

A PERSONAL RETREAT GUIDE

Trusting God
for Everything
Psalm 23

JAN JOHNSON

NAVPRESS 



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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 13 12 11 10 09

Contents

Introduction: Why Retreat? Making Space for God	7
*Meditation 1: Does God Really Provide Everything I Need?	17
Psalm 23:1; Ezekiel 34:11-12	
*Meditation 2: Trusting God for Soul Restoration	29
Psalm 23:2-3	
Meditation 3: Trusting God to Lead	39
Psalm 23:3	
*Meditation 4: Trusting God in the Deep Valleys	49
Psalm 23:4	
Meditation 5: Trusting That God Is with Me	61
Psalm 23:4	
Meditation 6: Trusting God with Those Who Oppose Me	71
Psalm 23:5	
Meditation 7: A Life of Settled Trust in God	83
Psalm 23:6	
Notes	95
About the Author	99

If you have time for only three meditations, you might wish to choose those marked with * (or you might be led to choose otherwise).

INTRODUCTION

Why Retreat? Making Space for God

In an age when daily life and even vacations, tours, and cruises are characterized by pressure-packed schedules, a day of retreat invites us to soul-nurturing rest. Jesus said, “I will give you rest,” and he is eager to do that (see Matthew 11:28). A retreat as extended Sabbath renews us as we experience solitude and play at a slower rhythm, allowing God more space to interact with us.

Christians throughout the ages have retreated just as Jesus frequently retreated (see Matthew 4:1-11; 14:13,23; 17:1-9; 26:36-46; Mark 6:31; Luke 5:16; 6:12). The format now used of spending the night away from home was begun by very busy Christian workers (those industrious Jesuits) who needed to pause and reflect on their lives. Sometimes their retreats consisted of a day or two; other times, thirty days or more.

Retreat is an attitude as much as a specific event and place. Once you're practiced at it, even a morning in the park can be a retreat. You learn to set aside worries that you'll be bored or lonely. You let yourself be intrigued by the amazing interaction with God in ways you don't expect; you let yourself be calmed by rest that you've needed for a long time.

What a Retreat Is Not

A retreat is not work. It is a sacred space for rest and reflection. Your goal is not to *cover* Bible passages. Instead, by entering deeply into just a few of them, you'll interact with God about how they speak into your life. Your goal is not to come home and feel that you have *achieved* anything. This retreat is not about what you can *do*. It's about interacting with God gently and knowing more about God's true self. Do you believe that God loves you just for your own self, or do you have to be *doing* something to be loved?

The point of this retreat is to help you build a relationship with God. A relationship involves regular personal interaction, ongoing connection, and shared life experiences. You will experience more deeply (yet also gently) what it means to have a life "in God" or "in Christ," as Paul liked to put it.

A retreat is not a nonstop Bible study. Scripture is used as a vital point of contact with God in order to have real conversations with God in each session. This process is based on what is called *lectio divina*, a way that people have prayerfully read the Bible for centuries. Today people often use self-directed effort to apply the Bible to themselves as if to correct themselves through their own strength. In this retreat, come to the Word to be "taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:13), which may or may not be correction but just something we need to know. This sort of dialogue is essential to life in Christ.

In these conversations, the Holy Spirit will mentor you by "ask[ing] you questions you hadn't thought of, challenging you to think in new ways, dropping a few gems to capture your imagination, and allowing you to try on a few ideas before guiding you to the true nature of the issue at hand."¹ Expect to be drawn in by the Holy Spirit so that you may not at times be able to "tell where God's words leave off and your intuitive thoughts begin."² Now and then, you'll be tempted to launch off onto a tangent, which is sometimes a good idea but other

times a distraction from your conversation with God. If you're the kind of person who usually goes off on tangents, resist for a moment and continue focusing on what's in front of you. See what happens. If you don't usually go off on tangents but you get the urge to now, go with it.

Bring a journal of some kind—a spiral notebook or any booklet will do—on your retreat in case you need to write beyond the space provided. Writing in this guide or in a journal isn't something for you to do or complete; it's a way for you to dialogue with God in a concrete way. Don't *try* to journal; just write what goes through your mind.

