

*Restore My Soul*  
*A Journey through*  
*Psalm 23*



*by Dr. Robbi Francovich*

## Psalm 23

Psalm 23 (Marty Haugen)	<i>Psalm 23 (NIV) A psalm of David.</i>
<p>Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.</p> <p>God is my shepherd, so nothing shall I want, I rest in the meadows of faithfulness and love, I walk by the quiet waters of peace.</p> <p>Gently you raise me and heal my weary soul, you lead me by pathways of righteousness and truth, my spirit shall sing the music of your name.</p> <p>Though I should wander the valley of death, I fear no evil, for you are at my side, your rod and your staff, my comfort and my hope.</p> <p>You have set me a banquet of love in the face of hatred, crowning me with love beyond my pow'r to hold.</p> <p>Surely your kindness and mercy follow me all the days of my life; I will dwell in the house of my God for evermore.</p>	<p><i>A psalm of David.</i></p> <p><sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  he leads me beside quiet waters,  <sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul.  He guides me along the right paths  for his name's sake.  <sup>4</sup> Even though I walk  through the darkest valley,<sup>[a]</sup>  I will fear no evil,  for you are with me;  your rod and your staff,  they comfort me.  <sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  in the presence of my enemies.  You anoint my head with oil;  my cup overflows.  <sup>6</sup> Surely your goodness and love will  follow me  all the days of my life,  and I will dwell in the house of the LORD  forever.</p>

## *Restore My Soul*

### *A Journey through Psalm 23*

*Restore My Soul*, is a journey of *return* and *rest* through the familiar and beloved Psalm 23. Using sensory imagination we will walk the sheep path, in restoring relationship with God as our Shepherd King. On a personal note, I wrote these meditations during a season as a caregiver for my mother in home hospice care.

*Read the Psalm* in different translations and take time to savor the words through the practice of divine reading: reading slowly and with the intent to listen for the word that speaks to you. Memorize the six verses of the Psalm so you can meditate on them throughout the day.

#### *Guided Meditations.*

##### *Enough*

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing."* Psalm 23:1 (NIV)

##### *Soul Rest*

*"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.  
He restores my soul."* Psalm 23:1-3

##### *Gone Astray*

*"(My Shepherd) restores my soul."* Psalm 23:3

##### *This is the Way*

*"He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."* Psalm 23:3

##### *Shadowy Path*

*"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me."* Psalm 23:4

##### *Stay With Me*

*"Your rod and your staff, they comfort me."* Psalm 23:4

##### *Shepherd Me*

*"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."* Psalm 23:5

##### *Anoint Me*

*"You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."* Psalm 23:5

##### *Goodness, Mercy!*

*"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."* Psalm 23:6

## Enough

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing." (NIV)*



This opening line of Psalm 23 is one of the most recognized and quoted verses in the Bible.

Breathe this verse in as a life-giving prayer: take a long breath in, saying, "The Lord is my shepherd," then exhale out, "I lack nothing."

The simple, comforting imagery soothes the soul as it focuses on relationship with the Shepherd,

who is the great I AM, the Almighty Creator, the Sovereign Holy One.

The image of God as Shepherd goes back to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and leader of God's people. In a blessing for his grandchildren, he identifies God as *"the One who has been my Shepherd all my life long to this day."* Genesis 48:15

The prophet Isaiah develops the image of the shepherd God into one of greatness, a God who *"comes with might as a ruler"* yet *"tends his flock like a shepherd."* (Isaiah 40:10-11) The Lord God is our Shepherd King. Yet, we might have an image of a shepherd as weak, with nothing to do but watch sheep—not realizing that sheep are helpless creatures who often are in danger of disease and despair. Shepherding involves great management skills for the health, safety, and productivity of the flock, as well as a compassionate heart for the needs of each and every lamb. The Shepherd is a protector against all enemies and disease, a provider of daily needs and rest, as well as a mentor and guide who is ever present to comfort and lead.

