

Pursuing God

In Step with the Psalms

Lesson 3: Psalm 23

Our Good and Gracious Shepherd

Stay on the Path ~

The story is told of two gentlemen who were called on to recite Psalm 23—the Shepherd’s Psalm—one evening in a church service. The first man had the reputation for being a skilled actor and great orator, repeating the psalm with stunning eloquence. The second man was elderly, requiring the use of a cane to assist him in mounting the platform steps to approach the microphone. He began to repeat the words of Psalm 23 from memory but, unlike the first man who had received thunderous applause, there was a strange hush that fell over the crowd as the man returned to his seat. Breaking the silence that had filled the room, the first gentleman returned to the podium and expressed to the audience with awe, “I may know the Shepherd’s Psalm, but I now realize that this great man knows the psalm’s Shepherd!”

The sweetest note ever sounded in the believer’s ears is the assurance that we know and belong to the One Great Shepherd of our souls. When we are able to move beyond trendy notions, religious rituals, and cultural mandates into the dynamic personal relationship for which we were created, then we will finally be satisfied as sheep belonging to the Shepherd’s fold. When we learn to follow the voice of our Shepherd, we will experientially know that He alone is sufficient to meet our every need, whatever the circumstances that come our way.

Did you know ~

The Book of Psalms is a vast volume of exquisite insights into what it means to think and feel as a human being. The highs and lows, joys and despairs of life allow the reader to discover and explore one’s own feelings and emotions. This does not mean that every emotion on display is to be emulated, but rather that we can glean and learn from them. “The first great value of this Book of Psalms is that it provides for our emotions and feelings the same kind of guidance as other Scriptures provide for our faith and actions” (J. Sidlow Baxter). Since all of life belongs to God, our emotions as well as our behavior should be submitted to His rule as Lord over all.

“In these busy days, it would be greatly to the spiritual profit of Christians if they were more familiar with the Book of Psalms, in which they would find a complete armory for life’s battles, and a perfect supply for life’s needs” (Charles Spurgeon).

Psalm 23

The Lord the Shepherd of His People
A Psalm of David

1 The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.

3 He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
for His name's sake.

4 Yea, 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.

5 You prepare a table before me
In the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall
Follow me all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house
of the Lord forever.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer.

Read Psalm 23:1-6.

Listen to the psalm ~ First impressions

What is the *tone* of the psalm? What stands out to you from your initial reading?

Does *your* Christian walk currently demonstrate a total trust in the Lord to provide all of life's needs? What immediately comes to mind?

Put a psalm in your heart ~ (Memory verse) **Psalm 23:6**

(Write out the verse in the spaces below. Practice it each time you open your lesson.)

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and
I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Learn the lessons of the psalm ~

Selah (Think about): Psalm 23 (referred to as the “pearl of the psalms”) is the most often read, quoted, recited, and memorized portion of Scripture. Think of the ways this psalm has been used to comfort and encourage many people in their time of need.

I. He is our Good Shepherd ~ vv. 1–3

As far as sheep go, it isn't exactly complimentary to compare God's people to lowly sheep but that is precisely what the Bible repeatedly does. Sheep cannot do anything for themselves—they are completely helpless, defenseless creatures, dependent entirely upon their shepherd for all of their needs. Understanding the attributes and actions of sheep reveals some striking similarities to human beings and we cannot help but be amused by them.

In ancient Israel, a shepherd did not punch a time-clock, he lived twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week outdoors in the sheepfold with the sheep: nurturing, guiding, protecting, and calling each one by name. It was considered the lowliest of all forms of work—the hours were long, the chores were dirty, and there was no one there to pat the shepherd on the back for a job well done. David understood that; he wasn't born into royalty. He wrote this psalm much later in life after becoming king, but the road leading him there was to be very dangerous and take him many years.

David was the youngest of eight sons (1 Samuel 16), the last one in line to be considered for attention. He often spent his days and nights tending to this father's flocks. It was those hours in the field as a boy that would later inspire him to look back and use the analogy of the shepherd caring for his sheep as he penned Psalm 23. David transferred the image of a loving, nurturing, caring shepherd to God and, appropriately, the image of a flock of helpless wandering sheep to God's people. David went on to model his leadership of God's people by what he knew of God personally. In Psalm 78:70–72, the scripture records: *He [God] chose David His servant, and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the ewes that had young He brought him, to shepherd Jacob His people, and Israel His inheritance. So he shepherded them according to the integrity of His heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands.*

1. What do the following verses in the Book of Psalms say about God's role as shepherd of His people and what about their response (where indicated)?
 - a. Psalm 78:52–53a
 - b. Psalm 79:13
 - c. Psalm 80:1
 - d. Psalm 95:7
 - e. Psalm 100:3–5

2. Read through John 10:1–30. In it you will find the promised Messiah represented as a loving shepherd. Notice the totality and perfection of this Shepherd’s work toward His beloved sheep. (Our Shepherd knows what we need even before we ask Him.) What do you learn from these verses regarding:

- The actions of the Good Shepherd?

