

# Restful Words for Labor Day

by John Piper

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*John Piper explores the profound comfort and guidance found in Psalm 23, emphasizing the importance of personal relationship with God through prayer and trust in His provision.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 23:1-84, Proverbs 18:14, Philippians 4:19

**Topics:** "Intimacy With God", "Spiritual Restoration"

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## Description

John Piper delves into Psalms 23, sharing his personal experiences and insights on the profound truths found in this beloved passage. He emphasizes the intimate and personal nature of the psalm, highlighting the deep hunger we all have for an authentic relationship with God. Piper reflects on the importance of intertwining theology with prayer, stressing the need to talk to God as much as we talk about Him. He explores the significance of facing life's valleys and crises, recognizing that it is in these moments that we draw closest to God and experience His provision and guidance. Additionally, Piper unpacks the concept of God restoring our souls, pointing to the essential role of God's Word and promises in bringing true refreshment and healing to our spirits.

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## Transcript

### Psalm 23

Here is a version of Psalm 23 you have probably never heard before. (Recite the Psalm in German.) The reason I know the psalm in German is that I recited it to myself hundreds of times riding on my three-speed bicycle between our flat at Preysingstrasse 22 and the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich where I studied from 1971-74. I can remember in those last months as the tension built before my final oral exams riding home in the evening through the grassy English Gardens along the quiet banks of the Isar and saying, "He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me by still waters."

The reason I recited the Psalm to myself again and again day after day was not merely to improve my German but mainly because it seemed that with this passage of Scripture more than any other, to recite it was also to experience its reality. The psalm itself was green pasture, the psalm itself was still water, the psalm itself restored my soul. Day by day, I lived by it, I ate it, I drank it in, and sure enough, in every situation it came true: The Lord was my shepherd, I did not want.

The psalm is very personal. There is no "we" or "us" or "they", but only "my" and "me" and "I" and "he" and "you." It is an overflow of David's personal experience with God. One of the reasons it has such an

attraction for us is that we all hunger for such authentic experience with God, and a personal witness to that experience brings us a step closer ourselves. So in the spirit of the psalm I thought I would just meander through the psalm with you and point out a few things that have proved of great significance to me personally.

First of all, I have learned something from the form of the psalm. In the first three verses David refers to God as "He": "The Lord is my Shepherd... He makes me lie down ... He leads me ... He restores my soul ... " Then in verses 4 and 5 David refers to God as "You": "I will not fear, for you are with me; your rod and staff comfort me; you prepare a table before me; you anoint my head with oil." Then in verse 6 he switches back to the third person: "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord." The lesson I have learned from this form is that it is good not to talk very long about God without talking to God. Every Christian is at least an amateur theologian--that is, a person who tries to understand the character and ways of God and then put that into words. If we aren't little theologians then we won't ever say anything to each other about God and will be of very little real help to each other's faith.

But what I have learned from David in Psalm 23 and other Psalms is that I should interweave my theology with prayer. I should frequently interrupt my talking about God by talking to God. Not far behind the theological sentence, "God is generous" should come the prayerful sentence, "Thank you, God." On the heels of "God is glorious," should come, "I adore your glory." What I have come to see is that this is the way it must be if we are feeling God's reality in our hearts as well as describing it with our heads. So even the form of Psalm 23 seems designed to give us a heartfelt experience of God by causing us to mingle theology and prayer as we read it.

But that is not all I learned from the form. I asked myself, "Why does David switch from 'He' to 'You' precisely at verse 4? Why didn't he just go on to say, 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, He is with me. His rod and His staff, they comfort me.?' " I think the switch to the more intimate "you" precisely when he enters the valley of the shadow of death is a universal experience among God's people, indeed among all men in one form or another. The crises of life draw us closer to God. We are more prone to talk about God when we are in the green pasture and more prone to cry out to God when we enter some fearful ravine.

We all know it is true. I have a friend named Jeff VanVonderon who used to say to me in Sunday School, "I have never learned anything about trusting God from the easy times, only from hard times." You ask June Backlin what her experience now has done to her relation to God. She told me she has never felt so close before. I said to her, "Why can't we all learn the lesson of how frail we are and how precious God is before we enter the valley of crisis?"

I think Jeff's comment is an overstatement: we are meant to learn something of faith in the easy times - we are to learn thankfulness. But Jeff is right and almost all our experience bears it out: it is the valleys of life that draw us close to God. It is the life and death crises that turn theological statements like "God gives grace to the lowly," into "O, my God, help me, for I am cast down."

And from this we can learn that, just as there is a danger in the valley that we might get angry at God and reject Him, there is an even greater danger in the green pasture that we might become satisfied with the grass and forget the Shepherd. In the dark we hug his knee; in the light we are prone to wander off in all directions. Therefore, as James says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials."

That is what I have learned from pondering the form of Psalm 23. The next source of help came from the phrase, "I shall not want." For a long time I misunderstood the word "want." In today's English this sentence sounds like, "I shall not desire." So I thought David was saying that when God is your Shepherd you don't have the feeling of desiring anything any more. But then along came Hebrew and I discovered that the translators did not mean that; they meant "want" in the sense of "be wanting": "I shall not be wanting anything." The literal, less ambiguous translation would be, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not lack." Well, that solved one problem, because I knew I still had desires (for food, for work, for my children, for God). But it created another one. The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not lack what?