**IMAGINE.** Take a moment to review some big events and turning points in your life and look for the presence of God guarding and guiding you along your life path. Use your imagination and memory to see where you were being shepherded by God. Now think about today, the coming week, how do you imagine the Shepherd Ruler watching over you? What care do you most need today?

**RETURN. Life without Lack.** "I lack nothing... describes the life we all desire—a life in which we want for nothing, or better yet, lack nothing. The psalmist is portraying a life we were meant to enjoy, one that is imminently available to us." Dallas Willard in *Life Without Lack*.

"But do you believe this verse is actually true?" asks Willard.

Returning to a life without lack with the Shepherd might mean letting go of being in control or being in charge. Allow yourself to be shepherded like a sheep, allowing someone else to care for you. The result of seeking God's kingdom first, not our own, as Jesus taught, is that *"everything else will be added."* (Matthew 6:33) Do you believe this?

**REST. Enough.** We can enjoy soul rest in understanding that a life without lack has the idea of "enough." Enough is the amount that satisfies, that brings rest in knowing the Shepherd's care is all we need:

*"My people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the Lord."* Jeremiah 31:14

As you examine your heart today, you may wrestle with these questions: Is God enough, am I enough, do I have enough? Allow Christ to be enough because Christ IS enough:

Christ our Shepherd, became the sacrificial lamb to bring us to God. He suffered for our sins so that we are made alive in the spirit. In Christ we are enough. And God declares that Jesus is enough, saying: *"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."* Mark 1:11

And we also are "enough" as beloved children of God:

*"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"* 1 John 3:1a (NIV)

Say to yourself now: Christ is enough. I am enough. I trust you, the Shepherd of my Soul.

Rest.

**BREATH PRAYER.** Every day this week say Psalm 23:1 as a breath prayer and a praise for the care of the Divine, the one who is goodness, that you are enough, you are beloved:

Breathe in: "The Lord is my Shepherd." Exhale: "I lack nothing." Repeat taking slow and deep breaths.

**PRAISE.** *Ich habe genug*, BWV 82, (English: *I have enough*) is a church cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach's expressive and serene oboe melody conveys the rest that comes to the body and soul at the same time, as Simeon took up Jesus in his arms at his presentation in the temple. (Luke 2:22-38) Bach captures this contented "enough-ness" which often cannot be expressed in words.

<https://pray-as-you-go.org/player/prayer/2021-02-02> Prayerfully engage and listen to David Thomas with the Taverner Players singing *Ich Habe Genug*, BWV82.



## *Soul Rest*

*The Shepherd makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.  
He restores my soul. Psalm 23:1-3*



**IMAGINE.** This beloved Psalm's promise of return and rest is a lifeline for weary souls. Look at the picture and recite Psalm 23. Close your eyes and see this place of rest, just beside the waters. What does it look like, what sounds do you hear? Spend a few moments using your imagination to see the Shepherd moving you into a place of restoration.

As you hear the peaceful waters, hear also the Shepherd's encouragement: *"All of you who are surviving the days of uncertainty and disease, look to my grace, the favor of my presence in a great wilderness time of deprivation and isolation. Just as Moses found favor with me, you also are my beloved people. Just as I knew him by name and we spoke face to face as friends, I know you. It is important that you are seeking rest and you will be restored. I will comfort and satisfy you with goodness and restore your weary soul with my faithful presence and steadfast love. Hear my Word, allow my Word to guide you on the straight path, and you will walk again by brooks of water."* (Adapted from Jeremiah 31, Exodus 33)

**REST.** He makes me to lie down in green pastures. What kind of a sheep lies down, or takes a rest in a green pasture--the one who has eaten its fill and is satisfied. If the sheep is not full, she'll be eating, not lying down. In spiritual formation vocabulary, lying down in green pastures is defined as rest. It is not a place we find, but one we are led to and we honor God and our body, soul and spirit living in restful rhythms.