Don't expect to come home a different person. You probably will be, but not in the ways you notice at first. In fact, you may notice a shift within yourself only after you've been home a few days. But don't look for it. Let God show you what you need to know.

Don't take a retreat because it sounds like a trendy spiritual thing to do. Do it only because you're drawn to do so. Pay attention to the inner nudge. You may be drawn by weariness. You may be drawn by a longing to be with God. You may be drawn for reasons you don't completely understand. If you're doing a retreat only because someone told you that you should, that may create resentment and detract from your experience.

A so-called successful retreat occurs when we keep our “expectations low and the activities quite simple. When we expect our [retreat] to be highly ‘spiritual,’ it becomes one more thing to do, continuing the addiction to productivity that is so common in our culture.”³

How Long?

If you'd like to take a personal retreat but you're not sure how to do it, begin by spending a morning in the park once a week for several weeks. Get used to that until you love it and long for more. You can

use this guide, one session per week. When you're ready for an overnight retreat, plan for it to be too short rather than too long (but at least twenty-four hours). Leave wishing you could stay longer. Then you'll be ready to come back.

If you want to use this guide for a one-day retreat, you'll need only three sessions at the most. Choose from the seven sessions listed in the contents section, perhaps the ones with the asterisk (*) by them. Choose the ones that most appeal to you.

If you're taking a longer retreat, complete only two or three sessions a day unless you are refreshed and ready to dig in. You will not interact with God well in the sessions unless you have allowed sufficient space to "be" and are well rested. So don't rush, but don't become bored. In general, meeting with God in the morning, afternoon, and evening will be about right. But if you are tired, skip the afternoon one and take a nap or skip the evening one and sit on the porch instead.

If you have time to complete all seven sessions, feel free to skip some and repeat ones in which you sense God particularly speaking to you. In fact, "repetitions" (repeating a session) are a common retreat practice, and the second experience of a session is often better than the first.

The sessions will not be study sessions but times of conversation with God. Feel free to stop to write or think whenever you need to. Try not to let a session last more than ninety minutes. If you're tired, you may find that as little as thirty to forty-five minutes wears you out. See what works best for you.

If you're drawn to a passage other than the ones provided, pause and ask yourself why. Is anything driving you to this passage other than God's direction? (For example, you have to teach on that passage or write an assignment on it.) If you sense that it is specifically God leading you, go ahead and immerse yourself in it in a meditative way.

As you move through the session, feel free to innovate and do things not suggested in the guide. You'll notice that at times you're

asked to read the passage slowly. You're on retreat, so you can afford to move slowly and read slowly. Let the words settle within you. At times, you'll be asked to read the passage aloud. Let the words fall on your ears so that you are hearing them as if for the first time. These are the words of your Beloved to you. Cherish each word. Taste and see that God is good.

Space is provided in this guide for you to write your answers. One reason for this is that you will think more clearly if you write things down instead of just muddling through them in your mind. Another reason is that you can then revisit your retreat after you've been home for a while.

In Between Sessions

Begin your day slowly and move slowly all day. Even if you hike or walk, do that slowly. Eat your breakfast slowly. Live by the clock as little as possible. Breathe deeply and take in every color, sound, and texture around you.

After your first session, listen to what's going on inside you. You might need to:

- Take a nap.
- Do something active, such as taking a walk, hiking, swimming, or doing relaxing exercises.
- Just sit and stare. Try “porch sitting,” in which you sit and think about nothing in particular. Find a spot to view birds and trees, if possible, and supply yourself with something to drink and a blank pad of paper. You don't have to write anything, but if you wish to, be ready. Or you may wish to sit in a Jacuzzi.
- Do something creative. You might wish to bring art materials (or even a book of art reproductions to look

at), a musical instrument, binoculars to watch birds, or perhaps materials needed for you to work with your hands (woodworking, needlework, beadwork). Regarding such work with your hands: You must not try to get anything accomplished and you don't want it to be mentally taxing (because your mind must be free to rest and linger on what you might be hearing from God). You are doing the activity for fun.

