

**The Psalms and Spirituality
as Reflected in Poetic Versions of
the Twenty-third Psalm
by
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Prayer

God of creation, infinite wisdom, and endless love;
Lord of lords,
Shepherd to every sheep:
Draw us into your fold –
Not because we merit your nurture and care,
Not because we are entitled to your blessings,
But for the reason that you are who you are – our loving Parent,
And we are who we are – your needful children.
Guide us and direct us in your way,
That we may live our lives to your glory,
And at the last, sing praises in the light of your presence.
Amen.

As a young child, the first book of Scripture I learned to find with ease was the Psalter, because it is at the very middle of the Bible. All I had to do was let the Bible fall open at its heart, and there it was, ready to “sing” to me of a mighty God, a loving and caring Shepherd, a Lord of righteousness and repentance and redemption. Of course, it took some years of living before I knew that if I opened my own heart, as I opened the Bible, the Psalms would become a source of personal dialogue between that same faithful God and a grown-up, much more complicated “me.”

What seems to set the Psalms apart from the rest of Scripture is their sacramental nature, their unique ability to mold and transform the believer. There is none of the narrative and parable of the historical books, the Gospels, and the Acts. We are not the objects of sermons and discourses from the Law and the

Prophets. The letters of Paul have yet to be written to us. We do not find ourselves as second-hand recipients of God's Word, but as one-to-one communicants actively in conversation with God. We lift up the Psalms to God as though they are our own prayers, in our own words and not as the recalling of some ancient litany.

The Psalms we sing and pray may reflect our own sentiments, or may be in conflict with them, but even in conflict, we are able to make them our own prayers. In our praise, they call us to affirm that it is God who creates and sustains us, and to whom we owe more thanksgiving than we can ever express. In our lament, we are assured that this same God will strengthen and love us and see us through the trials.

David Dickson in the mid-seventeenth century describes the seasons of our lives as a blend of "crosses and sweet comforts," and the Psalms are reflections of every imaginable condition of our human experience, but never without the illumination of who God is, and where we stand in relation to that wonderful Presence.

In his eloquent examination of the poetry and literature of the Psalms entitled *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, William Brown underscores this continuing conversation with the Almighty:

If prayer is the stuff of theology, then theology must find its home within the fray of life. From the cry of dereliction to the shout of jubilation, pathos pulses throughout the Psalms. The interconnection between the community and the individual, between the corporate and the personal, embraces a holistic view of human experience: God is trusted to remain active on all levels of experience and existence. . . .

Through metaphor, the Psalms paint a world of possible impossibility wherein conflict is resolved and shalom reigns, a world in which deliverance is experienced and sustenance is gained.

The 14th century English divine Richard Rolle defines the Psalter with lyrical abandon and vigor in the preface to his own translation of the Psalms:

Psalm singing chases fiends, excites angels to our help, removes sin, pleases God. It shapes perfection, removes and destroys annoyance and anguish of soul. As a lamp lighting our life, healing of a sick heart, honey to a bitter soul, this book is called a garden enclosed, well sealed, a paradise full of apples!

A paradise full of apples indeed! Nourishing morsels in abundance for hungry souls starved for sustenance, security, healing, or assurance. And baskets full of leftovers, like the remnants of the loaves and fish, to return in our worship with gratitude to a bountiful and benevolent God.

Walter Brueggemann says much the same thing in more contemporary and concrete terms:

The book of Psalms provides the most reliable theological, pastoral, and liturgical resource given us in the biblical tradition. In season and out of season, generation after generation, faithful women and men turn to the Psalms as a most helpful resource for conversation with God about things that matter most. The Psalms draw our entire life under the rule of God, where everything may be submitted to the God of the gospel.

A master in his observations on the Psalter, Brueggemann continues:

The Psalms, with few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity, gathered over a long period of time. It speaks about life the way it really is, for the same issues and possibilities persist in those deeply human dimensions.

Such a conversation between God and the community of faith underscores the fulfillment of the ancient covenant through which we have become the adopted sons and daughters of God – children who honor and claim the goodness and grace of a loving parent. “I am yours, you are mine,” God has promised; “I am with you always,” and it is through our worship, both in our congregations and in our own hearts, that we keep the conversation alive.