I was a 24/7 caregiver for my mother who was in the hospital and then in hospice at home. We got home from the hospital just as a record-breaking, great Texas ice storm began. We were snowed in without water for a week and power for a few days. My dear husband never rested as he gathered snow for needed water. And when water was restored, there was no rest as we had to put our two homes back in order. My sister came to relieve us and we went home for a much-needed break. As services were restored, we finally laid down to uninterrupted rest. Yet true rest could come only as I both mentally and physically surrendered the responsibility, the tasks, and the stress to another.

After days without water, I woke up with great joy at 3 am when I heard the gurgling from the open tap. What happiness to enjoy something so essential, so sweet, when we have been deprived. Water is a daily necessity and gift we take for granted until it is missing. Jesus offers living water to those whose spirits are thirsty for relationship with God. Oh, what joy to be led by the Lord to the waters that quench our spiritual thirst. *"O Lord take me to your river, walk with me by the sweet brook."* (Jeremiah 31:9)

**RETURN. He leads me beside the still waters.** What do you need to let go of, to surrender, in order to accept the rest of the Shepherd's green pastures? What physical, emotional, or mental limitations to rest come up as you lie down? Acknowledge those now and voice your thoughts as a prayer: *"I pour out my soul. My tears have been my food day and night. My soul thirst for the living God."* Psalm 42

Have you struggled with a dry season, brokenness, or apathy? What one step forward can you take to allow the Shepherd to lead you to still waters? The broken depths of my soul were healed and energized by God's spirit to live another day. In the midst of any crisis, survival mode becomes acute, and we focus on doing the needful for each day. The Shepherd of our souls stands ready each day to restore our very core with rest.

After my second *Moderna* vaccine, I experienced unpleasant side effects: chills, headache, nausea, and an elevated heart rate over 120 bpm. I put a cold pack on my face and neck to stimulate the nerve that connects the brain to the heart in order to regulate the fast heartbeat. And, thankfully my heart did slow down. What a perfect illustration of my need to regulate and restore spirit connections with the Lord God. Often my life can become so anxious and full that it is difficult to rest. Rest may only come when I unplug from everything, get out of a stressful environment for a walk or day away, and to let go and allow others to take care of things.

What are ways to get the message from your busy brain to your heart to slow down and rest?

**BREATH PRAYER.** Repeat this breath prayer along with Psalm 23 every day this week: *Walk with me O Lord, by brooks of still water.* Jeremiah 31:9. Inhale: Walk with me O Lord, Exhale: By brooks of still water.

**PRAISE.** Allow space and time for sacred connection and restoration through music:

Salt of the Sound, Be Still <https://youtu.be/fR1tc4wq7nU>

The Lord is My Shepherd, Paul Zach, Integrity Music. <https://youtu.be/0cHL1Ut47wE>

## *Gone Astray*

*"(My Shepherd) restores my soul." Psalm 23:3*



*"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned-- everyone--to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him (The Suffering Servant) the iniquity of us all." Isaiah 53:6*

*Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God. Psalm 42:11*

Stray animal rescue videos fascinate me, and in particular, homeless dog rescues. Sadly, many dogs are living on the streets, and humans for that matter, and in time they become almost unrecognizable from their former selves. Dogs end up matted messes of filth, disease, and vermin. The allure of the videos, of course, is the transformation of the before and after of their rescue. Rescuers first take the dog to the groomer to shave off all the mess before heading to the vet. After lots of love and a safe place to heal, the dog's former glory is restored.

The Scriptures offer agrarian "rescue" stories, such as sheep who have gone their own way and must be returned to life with the Shepherd. Going astray is like "being cast," a common danger for sheep, as shown in the picture. The pregnant ewe or stocky sheep with a full fleece are prone to roll over on their backs. Then unable to get up, they are vulnerable and distressed and can die in a short period of time.

**IMAGINE.** Look at the picture of the cast sheep. Can you relate to the look on its face? Have you ever felt like this, on your back, flailing and unable to get up? Take some moments to see the Shepherd approaching, listen to the gentle voice calling out to you, and see him pick you up and set you on your feet again.