Do God's sheep ever lack anything? We don't have to go outside the Psalm to know they do. When the sheep is walking through the dark valley it lacks light and I presume it lacks the green pasture and the quiet waters. Sheer common sense tells us that no matter how well things are going you always lack something. Blessings must wait their turn. I think, therefore, that what David means is that God's sheep (and that is not everybody, but only those who trust Him) never lack anything that the Shepherd thinks is good for them.

This is confirmed for me when I ponder verse 4 about walking through the valley of the shadow of death. The picture here is of a situation with extreme danger that could take the sheep's life if the shepherd weren't there to protect and guide with his rod and staff. But why would a sheep be going through such a place? Not because he strayed off in sin; that is not the point here, because the shepherd is pictured as going with the sheep not snatching him back to the pasture he left behind. No, the reason the sheep is going through the valley is because the shepherd is leading it. The connection between verses 3 and 4 confirm this, I think: "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake; even when I walk through the valley you are with me." The path through the valley is also one of the paths of righteousness in which God leads.

But why would a shepherd lead a sheep into a valley filled with danger and death threats? Isn't the only possible answer, "To get to some better place?" The longest poem I ever wrote is called "Cienaga." It was the overflow of joy Noel and I had before the boys were born, when we took a camping trip in the San Bernardino Mountains. We followed a map and got on a dirt road that got smaller and bumpier and crossed a couple of creeks and twisted on the edge of the mountain. It was very dangerous - totally unknown and no turning around possible. Why were we on that crazy road? One reason: Camp Cienaga was at the end of it. And it was worth it. God has seen to it that the grazing pastures for His flocks are not fence to fence but are separated by often very treacherous territory.

So I learned from verse 4 that I might indeed have to lack many things in following the shepherd, but I will never lack anything that the Shepherd thinks is good for me. As Psalm 84:11 says, "No good does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly." Or as Paul says in Philippians 4:19, "My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

The next phrase that has been a great source of strength to me is the phrase, "He restores my soul." This could mean either He returns my soul from erring in sin or He refreshes my soul when I am dry and lifeless. The same phrase occurs in Lamentations 1:16, which says, "My eye, my eye runs down with water because far from me is a comforter, one who restores my soul." The idea of comfort also occurs here in Psalm 23:4, "Your rod and staff comfort me." So I think we should probably think of soul refreshment here instead of moral correction.

Proverbs 18:14 says, "A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a broken spirit who can bear?" If our hearts are strong in the Lord, if our soul is refreshed, we can endure the pain of the body. But if the spirit is broken, if our hearts are downcast, if our soul is flat like a deflated beach ball, what can you do? The very will is broken, the flags of our affection just hang there with no wind to unfurl them. Every believer has known these times. I sure have.

I have tried to analyze what I need in those times. I think I can sum it up in three things. First, I need a sense of release from the anxious cares that have made me feel hopeless. Sometimes the demands on our mind and our time combined with aggravating hindrances to getting it all done are like tight straps around the soul that squeeze all the life and color out of it. I need to feel those straps broken and a great swelling of hope. Second, I need to see some beauty. I won't go into this much now because I am going to talk about "Sky Talk" in two weeks from Psalm 19. But at least this much: we have all felt the healing power of nature. I have thought I would explode with joy standing on a peak at Bear Trap Ranch looking out over the vastness of Colorado. The sight of some stupendous beauty restored the soul. Third, I need to feel the reality of a great power outside myself flowing into me. God created us to be conductors of an infinitely powerful current of life flowing from Himself. Which is why ultimately the only satisfying restoration of soul comes from God. If we try to make nature into our God, it will disappoint. God is going to roll up the sky like a garment someday and let us see the real thing.

Until then we should always avail ourselves of the Word of God along with nature. For Psalm 19:7 says, "The instruction of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul." Nothing, not even nature, can cut the suffocating bands of anxiety from our soul, except one thing, the promises of God. Neither valium nor any other tranquilizer can compare to hearing God say, "Be content with what you have, for I will never fail you nor forsake you. Hence we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5-6). Don't turn to drugs for the restoration of your soul, turn to God, to His Word of promise and His works of beauty.

Well, that is the beginning of what I have learned from Psalm 23. First, from its form, that we ought not speak too long about God with our minds before we turn and speak to God from our heart. We must stir a lot of prayer into the stew of our theology. And also from the form: it is the crises of life that draw us closer to God and turn our theological statements about God's mercy into urgent cries for His help. Second, from the words, "I shall not want," I have learned to trust God not for every possible pleasure but for everything that would be good for me: "No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly." Even the valleys of the shadow of death are only pathways to greener pastures. And finally, from the words, "He restores my soul," I have learned to wait for God in my periods of depression and lifelessness, and to look for hope and beauty and power in His creation, but mostly in His word.

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