What more powerful expressions of our spirituality exist than the presence of God within us, and the dialogue – in word, in thought, in pulse, in prayer, in lament, in praise – between us and the One who created and loves us?

The Psalmist exhorts us again and again to “sing new songs unto the Lord.” Paul in his letter to the Colossian Christians encourages them with gratitude in their hearts to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (3:16). I, too, must confess a natural prejudice for singing the Psalms rather than just reading them.

For me, it is the language and imagery of these poetic paraphrases that give the prose Psalms a broader and more personal, yet no less divine, expression of our connection with God.

Isaac Watts, the Anglican preacher whose paraphrase of the Psalms “imitated in the language of the New Testament” bridged the gap between psalmody and hymnody, saw this need for continuing dialogue, and provided for it through his texts. He said, “When we read a prose Psalm from the Bible, God speaks to us. When we sing a metrical Psalm, we speak to God.”

In the cradle years of the English-speaking church, the opening verse of Psalm 100, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth,” became at the hand of the Scotsman William Kethe,

*“All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
him serve with fear, his praise forth tell,
come ye before him and rejoice.”*

Psalm 32 rejoices in the promise of forgiveness for the faithful:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

In the metrical version by Fred R. Anderson, however, these verses sing with a rhythm that starts our hearts to dancing, and becomes a real celebration of joy:

*How blest are those whose great sin has freely been forgiven.
Whose guilt is wholly covered before the sight of heaven.
Blest those to whom our Lord God will not impute their sin,
Whose guilt has been forgiven, whose heart is true again.*

Certainly these are exceptional examples, but metrical Psalms must be carefully scrutinized for their imagery and poetry. Most of them were composed by local pastors, country squires, and humble parish organists whose intent usually surpassed their skill. None of the great poets ever attempted versifying the entire book of Psalms, with the possible exception of George Wither, Christopher Smart, and James Merrick (though one could reasonably argue whether any of these may be considered “great poets”). Milton, Donne, Crashaw, Cowper, and Herbert composed a few settings – more as exercises in the discipline of paraphrasing – and then moved on to more liberated creative efforts.

Perhaps Oscar Wilde was correct when he observed that there seems to be a direct correlation between piety and poor rhyme!

For many of these poets, turning the Psalms into verse was a part of their personal devotional exercise, and from the time I personally devoted to preparing my own paraphrase of the Psalms, I can attest to this as spiritual time well spent.

My thought for today is that we might explore, in a sort of exegesis, how poets over the centuries made Psalm 23 their own expressions of God’s loving care.

In his approach to these Old Testament songs, Walter Brueggemann has methodically categorized the Psalms around three quite general themes – orientation, disorientation, and new orientation – which, in the sheer exercise of living, relate the Psalms to every aspect of our human experience.

Psalms of orientation reflect our seasons of well-being and articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and reliability of God, God’s creation, and God’s governing law. We give thanks for the good things in our life – the material blessings and the intangible gifts of God’s continuing care for us. We rejoice in who God is, who we are, and ancient ties that bind us together.

Our anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death are expressed in the Psalms of disorientation, which evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred. These Psalms lament the ragged, painful disarray we inevitably encounter in our lives. We may feel alienated from each other, and, more tragically, abandoned by God. We experience grief in what we feel has been taken from us, and despair that we are alone.

Providentially God hears us, and we again are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through the despair. Reconciliation, redemption, rebirth, and resurrection are the themes we sing about in the Psalms of new orientation. We are restored to the comfort, the security, and perhaps even the complacency of our former lives, when “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world.”

All of life is spent either resting or wrestling in one of these stages of orientation, or in transition from one to the other. At any moment in our lives – in fact, at every moment – there is a Psalm to speak to us where we are. A Psalm of praise one moment, a Psalm of lament the next – such is the recurring joy and plight of our human existence.

The 23rd Psalm is one of those Psalms that bring all three of these themes together in a beautiful and powerful way.

I don’t ever remember sitting down and memorizing the 23rd Psalm, but somehow I just seem to have known it all my life.

