

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • AUGUST 16, 2020
“IT’S ALL ABOUT SOUL”

The Scripture
Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
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 anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

The Message
It’s All About Soul: Restoration
Mark Briley

Synopsis: Restoring our souls suggests that it doesn’t run on *full* all times. The soul grows weary. It empties. Like our vehicles, trusting your gasoline dial can become a bit of a crap shoot. How long can your soul run on fumes? How does your soul need to be restored?

“He restores my soul.” – Psalm 23:3



Can we all agree that in 2015, not a single person got the answer correct to the question: “*Where do you see yourself five years from now?*” It’s not a bad question, of

course. We ask it with the hope that there's some vision for the future, some goals we are striving toward, some sense that to get where we dream of going, we're going to have to put in the work today to fulfill such a dream. That's the ideal. But then reality hits that leaves most of us saying, "*I did not see that coming!*" It is the unforeseen seasons that truly put our souls to the test.

March 15 seems to be a day many identify as the wall... when life screeched to a halt. That also happens to be our dog's birthday, and she has been mildly resentful that her day is now being held with some contempt by society. But that became a day when everything shifted, and we were faced with a fairly standard, but all too hard to answer question: "*Where are you?*"

We were all somewhere and we were all headed somewhere. We were starting a new program. We were getting ready to make the big Prom ask. We were starting new jobs or taking a relationship to the next level. We were days from that surgery that now was going to be delayed for months. We were figuring out some things and letting go of some others. We had completed our March Madness NCAA basketball tourney brackets and were ready to roll. We were like the long line of often anxious and frustrated people, waiting to get through security at the airport. Some were in beach hats and sandals heading to a tropical location. Others were suited up carrying only a briefcase... out for business for just the day. Some were happy and some were sad. And it's weird, right? Everyone was heading somewhere and yet no one was going anywhere at the moment. We were in such a line on March 15, ready to roll, only to learn that every flight was cancelled. And we were left with the question, "*Where are we now?*"

It's not a bad question. It's a healthy question to ask in our relationships, in our vision for the future, in the state of our soul. After a particularly bad day, God's first words in the garden to Adam and Eve were simple ones: "*Where are you?*"¹ It's the first conversation between God and these two following the whole forbidden fruit scandal. This question really isn't as much a geographical one as it is a relational one. There were some mistakes. It was a hard time. Certainly, some feelings and so the natural question was, "*Where are you?*" "*Where are we? Are we okay?*" And in this pandemic'd season, it's a good soul question, "*Where are we?*" Where is our faith? Where is our spirit? How are we holding up?

We may be prone to pretend we're at a different place in our faith than we really are. We pretend to be someone we're not, hoping we'll find more love or respect or popularity. It's not necessarily a bad motive behind this – we do it because we're insecure or looking for approval or reaching to connect with people around us. But when what our faith *looks* like becomes more important than what it *is*, it may be an

¹ This reference (*and other parts of this message*) are influenced by Bob Goff's work, *Everybody Always*. Chapter 12 – *Three Minutes at a Time*. Thomas Nelson Publishing. 2018.

indicator that we've forgotten who we are... we've forgotten where we are with God and with each other. These seasons force us to stop, listen, and answer that question, "*Where are we?*"

The quick answer is, "*We're in a tough spot.*" It's a dry season. I hear from many of you who are soul-weary. All the choices we used to navigate and cherish are wiped out. We're used to options, and they're just gone right now it seems. There was a guy on a four-hour flight on a small airline. The flight attendant approached the man and asked him if he would like to have dinner? "*What are my choices?*" he asked. The flight attendant replied: "*Yes or no.*"

Because we have seemed to lose so many options, people are hurting and losing and feeling anxious and discouraged if not depressed. Maybe that's where you are right now. You're in good company. We may be prone to say, "*Christians aren't supposed to struggle this way.*" And it's not that we forget we are Christians. We forget that we are human and naturally have these emotions and struggles. The same examples are all over Scripture. Isaiah called it being "*undone.*" Jeremiah said he wished he'd never been born. Moses asked God to blot him out of the Book of Life. Jonah was out. Job went through hell. Even Jesus, entering a time of intense prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, was in "*great despair.*"

Mother Teresa said, "*I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.*" Whew. We all have these seasons even when we look at others and envy their lives that seem so put together. "*Where are you?*" is God's question. "*Where are you, really?*" And let's just be honest with ourselves and God this morning. You don't have to tell anybody else right now. But you know. And so does God. And we can just commit to holding that together right now.

