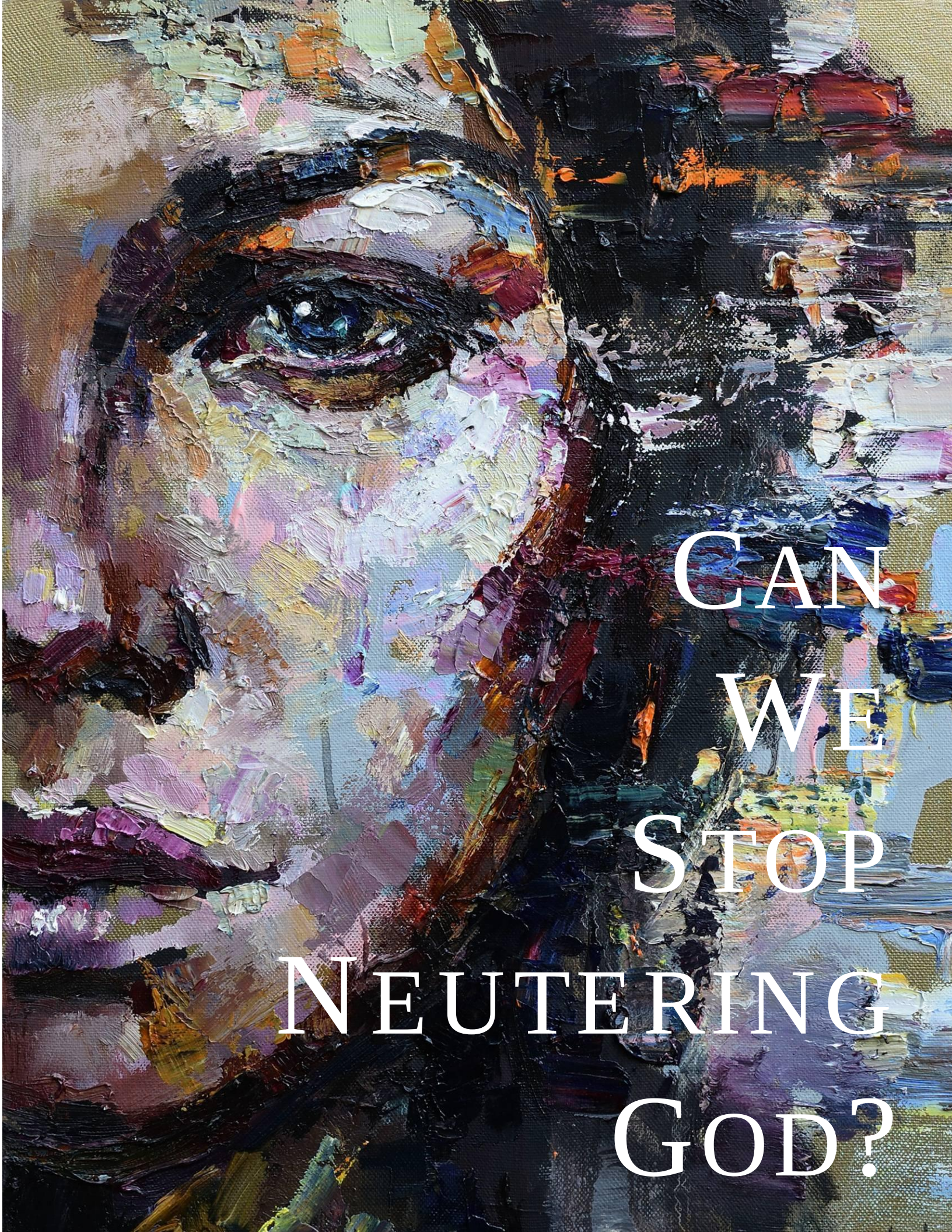

# Can We Stop Neutering God?

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*Unedited version of article published in Dialog 58, 2 (June 2020), pp. 86-89.*

According to a study carried out and published by the Pew Research Center last year, 80% of adults in the U.S. continue to believe in God. Of these, however, 23% do not believe in the "God of the Bible" but merely in a "higher power" or "spiritual force" that they call "God." Another 9% of U.S. adults say that, though they do *not* believe in God, they *do* believe in a "higher power" or "spiritual force" in the universe. Thus, while a little over half of the adult population believes in the God of the Bible (56%), one-third of adults (33%) believe in a higher power or spiritual force, which they may or may not call "God." The same study indicates that among young people aged 18-29, the percentage of those who believe in a higher power or spiritual force that is distinct from the God of the Bible is 39%, a percentage only slightly lower than the 43% who say that they *do* believe in the God of the Bible. The study also found that 97% of those who believe in the God of the Bible also believe that God "loves all people, regardless of their faults," while 69% of those who prefer to speak of a higher power or spiritual force agree with that affirmation regarding "it"—or perhaps for some, "him" or "her."[1]

