

“Confidence in God’s Shepherding”

Background Scriptures: Psalm 23; John 10:11-14 **Devotional Reading:** John 10:1-10

Psalm 23 (NIV)

A psalm of David.

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, 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 overflows. ⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To summarize metaphors of God as shepherd and God as host.
- **Biblical Principle:** To see God as caring and thoughtful toward His people.
- **Daily Application:** To thank God for His daily provisions and protection.

INTRODUCTION

Needy Creatures

Humans have a lengthy period of development compared to other living creatures. We enter the world entirely dependent on others and remain so for several years. As time passes, we envision ourselves becoming more proficient at addressing our needs.

The truth is that many parts of our lives are not easy to control: our circumstances, environment, and health, for instance. We also cannot control the people around us. When we do not get our way, it is easy to slip back into our childhood self - the one who cries out for attention when needs are not met. The psalmists found comfort in letting God meet his needs.

LESSON CONTEXT

This Psalter (a collection of Psalms for liturgical use) was clearly given consideration to an arrangement of its 150 psalms; it is frequently noted that they are arranged in five “books,” the first four of which conclude with “Amen,” meaning “we agree” or “true” (Psalms 41:13; 72:18–20; 89:52; 106:48).

A connection to David is apparent in half the psalms. His name appears in the superscriptions of 73 of them, with two more psalms attributed to him in Acts 4:25 and Hebrews 4:7. Superscriptions are instructions or attributions appearing at the beginning of many psalms. Superscriptions are part of the text, although modern Bibles give them no verse number, and Bible software gives them a verse number of zero.

Today’s text is an example. Its superscription reads “A Psalm of David.” This indicates that David was the author. David first appears in Scripture as a keeper of sheep (1 Samuel 16:11). During a war with the Philistines, he continued to be responsible for the care of his father’s flock (17:15, 20). That might seem to have been a safe, behind-the-front-lines kind of job, but in that role as a shepherd, David had fought both lion and bear (17:34–37).

Note that “shepherding” is a common metaphor in the ancient Near East, used especially for kings who protect and provide for subjects. This goes a long way to help explain the depiction of David. His introduction as a shepherd in 1 Samuel guides readers to anticipate

that he would make a good king. This was an important development, for when the Israelites first asked Samuel for a king, they contravened (went against) the wishes of God (1 Samuel 8). But God nonetheless redeemed the monarchy and made an everlasting covenant with David (2 Samuel 7). Anything either by or about David is, therefore, important to consider.

God's Shepherding: Psalm 23:1–4

The metaphor of the shepherd is frequently found in Scripture (Isaiah 40:11; 49:9-10; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:6-19). David was familiar with the role of shepherd, and he understood the great responsibility of providing for the needs of a flock. As domesticated animals, sheep are less able to provide for their own needs. However good David may have been as a shepherd in meeting those needs, the psalmist depicts God to be even more mindful in that regard as he uses the words "my shepherd." This confidence is evident in the phrase *I lack nothing*.

Whatever need may arise for the speaker, God is ready and able to meet this need (compare Deuteronomy 2:7; 8:9; Psalm 84:11). A good shepherd will do this, but a bad shepherd will be far away when needs arise (compare Ezekiel 34:1–16). God is not distant (John 10:7–16).

1. What metaphor did David use to show his confidence in God to provide for his needs? (Psalm 23:1)

What Do You Think?

How do you practice finding contentment in God's provision?

Digging Deeper

Write a brief prayer identifying situations in which you need the Lord to guide you to greater trust in Him.

Continuing the thought that the Good Shepherd brings us freedom from want, the psalmist notes, "he makes me to lie down in green pastures." This means that this is a place of most substantial feeding for the sheep. Since the green pastures of Palestine are so few and far between, sheep must be led from pasture to pasture. When once a pasture is found, it is there that they rest before moving on to the next pasture. Coupled with the expression, "He leads me besides still waters," we see the perfect balance between rest and activity.

Side note: Sheep will not lie down when they are hungry, nor will they drink from fast-flowing streams. Sometimes the shepherd will temporarily dam up a stream so the sheep can quench their thirst.

2. Why did shepherds constantly look for green pastures for their sheep? (Psalm 23:2a, b)

Not only is physical sustenance provided by the Good Shepherd, but spiritual restoration is provided as well. When the soul becomes sorrowful, He revives it. When our spirit becomes weak, He invigorates. We have freedom from depletion, for every time we would stray, as sheep would, He brings us back.

A faithful or righteous shepherd—as God is—leads the faithful of the flock into right paths. God proves to be faithful; it is not in His nature to be otherwise!

3. What else does the Good Shepherd provide? (Psalm 23:3)

What Do You Think?

How is God's name and reputation enhanced by guiding you along the right paths?

Digging Deeper

What part do you play in enhancing God's name? Cite verses that support your answer.

David the psalmist continues by now emphasizing the protection side of God's shepherding. We would all prefer that there would be no more dark valleys of life. Nevertheless, there are, and there will be, until Jesus returns. There is no promise that the Christian will not have to endure such valleys—quite the opposite (Matthew 10:22; 24:9). But we do indeed have a promise of God's presence (Matthew 28:20; John 14:16–17; Hebrews 13:5).

The presence of God should signal the absence of *fear*. Fear is a God-given emotion that helps protect us. When our fear is justified because of real and imminent danger, it can save our life (if fear doesn't turn into panic). Fear can be related to *evil* in several ways. Here are three ways: First, a person might fear neither evil nor God because he or she has embraced evil (Ps. 36:1–4).

Second, a godly person can fear evil by deciding to avoid it because getting too close to it runs the danger of falling into its clutches (Proverbs 14:16; 16:6; 1 Corinthians 15:33; etc.). Third, a godly person doesn't fear evil because he or she knows that God's presence is stronger than any evil that may lie in the path (Psalm 49:5–6, 15). This third option is in view here.

