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TRANSFORMED

Transformed In My Physical Health

Psalm 23

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Nancy Lee and I have a weekly ritual with our granddaughters who live in Charlottesville, Virginia. Because we want to find creative ways to be in their lives every week, we've made the commitment to "Facetimeing" with them for "Show and Tell." Just a couple of weeks ago we shared a couple of pages from Glenys Nellist's classic little children's books, *Snuggle Time Psalms* and *Snuggle Time Prayers* based on Psalm 23. In each book, the author turned this beloved Psalm into a simple rhyme that did something really surprising for me. Not only did it give me a way of hearing the psalm the way a child could understand it, but it actually had a calming effect on me; my shoulders relaxed, my hands loosened, my heart opened. It actually reduced the level of stress with these simple words: *"God, I am your little lamb; / you give me all I need. / You always keep me in your care; / I'll follow where you lead. / Wherever life may take me, / One special thing I know: / My shepherd's love and goodness / Will never let me go."*

Pretty amazing. As the series – Transformed – continues this weekend, we're focusing on being "Transformed in our Physical Health" and we're basing it on Psalm 23. We could use a lot more Psalm 23 for the simple reason that it speaks right into the places of stress in our lives. Stress isn't always a bad thing for us; there's a kind of stress that helps protect us. If there's danger lurking, we want to be able to respond to that. But the unhealthy kinds of stress in our lives—the stress that comes from worrying and hurrying, the stress of too many choices, the loss of privacy, fear of the future – those kinds of things, can be met with the deep wisdom that comes out of these ancient words from Psalm 23. So what I want to do is read this Psalm and then walk through Seven Spiritual Habits that can Reduce Stress in our lives. [Read the text]

So how do you feel right now? Calmer? Less stressed? That wouldn't be a surprise. Psalm 23 has given comfort to people for thousands of years. When we really dig into it, when we understand each of these metaphors, it is telling us how to lower our stress which, in turn can transform our physical health. You could say that Psalm 23 is a model of stress management. So let's look at the Seven Spiritual Habits that Reduce Stress.

First, Look to God to Meet Your Needs. Verse 1 says, *"The Lord is my shepherd, so I have all I need."* There's a

big difference between living in an abundance mindset as opposed to a scarcity mindset. Your level of physical health—to say nothing of the path your life takes depends, in part, on the mindset you adopt. You can choose to either view the world as abundant or scarce, but they cannot co-exist. The abundance mindset flows out of a deep inner sense of personal worth and security. It is a paradigm that is grounded in the belief that 'there is more than enough' for everyone. Alternatively, a scarcity mindset is the belief that there will never be enough, resulting in feelings of fear, stress, and anxiety. Verse 1 reminds us of the most basic fact that because the Lord is our shepherd, we have everything we need. It's an invitation to stop putting our security in the things that we can lose. God, the shepherd provides all we need.

Because living in scarcity keeps us up at night, **the second spiritual habit naturally follows: Get Enough Rest.** Look at verse 2a: underline it in your Bible, or write this down in your workbook: *"He makes me lie down..."* The image here is of a God who invites us into rest. For me, this is all about renewal, recharging. And all of that goes back to the ancient word, sabbath, as in from the book of Exodus, "Six days are set aside for work, but every seventh day is a sabbath – you must rest completely, even during your busy seasons, you must observe a Sabbath day of rest." (Exodus 34:21) What practicing sabbath does is it rests your body and refocuses your spirit. It allows you to simply empty out so that there's room to refill when the time comes. One of the best and most challenging ways to do this is to keep sabbath or practice sabbath by disconnecting. I have a friend who has challenged me to do this by disconnecting, unplugging. He goes off the grid from Friday afternoon after work until Sunday afternoon. No screens. No email, no technology from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon. At first it was horrible. But then, after some time, he found he had far more capacity and margin for creativity when he did that, the gains in his physical health began to emerge and he was able to actually accomplish so much more.

Because we gain so much more capacity and margin by resting, we're then able to move to **the third spiritual discipline of Recharging Our Souls With Beauty.** Verses 2 and 3 say: *"He makes me lie down in lush green meadows and leads me beside calm, quiet waters. He restores my soul."* There's something about that image: lying down in a serene, beautiful, meadow of tall, flowing grasses that just makes me feel better, stronger. Many people can "go there" by simply visualizing that scene. Art and music do the same thing: how many of us here, when we're feeling stressed, have a certain playlist we listen to or a book of beautiful pictures that we look at. This is the third thing we need to do: Recharge our souls with beauty. Beauty is an incredibly important thing in stress management. Ugliness stresses us out. Beauty inspires us. Beauty encourages. Beauty motivates. Beauty stirs up positive emotions. So let

me suggest this: Get outside every day. If you're not getting outside every day your stress level is going up. Even if it's just your back yard, even if it's just a walk around the block, even if it's just take your lunch outside, walk outside of the office and sit outside and look up at a tree while you eat your sandwich. We need to be in touch with God's creation. We need to surround ourselves with beauty. We can do that by getting outside.

