). **Your soul, then, is your total self, that which makes you, you.** Therefore, from a biblical perspective, when we declare that God restores and provides rest for our soul, we need to understand that as a **restoration of the totality of our being – the center of our life, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.**

There is deep comfort in recognizing and acknowledging that the care of your soul, its restoration, is of concern to God. To restore your soul means to revive it and to enliven it. With that, however, comes an ethical and moral purpose. Psalm 23 reveals that the restoration of our soul allows for divine guidance in the right paths of life, or "paths of righteousness" in the King James. What are rights paths? **A right path is one that leads to what the author of the Gospel of John calls abundant life – those paths and ways of life that help us to live life fully.**

The psalmist reveals, however, that sometimes our paths in life take us through dark, disturbing, and threatening places. Verse 4 (in the King James Version) begins, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." There's probably not a person in this country who hasn't heard these words at a funeral or memorial service. When looking at the original Hebrew language, however, we learn that the single word translated as the phrase "shadow of death," is actually too narrow of a translation. A more accurate translation is "deep darkness." That is why the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (the version of our Pew Bibles) uses the phrase, **"Even though I walk through the darkest valley."** This translation gives this psalm a much greater range of meaning and human experience than just dealing with the issue of death, important as that is. **For we all walk through valleys of deep darkness at many different times during our lives** – times of great pain, sorrow, fear, anxiety, danger, crisis, illness, perhaps danger, and even tragedy.

**What are the dark valleys that you have walked through in your life? Perhaps you're walking through one right now.** The stark reality of this psalm is the acknowledgment that God does not necessarily prevent us from facing dangers, threats, and dark valleys. Sometimes we are tempted, however, to think we walk through those tough times alone. **The great promise of this psalm, however, and one of the most central themes throughout the entire Bible, is that no matter what the threat or**

**difficulty we may face in life, God is right there with us. As the psalmist declares, “For thou art with me.”** “God with us”, literally in the Hebrew, Emmanuel – is a term also associated with Jesus, carrying this Jewish theological belief directly into Christian theological thought.

God's Sacred Presence is always with us, always with you, to provide you with comfort, strength, and restoration of your soul. Perhaps it was in reflecting back on a difficult time in your life that you came to a better recognition of that Presence that was with you, like in that poem *Footprints*.

One more quick point about the differences in meaning found in translating the Hebrew into English. Verse 6 states, “Surely goodness and mercy shall *follow* me all the days of my life.” **The word “follow” is a weak translation of the Hebrew word that is used. It carries a much more active meaning, more along the lines of pursuing or even chasing.** It's the word used when psalmists write about how their enemies pursue them. And though this author writes about an abundant meal set in the presence of his enemies, it is not those enemies that pursue and chase after him, but rather it is God's goodness and mercy and love and kindness. **Put that visual into your heart and mind, of God pursuing and chasing after you with goodness and mercy, love and kindness.** This may help you to better recognize God's Presence in your life when you do encounter such goodness and mercy.

In the end, the beautifully poetic and vivid imagery used by the psalmist expresses a personal testimony of confidence, dependence, and trust in God. Notice that the psalmist declares, “The Lord is **my** Shepherd...” I invite you to internalize and personalize this psalm for yourself, so that it may serve as a song of comfort, strength, peace, confidence, and rest for your soul in your journey of faith.

**“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” May that promise alone help bring restoration to your soul.**

Amen.