Phillip Keller, a shepherd himself, explains the reason for a sheep becoming "cast" in his classic *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*:

*When long fleece becomes heavily matted with mud, manure, burrs and other debris, a sheep can become cast, weighted down with its own wool. They will lie down comfortably to stretch*



*out or relax and their center of gravity suddenly shifts and their feet no longer touch the ground. In the panic and struggle to get up, gasses build in the stomach and expand and cut off the circulation in the legs. The Shepherd must quickly pick up the sheep and rub its legs to get it on its feet again. The Shepherd also must shear the sheep of its heavy load to restore it to good health.*

**RETURN.** The long, matted wool is a symbol of the condition of our life apart from the care of a loving, wise shepherd. After we have “gone astray” and picked up the mess of the world around us, often the only remedy is “shearing off” all the offensive habits and sins that keep us fat and unhappy on our backs.

Spend some time now in Psalm 51. As you read, ask the Spirit to show you where your life has turned over into dangerous and unhealthy ways.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*

*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

**REST.** The Psalmist asks God to restore the joy of his salvation. Make this prayer your own and rest in the love and mercy of the Shepherd:

*O God, my shepherd, it is painful to see the mess I’ve become by my own neglect. I’ve sat in this sad state too long, unable to get up. Forgive me for being too comfortable, too heavy with sin, to even cry out for help. Although, I resist and cry, please shear off my sin, restore me to the joy of relationship with you. I offer you my broken heart and ask you to teach me wisdom and truth. Thank you for your healing forgiveness. Amen.*

**PRAISE.** Allow space and time for sacred connection and restoration through music.  
*All we like sheep have gone astray*, Gramophone Chorus <https://youtu.be/Ld0mplvq16w>

**Resource:** “How to save a sheep” Encourage someone this week to “get up.”  
<https://youtu.be/B0iJQD7B6DQ>

# *This is the Way*

***The Lord is my Shepherd.  
He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
for His name's sake. Psalm 23:3***



*Stand by the roads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. Jeremiah 6:16*

The sheep have been restored in the presence of the Shepherd beside green pastures and still waters. Now they continue moving on the journey as they are led on this good and ancient path.

**IMAGINE.** The Lord is my Shepherd, he leads me in paths of righteousness. As you meditate, see the path ahead of you. Hear the song the Shepherd sings or the loving words he uses to lead you. What do you see ahead, what do you leave behind? Take some moments to imagine the scene. What emotions are stirred up in you? Do you look back in hesitation, do you run ahead, or walk side by side?

**RETURN. He leads me.** These pronouns make this sentence personal. God guides me. I follow. Allow yourself to focus on the face of the one leading, recognizing the right-ness and goodness of guidance that opens the way ahead for you. Put down any weights and obstacles that keep you from moving forward in the journey with the Shepherd.

Jesus warned against the adherence to religious rules to appear righteous and described it as being tied up by a heavy burden, hard to bear. Think about if there is someone who has tied up a heavy burden of rules for right living and laid them on your shoulders. See how the weight might be keeping you from freely walking with the Shepherd on the path ahead.

*In all your ways know and acknowledge and recognize Him, and He will make your paths straight and smooth [removing obstacles that block your way]. Proverbs 3:6 (AMP)*

The path is righteous only because *"the Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works...the Lord preserves all who love him."* (Psalm 145) Take this moment to accept and even delight in the One who wants to lead you on good paths of peace and wholeness.

**REST. For His Name's Sake.** These four words sum up the reasoning behind everything God has done to display his glory, beauty, and salvation for all people. As God emphasizes: *"For my name's sake, for my name's sake, for my name's sake.* (Isaiah 48:11) Also in King Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple of God, he said that all people will come to worship God *"because of your name, your great name."* (1 Kings 8) The prayer in Psalm 67 asks repeatedly that God bless us...bless us...bless us...so that all the nations might know *the way of the Lord.*

The words compassion and forgiveness come to mind as I meditate on this metaphor of sheep being led on a path with the Shepherd. My heart grew with compassion during my season as a caregiver, when I longed for each and every movement, task, and word I spoke to be filled with love, care, and healing for my loved one. Forgiveness also had to be present, first for myself when I failed to make good decisions or become impatient in the process, and second for each member of our family care team as we served together.