- Do light, meditative reading. You might bring favorite magazine articles that have helped you in the past or books through which God has spoken to you. Read again the underlined parts. Don't bring a detective novel or something that will engage you wholly.
- Use worship music, but remember to enjoy a lot of silence.

Because you are letting your mind rest, these in-between moments will provide space to “connect the dots” from what you lack to what you need. Ideas will coalesce and you'll be surprised at what comes to you. The downtime will create space for you to hear God.

Develop a rhythm for your day(s) that includes rest, prayer periods, time to sit and stare, play (walking, hiking, working with your hands, looking at an art book; avoid video games). Rest a great deal. Look deeply at everything around you. End your day the same way, such as with a certain prayer or staring at the stars.

Retreating as a Group

Three or four people might want to take their retreat together by staying at the same location (with separate rooms for sleeping and just “being”) and meeting a few times a day. This can be as varied as a few people at a retreat center or a bunch of guys on a fishing trip. All

should agree on times to be alone and times to meet.

Sessions together might include one or two of these:

- Discussion of what happened during their times alone, how they heard God; this might include reading of what was written in their journals
- Mealtime
- Evenings of being together but being quiet, perhaps each reading or doing artwork or tending a campfire
- Saying a pre-bedtime, evening prayer together

Participants should guard each other's quiet and work hard at not being intrusive, respecting God's ability to speak to each of us.

Preparation for Your Retreat

Start gathering what you'll need, especially hiking gear and things for your creative outlets. You may wish to bring any recording you have of Psalm 23 put to music. Pray about how God might want to nurture you on this retreat. Ask someone who cares about you to pray for you while you're gone, especially if you're often plagued with worry or regret. Count on God's help to let go of those things.

Choosing a Retreat Site

Two important questions to consider are these:

- Do you want to fix your own food and eat by yourself (a secluded place or a retreat center hermitage), or would you rather be at a retreat center where you will eat with others three times a day?

- What sort of physical activity do you want to participate in (hiking, Jacuzzi-sitting, fishing)?

A retreat center is better than a resort getaway because it will promote quiet. It might have:

- A worshipping community of monks or nuns who invite you to join in certain short offices (services) throughout the day
- A fireplace that you might enjoy tending
- A piano you can play if you wish
- A spiritual director (if so, make those arrangements ahead and let the director know the topic you have chosen and how often you'd like to meet)

Can't I Retreat at Home?

Going away takes you away from distractions and gives you a different, more relaxed attitude. If you absolutely cannot get away (even for a morning in the park), remove all distractions (turn off telephones; do not turn on a computer or television; do not answer the door). Take everything that you will need to a place in your house or apartment that does not remind you of work and distractions. Keeping a lit candle in that room might help you quiet yourself and focus.

If you don't have much time when you'll be home alone, you might wish to do just one session a week. If so, try to go through the session the same day of the week and at the same time. This will develop a retreat rhythm in your life.

Reentry into Home, Family, and Community

Before leaving your retreat site, pause. Thank God for this extended time. As you near home, start picturing the people who might be there, what they need from you, and what your tasks will be. Thank God for these people and ask God to help you welcome them. Once you arrive, keep moving as slowly as possible.

As the days pass, continue to journal about the ideas you absorbed during the retreat. Reread your journal.

Make notes on what worked well about your personal retreat (location, setting, timing) so that your next retreat will bring an even more natural tendency to rest in God.

MEDITATION 1

Does God Really Provide Everything I Need?

The psalms give us a picture of what it looks like when we live in the kingdom of God here and now every day. That overflowing life exists not only in the future, but also now: “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Such a life of connecting with God moves us toward becoming people who live with joy and gratefulness, being able to bless enemies (difficult people), going the extra mile, living with purposeful intentionality, letting go of pride, and never judging.¹ This is the life humans were meant to live. In one of Jesus’ many “shepherd moments,” he said, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). This life in the kingdom of God is a life of confidence in God.

Opening to God’s Message

Find a comfortable, pleasant spot to settle that will not present distractions.

