

# What to read when someone is dying

At a bedside you need verses that are short, plain, and true, because the person may be drifting and you will be reading through your own tears. These are the ones hospice chaplains reach for. None of them argues. They say: you are held, you are going somewhere, and you are not going alone. Read one, slowly. Then sit. The sitting is most of it.

## FOR THE ROOM

### Psalm 23:1-6

“Yahweh is my shepherd: I shall lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. 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, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over. Surely goodness and loving kindness shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in Yahweh’s house forever.”

The person has probably known it their whole life, and hearing it now connects the end to everything before. It names the valley and walks through it.

### Isaiah 43:2

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, and flame will not scorch you.”

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When, not if. Honest about the crossing.

## FOR THE PERSON

### Luke 23:43

“Jesus said to him, “Assuredly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Jesus, dying, to the man dying next to him: today. The shortest, clearest promise in the Bible about what comes next, made to someone with nothing left to offer.

### Psalm 31:5

“Into your hand I commend my spirit. You redeem me, Yahweh, God of truth.”

“Into your hand I commend my spirit.” Jesus said it on the cross. If the person can still speak, they may want to say it. If not, say it for them.

### John 14:1-3

“Don’t let your heart be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many homes. If it weren’t so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will receive you to myself; that where I am, you may be there also.”

A prepared place, and someone coming back to get you.  
From the one who went first.

## FOR THE FAMILY, AFTERWARD

### Psalm 116:15

“Precious in Yahweh’s sight is the death of his saints.”

Precious in his sight. One line, for when nobody knows what to say.

## WHAT TO SAY

- Say less. One verse, slowly. Then hold a hand.
- “You can go when you’re ready. We’ll be all right.” Families often need to give permission, and the dying often wait for it.
- Say what they meant to you, in the present tense, while they can hear it. Hearing is usually the last sense to go.
- Play the music they loved. Read the psalm they knew. Familiar beats profound now.

## WHAT NOT TO SAY

- ✗ “Fight this.” Late in dying, it becomes one more thing they are failing at.

## HOW TO USE THIS

Bring two verses, not seven. Psalm 23 for the room, Luke 23:43 or Psalm 31:5 for the person. If you don’t know what they believed, Psalm 23 and Isaiah 43:2 ask nothing of the listener.