We find rest as we take the path of blessing, the path of beauty, the path of God's righteousness. Follow the Shepherd, lay down your life, take up our cross, delight in the knowing and being known, loving and being loved.

Make this prayer from the Passion Movement your own this week:

*"Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws, I wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of my heart."*

**PRAISE:** Psalm 23 (I Am Not Alone) Woodmen Worship. <https://youtu.be/wc-wX8ofr4w>

Title Credit: In popular Disney culture, the Mandalorian code says, "This is the Way." And from the prophet Isaiah, 30:21 *"This is the way, walk in it."*

## *Shadowy Path*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Psalm 23:4*



*Shepherd me,  
O God,  
beyond my  
wants, beyond  
my fears,  
from death  
into life.  
Marty Haugen*

The global pandemic resulted in the deaths of millions worldwide. For many, it was just an inconvenience, but for those who lost a loved one, the ever-present valley of the shadow of death is a journey of immeasurable pain, sorrow and mystery. A dear pastor friend of mine lost her 50-year-old husband to coronavirus, yet her 80-year-old mother survived. During the first year of the pandemic, we were 24/7 caregivers for our loved one, suffering the diminishment of age and health. Even with careful planning, prayer, and support, walking the valley path of the steady decline of my mother's health and her death added to the depth of uncertainty and change that those days brought to us all.

**IMAGINE. Shadow.** You may have experienced walking in the shadow, that dark cloud of unknowing that can hover over days and decisions. Or imagine what it is like for many around the world to know that disaster or death is lurking around the corner. Many caregivers and health care workers have prayed for miracles to bring recovery and life as they seek to provide healing from pain and suffering.

*Even God experiences the hellish dark by virtue of being connected to those who suffer its pain — which is to say, everyone. In those places where people face darkness, God goes as well, linked in sacred relationship to the vulnerability and fear human life often includes. (My Jewish Learning, Psalm 23)*

**RETURN. You are with me.** The aloneness of walking this long and deep valley towards death is overcome with the comforting presence of God. The night before his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus' prayer of anguish was for continued connection with his Father as he said,

*“Not what I will, but what you will.”* Those closest to Jesus did not stay awake through this shadowy night and he scolded them saying, *“Are you still sleeping, wake up!”* (Mark 14)

Our ability to stay awake and alive to the divine comes and goes in the valley. Yet the One who will travel with us through the spring of youth, the summer of productive life, and the autumn of wisdom years, will hold us close in the cold winter of our last days. We know each other so well, the Shepherd and sheep, from the days beside the quiet streams, that the loss of words and lingering mysteries are not really important.

*Aging will become a process not of losing, but of gaining. As our physical body fades out, our glory body approaches and our spiritual substance grows richer and deeper. As we age, we should become obviously more glorious.* Excerpt from *“Passing through the Stage Normally Called Death,”* Divine Conspiracy, Dallas Willard.

**REST. We walk the shadowy path together.** Knowing his hour of suffering and death was near, Jesus wanted his friends close by as he prayed. He asks them to sit, to remain, to watch with him in the most heavy, anguished, and devastating moments of prayer, in which he said, *“my soul is very sorrowful.”* (Mark 14) Whatever physical or emotional sorrows you might be facing, allow others to walk the path with you: *I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*

In spite of the fear that confronted our family in losing a parent, we became closer and better as a team. We all shared Mom-care 24/7: My husband was great at getting things done quickly with his people skills and energy, my sister took night shifts, since she is a night owl and loves to snuggle, I took day shifts to talk to doctors and do the needful, and the grandkids and a few dogs brought the warmth of youth and laughter. Together we shouldered the stress and shared the fears with hugs, love, and food. Our friends and neighbors surrounded us with prayers and caring. We can rest as we declare: *The Lord is our Shepherd. We lack nothing.*

**BREATH PRAYER.** Psalm 56:3 *When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.* Breathe in: When I am afraid... (anxious, tired, etc.) Exhale: I put my trust in you.