Why are you taking this retreat? What do you most need from God in your life right now? What do you most need to understand from God right now?

At what moments in life are you convinced you don't have everything that you need? Give a few lighthearted answers (when I see a new car or purse or vacation out of my price range) and a few serious answers (job has ended; precisely needed medication not affordable). Answer as honestly as you can.

Immersed in God's Message

BACKGROUND: *Confidence psalms* While many psalms are thanksgiving psalms composed after being delivered from a crisis, confidence psalms “are more distanced from the crisis and reflective. They speak generically of a relationship with Yahweh that is utterly trustworthy in the face of *every* threat. . . . The speaker of these poems cannot imagine a situation that would cause doubt or trouble enough to jeopardize the trust. The relationship has been tested severely, and Yahweh has shown himself to be profoundly reliable and powerful. That is to be celebrated.”² In confidence psalms, psalmists take what God says and make it their own from the depths of themselves. This guide focuses solely on Psalm 23 because it is a confidence psalm.

To quiet yourself and focus before reading the Scripture passage, say this slowly:

In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us today and for our Christian life.³

Read this passage aloud very slowly. Because it's probably familiar, you might be tempted to rush through it.

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 fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and
thy staff they comfort me. . . .

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness." . . .

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. (Psalm 23:1-4, KJV; Ezekiel 34:11-12, NIV; Psalm 23:1, GNT)

Before reading the passage again, consider:

CONTEXT: God as shepherd is a familiar image in Scripture (see Psalm 79:13; 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 23:3-4). The shepherd image is also used by and applied to Jesus, which is why it is appropriate to transfer the meaning of Psalm 23 to Jesus as well (see John 10:11,14,27-30; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4; Revelation 7:17).

BACKGROUND: Picture the work of a shepherd as you read this psalm.

- **Protector of sheep:** The shepherd defends the sheep from wild dogs, cougars, and rustlers. A shepherd also protects the sheep from the environment by providing shelter from storms and blizzards.
- **Provider of food and clean water (instead of stagnant, muddy water):** The shepherd manages the food supply by leading sheep where they will find adequate pasture instead of leaving them in bare brown fields.
- **Doctor:** The shepherd tends the wounds and diseases of the sheep and has to keep constantly alert to spot their injuries.
- **Disciplinarian:** The shepherd monitors fights among the sheep and protects smaller or wounded ones.
- **Rescuer:** When sheep get lost or wander into dangerous places, the shepherd must search relentlessly. That might involve climbing down into crevices or coming close to poisonous snakes in order to rescue the sheep.
- **Companion:** The shepherd walks with and among the sheep and knows them by name. The sheep of different shepherds can be kept in the same pen because when a shepherd comes to the pen and calls for his or her sheep, only that shepherd's sheep will come.
- **Delighted manager:** Speaking of God as a shepherd, Phillip Keller wrote, "For Him there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing His sheep contented, well fed, safe and flourishing under His care. This is indeed His very 'life.' He lays Himself out for those who are His."⁴

A shepherd who is gentle, kind, intelligent, brave, and selfless (as God is) is much preferred to a careless, selfish one who would cause the sheep to struggle, starve, and suffer hardship.

MEANINGS OF WORDS: *I shall not want* is also well translated “I have everything I need.” Try saying that last phrase aloud slowly. How many people do you know who would say that and mean it? This is a radical statement in a culture flooded with advertising—an industry whose primary goal is to convince you that you *don’t* have everything you need. The Israelites would have felt lack many times, yet “Israel refuses to split things into spiritual and material. It affirms that Yahweh is the satisfaction of all wants and needs . . . of every kind of need.”⁵

Here are some other paraphrases:

- I am completely satisfied with God’s management of my life.
- I can’t think of anything God could give me that would make me more content.
- I don’t need a thing.

The statement “I have everything I need” brings up issues that will not be resolved in this session:

- Do I believe God has done well by me? (Meditations 4–6 especially)
- What do I believe about the times in my life that have been difficult?
- Have I perhaps struck an unspoken bargain with God that I’ll believe and follow but I expect my life not to include difficult times?