For years now, it has been common among many Christians to insist on the use of what is generally called "gender-neutral" language to speak of God. This involves avoiding the use of masculine pronouns ("he," "his," "him," and "himself") when referring to God. Many Christian publishers have adopted this practice as policy and thus insist that any theological and biblical material that they publish adhere to that policy, though under certain circumstances they may make an exception. While I have followed that practice in many of the things I have written, I generally struggle tremendously when trying to implement it. I find that it requires constant circumlocutions in order to avoid phrases and sentences that sound extremely awkward or are overly repetitive in their use of the word "God." At times, that practice makes it impossible for me to speak of God as I wish or impedes me from saying what I want to say about God—in particular, the God of Israel, Jesus, and the Scriptures. In order to employ exclusively gender-neutral language to refer to God, many writers and speakers resort to the use of terms such as "deity," "divinity," the "divine," and even "Godself." When even this is problematic or sounds awkward, sometimes one feels compelled simply to avoid making any reference at all to God in the words one wishes to share with others verbally or in print.

I do, however, concur wholeheartedly with the logic behind that practice. To speak of God exclusively as if "he" were male does indeed foment gender inequity and many other related problems and injustices, including not only male dominance but also violence towards women, which can take many different forms. Nevertheless, as I have written elsewhere, I do not believe that the solution to this problem is to

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[1] "When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?," *Pew Research Center*, published on April 25, 2018 at http://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/.

"neuter" God.[2] From my perspective, such a practice tends to make of God an abstraction and to depersonalize God. It not only reinforces the notion that God is some*thing* rather than some*one*—a "higher power" or "spiritual force"—but also leads people to conceive of God as distant, amorphous, dispassionate, and detached, in addition to being an impersonal abstraction.

In my case, I would never refer to the God in whom I believe as a "deity," "divinity," or "divine being." Instead, the God in whom I believe is the God of Scripture, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and above all the God of Jesus Christ. For me, the love of God is not something that "emanates" from a "higher power" or "spiritual force," and much less some type of higher power or spiritual force in itself, but a reality that I experience as deeply personal, intimate, and affectionate as I relate to a person whom I regard as caring, kind, and compassionate and at the same time passionate, audacious, relentless in seeking the well-being of all, and merciless in being merciful. That is the God of Jesus Christ and the cross—a God who will pay any price to see us made whole, a God whose love for us will stop at nothing.

The problem, of course, would seem to be that the Scriptures that speak of this God consistently do so with the use of pronouns, adjectives, and verb forms that are masculine and not feminine in gender. In addition, the anthropomorphic language and metaphors that they employ appear to present this God almost exclusively as male. On this basis, many Christians and their leaders have traditionally claimed that to be faithful to those Scriptures, we cannot speak of God as if God were female in gender, but must use language that portrays God only as male. For that reason, even in churches and schools that employ gender-neutral language to speak of God (in English), in virtually every case the Bibles that are used in those places continue to use only masculine forms of pronouns and adjectives when referring to God, as well as anthropomorphic language and metaphors that almost without exception characterize God as male.

However, if we look more closely at the way in which we translate from the biblical Hebrew and Greek into English and also apply the principle according to which "Scripture interprets Scripture," we discover that there is actually a strong basis for arguing that, in order to be faithful to our Scriptures, we should speak of the God we find there as female as well as male. And that, I would argue, is precisely what we must start doing.

There are in fact many good reasons to do so. Although in the Bible masculine forms of pronouns, adjectives, and verbs are consistently used to refer to God, those same forms are used throughout the Bible to refer to people of either gender.[3] In Leviticus 17:10, for example, God is presented as affirming, "If any man of the house of Israel or of the strangers that sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people" (RSV). Here God is clearly speaking of both males *and females*; I strongly doubt that it was ever argued in ancient Israel or Judaism that women are free to drink

[2] See my online article "Inclusive God-Language," published on October 31, 2017 and in revised form on July 16, 2018 at http://94t.mx/inclusive-god-language/.

