

He Leads Me Beside Quiet Waters to Rest and Restore My Soul (Psalm 23:2-3)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on June 7, 2010

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A pastor records how his shepherd-Lord ministered to him these words we'll be studying today from Ps 23. He lived in Germany and recited these verses hundreds of times riding his bicycle in tension-filled days, 'riding home in the evening through the grassy English Gardens along the quiet banks [reciting in German the words of Psalm 23:2-3] ... again and again day after day ... 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.'¹

The book *Pilgrim's Progress* has a scene (Part 1, 7th stage) with peaceful waters and green pastures where the pilgrims found rest: 'they went on their way to a pleasant river ... Now their way lay just upon the bank of this river: here, therefore, Christian and his companion walked with great delight; they drank also of the water of the river, which was pleasant and enlivening to their weary spirits. Besides, on the banks of this river, on either side, were green trees ... On either side of the river was also a meadow, curiously beautified with lilies; and it was green all the year long. In this meadow they lay down and slept, for here they might lie down safely [footnote cites Psa. 23:2]. When they awoke they ... drank again of the water of the river, and then lay down again to sleep. Thus they did several days and nights. Then they sang;

"Behold ye, how these Crystal Streams do glide,

To comfort pilgrims by the highway-side ...

So when they were disposed to go on, (for they were not as yet at their journey's end,) they ate, and drank, and departed.'

John Bunyan wrote those words not sitting in a green field next to a gentle stream in the beautiful countryside of England, but in a jail cell in Bedford, earthly comforts gone because he refused to stop preaching the Scriptures. But spiritually His Shepherd Lord gave rest to his soul, refreshed his soul, satisfying it with Christ alone.

King David may not have written Psalm 23 in the actual pastures and riverbanks he speaks of in verse 2. Most scholars believe he wrote it later in life, some suggesting it was around the time his son Absalom rebelled against him, or another dark valley of life. Whatever the occasion was when David penned these immortal words, God inspired and intended these to transcend all occasions and even to give us sheep here today occasion to rest our soul by refreshing waters from our soul-satisfying soul-restoring Shepherd.

Verse 1 can be seen as the summary statement that the rest of the psalm develops. "*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want/lack.*" If the Lord is my Shepherd (v. 1):

1. I shall not lack spiritual rest (v. 2)
2. I shall not lack spiritual restoration (v. 3)

I Shall Not Lack Spiritual Rest

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters [or "still waters"]*
KJV / ESV]

In the original context, what were sources of water sheep would be led to:

1. Watering troughs (Genesis 30:38)
2. Wells (Genesis 29)
 - Jacob's well was given to his descendants (Gen. 48) and was used for watering flocks and is still active this day
 - At the end of Jacob's life, 48:15 says "*Then he blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, **the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day ...may he bless these boys.**"*"
 - In 49:24 Jacob adds that the reason Joseph was blessed and strengthened: "*...because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, **because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel***"
 - In Exodus 2, Moses flees Egypt and at another well with shepherds he becomes another notable OT character to meet his future bride, a shepherdess, at a well
3. Water springs or streams (Exodus 15)
 - One of the reasons wells and other water sources were commonly used for flocks is that in Palestine running water is so uncommon.
 - Moses and Israel knew this from Exodus 15 when they wandered for 3 days without water through the wilderness and then God led them beside springs of water where they were able to rest refreshed
 - The Lord who shepherded Israel through the wilderness desert, fed them and led them beside full springs of water and gave them rest. In Ezekiel 34, God says: "*I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, **by the streams** ... in a good pasture ...**There they will lie down** ... and **I will lead them to rest,**" declares the Lord GOD. (v. 13-15 NASB).*

Leading to waters is language for *spiritual rest*

- The word in Psalm 23:2 translated "*still waters*" in the KJV is a word that's almost always translated "rest" in other places. So it could be translated "*waters of rest*" – it's in the plural, and in Hebrew grammar this is called a plural of amplification, i.e., it intensifies the idea of the stem ("great restfulness, refreshment")²
- The same Lord Jesus who commanded the troubled seas "*peace be still*" is the same Lord who is our Shepherd who can command peace to our troubled souls and who commands "*Be still and know that I am God.*" He calls us to cease striving and to rest in Him. Be still my soul, we need to preach to self, till it is well with my soul, peace like a river attendeth my way, as my Shepherd leads me by it
- The waters of Psalm 23 are not necessarily silent or still in a pool (which could stagnate) but the idea is restfulness (which moving water of rippling brooks actually produces), peace-giving gentle streams or springs. If too fast or muddy, a shepherd may make dam
- If other fears or factors prevent them from drinking, a good shepherd will take care of those (ex: story of dog he had to scare away then stand by water for minutes to reassure of his presence / protection).