**PRAISE.** Spend some time with this song: *I want Jesus to walk with me.* Liz Vice, Paul Zach <https://youtu.be/SwwTZa8o4TQ> A beautiful African American spiritual. The hymn is named after Sojourner Truth, the freed slave woman who publicly spoke for freedom and equality for all.

**Resources.** Passing through the Stage Normally called “Death,” Dallas Willard <https://renovare.org/articles/the-changes-to-come>

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/psalm-23-who-walks-in-the-valley-of-the-shadow-of-death/>



## *Stay With Me*

*You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

*Psalm 23:4*



The rod and staff as the symbols of a comforting and protective presence might be difficult to visualize for urban dwellers in understanding a relationship with God as Shepherd. These unfamiliar terms came alive for me after spending time with the Maasai people in Kenya. The culture and livelihood of this beautiful and timeless tribe are centered on caring for their livestock of cattle, goats, and sheep. As proud warriors, the young men keep predators and other dangers away from the herd with sticks or rods. The men wear a “shuka,” a red blanket, and carry “eng’udi,” long curved sticks, pictured here, that are used to lead their livestock to water and pasture land. Even more importantly, their “rod and staff” serve as markers of their cultural identity.

**IMAGINE.** The Lord God comforts his people as their Shepherd. Just as with the Maasai herdsmen, the rod and staff serve as markers of the character of God as our strong protector and guide. Take a moment to walk again through Psalm 23, seeing the One with whom you lack nothing, and are restored, comforted, and healed. Close your eyes, embrace the comfort of his strong company through the green pastures, still waters, and even the valley of the shadow of death.

**RETURN.** **Your rod and staff comfort me.** The Lord’s staff is used to help us return to the still waters and the paths of righteousness, places of restoration and peace in the chaos of life. The staff also marks the identity of the Shepherd as the one in charge, which means I don’t have to

“personally” be responsible, or work harder. Whatever you have been holding onto, pride, independence, or a stubborn determination to be in control, allow God the Shepherd to come alongside and then be comforted by his guiding and protecting presence.

One of the Maasai leaders gifted his “eng’udi” to my husband, after he shared the story of how God used Moses’ shepherd staff to protect and free his people. Moses stands out as a leader who later in life let go of his own dream of entering the promised land and passed on his staff of leadership, the marker of his identity to Joshua:

*And Moses said to them, “I am 120 years old today. I am no longer able to go out and come in...Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land.” Deuteronomy 31:1-2*

**REST. You are with me.** Moses letting go of his responsibility and passing it on shows us that it is not always on us to finish everything by ourselves, because we are part of a larger story, a timeless kingdom. If we have raised and trained the next generation well, the humbling and freeing truth is that we can let go and rest. As parents, teachers, first responders, and all those who love and serve others, we need time off to recharge and just be free of the heavy burden of responsibility. Can you trust others to take over for you so you can put down the caring role and allow yourself to be cared for by others?

It is a wise and compassionate gift to yourself to ask for and accept help. I struggled to let go of control as a caregiver in order to practice my own self-care and healthy rhythms. From lifting and moving my mother, my back was twisted and hurting, so I went to my chiropractor for an adjustment. As I was lying face down, she pushed on my tight shoulders and I felt the pain starting to move and loosen. I found myself blurting out an explanation, “I’ve been carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders.” She answered, “Yes, and you’ve been carrying it a long time.” The tension broke and I was crying hard right into the paper covering on the table. She fixed my twisted body and her simple holding of my pain was soul healing.

In your own life circumstances, reflect on where you need to let go and accept that your unfinished work can be carried on by others. Take an inventory of your physical well-being. Where do you feel the “weight of your world?” Allow someone to hold your pain.

**BREATH PRAYER.** Psalm 46:10. *Be still and know that I am God.* Inhale: Be still (your name). Exhale: And know that I am God. Personalize and sit with this in moments of silence.