The 23rd Psalm is our "*All about soul!*" verse today. It's made the rounds, you know? I've sat with people suffering greatly from dementia or Alzheimer's who struggle to remember much at all, but they can recite the 23rd Psalm as if it was programmed into their very being in the womb. A man I saw regularly in Tulsa suffered from Alzheimer's. He was a brilliant man, who started a company that changed the world... even has a presence in Columbia that makes me smile every time I see it because I think of him. I served with him when he was of full mind and walked with him through the end. Toward the end of his life, our visits were challenging but I just went with him wherever his mind carried the conversation. As was our practice, I would get out the little communion cups and the bread chicklets, and he could hardly partake, but he did the best he could, and we would recite the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer. While nothing else could be pulled to his memory, those were embedded. The last time we were together, we recited it as we always did together, and he looked in my eyes afterward

with more clarity than I had seen in his eyes in years and he said, *"I'm free."* There's something about this psalm that sticks with us when so much else falls away.

It's a psalm that hits a lot of major realities – enemies, death, fear, struggle, failure, trust. In this summer of soul, we're diving today into the small words with deep meaning found in the third verse. *"He restores my soul."* God restores my soul. What these four words say to me is simply, *"We need restoration."* The need for restoration suggests that the soul grows weary. The soul hits the March 15-ths in life and is depleted. The soul goes through challenge and grief and loss and heartache and does not simply replenish itself. We get this in general, but we don't really give the soul that same attention as we do so many other things... like our phones. We know our phones get drained and have to be recharged all of the time. Families even talk about this... they may not do soul-check-ins with each other but keeping your phones charged? Families are on it. Like when your kid unplugs your phone that is charging to plug in their own and you say, *"My phones actually charging right now."* And they respond, *"Yeahm but what percentage do you have?"* Right?!?

Phone charging... big in marriages, too. I read this headline last week, *"In Ultimate Act of Sacrificial Love, Man Plugs in Wife's Phone Instead of His Own."* It was followed with the slightly altered Bible verse, *"Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his own dying phone for his wife's."* Your soul needs the same restoration, but we don't often give it the focus we need... maybe because we don't feel like we can readily see it.

Big storm hit our home a few years ago when we were living in Tulsa. Woke us up in the middle of the night. It was dark except when the lightning struck which really lit up the sky. It was in one of those moments that we looked out the back-patio door and noticed our huge, beloved, beautiful willow tree in our backyard. Such would have been fine, but that willow tree was supposed to be in the front yard. It was an enormous tree. We loved it. We lived on the corner of two pretty busy streets in the neighborhood, so people often gave others directions based on our tree. Turn left at the huge willow tree. Hang a right when you see the willow tree. That sort of thing. But it was uprooted, laying across the fence to our back yard, and we were sad. And the neighborhood sent condolences. They were sad. And we all said, *"It was such a healthy tree!"* But... I learned something about willow trees. Their roots are shallow; close to the surface. While it was a big, beautiful tree on the outside, it couldn't hold itself up during the storm. We may look good on the outside – strong, healthy, cool, calm, and collected, but if our souls aren't actively being restored, our roots may be too shallow to withstand the storms we live through.

Sometimes we hit rock bottom, and that restoration takes some serious intervention, but much of the time, many of us will simply grow dry over time. We drift, and such reveals how deep we've planted roots in the soul.

Wayne Cordeiro, a pastor who wrote about his own depression and burnout in his book, *Leading on Empty*,² said in connection to his struggle, *“During my struggle, the only things I had to hold on to were the disciplines I had already built into my life. When you go through dark seasons, you will be restricted by, or released to, what has already been established within your soul.”*

You’ve got to find what fuels you. You’ve got to find healthy ways to fill your soul tank... to deepen those soul roots so that you can withstand the storm head on. I learned that buffalo survive bad storms on the prairie at a much greater rate than cattle. Maybe a farmer could confirm this for me, but the story goes that cattle turn from the wind and rain when it comes attempting to retreat from it. In the process, they are more prone to injury because they’re not planted but running the same direction of the storm and more easily get tripped up and fall. But buffalo lower their heads and lean into the strong winds and rain and seem to come out of the storm with way fewer injuries because of it. Rooting our soul will certainly help when we have to lean into the tough times we all face. I know this can be exhausting. It’s why the Psalmist says, *“God makes me lie down... as a precept to “God restores my soul.”*

