



125: Read Psalm 23

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 125.

This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information, and, sometimes delightful but also distracting, hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step.

Depending on how you're counting, we're now in the eighth week of some version of staying at home because of this pandemic. I won't attempt to review all the many situations that you might find yourself in as you listen, as I know they're layered, personal, and diverse. But I do think it's fair to say that we've all walked through, or are walking through, various degrees of sorrow, anxiety, frustration, and impatience. Some days are better than other days, but all days have the potential for fear.

We all have a part to play these days in service to the world, our community, and our neighbor. In today's short episode, I want to extend a small expression of what I see as my part, which is attempting to put into words, thoughts, and longings you might not have time or capacity to express and to offer one simple next right thing practice to engage. Listen in.

Of all the passages of scripture in the Bible, there's one that has become to me, and maybe to you, like an unfaltering beam of warm light guiding my way through the darkness like a mother's voice in the middle of the night, a father's steady arm, wrapped around a shaking shoulder. The six verses in Psalm 23 do more than comfort us in death, they guide us in life. And if we're paying attention, these six lines can teach us how to walk into every room every day of our lives.

It's because Psalm 23 is a next right thing kind of psalm, and I will never get over it.

Many have memorized it, and it's perhaps the most well-known psalm in scripture, but I think it's safe to say, well, many people know it by memory, they may not fully know it by heart. We've all seen these verses recited and accepted by people who don't claim to know God, don't seem to really like God, and certainly aren't interested in what God has to say in other parts of scripture.

We've watched these lines quoted by politicians on both sides of the aisle, on hit TV shows during the scenes of sadness and goodbye. We've heard references to these verses in song lyrics and movie scripts

and in whispered graveside conversation among people from all walks of life.

The 23rd psalm is one passage of scripture that seems to get a free pass -- the traveler who breezes through security. When others have to stand in line behind the rope, no one hinders or stops her. No one detains her for questioning. We don't demand she make sense or explain herself.

I think it's because the 23rd psalm is often associated with death, and in death, even the most cynical among us make exceptions for the grieving. And while I think that's beautiful, it is a surface understanding of the intent behind this psalm because while it has most certainly comforted us in times of death, it has the potential to reveal to us a new kind of life.

It's a liturgy, a poem, a lyric, an invitation. It's a story if we'll listen, and it's for you right now, if you'll let it be. These lines have mothered me, fathered me, comforted, and challenged me. I have discovered peace in hearing them, curiosity in studying them, and freedom in believing them. And somehow, the more I read them, the more questions I have and the more settled I become.

Psalm 23 is an invitation to trust God for the life we all most want to live as Dallas Willard puts it "a life without lack." It is possible to live as though the Lord really is our shepherd. It is possible to live as though we already have what we need. It is possible to live without fear. That's the promise and the mystery of the psalm.

Today, my intention is not to dissect this promise verse by verse or to give you an explanation of what this psalm means to me or what I think maybe it could mean to you. That's not my job today. Instead, in keeping with the intention of this podcast that's about making decisions and making a life, I want to invite you to bring Psalm 23 into your day.

How would the presence of the Lord, through the words of David, inform, influence, and impact your decisions today?

What if the Lord really is your shepherd?

What if he really does provide all that you need?

What if you could walk without fear?

What if he could restore your soul?

What if your cup really does overflow?

Maybe your next right thing is to read this beautiful, challenging psalm for yourself. I'll make it easy and read it for you, giving you a chance to think on these things.

From the New American Standard Version, the verses of Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.
Surely goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This is the word of the Lord. It is absolutely true and given to us in love. Thanks be to God.

Thanks for listening to episode 125 of The Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple practice of reading Psalm 23 can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

What better way to practice our life than to not only read the words of scripture but to let the words of scripture read us. Thank you for inviting me into these few minutes of your day. I'm glad you made the choice to listen, and I'm grateful this podcast was your next right thing.

As always, you can find me @emilypfreeman on Instagram or online at emilypfreeman.com. It's a joy and it's an honor to bring you new episodes every week. And to be honest, during the last eight weeks, it's been sanity-keeping for me, personally, so thanks for being a part of that.

I'll close with words from Eleanor Roosevelt in her short book about her life called *You Learn by Living* in which she writes this:

“Every time you meet a situation, though, you may think at the time it's an impossibility. And you go through the tortures of the damned. Once you've met it and have lived through it, you find that forever after you are freer than you were before. If you can live through that, you can live through anything. You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.”

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.