Let’s begin by saying the 23rd Psalm together, as you are able, and in whatever version you may claim as your own.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness,
for his name's sake.
Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will feare no evil: for thou art with me,
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me,
in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil,
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

Now let's sing together that wonderful paraphrase of Psalm 23 by Isaac Watts, who possessed a tremendous gift for rhyme.

Watts was a precocious child, learning Latin at age 4, Greek when he was 8 or 9, French when he was 11, Hebrew when he was 13.

His precocity showed itself in insatiable reading, and in versifying in season and out. His conversation was so annoyingly metrical that after various prohibitions against rhyming, his father started to whip him, whereupon the rhymester cried out through his tears,

*„Ofather, do some pity take,
And I will no more verses make.'*

Fortunately for us, Isaac didn't keep his promise!

(Sing Watts's Psalm 23 to the tune Resignation.)

*My Shepherd will supply my need:
Jehovah is His Name;
In pastures fresh He makes me feed,
Beside the living stream.
He brings my wandering spirit back
When I forsake His ways,
And leads me, for His mercy's sake,
In paths of truth and grace.*

*When I walk through the shades of death
Thy presence is my stay;
One word of Thy supporting breath
Drives all my fears away.
Thy hand, in sight of all my foes,
Doth still my table spread;
My cup with blessings overflows,
Thine oil anoints my head.*

*The sure provisions of my God
Attend me all my days;
O may Thy house be my abode,
And all my work be praise.
There would I find a settled rest,
While others go and come;
No more a stranger, nor a guest,
But like a child at home.*

In the words we all know by heart from the King James' Bible, we are immediately reminded of our relationship with God.

The Lord is my shepherd.

It is God who cares for us and provides for us, as a shepherd tends the flock. We are like God's sheep, dependent on God's providence for all that we need, and which with confidence we receive abundantly.

I shall not want.

Or, in the earlier translation by Miles Coverdale from the Great Bible of Henry the Eighth, "*Therefore can I lack nothing.*"

We do not expect God to supply us with everything we want – the four corners of the earth are too close together to accommodate those material things we desire. What we affirm is that God will provide for us those things we need for sustenance – the "green pastures" filled with food, the "still waters" from which to drink and enter through baptism into the fold of God, the presence of God to guide us, and the abundant blessings of love and grace and justice and mercy.

What more powerful orientation can we claim to God than this?

Consistently through the history of English translations of the Psalms, this image of Shepherd and sheep is affirmed.

Sir Philip Sidney began his paraphrase of Psalm 23 in 1587 by reminding us not once but twice who God is:

The Lord, the Lord my Shepherd is,

And so can never I taste misery.

The first book to be published in the New World – the Bay Psalm Book of 1640 – expressed this orientation in somewhat awkward grammar, but to me its wording reflects the strength and determination it took for our ancestors to leave their homeland for unknown territory:

The Lord to me a shepherd is,

Want therefore shall not I.

Henry Hammond, the “Father of English Biblical Criticism,” amplified the words of the Psalmist with these words:

*The Lord my God is to me and all that diligently wait
on him as a Pastor is to his flock of sheep; though it
be in a wilderness, he is able to provide for me. I shall
not be left destitute.*

Perhaps no other writer underscores this relationship we have with God in more literary terms than the seventeenth-century poet, Samuel Woodford:

*The mighty God, who all things does sustain,
That God, who nothing made in vain,
Who nothing that He made did e'er disdain;
The mighty God my Shepherd is,
He is my Shepherd, I His sheep,
Both He is mine and I am His;
About His flock, He constant watch does keep;
When God provides, poor man can nothing need,
And He, who hears young ravens cry,
His sheep will feed.*

I'm not really sure where Woodford got the idea for the young ravens, but it goes to show the poetic license some of the experts take with familiar texts.

George Buchanan was a Scottish poet who published a Latin paraphrase in the 1560s. His version was reprinted many times over the years, and was translated several times into English prose and meter.

In his paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm, Buchanan carries the menagerie idea a step beyond the sheep and the ravens.