[3] I recognize, of course, that today many prefer to speak of more than two genders. Greek, in fact, speaks of three genders and even applies the neuter gender to human persons in words such as *paidion*, *teknon*, and *nēpion*. Here, however, I am speaking of gender in a grammatical sense.

blood since they are not included in this prohibition. The NRSV rightly alters the wording of this verse to make that point clear: "If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people."

When we turn to the New Testament, we find Jesus asking his disciples questions such as, "For what can a man give in return for his life?" (Mark 8:37 RSV). Obviously, Jesus has in mind here both females as well as males, as the NRSV reflects by using the third-person plural: "Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" In this verse, the Greek word Jesus uses is *anthrōpos*, which is masculine in gender but generally refers both to males and to females. Accordingly, the corresponding pronoun *autou*, which literally means "his," is also masculine in gender, even though here it too refers both to males and to females. In contemporary English, it has become standard not only to use something such as "human being(s)" instead of "man" when referring to persons of either gender or all people collectively, but also to use words and phrases such as "one," "they," "he and she," "she and he," and often even just "she" rather than "he" when speaking of individuals and when translating a third-person masculine pronoun into English from other languages—including Hebrew and Greek.

Unlike languages such as Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and German, the English language does not have a word such as *'ādām*, *anthrōpos*, *homo*, and *Mensch* to distinguish an individual of either gender or a people composed of both females and males from an individual who is male (Hebrew *'îš*, Greek *anēr*, Latin *vir*, and German *Mann*). All of these foreign words are masculine in gender and have traditionally been translated into English as "man," but only the last four refer exclusively to males. If words and especially pronouns that are masculine in gender in biblical Hebrew and Greek not only *can* but at times *must* be translated as referring to females and not only males in order to reflect properly their meaning, then there is no good reason why we cannot also translate words of masculine gender that refer to God with female forms as well as male ones.

In fact, at times even a Hebrew or Greek word that in principle refers only to males must be understood as including females. In the passage from Leviticus 17:10 cited above, the word that the RSV translates as "man" is not *'ādām* but *'îš*. Furthermore, in both Hebrew and Greek, the words for "God" (*'ĕlōhîm* and *theos* respectively) can be used to refer not only to male gods but female ones as well, especially when used in the plural, but on occasion even in the singular.[4] When referring to the Spirit of God of whom the Scriptures speak, in English we generally change the gender of the words *rûaḥ* and *pneuma*, which are respectively feminine and neuter in gender, by using pronouns that are masculine. If it is acceptable to change a word that is of feminine gender to masculine when speaking of God's Spirit—who in Christian Trinitarian theology is "himself" or (in Hebrew) "herself" God—then it should also be considered acceptable to change a word of masculine gender to feminine so as to speak of God as "she."

It is also worth noting that the Hebrew Bible affirms explicitly that God is *not* a man using the Hebrew word *'îš* (Numbers 23:19; Job 9:32), thus

[4] In Hebrew, for example, see 1 Kings 11:5. In ancient Greek literature, *theos* could be modified by articles, pronouns, and adjectives that were feminine in gender, although the feminine form *thea* also existed. See Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), s.v. "θεός."

simultaneously affirming that *God is not a male*. And since images of God were expressly prohibited in the Hebrew Scriptures and among Jesus and his first followers as well, the God of Israel was never to be depicted visually as male.

In reality, almost all Christians agree that the God of Scripture is not actually male or female in gender. When using anthropomorphic language to refer to God—which is the only language we *can* use for God—God is never said to have physical or anatomical traits that are exclusively male or female, and the physical and non-physical traits and qualities that *are* attributed to God in the Bible can apply equally to females or males. At the same time, however, the God of Scripture is consistently presented not merely as *personal* in nature but *as a person*. In order to reflect this reality faithfully, therefore, we would need to use *personal pronouns* when speaking of God; yet in English the only personal pronouns we have are masculine or feminine. I would insist that we may and should use *both*, alternating between the two, in order to reflect faithfully biblical thought. This should be the case even when we speak of God as "the Lord," since that word refers to a (divine) *person* who is neither female or male. In fact, by speaking of God as *female* we can convey the truth that God is *not male*, just as by speaking of God as *male* we convey the truth that God is *not female*.

