

# Soul Restoration

## A Reflection on Psalm 23

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

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I forget who first mentioned this to me, but if you *really* want to know how someone is doing, don't ask, "How are you?", because the answer is almost always, "Fine," whether it is or not. Instead, ask "**How are things with your soul?**" That's a question worth pondering.

The world we live in, though created by God and filled with wonder and beauty, is often 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. So let me ask:

- What does rest look like in your life?
- What could rest look like in your life?
- What practices feed your soul?
- What if you gave yourself permission to rest, rather than perform?

Author Anne Lamott wisely comments, "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 in the context of Psalm 23. **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 activity, and at any time at any place. This is a central understanding in Celtic spirituality and most indigenous spiritualities.**

Though we (rightly) often get wrapped up in intellectual debates over biblical interpretation, the scriptures themselves remain a powerful source of comfort and strength. One of my favorite passages to recall when life is tough is **Matthew 11:28-29**, where Jesus offers the following invitation. "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 the 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. God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still waters; **God 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 term "soul." The English translation of *soul* is from the Hebrew word, *nephesh*, and from the Greek word, *psykhe*. Most folks would probably define the soul something like this: The spiritual nature of humans, regarded as immortal, separable from the body at death. However, our 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, 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 to be found in recognizing and acknowledging that the care of your soul, and its restoration, is of great concern to God. To restore your soul means to revive it and to enliven it. That comes, however, with 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 Version. **What are right 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, as modeled by Jesus, 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 **too narrow of a translation. A more accurate translation in English 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, 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 never promises that we won't have to face dangers, threats, and dark valleys.** Sometimes we are tempted, however, to think we walk through those tough times alone. While this is true for everyone, it may be especially true for those of us who are single. 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, including the consequences of our own bad decisions, God is always right there with us.** As the psalmist declares, "For you are with me." The Hebrew word Emmanuel, literally "God with us", is a term associated with Jesus, carrying this Jewish theological belief directly into Christian theological thought.

God's Sacred Presence is always with and within us, always with and within you, to provide you with comfort, strength, and restoration of your soul. Yet, it is often when reflecting back on difficult times in your life that you come to a better recognition of

that Presence which was with you. It's like in that popular poem *Footprints in the Sand*, when a person dreamed of walking along the beach with God, thus two sets of footprints. But when looking back at the lowest and most troublesome times in life found only one set of footprints in the sand. After questioning why God had left, God replies, "I love you and would never, never leave you. During your times of trials and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you." While some may find this poem a bit trite and simplistic, I will admit that I have found it to be true in my own journey of life and faith.

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. For 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, mercy, love, kindness, and grace that do the pursuing. **Put that visual image into your heart and mind, of God 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 and grace.

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 life and faith**. Let the promise of God's constant Presence, which seeks and desires your wholeness and well-being, help bring restoration to your soul.

To close, I want to share a meditation on Psalm 23 from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, entitled, "**Present Shepherd**".

In this time of fear and uncertainty  
we look with anxiety to the future.  
But the Good Shepherd leads you  
into the present moment.

Anxiety is an invader from the future.  
The Shepherd of our Souls offers us  
courage and comfort in this moment.  
Follow the path into the present.

The green pastures may be distant  
from this shadowed valley,  
but they are greater than you know.  
You fear the smallness of your vision.

Meanwhile the Shepherd of our Souls is here  
with us, leading us, right now.  
Behold this moment. Behold the love.  
Look till you see beauty. Stay till you know.

It is not protection from the future,  
but the presence of the Shepherd,  
even in the darkest day, that is our peace.  
Trust that peace. Follow that shepherd

into this moment. Be present.  
Stop and breathe, and breathe again.  
No matter what happens in the future  
God is here, with you, now. Be present.

Amen.