In the translation by Andrew Waddel, published in 1772, we stretch our imagination to read,

*Ye ravenous dogs, why do ye attack me to no purpose?
Envy, why dost thou push a wicked aim?
The Lord superintends me, as a shepherd his flock;
Nothing at all shall be wanting to me.*

Or, as John Eadie sixty years later would have us sing:

*Why do ye thus, like rav'nous dogs,
Against my life combine?
Why dost thou envy eager urge,
Thine infamous design?
For as a shepherd tends his flock,
And in due season feeds,
The Lord supplying all my wants,
Me in abundance leads.*

The metrical version of Psalm 23 sung in the early congregations of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in America begins,

*Jesus, my Lord, doth condescend
To be my shepherd and my friend.*

This, of course, goes one step beyond what any translation faithful to the Hebrew would ever express, but makes the New Testament connection we cannot help but subliminally interpose on our interpretation.

Charles Wesley composed his setting of the Shepherd Psalm with the same Gospel image in mind:

*Jesus, the Good Shepherd is;
Jesus died, the sheep to save;
He is mine, and I am his;*

*All I want in him I have:
Life, and health, and rest, and food,
All the plenitude of God.*

It is only in those English versions – primarily the medieval and Catholic translations – which deprive us of the allusion to God as our shepherd. The Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome, upon which these translations are based, begins simply “*Deus regit me*” – rendered in the Douay Bible of 1610, “*Our Lord ruleth me, and nothing shall be wanting to me.*”

Beginning in the early 1970s, the church experienced an increased awareness of gender in worship, especially in the Scriptures we read, the songs we sing, and the prayers we offer to God. Inclusive language, about the people of God in general, but more particularly in the imagery of God, caused much consternation, and in some cases alienation, among worshipers.

Our images of God are so based in our conditioning to the traditional language of worship that many of us can say the “Lord” instead of “God” or “Jehovah” or “Elohim” or “Creator,” or say without a thought to gender, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,” “he leadeth me beside still waters,” or “he restoreth my soul.”

Often it is only when those masculine terms are avoided or altered that they become obvious, or even glaring, to us.

*God is my Shepherd, I shall not want.
God maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
God leadeth me beside still waters;
God restoreth my soul.
God leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for God's own name's sake.*

“Equal time” between the genders can be even more bristling, as two feminist Psalmists demonstrate for us.

Marchiene Vroon Rienstra in her book, *Swallow's Nest*, gives us:

*Because El Shaddai shepherds me, my deepest needs are met.
She gives me rest in the green pastures of Her Word.
She leads me beside the still waters of prayerful silence.
She restores me, body and soul.
She leads me in the paths of wholeness.*

And over a decade later, Barbara Monda, in *Rejoice, Beloved Woman*, revisions the Psalm for us in these words:

*My mother is my shepherd and I lack nothing.
She lays me down in green grass and carries fresh water to me.*

Perhaps sometimes it may be easier for us to relate to the loving care of a mother more intimately than to that of a shepherd boy, though as Christians living on this side of the cross, we do have the image of Jesus, the good Shepherd, to help us understand the psalmist's intent.

Another human concern needs to be acknowledged.

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Clint McCann, in his study entitled *Great Psalms of the Bible*, causes us to consider how this relationship of care may speak to people who know firsthand the aches of hunger, burning thirst, and a dehumanizing existence where justice and grace are absent. Can they hear these words and only imagine a sheep destined for slaughter?

Carlos Valles, a Jesuit monk who survived perilous times in Spain, and later engaged in Christian ministry and education in the poorer areas of Pakistan, reflects:

*I have watched flocks of sheep on green mountain sides.
They romp about, they graze at will, they loiter in the shade.
They have no sense of hurry, no agitation, no worry.
They don't even look at their shepherd; they know he is there
and he cares.
Yahweh, you are my shepherd.
If only I believe in that, my life will change.
My anxiety will go, my complexes will dissolve,
and peace will return to my troubled nerves.
I will be able to live from day to day, from hour to hour,
because he is there.
How great is the blessing of believing in Providence!*

The provisions of God, building on the image of the shepherd, carry on into the next few verses of the Psalm.

The King James translators enlighten us with the images of “lying down in green pastures” and being led “beside the still waters” – rest and sustenance to restore our souls.