- The action of His sheep?

Sheep are interesting animals, they are not driven from behind, they are led; they respond to voice command. While often different flocks are housed mixed together in one sheepfold for the night, one of the shepherds will lie down across the open door to protect the flock from intruders. At first daylight, all the shepherds appear to call forth their sheep and, even though the flocks are mingled, each sheep will respond only to the voice of its own shepherd.

Pause & ponder ~

There are many voices calling at you from every conceivable direction each and every day. The question is: whose voice do *you* listen to—that of your Shepherd or those of the world? On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being best, how quick are you to recognize the voice of your Shepherd when He is speaking to you through His Word? Please explain.

Can *you* honestly say in your heart as David did: “The Lord is *my* shepherd”? You can if you call out to Him today!

Touchpoint ~

A closer look at the phrase, “the Lord is my shepherd” (v.1) reveals the verb is in the present tense and could better be translated “the Lord *is* shepherding me.” In other words, He is right now at work providing, protecting, nurturing, caring, and guiding us to our destination. All of the Old Testament names of the Lord are an indication of His ongoing oversight of every aspect and detail concerning His people. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ refers to believers as “My sheep” because the Father gave us to Him (John 17:12) and because He willingly laid down His life for us.

The following exercise will give you the opportunity to cross-reference the shepherding care promised to God's people in Psalm 23 with the covenant names of Jehovah God. Look up the Old Testament references that correspond to the verses in Psalm 23 and, in your own words, personalize what God does for you as the result of your covenant relationship with Him. The first one is done for you as an example.

<u>Psalms 23</u>	<u>God's Name</u>	<u>My Blessing</u>
vv.1-2: <i>I shall not want; He makes me to lie down in green pastures</i>	Genesis 22:14 – <u>Jehovah-Jireh</u>	<u>He will provide for me</u>
v. 2: <i>He leads me beside still waters</i>	Judges 6:24 – <u>Jehovah-Shalom</u>	
v. 3: <i>He restores my soul</i>	Exodus 15:26 – <u>Jehovah-Rophe</u>	
v. 3: <i>He leads me in the paths of righteousness</i>	Jeremiah 33:16 – <u>Jehovah-Tsidkenu</u>	
v. 4: <i>Yea, though I walk through the valley. . . You are with me</i>	Ezekiel 48:35 – <u>Jehovah-Shammah</u>	
v. 5: <i>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies</i>	Exodus 17:15 – <u>Jehovah-Nissi</u>	
v. 5: <i>You anoint my head with oil</i>	Leviticus 20:8 – <u>Jehovah-M'Kaddesh</u>	

Abundance, rest, protection, restoration, keeping to the right path—all these are the responsibility of the shepherd. To take it further, David states that the shepherd is able to go above and beyond to protect his sheep as they face moments of great need and peril.

II. He is our Gracious Host ~ vv. 4–6

Here the metaphor shifts from a shepherd with his flock to that of a gracious host meeting the needs of his traveling guest so they will lack nothing. The pronoun also transitions from David talking *about* God to him talking directly *with* God. Surrounded by his enemies, David is confident that God is working all things together for his good.

1. What brought David comfort and freedom from fear in the face of his enemies?
 - a. Do a little investigating on your own to discover what the *rod* and the *staff* were used for and note your findings below.
2. The act of anointing the head with oil (v.5) was to symbolize the heart being revived in the face of great need. What difference would the certainty of God's presence make?

The overflowing cup (v.5) signified the abundant supply of God's divine grace (that which is beautiful and pleasant) in every situation. Here the expression is used to convey David's confidence that God would forever show him favor based on His covenant love.

3. As a result, what was David's final triumphant declaration? v.6

Pause & ponder ~

Take a moment to meditate on Romans 8:28–39, which clearly states the certainty of a believer's relationship with God *now* as well as their future hope. What in these verses conveys the assurance of comfort and confidence toward God that you need most today?

Live the psalm ~

Select one of the verses from your study of Psalm 23 and share how it will affect your perspective? How can you apply this verse to your life this week?

Pray the psalm ~

David, the shepherd-king of Israel prayed the words of Psalm 23 to the Lord—the One who exemplified everything that a true shepherd is to his sheep. Record your prayer in the space below, date it, and then wait in faith for the answer.

Whether in the pasture, in the fold, or through the valley, the sheep's path ultimately leads to the Father's house where God's flock will dwell with Him and forever sing His praises!

... For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Revelation 7:17

