SCRIPTURE:
“…you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.” –Psalm 23:5
“…and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” –Philippians 4:7

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” –Galatians 5:22–23

MEDITATION:
When I was in graduate school, a lot of the faculty, post docs, and grad students played golf. I am not a golfer. They had an annual tournament which I managed to escape for some time, but it eventually caught up with me and I was “invited” and “encouraged” to participate. Of course, I didn’t have any clubs. So, someone asked around the department and found an old set of golf clubs that I could use. The problem was the golf bag. It was leather and it wasn’t just old or cracked, it was disintegrating! I didn’t want to carry it but there seemed no other option. I decided to be a good sport and just try it out. How bad could it be?

After four hours of walking around the golf course, picking the bag up, setting it down, transferring it to the opposite shoulder, I was literally covered in leather dust. It wasn’t just on the surface, it was brown dirt ground into my shirt and clothes. Thank goodness I am old enough that this happened before the age of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, smart phones, and every other example of social media.

Like leather, our hearts can become dried and rigid over time. When I look around at the news reports of some of the things happening in our cities, on our roads, on airplanes, and in our cities, I wonder if some of us have become like leather—dried and cracked to the point where we are coating those around us with “leather dust.”

In the Old Testament, one of the most powerful images is that of a shepherd. In Psalm 23, David writes, “You anoint my head with oil.” We put oil on leather to seal it, protect it, and keep it from cracking. What experiences in our lives change us into “dried and cracked leather”? How does God protect and seal our hearts from the conditions around us?

W. Philip Keller was the son of African missionaries who later moved to Canada and became a shepherd and a pastor. In his book A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, he discusses each verse in the psalm from the point of view of a shepherd. When it comes to the verse “you anoint my head with oil,” he describes three benefits sheep receive from being anointed with oil: protection from flies, healing of an infectious skin disease, and protection from other aggressive sheep. So, from Keller’s experience, the things that “bug” us in our lives, the non-Christian thoughts that “infect” us, or the jealousy and strife from our interactions with others can all cause irritation that unsettles us and makes it difficult for us to live out a Christian life.

For Christians, the Holy Spirit is the “oil” that soothes us, heals us, and keeps us resting and peaceful in God’s grace. When we are in danger and when we are around evil influences, the Holy Spirit hears our prayers. We don’t even have to pray with words. We just need to look to God with our concerns. In the midst of other influences, the Holy Spirit reminds us to focus on God’s will and empowers us to live it out in our lives. We are reminded to bear the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Keller also talked about the level of awareness needed by the shepherd. A good shepherd was always watching. It was critical to catch changing conditions early, before the sheep became spooked or agitated. After the sheep were dipped or anointed with oil, the protection didn’t last forever. It had to be repeated often, even daily. Keeping the sheep healthy was a constant battle that needed to be evaluated and addressed every day. In the same way, we need to spend time every day anointing our spirits with God’s grace through scripture and prayer.

I think David’s psalm is intentional when it describes anointing the head. Flies can bite you anywhere and it is annoying and painful. But flies around the head create a different level of fear, annoyance, and discomfort. Likewise, to be anointed on the head is something very personal and intimate. You won’t let just anyone treat, touch, or anoint your head, only someone you trust. Sometimes we are so frantic with a situation or with worry that God can’t even get close to help us. That daily time of prayer and reflection can help remind us to calm down and allow our Savior to tend to our cares.

Recently one of my kids went on a field trip. We made sure we packed sunscreen, but we both forgot to apply it before leaving. There was a bit of sunburn on her forehead that evening. We spent a couple of days applying some “unburn” to the area so that it was more comfortable as it healed. Later, when the skin was itchy and about to peel, I applied some good lotion to help with
healing. As she closed her eyes and tipped her head back for me to apply the ointment or lotion with my fingertips, she would smile and her whole body would relax. It wasn’t just the skin on her forehead that was being cared for. It was all of her. I thought about these verses in Psalm 23.

**REFLECTION:**
Think about your life right now.

1. What cares, hurts, fears, or resentments are “bugging” you or threatening the peace and rest in your life in Christ? Ask Christ to anoint you with his spirit of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation.
2. How can we “anoint” those in need and bring the fruits of God’s spirit to those around us? Identify one or two people in your life to focus your prayers and actions on for this purpose.

**PRAYER:**
As we come out of this time of social isolation, of watching our world change in so many ways, our lives need your anointing. Heavenly Father, please forgive us, strengthen us, and lead us forward. I pray that we can be your oil to soothe a fractured world, to bring hope to those in despair, to comfort the broken-hearted. As we listen to each other this weekend, I pray that we hear your voice and feel Christ’s presence.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**
Kathleen Tallman is a professor in the Department of Physical Therapy at Azusa Pacific University. She teaches cadaver anatomy and is interested in how students develop an understanding of embodiment while studying cadavers. She is active in her local church along with her husband and her family.