Again, Philip Sidney gives us:

*He rests me in green pasture his;
By waters still, and sweet,
He guides my feet.
He me revives; leads me the way,
Which righteousness doth take,
For his name's sake.*

Henry Hammond continues his expanded translation, to give us perhaps more information than even David might have imagined, and without the poetry that makes the Psalm sing to us:

He provideth abundantly both for my food and refreshment. He revives and refreshes and comforts me by his spirit, affords me a full and plenteous bait, and thereby enables me for the hardship of a journey, and then leads me forth in the even paths of pious duties, gently and carefully, as I am able to go; by this means directing me to that true felicity even of this life, the exercising of myself, and guiding my steps by his excellent laws and rules of living; and this out of his free mercy to me, the greatest and most valuable that any mortal is capable of.

One of the more notable poets of the eighteenth century, James Merrick, gives us a more metrical, though no more comprehensible, paraphrase in 1765:

*Lo, my Shepherd's hand divine!
Want shall never more be mine.
In a pasture fair and large
He shall feed his happy Charge,
And my couch with tend'rest care
„Mdst the springing grass prepare.
When I faint with summer's heat,
He shall lead my weary feet
To the streams that still and slow
Through the verdant meadow flow.*

Even though Merrick's version was set to music to be sung by a congregation, his poetry did little to inspire any degree of warmth in our orientation to God.

In 1969 there was published a single sheet with an imagined paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm in Native American dress, which does encourage us to “warm up” to God:

*The Great Father above a Shepherd Chief is,
I am His and with Him I want not.
He throws out to me a rope,
and the name of the rope is Love,
and He draws me, and He draws me,
and He draws me to where the grass is green
and the water not dangerous,
and I eat and lie down satisfied.*

This same version leads us perfectly into the “disorientation” portion of the Psalm, where we acknowledge, and even lament, those times in our lives when the Shepherd seems to be absent:

*Sometime, it may be very soon, it may be a long, long time,
He will draw me into a place between mountains.
It is dark there, but I'll draw back not,
I'll be afraid not, for it is in there between those mountains
that the Shepherd Chief wills me, and the hunger
I have felt in my heart all through this life will be
satisfied. Sometimes He makes the rope into a whip,
but afterwards He gives me a staff to lean on.*

Most of our biblical translations refer to dark valleys which lie in the shadow of death, and the evils that await us there. But even in this time of disorientation, we are reminded that God has not abandoned us.

Archbishop Parker, in his metrical version of the Psalms written during the reign of “Bloody Mary” when he was hiding in the English countryside, says:

*Yea, though I go through death his woe,
His vale and shadow wide;
I fear no dart, with me thou art,
With staff and rod to guide.*

The first three authorized translations of the Bible in English – the Great Bible, the Bishops’ Bible, and the King James Version – all confess that it is God’s “rod” and “staff” which bring us comfort in our seasons of disorientation.

Miles Coverdale, in the first English Bible in 1535, speaks descriptively of God’s “sheephook,” which for me instantly brings to mind the old print on the wall of the Sunday school classroom in the small country church where I grew up. It depicted Christ as the “Good Shepherd,” with a lamb reposing safely on one arm, and a curved staff – a “sheephook” – in the other hand.

Theodore Haak, in his translation of the Dutch Staats-General Bible in 1657, says “*Thy stick, and thy staff, they comfort me.*”

The first version appended to the proposed American Prayer Book in 1785 speaks of “paths of death” and “gloomy horrors,” and affirms,

*Thy friendly crook shall give me aid,
And guide me through the dreadful shade.*

Samuel Woodford expresses our disorientation and hope with this imagery:

*Secur'd by Him, I will no danger fear,
Nor death itself, if it were near,
And should in its most horrid shape appear,
Death's gloomy shadow by His sun
Shall cheerful grow, as morning light,
And at the day His eye has spring,
The grave itself shall with new beams look bright,
Thy staff shall bear me up; my way, O God,
Not by my Scepter shall be guarded, but Thy rod.*

In one of Isaac Watts' lesser known settings of the 23rd Psalm, he invites us to sing:

*Though I walk through the gloomy vale,
Where death and all his terrors are,
My heart and hope shall never fail,
For God my shepherd's with me there.
Amidst the darkness and the deeps,
Thou art my comfort, thou my stay;
Thy staff supports my feeble steps,
Thy rod directs my doubtful way.*

The most powerful link between the Old Testament and the New is the image of God “preparing a table for us in the presence of our enemies,” for who among us today can hear those words and not be reminded of the gifts of Christ through the bread and the cup he shared with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion.