4. How does God's presence help us fight fear along life's path? (Psalm 23:4a)

What Do You Think?

Identify dark valleys you have encountered or currently face. (Personal question).

Digging Deeper

Does God lead you differently if you entered that valley because of your own choices? Explain your answer.

Rod and *staff* are tools of the shepherd. By them he guides the sheep. The Hebrew word that is translated "rod" was a heavy cudgel with which the shepherd could stun or kill an attacking beast, and the staff was the shepherd's crook, which he used to assist the individual sheep. When passing through the shadowy ravine, the sheep know that the gentle tap of the shepherd's staff is designed for their safe passage.

At evening, he would have the sheep pass under the crook one by one so he could count them and examine them (Lev. 27:32). It gave the flock peace knowing that the shepherd was there and was equipped for any emergency. Even in the face of danger we need not be afraid, God has our back! (notice the intimacy with God as David now switches from "He" to "you" in v. 4 of today's lesson).

5. What did David use his rod and staff for? (Psalm 23:4b)

The Lord Supplies: Psalm 23:5

With a new verse (5) comes a change in metaphor. God is now depicted as a gracious host who has prepared a fine meal for the psalmist to enjoy. Notice that God is not in a rush.

Preparation *in the presence of my enemies* could be intended to show that God was not hiding the display of His favor. Because of God's protection and provision, they can do nothing to harm the psalmist. So, even in the midst of our enemies we can find perfect peace in God.

It is impossible to say whether the psalmist has particular enemies in mind, perhaps the literal foes of David. His anointing as king made several enemies, not the least of which was his predecessor, King Saul (1 Samuel 16:13; 19:1; etc.). A related text refers to a time "when [David] was in the Desert of Judah" (Psalm 63), and it speaks of enemies seeking his life (63:9–10).

6. What does the Lord supply, even in the presence of enemies? (Psalm 23:5a)

What Do You Think?

What verses encourage you to wait for God's action against your enemies rather than taking revenge yourself?

Digging Deeper

What can you learn about God while you wait for His action?

The host honors the guest by anointing his *head* with oil (compare Psalms 45:7; 92:10). Given the fragrances that were available to add to olive oil (see 45:8; Proverbs 7:17), such anointing is a soothing and refreshing experience for a weary traveler.

The psalmist continues to acknowledge God's benevolence as host. Presumably, the host has given the guest a large cup of wine (compare Jeremiah 35:1–5), and the guest is satisfied. The Hebrew word translated *overflows* occurs elsewhere only in Psalm 66:12. There, it is translated "place of abundance" in the context of being rescued by God. This cup of satisfaction is equivalent to the waters of Psalm 23:2b.

7. What is the anointing with oil and running over cup an acknowledgment of? (Psalm 23:5b-c)

The Psalmist's Future: Psalm 23:6

The text has twice mentioned hardship: danger in the dark valley (Psalm 23:4) and enemies in sight of the host's table (23:5). If the psalmist feels that he is being chased by death and evil, then he imagines that God's *goodness and love will* pursue him more. It's insightful into God's character to see how the two Hebrew words translated as "goodness" and "love" are paired in other passages (see 69:16; 86:5; 100:5; etc.).

As the shepherd lay each night at the door of the sheepfold, he looked back over the day and gave thanks that the Lord had blessed them with goodness and mercy. As an old man, David looked back over his long life and came to the same conclusion. In spite of his sins and failures, he had been followed by goodness and love. One day, you will look back at your life and see that it was only "goodness" and "love," and that includes the valley experiences. If life is difficult today, just keep following the Shepherd; He will never lead you where He cannot care for you (see Romans 8:28).

8. Despite dangers and enemies, what was the psalmist certain of? (Psalm 23:6a)

What Do You Think?

What gives you confidence that goodness and mercy follow you when circumstances suggest otherwise?

Digging Deeper

How would you counsel someone who has lost sight of God's mercies because of present hardships?

The final verse Psalm 23:6b provides a fitting conclusion for the psalm as it vividly depicts nearness to God. The *house* does not indicate a temple or church, but rather communion with God. The fact that we will dwell in *the house of the Lord* forever indicates sonship and that the blessings mentioned are spiritual. 2 Samuel 7:1–7 also points to the house of the Lord being a heavenly dwelling.

CONCLUSION

Needy for God

Psalm 23 is short, at only six verses. By contrast, the 150 psalms in total average about 16 verses each. But the influence of Psalm 23 is not limited by its length. The striking elegance of how the psalm begins results in many Christians memorizing its opening line easily and effortlessly: "The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing."

However, if we limit ourselves only to that opening line, we miss the second important image of the psalm: that of God as host. This is a poetic text, and the juxtaposition of metaphors enhances the meaning. Two images—God as shepherd and God as host—collectively portray the Lord as caring and thoughtful toward His people.

What the psalmist proclaims is more radical than readers typically grant. He lived in a world where food and drink were not always easy to find. He saw enemies behind each corner of the road, not from a sense of paranoia. Nevertheless, he trusted that he was loved and remembered by God. He saw that God was with him, satisfying all needs.

The same can be said of us today as we place Psalm 23 in our hearts. By meditating on it, we can be encouraged to present our everyday needs to God, expecting trust to be honored. God is righteous and faithful!

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your presence! Your provisions astound us. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, the Shepherd who died for the sheep—*and we shall meet our Shepherd in heaven!* In His name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God has provided, is providing, and will provide.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "**Songs of Praise**" from Psalms 146 and 150 in which the psalmist reiterates the need to consider God's mighty deeds and show gratitude for them. Study both Psalms 146 and 150.