God's invitation to walk through lush green meadows beside calm quiet waters has one effect... it reduces our stress and enriches our lives so that we can be more open to **the fourth spiritual discipline: To Go to God for Guidance**. In verse 3 we read: *"He guides me in the right paths for his name's sake."* The reason this is important is because a common source of stress in our lives is indecision. You ever have those moments where you just can't make up your mind? Some of you are right there, right now - wavering. You're at a fork in the road or maybe you've got multiple options and you just can't decide and the stress is killing you. You can't decide whether to get in or get out or do neither. You've got too many choices. I want to give you a way of moving through that; a method that's actually centuries old. Are you ready for this? You read scripture and then let it speak to you. I can't tell you how many times people have told me that with some big decision looming, they've read from the book of Psalms or the book of Proverbs and just let the words "be in them." And some word, some phrase, some thought will resonate in their heart and they'll just be able to move forward. God does this with the word: God guides us in right paths for his name's sake. And that matters. That matters a lot. Because knowing that God is with us—leading us and guiding us matters when we walk into difficult times because we're all going to walk into difficult times.

But **the fifth spiritual discipline reminds us to Trust God in the Dark Valleys**. The Psalm says in verse 4: *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me."* It's safe to say that every one of us is going through some dark valley right now. For some, the dark valley is related to our physical health. That's why Psalm 23 is so important for us. Some of you are going through the valley of the shadow right now. Maybe the valley of the shadow does have to do with death. It may be the valley of the shadow of debt. It may be the valley of the shadow of conflict. It may be the valley of the shadow of depression. It may be the valley of the shadow of discouragement. But you're going through the valley of the shadow. Shadows are scary. Remember how you used to get afraid of shadows when you were lying in bed as a little kid? Some of the things that I've learned about shadows are this: Shadows can't hurt you. They can't hurt you. A car can run over you, but if a car's shadow runs over you it doesn't hurt you. A shadow can't hurt you. Shadows are always bigger than the source. Isn't that true? It's your fear of that that is greater than the actual event. Shadows are always bigger than the source and makes them look bigger than they really are. But here's the good news. Wherever there's a shadow there's

a light. You can't have a shadow without a light. So the key when we're going through the valley of the shadow to not be afraid is to turn our backs on the shadow and look at the light. Because as long as we keep our eyes on the light, the shadow can't scare us.

Jesus is the light of the world, we can go through the valley of the shadow of death letting Christ be our light and **Letting God Speak Blessing On Us. And that's the sixth spiritual discipline**. Verse 5 reminds us that God is our blessing. The Psalmist writes, *"You prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies, you anoint our head with oil; our cup overflows."* A really common source of stress is wondering if we're "enough" if we're "good enough." And one of the most potent voices in all of this is the voice that says we're not; we're not good enough. The voice tells us that we haven't measured up, shown up, or made the grade; we haven't arrived, haven't done well enough. We all do this. And we all long for the affirmation that we're enough. It wasn't long before my dad died; it was one of the last times that he was at our home for Sunday lunch. Nancy Lee and I and our son, Soren were sitting at the table. My dad was sitting at the head of the table where he always sat and he was looking at me, just looking at me. Quiet, still, solid. I looked at him as he looked at me and then he spoke. He just said, "Paul, you've done really well. I'm proud of you. I love you." It was an amazing moment of blessing. The father blesses the child. That's what's going on here in this verse: God is reminding us that we are enough. We've got a seat at the table. With blessing, God says, "you are enough." The oil of blessing, the presence at the table is God saying to us, "you are enough just the way you are. In my love and grace, you are enough."

And because of that "enoughness" of God's love for you, you can **Expect that God will Finish what God has Started in You. That's the seventh spiritual discipline**. Verse 6 tells us that we'll never, ever, ever be alone, ever. *"Surely, certainly, without a doubt, the goodness and love of God will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

If there's anything I want our three granddaughters to know surely, certainly, without a doubt, it's that they are loved and treasured and that God will follow them all the days of their lives. We want them to know that they, having been created by the Creator, will have what they need just when they need it. That part of being physically healthy comes from knowing that God will always be there for them. The second of the two children's book that Nancy Lee and I shared with them on Facetime seemed to capture the child-like response to God's faithfulness with these words: *God, I hear you sing to me / As I curl up to sleep. / You tell me you're my shepherd, / And I'm you're little sheep. / And like your special little lamb, / I'll trot right by your side, / And I will never be afraid, / Because you are my guide.*

Seven Spiritual Disciplines, one spiritual truth: The Lord is our shepherd, and because of that we have everything we need.