Shepherds lead to water in compassion for their sheep's needs:

- Lead in Ps 23:2 is powerful but caring party toward weak/needily/vulnerable.
- Isaiah 49:10 *They will not hunger or thirst, Nor will the scorching heat or sun strike them down; For **He who has compassion on them will lead them And will guide them to springs of water.***
- In Jeremiah 31:9, God says "... I will lead them [ESV "with pleas of mercy I will lead them back"]; I will make them walk **by streams of waters**, On a straight path in which they will not stumble ... He who scattered Israel **will gather him And keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock ...**¹² "... And over the young of the flock and the herd; And their life will be **like a watered garden**, And **they will never languish again.** ...²⁴ "... the farmer and they who go about with flocks.²⁵ **"For I satisfy the weary ones and refresh everyone who languishes."**
- The idea of the waters in Psalm 23:2 is satisfaction for the weary and refreshment to the languishing, spiritual rest. In the words of Jesus, "Come unto me all who are weary ... I will give you rest ... you will find rest for your soul." Soul-rest, spiritual rest in Him.

Our soul can only be satisfied and refreshed in the Lord:

Psalm 63 (NIV) A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah.

¹ *O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water ...* ⁵ *My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.*

Psalm 143:6 (NIV) "... my soul thirsts for you like a parched land"

In other places it's like a sheep about to die without water or a deer

Psalm 42 (NIV) *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.* ² *My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

In Isaiah 55, God offers Himself as waters: *Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come ... Why do you spend money ... your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me ... delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live ... Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.*

John 7:37: *Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink."* ³⁸ *"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'* "

So when our Lord Jesus the Good Shepherd leads us to the waters, it is by calling out to us "come to me" – quench the thirst of your soul here, your innermost being and soul will be filled and flowing with living water! Don't thirst or long for anything else spiritually! Come to Christ! He'll satisfy you, nothing else will! Come to Him!

That's a call for salvation. That's a call for satisfaction. Jesus says "*Come to me ... I will give you rest for your soul.*" Spiritual rest and refreshment and replenishment is not found in worldly sources or substitutes – they may look like water from a distance but it's a mirage! You can keep walking toward it but it's not really there. Jesus says "*if you're thirsty, come to me, drink believe in me!*" If you thirst after His righteousness, He said, you will be satisfied. Christ is gentle in heart and His waters give rest for your soul.

Isaiah 8:6: "*these people have rejected the gently flowing waters*"

Jeremiah 2:13 "*For My people have committed two evils: They have **forsaken Me, The fountain of living waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns That can hold no water.***"

Why do we settle for so much less and go elsewhere for rest, refreshment, satisfaction from empty sources that leave us empty?

It's like some real-life sheep one writer describes how he 'watched one day ... being led down to a magnificent mountain stream. The snow-fed waters were flowing pure and clear and crystal clean ... but on the way several stubborn ewes and their lambs stopped, instead, to drink from small, dirty, muddy pools beside the trail. The water was filthy and polluted not only with the churned up mud from the passing sheep but even with the manure and urine of previous flocks that had passed that way. Still these stubborn sheep were quite sure it was the best drink obtainable ... [but it] would eventually riddle them with internal parasites and diseases of destructive impact.'³ – what a picture of the spiritual foolishness of us sheep in our shortcuts instead of our satisfying Shepherd's ways

Ezekiel 34:18 (NIV) asks "... *Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?*"

The gospels begin with John the Baptist calling sinners to the waters to repent and be baptized, water symbolizing their need for washing and cleansing, OT salvation language.

John 4 ¹ *Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John* ² *(although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were),* ³ *He left Judea and went away again into Galilee.* ⁴ *And He had to pass through Samaria.* ⁵ *So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph;* ⁶ *and Jacob's well was there. So **Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well.*** *It was about the sixth hour.* ⁷ *There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink."* ⁸ *For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.* ⁹ *Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?"* *(For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)* ¹⁰ *Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew **the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.**"* ¹¹ *She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water?"* ¹² *"You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons **and his cattle?**"* ¹³ *Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again;*

¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him **shall never thirst**; but the water that I will give him will become in him **a well of water springing up to eternal life.**" ¹⁵ The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw." ¹⁶ He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here." [He brings up her sin and where she was seeking satisfaction wrongly – He knows her truly and still offers life] ¹⁷ The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly." ...