**PRAISE.** Shepherd Me, O God, Marty Haugen. <https://youtu.be/YFgZGlZ5t80> Marty Haugen shares how he wrote this song at a winter retreat. Recite or sing the words to Psalm 23.

## Shepherd Me

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Psalm 23:5*



*You have set me a banquet of  
love in the face of hatred,  
crowning me with love  
beyond my pow'r to hold.*

*Marty Haugen, Psalm 23:5*

On Palm Sunday we rejoice as Jesus Christ enters Jerusalem hailed as the King of Jews. Yet, even in the midst of the shouts of "Hosanna," his enemies were surrounding him like a pack of dogs. With determined obedience, Jesus faces his enemies, knowing that he and the Father are One. And on Thursday in the Garden of Gethsemane, in this oneness of the Spirit, Jesus freely prays his fears and doubts: *"Remove this cup from me...not my will but yours be done."*

**IMAGINE.** Use your imagination to hear Jesus reciting this Psalm as he enters the gates of Jerusalem or prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. *"You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies."* What must these words from his Father mean to Jesus as he faces the hatred of his enemies?

**RETURN.** **You prepare a table.** The prepared table is your invitation to return to enjoy the abundant love of a big feast. The word table here also has the meaning of a mesa, or a large flat area with steep sides. For the sheep to be able to graze on an abundant tableland, the shepherd's duties include removing poisonous weeds and making sure there is clean water. The sheep have journeyed from the green pastures, still waters, down the path of righteousness, through the valley, and now have returned to flourish on the fruit of the tablelands.

Take a moment in God's presence. Open your heart and give thanks for the abundance of God's provision. What does it mean to you that the Shepherd has prepared a safe place with living water and the richest of fare for your feast? How does Haugen's lyric: *"You have set me a banquet of love in the face of hatred,"* stand true for you as you might be facing racism, criticism or other hardships?

**IMAGINE.** Use your imagination to be present in this scene: On the night before he was crucified, Jesus prepares a feast for his followers including his betrayer. Jesus breaks bread and offers wine, symbols of his broken body and blood poured out for our salvation. He said, *"Do*

*this in memory of me.*" Jesus literally prepared a table for us in the presence of his enemies. All are invited to the prepared feast, the banquet of love that continues on even in the face of hatred.

Remember the intensity of emotion during Holy Week that surrounded Jesus, including hatred and jealousy in the hearts of his enemies. At the end of the week on Good Friday, Jesus will be "crowned" with the thorns of evil by his enemies. Yet by Easter Sunday, Jesus will be "crowned with love" as the grave could not hold back his resurrection in power and glory.

**REST. Crowning me with Love beyond my power to hold.** Every day while my mother was in hospice care at home, I would take a walk before a long day of caregiving. It was my time to pray and cry and seek strength needed for the day. One morning, a neighbor's black lab named Ollie got out of his back yard and was running happy and free. He ran up to me with an inviting smile and wagging tail ready for adventure. What joy there is in freedom from any boundary of prison or pain. "Freedom" is my prayer today for my loved one...to be free of the enemies of pain and death, to be free of the fear of letting go and leaving loved ones and to be free of the countless hours and days of suffering with a terminal illness. It is my joy to offer a crown of love and freedom beyond myself with my prayers, spirit, and humble service. Oh, dear God, Jesus, "Crown her with love beyond my power to hold." "Let her spirit fly free!"

We can rest knowing the sacrifice of Jesus Christ has freed us from the power of death. Jesus removed the poisonous weeds from the tableland, giving his own body and blood to become an acceptable offering, a banquet table of love. The crown of thorns became our crown of love. Hosanna forever, we worship you.