The biblical images of banquets are many, beginning with the apple in Genesis to the manna in the wilderness, from Belshazzar’s feast to feeding the loaves and fish to the five thousand, to Jesus himself frying up breakfast for the disciples after the resurrection.

The first of the miracles Jesus performed was at the marriage feast in Cana, when he changed the water into wine.

Several years ago I acquired for my collection of Bible a New Testament version called the “Purified Translation.” It had been sponsored by a foundation in New York state whose main emphasis is temperance, so naturally the first thing I did when the book arrived was to check the second chapter of John’s Gospel to see what they did with that particular miracle.

Sure enough, they had Jesus turning the water into wine, but not without a long footnote. They claimed that the only reason Jesus did this was because Mary was so insistent. And the reason she was so insistent was that at this time in her life, Joseph had died, Mary had fallen on hard times, and had gone into the catering business. She was actually the caterer for the marriage feast, and the person responsible for the shortage of wine.

The note went further to state that Mary never asked Jesus to perform this particular miracle again, because she was afraid that strong drink would come between her and her place at the cross.

I shared this story with one of my colleagues at Columbia Seminary, who remarked, “Well, I guess after Cana, Mary only catered immaculate receptions!”

And what more “immaculate reception” can we hope for than our welcome through baptism into the family of God, the fold of the good Shepherd.

We can relate our own baptism with the anointing oil of God’s blessing, and affirm the boundless love of God in the overflowing cup of grace poured out for us.

At various times in the history of English translation that cup is “full,” “abundant,” “brimful,” “fully dight,” “running over,” “plentiful,” “pure,” “crowned,” “cheerful,” “smiling,” “generous,” “laughing,” and even “inebriating!”

But the cup is always there, and always filled with more blessings than we can imagine.

And it is in this fulfillment that the Psalm transitions into what Walter Brueggemann calls “new orientation,” where we find ourselves again in the presence of God.

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

Some translations replace the word “follow” with “pursue,” and this gives an interesting, active perception to what could be interpreted as a rather passive process. Goodness and mercy do not merely “tag along” behind us, keeping their distance for fear they will intimidate us. Rather they chase us through life, always at our heels, ready for us to turn around and welcome them – beside us, over us, within us.

The first complete version of the Psalms by a woman was the work of a “chronologically gifted” (meaning, senior) lady in Perth, Scotland, named Margaret Patullo.

Over a period of years she had paraphrased the Psalms for her own devotional contemplation, and one Sunday after worship, she handed her manuscript to her minister, asking him to read through it and offer any suggestions to improve it.

After reading a few of her verses, he realized that the poetry was not the best, and rather than confront her with his judgment call, he put the notebook in a drawer in his office and promptly forgot about it.

Two years later, after the service, Margaret asked him for it. As he gave her the manuscript, he humbly confessed, “There is nothing I can do to make this better.”

She took this to mean that it was perfect the way it was, and promptly had enough copies printed at her own expense to give to all her friends, and to stock the bookstores in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Her friends, reading her poetry, soon came to the same conclusion as her minister, and to prevent a critic from writing a review which might hurt her feelings, they purchased all available copies of the book and destroyed them.

Margaret went to her grave under the impression that she had written a version of the Psalms which even a preacher couldn't improve, and that the book, which is now one of the rarest Psalters to be found, had quickly sold out.

Her closing verses of Psalm 23 read:

*Amazing power and love divine
Shines in Immanuel's face;
His loving kindness on shall shine
Through all his dwelling-place.
Then let us join those round the throne,
With harps of heavenly gold,
That men and angels join in one,
God's glory to unfold.*

Again, the imagery of what follows us all our days varies from translator to translator: “goodness,” “mercy,” “gentleness,” “loving kindness,” “felicity,” “grace,” “praise,” “beneficence,” “wondrous love,” “sure provisions,” “prosperity,” “favor,” and “special love,” just to mention a few.