So rather than using words that are *neither* masculine or feminine in gender when speaking of God, let's do both, *even*—or *especially*—*when we are translating Scripture into English*. Undoubtedly, precisely how, where, and when to do this is problematic for many reasons and raises many questions that are difficult and complex.[5] Obviously, it would be best not to alternate between the two in the same immediate context, for example. We would need to figure out how to deal with the many different metaphors used for God—and they *are* only metaphors—including especially "father" and "king."[6] "Mother" comes across very nicely, and its usage might even help us address common gender-role prejudices. When teaching on the subject of gender, I often ask my students, "If I am tender and affectionate, holding my daughter in my bosom as I gently caress her hair and softly sing to her a lullaby, have I stopped being fatherly so as to become motherly?" I would disagree vigorously with any who would answer "Yes" to that question.

With the help of others, I would have to think some more about substituting "queen" for "king" when this term is used for God in the Bible, due to some of the connotations that "queen" has come to have for many—several of which reflect prejudices regarding human sexuality and gender that Christians urgently need to continue to address. In principle, of course, nothing should differentiate the reign of a queen from that of a king. Some would raise the question of what these images convey about power relationships, but that too is a subject for

[5] Of course, critical reflection on questions such as these among Christian theologians and biblical scholars has already been going on for at least the last half-century, thanks especially to the work of scholars such as Sallie McFague and Rosemary Radford Ruether, who brought many of these questions to the forefront. It is important, however, to make sure that those questions *remain* at the forefront, rather than thinking that we have already resolved them.

[6] Walter Brueggemann rightly notes that this is *always* the case: "Nouns used for Yahweh in the Old Testament are metaphors. . . ." (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, 230). The same, of course, is true of the nouns used for God in the New Testament.

ongoing discussion. I believe that we need to rethink, redefine, and transform power relationships, rather than naïvely and mistakenly believing that we can or should eliminate them or that in themselves they are bad and oppressive. But once again, I would argue strongly against using gender-neutral language to replace "heavenly king" with "heavenly ruler," for example. I would not like to address the God in whom I believe in that way, and I *certainly* do not want to address my heavenly Father and heavenly Mother as my "heavenly Parent."

Thus, while it is certainly problematic to use feminine word forms and metaphors when speaking of the God of Scripture and translating those Scriptures into English, from my perspective, *not* to do so is even *more* problematic. As Walter Brueggemann has argued,

> the Old Testament employs many metaphors for Yahweh because no single metaphor can say all that Israel needs to say about their God. The full gamut of nouns for Yahweh contains not only a rich variety but also a panorama of possibilities, many of which contradict each other. The witnesses in Israel, moreover, do not undertake to harmonize or make all the metaphors fit together. Rather, the rich range of metaphors often stand in tension with each other, so that one metaphor may say what is left unsaid by another, so that one may correct another, or so that one may deabsolutize another.[7]

I would add only that everything that Brueggemann affirms here about the God of Israel and the Old Testament is also true with regard to the God of Jesus and the New Testament, and that it should be applied to the use of gender-specific (rather than gender-neutral) word forms and metaphors, not only when we speak or write about the God of Scripture today, but also in our translations of the Bible into English.

Personally, I do not want a God who has not only been neutered but castrated and sterilized as well—though strictly in a metaphorical sense, of course. And I am tired of being pressured and often given no choice but to speak and write of her in that way. That is not the God in whom I believe, the God whom I worship, the God about whom I write, and the God I love with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I want a God of whom I can say, "We love because she first loved us" (1 John 4:19). I want to hear a Bible reading that tells me: "and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with human beings. She will dwell with them, and they shall be her people; and God herself will be with them; and she will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:3-4). I want a hymnal or bulletin that enables me to join in song with my sisters and brothers in Christ to give thanks to God that "she walks with me and she talks with me, and she tells me I am her own."[8] Then I want to recite together with them the Psalm that for most Christians describes more beautifully than any other the God in whom we believe, but to begin it by saying:

> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
> she makes me to lie down in green pastures.
> She leads me beside the still waters;
> she restores my soul.
> She leads me in paths of righteousness
> for her name's sake (Psalm 23:1-3).

Ah, how soothing and refreshing is that! What a God!

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[7] Ibid., 231-232.

[8] Adapted from the hymn "In the Garden," composed in 1912 by C. Austin Miles.

And finally, when I have done all of these things, I will pray to God asking her to enable others to discover through me and my fellow believers in Christ that, far from being a "higher power" or "spiritual force," she is the most wonderful, kindhearted, captivating, and supportive person that they could ever dream of getting to know.

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