**Praise.** Hosanna Palm Sunday, Saddleback Worship. <https://youtu.be/5m-QB5hgMSE>

## *Anoint Me*

*You anoint my head with oil.  
My cup overflows. Psalm 23:5*



The use of oils for medicinal and protective purposes are very much part of Shepherd care. Oil protects the sheep from buzzing flies laying eggs in their noses, and keeps parasites from their wounds and scabs. In Biblical times, anointing, or rubbing one with oil was an ordinary ritual of respect and healing. As preparation and a sign of Jesus' predicted death, a flask of pure nard, an expensive essential oil, was poured over his head by one who loved him greatly.

These healing words of Psalm 23 became like a balm of oil over my head during my mother's last days. She passed from this life on a Good Friday to dwell in the eternal house of the Lord forever. That morning I whispered softly to her that today was a good day to let go, as she had been baptized in Christ, would join him at the cross, and be raised to glorified life on Easter resurrection. In the hope and peace of Christ, she may be physically gone, but her spirit

lives on forever as she left us a legacy of faith, goodness and mercy, and loving self-sacrifice for her family, community, and friends.

On another April day in 1968, we lost Martin Luther King. In the horror and despair that followed, Robert F. Kennedy pointed us all to grace and peace quoting Aeschylus:

*He who learns must suffer.  
And even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget,  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
until in our own despair, against our will,  
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.*

On a Friday sometime in April A.D. 33, Jesus was crucified outside of Jerusalem. On Sunday morning Jesus was no longer in the grave, but resurrected from the dead. That same day, two disciples, Cleopas and possibly his wife, afraid and unaware that Jesus was alive, headed home to Emmaus, escaping from the devastating sadness in Jerusalem.



They would not walk alone as *“Jesus himself drew near and went with them.”* Luke 24:15. Yet Luke reports, *“Their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”*

Wrapped in their grief, preoccupied with fear, they couldn't see the way, the truth, and the life in front of them. For years, I had not understood how they could not have recognized Jesus, until I experienced the pain and despair of death. Now, I myself am wrapped in grief walking the road to Emmaus. And with all my heart I pray that when I arrive, the Spirit will open my eyes to see and hear and touch the Lord who draws near.

**IMAGINE.** Place yourself in this scene as one anointing Jesus with oil:

*One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Luke 7:36-38 ESV*

Allow any preoccupations, anxiety, and tasks are you wrapped up in to fall away. See Jesus, recognize him as he walks alongside, loving you and speaking truth.

**PRAISE.** Bifrost Arts, O God, Will You Restore Us? <https://youtu.be/Klew9FvlhvE>

## Goodness and Mercy



*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* PSALM 23:6

*Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I'm back home in the house of God for the rest of my life. Psalm 23:6 (MSG)*

The sheep have now completed their journey from the green pastures, still waters, down the path of righteousness, through the valley, and now flourish, reproduce, and leave a fruitful legacy of abundance on the table lands.

Goodness and mercy follow the flocks because they have left behind something worthwhile, productive, beautiful, and beneficial, both to themselves and to others and especially to the Shepherd. A flock of sheep that have been well cared for and loved will clean up and restore a piece of unproductive land as no other animal can do. They eat weeds and undesirable plants that can take over a field and their manure is one of the best balanced of domestic stock.

**IMAGINE.** One of my dearest friends went through these meditations on my weekly blog. When he got to this reflection, he so identified with the leaping lamb he said, “This is my new spirit animal!” Spend a moment in the happiness of living with-God in the kingdom here on earth, and in hope for the coming kingdom. Remember and reflect on your life path with the Shepherd and let your soul leap with joy. Take a moment to name and visualize the beauty and love of God chasing you, bringing you home forever.

**PRAISE.** We praise you Lord God for the goodness and mercy of the Risen Savior, Jesus Christ, the Shepherd of our souls.

Shane and Shane, Psalm 23 <https://youtu.be/gxLlpViTcic>

**RESOURCE.** <https://dwillard.org/articles/introduction-life-without-lack>

*Life Without Lack—These verses (Psalm 23) are a description of the eternal life available to us now in the kingdom of the heavens; the abundant with-God life that comes from following the Shepherd, where we dwell and abide with God in the fullness of his life—a life in which all the promises of Christ’s gospel are realized.* Dallas Willard



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