Most people find these questions challenging. This psalm presents a radical picture of what it looks like to trust God. If you don’t feel authentic saying, “The Lord is my shepherd and I have everything I need,” feel free to add *maybe* or *sometimes* at the beginning or end.

That's a realistic way to aim toward an attitude of complete trust.

As you read the passage, consider what word or phrase stands out to you or resonates with you.

- Waiting for a word to stand out is not a spooky or magical thing. This is a natural thing that probably already happens to you when you read the Bible—you think: *How come I never saw that word or phrase or idea before?* Actually, you did see it before, but now you see it in a new and different way. It now stands out to you.
- Don't feel pressured to make something up. If nothing stands out, quiet yourself, read the quieting exercise ("In our meditation we ponder the chosen text . . .") and read the passage again.
- Don't use self-directed effort to try to apply the passage to yourself. When you attempt to apply a passage, you try to figure out what you should do to implement what you read. At this point, simply let God bring to you what you need to know. Let it be God's effort, not your own.
- Be open to letting God speak to you. Expect to be surprised.

Now reread the passage again slowly aloud.

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 fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. . . .

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.” . . .

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.

Write down the word, phrase, or idea that stands out to you.

What feelings did you get in these verses?

What thoughts or impressions come to you? What connections do you make? What questions or perhaps objections do you have? Does anything surprise you?

What might God be saying to you through what has stood out in this passage?

Responding to God's Message

Read the passage again to yourself and consider how it leads you to dialogue with God.

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 fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy
staff they comfort me. . . .

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness." . . .

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.

Say to God what you most need to say. It will help if you write your prayer in the space provided or say it aloud. Doing so will make it more concrete and relational. Be open to having a dialogue with God, to being gently led by the Holy Spirit.

If you write your prayer, you might want to begin with "Dear God" or "Dear Jesus" and then say what you need to say in response to what Jesus has said in the passage to you. If you're not sure what to write, here are some possibilities:

- Begin with, “I’m so glad that you said . . .” or “I really needed to hear that you . . .”
- Feel free to say things that don’t sound spiritual (such as, “What if I don’t really believe that . . .?”). Then move on with more you need to say.
- Tell God what you don’t understand.
- Ask questions. Put a star by these because you may find them answered by the end of today or tomorrow.
- Never feel pressed to write pages and pages. One sentence might really be enough, or you might need to write more.

Resting with God in the Message

Read the passage (or the portion that stood out to you) again to yourself one more time.

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 fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy
staff they comfort me. . . .

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.” . . .

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.

As you’ve read the passage several times, how have you experienced God? What was God like? Reflect on how God seemed to you. Did you have a sense that you’re only talking to yourself or that God was present? Did God seem distant or attentive? Caring or frustrated? Demanding or inviting? Talk to God about this.

Allow yourself time to soak in what has come to you—questions, new ideas, and clarifications about God or yourself. Let it sink all the way down to where you really live. Sit for a few moments and ponder what has transpired. You might wish to:

- Sit and just “be” with God.
- Appreciate or celebrate what occurred in your conversation with God.
- Worship God in some way (even dancing, singing a favorite song, or drawing).
- Rest in the idea that you are the dwelling place of God and that God wants to build a home in you.

Close the interaction with this prayer:

May today there be peace within.

May I trust you, God, that you can work in me exactly
where I am.

May I not forget the infinite possibilities born of faith.

May I use those gifts I have received and pass on the love
that has been given to me.

May I be content knowing I am your child.

Let your presence settle into my bones and allow my soul
the freedom to sing, dance, praise, and love.

—THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX (PARAPHRASED)

Move into a time of enjoying the life and breath God gave you.
You might want to:

- Take a nap
- Take a walk, hike, swim, or do relaxing exercises
- Try “porch sitting,” watching birds and trees, or sitting in a Jacuzzi
- Do a creative activity (using art materials, woodworking, needlework, beadwork), without trying to accomplish anything
- Do light, meditative reading (not a detective novel or something that engages you wholly)