... ³⁹ From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I have done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. ⁴¹ Many more believed because of His word; ⁴² and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that **this One is indeed the Savior of the world.**"

Revelation 7:16-17: "They will hunger no longer, **nor thirst anymore**; nor will the sun **beat down on them, nor any heat**; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them **to springs of the water of life**; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

Revelation 22 ¹ Then he showed me **a river of the water of life, clear as crystal**, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb ... [in v. 12 Christ says] "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. ¹³ "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." ¹⁴ **Blessed are those who wash their robes**, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying. ¹⁶ "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." ¹⁷ **The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.** ¹⁸ I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. ²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Jesus will come, maybe very soon. The question is: are you ready? If not, plagues and punishment eternally await you, like the rich man Jesus said went to hell and will never have a drop of water. If you add to the gospel, whether by word or your works as part of what you think gets you to heaven, if you have practiced lying or any sins that you have not repented of and been washed by the waters of salvation by Christ alone, you have much to fear in the lake of fire without a single drop of water to cool your tongue. Jesus will come as Judge of all who seek their satisfaction apart from Him, but until then His grace is offered freely to all who will come to the waters of salvation without cost, knowing they can't pay for it or earn it, knowing they have no resources if they could, knowing they are filthy sinners in need of spiritual cleansing, trusting as their only hope Jesus Christ to wash away their sins, thirsty for righteousness they don't have -- they will be satisfied, Jesus promised, if they come in that way.

Whoever hears, come. Whoever thirsts, come. Whoever wishes, come. Plunge yourself fully into Christ, let Him wash you 7x in the river of grace like Naaman in the Jordan, curing your disease of pride. Confess your sin and be cleansed of all unrighteousness. Rest in Him as your all-sufficient soul-satisfying Shepherd and He will continually lead you beside peaceful and peace-giving waters again and again, so that you shall not lack spiritual rest in Him.

His sheep also shall not lack *Spiritual Restoration*

Psalm 23:3 picks up where v. 2 ends: “*He restores my soul ...*”

The word “soul” in Hebrew refers to the spiritual, sometimes the emphasis is the inner person, or the whole person, or simply “life.”

What are some applications to help us appropriate the blessings of Psalm 23:2-3?

1. Pursue Christ in His Word (Psalm 19)
 - ⁷ *The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul ...*
 - ⁸ *The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.*
2. Pray for restoration / revival as you read (Psalm 119)
 - ²⁵ *My soul cleaves to the dust; Revive me according to Your word.*
 - ³⁷ *Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, And revive me in Your ways.*
 - ⁴⁰ *Behold, I long for Your precepts; Revive me through Your righteousness.*
3. Preach truth to yourself instead of listening to yourself

Psalm 42:5 *Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence.* ⁶ *O my God, my soul is in despair within me* [NKJV “cast down”]; *Therefore I remember You ...* ¹¹ *Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.*

The book *Future Grace* has an excellent chapter on depression, that unpacks ‘Psalm 73:26 ... “*My flesh and my heart fail!*” [meaning] I am despondent! I am discouraged! But then immediately he fires a broadside against his despondency: “*But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*” The psalmist does not yield. He battles unbelief with counterattack.

In essence, he says, “In myself I feel very weak and helpless and unable to cope. My body is shot and my heart is almost dead. But whatever the reason for this despondency, I will not yield. I will trust God and not myself. He is my strength and my portion.”

The Bible is replete with instances of saints struggling with sunken spirits. Psalm 19:7 says, “The law of the Lord is perfect, *reviving the soul.*” This is a clear admission that the soul of the saint sometimes needs to be revived. And if it needs to be *revived*, in a sense it was “dead.” David says the same thing in Psalm 23:2–3, “He leads me beside quiet waters; *he restores my soul.*” The soul of the “man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14) needs to be restored.

It was dying of thirst and ready to fall exhausted, but God led the soul to water and gave it life again.

God has put these testimonies in the Bible so that we might use them to fight the unbelief of despondency. Wherever despondency might come from, Satan paints it with a lie. The lie says, “This is it. You will never be happy again. You will never be strong again. You will never have vigor and determination again. Your life will never again be purposeful. There is no morning after this night. No joy after weeping. All is gathering gloom, darker and darker. This is not a tunnel, it is a cave, an endless cave.”

That is the color that Satan paints on our despondency. And God has woven his Word with strands of truth directly opposed to that lie. The law of God *does* revive (Psalm 19:7). God *does* lead to springs of water (Psalm 23:3). God *does* show us the path of life (Psalm 16:11). Joy *does* come with the morning (Psalm 30:5)

...The psalmist preaches to his troubled soul. He scolds himself and argues with himself. And his main argument is future grace: “*Hope* in God!—Trust in what God will be for you in the future. A day of praise is coming. The presence of the Lord will be all the help you need. And he has promised to be with us forever” (23:4, 6) ... And so preaching to ourselves is at the heart of the battle.’⁴

I’m done preaching for today. But you need to preach to yourself throughout this week. Why are in you in despair my soul? Hope in God, O my soul. Be still my soul and know God is God. It is well with my soul, because my sufficient Shepherd restoreth my soul.

¹ John Piper, “Restful Words for Labor Day,” preached 8/31/1980

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/1/248_Restful_Words_for_Labor_Day/

² Gesenius' *Hebrew grammar*. E. Kautzsch & S. A. E. Cowley, Ed. 2003. 2d English ed., p. 397.

³ Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*, p. 45-46.

⁴ John Piper (1995). *Future Grace*. Sisters, Or.: Multnomah Publishers, p. 302.