An anonymous translation is quoted by Norman Vincent Peale in his book, *You Can If You Think You Can*:

*Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be
the fruits of my hours.*

George Herbert, the great metaphysical poet, gives us:

*Surely thy sweet and wondrous love
Shall measure all my days;
And, as it never shall remove,
So neither shall my praise.*

“Never shall remove,” “through the long years,” “as long as I live” – just how long shall we hope to dwell in the house of God, the presence of the Shepherd, the “lofty temple of the Lord,” the “fortress of the infinite Love”?

The nuances vary from the finite time of our death, to the infinite span of eternity.

“Forever,” “a very long time to old age,” “length of days,” “always,” “a long season,” “longitude of days,” “end of days,” “till time close up mine eyes,” “so long as days shall be,” “my latest days,” “through the long years,” “all eternity.”

As I was browsing through paraphrases of the 23rd Psalm, the worst one I found was entitled “The Politically Correct Jargon Version.” Graciously, the author chose to remain anonymous:

It is an ongoing deductible fact that your inter-relational empathetical and non-vengeance capabilities will retain me as their target focus for the duration of my non-death period, and I will possess tenant rights in the housing unit of the Lord on a permanently open-ended time basis.

These are just a few of the ways translators have expressed the endless season we will enjoy in God’s presence, as sheep with a faithful Shepherd, or as Isaac Watts calls each of us,

*No more a stranger or a guest,
But like a child at home.*

The best way to explore what a particular Psalm means to you – and what better example can there be than Psalm 23 – is to try your hand at paraphrasing it for yourself.

As I prepared my own *Psalter for Christian Worship* several years ago, I lived more intimately with the Psalms than I had ever done with Scripture in my life, and became convinced of two very important things.

All of the Psalms are a part of our being; they speak to us in every season of our lives, when we need to hear them, but in different ways. Remember Dr. Brueggemann’s categories of Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation.

I found early on that I could not simply sit down with the next Psalm on my list, compose my thoughts, and check it off. There were times I would sit down with a Psalm of praise, and after fifteen minutes not a single line of text would come to me. I would turn to a more introspective Psalm, and in ten minutes would have written three verses, because what that Psalm said was something I needed to hear or express. The next time, I might start with a Psalm of lament, but it was really a Psalm of thanksgiving that was singing in my ears.

As I confessed to a friend, it seems that in the course of the summer when I composed my own version of the Psalms, I had enough mood swings that eventually each of the 150 Psalms spoke to me!

The other important thing I learned was that I could take the words of the biblical Psalms and transform them to my own thoughts and images, and at the same time conform my own ideas to their teaching. What I believe through my own faith journey found new expression in my own interpretations, and what the biblical Psalms said to me reinforced what I believed. It was a classic “give and take” relationship.

As you return to your own devotional exercises, I urge you to try your hand at paraphrasing a Psalm and making it a more personal expression of your own faith.

You’ll find yourself singing from your heart in a new and powerful way.

In closing, I invite you to sing with me my version of Psalm 23, which I’ve adapted to the familiar tune, “Forest Green.” That tune, for me, seems to echo the pastoral setting of shepherds, sheep and little lambs, clear streams and green pastures – where we rest and sing God’s praises.

(Sing Morgan’s Psalm 23 to the tune Forest Green.)

*As faithful shepherds tend their flocks,
So God will care for me;
And from God's store of grace my needs
Are met abundantly.
In pastures green, by waters still,
My soul new life does take;
And in the paths of righteousness
I follow, for God's sake.*

*When death surrounds I will not fear,
God's strength dispels my dread;
I hold God's blessing in my heart
And face my fear instead.
For as a lamb, my comfort rests
Upon the Shepherd's rod,
To bring me home, where'er I stray
Into the fold of God.*

*A bounteous feast for me is placed
In presence of my foes;
My head with oil the Lord anoints,
My cup with grace o'erflows.
The loving-kindness of the Lord
Is mine for all my days;
And in God's house for evermore
I'll join the songs of praise.*

As we move between the mountain tops and canyons of our lives, there are surely times we may raise the question, “Why am I singing?” May we never doubt the song – the Psalm – God gives us to sing, but rather ask ourselves, in the words of the old Shaker hymn, “How can I keep from singing?”

Thank you.