Cordeiro, who I named before, hit his big storm of struggle and needed that “makes me lie down” mandate. *“Many times,”* he said, *“We won’t make major course corrections until the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of making the change.”* He decided to spend a week at a monastery in silence. For this extrovert, he was nervous about how he could manage. He was thinking of the story about a new monk, who joined the monastery with the bishop allowing the man only to speak aloud two words a year. After the first year, he stood before the bishop and chose his two words carefully: *“Bed hard!”* At the end of the second year, his summary of the year was: *“Food bad.”* The third year found him again standing before the bishop and his final comment was: *“I quit!”* *“Good!”* the bishop shot back. *“All you’ve done since coming here is complain, complain, complain.”*

Cordeiro struggled through the week, but he knew he needed to reset... he needed to make a shift... make a change. We won’t always understand these changes our souls need in seasons of our lives. You will face famine at home, in your disposition, in your soul. We will be poised for clogs in our relationships, in our work, in our approach to life. You’ll start to notice “mini-strokes” in your relationship with your spouse, or colleagues, or friends, or children, and your connection with God will seem to have lost its vibrancy, too. We won’t always know the how’s and why’s or when’s of it all, but the soul will tell us when we listen closely. It is part of what it means to step out in faith.

² Wayne Cordeiro. *Leading on Empty*. Bethany House Publishing. 2009. Other thoughts on biblical accounts of despair or depression shared in this message found in Cordeiro’s book as well.

Faith is living in advance what we will only understand in reverse. And that's a challenge isn't it? We want to have it all laid out, clear as day, no shred of doubt in approach and next steps, but we don't have that. Faith is living in advance what we will only understand in reverse, or hindsight we might say. Don't let the unknown paralyze you from making a move, taking a step, rooting deeply your soul in the spirit of God. Because when soul paralysis sets in, our creativity begins to wane, and we settle for imitating rather than innovating.

And when our soul is floundering... when we're up against a wall... when we're stuck... when we need restoration... sometimes God won't bring the information you think you need to know but instead, the example you need to live. God may not bring the exact plan but a person.

When that willow tree collapsed in our yard... not rooted deeply enough to sustain the stiff weather, we had to do something about the fallen tree. Turns out the neighborhood association didn't think the uprooted look was a new trend that would benefit the home values in the neighborhood. But it was a big tree, and Carrie and I were trying to weigh up options for what needed to be done. It's expensive and all to remove a tree like that, you know? The next day, our doorbell rings. I open the door and there's this guy with a chainsaw in his hand. He says, "*Hey. I'm Jason. Just moved in two doors down... need some help with that tree?*" Guy has a chainsaw in his hand... am I going to say, "No?" He could have said, "*You know what you need to do or you really ought to do this or you know you should have never let it get so big in the first place.*" People are always ready with an opinion, you know? Instead, he showed up with a tool and willing spirit, and we spent hours cutting up that beloved tree. He could have met that need and gone on his way, and I would have been grateful for the help. Instead, I think God said, "*Hey... I think this is a chance to do some soul restoration... to let the roots grow a little deeper... it will strengthen you when the storms come down the road.*" And it would. It has. And it has taken investment on his part, and mine and that of the Spirit.

The tree led to pizza, and pizza leads to everything else, right? We became friends. When he and his wife wondered if they could ever have another child, and we walked through the ups and downs of such a season, Carrie and I had the joy of being there in the hospital the day they welcomed twins into the world. We've seen parts of the world together I don't know I would have seen otherwise. We created a men's ministry, along with some others, that engaged the needs of young students without fathers and served the elderly in our church who just needed a little extra help. We dug a big hole and planted a new tree where the willow once was, and we planted a twin tree in his yard, too. We found and adopted our dog while staying with them at the third-generation homestead, naming her after his grandmother, who I also came to know and love. They found their way into our church in Tulsa, and in a few short months from now, some seven years down the road from that fallen willow tree, Jason will begin his role as moderator of that growing, dynamic congregation.

People don't often need more information; they need examples. God wants to use ordinary people like you and me to show up, be present, and share what we know about Jesus by having them see the way we love the people around us. We're living through this current storm together... and it is revealing our souls to the world like a giant willow tree uprooted unexpectedly. God is the one who restores our souls... but God just may be prompting us to share in the restoration of each other.

So... where are you? How's your soul? I don't know what your answer today might be to the question, "*Where do you see yourself in five years?*" but... I do know that the soul promptings we follow today will make all the difference when we're living out the realities of 2025. What I hope? Is that five years from now, we're looking back on this time in awe of how God has grown in and through us at Broadway, in Columbia, in our nation, and even the world, and that we'll be rooted deep enough to affirm without question: "*God redeemed this season. God restored our souls.*"