



## SESSION 5

# OUR SHEPHERD

### ▶ **The Point**

God guides us as He walks with us.

### ▶ **The Passage**

Psalm 23:1-6

### ▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

Maps are good to direct you from one place to another, but you need to study them before leaving on a trip. If you don't know the route well, you will need to stop periodically and double-check the map. GPS is better, but you still have to pay attention. You must glance continually at the screen to get a visual on how soon a turn is coming or listen intently to the verbal instructions. The best way to travel is with someone who knows the route well.

A guide can anticipate things and remind you to “get in the left lane” or “be prepared for a sharp turn.” They often know shortcuts that the GPS is not clever enough to know. A guide can also provide “color commentary” as you travel, telling you interesting tidbits about places along the route.

Let's admit, we all need a guide to get through life. Even when we think we have things figured out, life inserts a roadblock and the journey changes. But God does for us just as a shepherd does for his flock. God is our Good Shepherd who guides us on the right path and in the right direction.

### ▶ **The Setting**

Psalm 23 is attributed as “A Psalm of David.” From his experiences as a shepherd when he was a young boy, David was able to take the imagery of shepherding and apply it to God as the Shepherd of his life. The psalm is a powerful testimony of David's trust in God's guidance and care in times of both peace and trial.

## *What does the Bible say?*

**Shepherd** (v. 1)—A shepherd was responsible for guiding his flock to sources of food and water, all the time protecting his sheep from danger.

### ***Psalm 23:1-6***

**<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd;**

**I have what I need.**

**<sup>2</sup> He lets me lie down in green pastures;**

**he leads me beside quiet waters.**

**<sup>3</sup> He renews my life;**

**he leads me along the right paths**

**for his name's sake.**

**<sup>4</sup> Even when I go through the darkest valley,**

**I fear no danger,**

**for you are with me;**

**your rod and your staff—they comfort me.**

**<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me**

**in the presence of my enemies;**

**you anoint my head with oil;**

**my cup overflows.**

**<sup>6</sup> Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me**

**all the days of my life,**

**and I will dwell in the house of the LORD**

**as long as I live.**





## Psalm 23:1-3 Commentary

**[Verse 1]** Psalm 23 is attributed to King David, who knew God, his Shepherd, gave him the guidance he needed. Of course, David himself was a shepherd (see 1 Sam. 16:10-13; 17:34-37), and so he would have had firsthand knowledge of the images he wrote of in this psalm. The shepherd's primary responsibility was to ensure his flock of sheep was fed, watered, and kept safe from wild animals and robbers. David used God's covenant name **the Lord** (*Yahweh*), emphasizing his Shepherd was the only true God (see Deut. 6:4), who had revealed Himself and His name (see Ex. 3:13-14) and established His covenant with the Israelites. (See 19:3-6.) Also, David described the Lord as **my shepherd** (emphasis added). David was confident that the true God knew him personally and was always near.

David then offered a sweeping testimony of the results of his relationship with the Lord as his Shepherd. David could confidently say, **I have what I need**. The Hebrew verb form indicates David was giving a testimony of his past personal experience. As David looked back over his life and wrote this psalm, he could see how as he had trusted and obeyed God, he truly did not lack for anything. In the same way a shepherd provided his sheep with food, water, and protection, those who place themselves under God's authority have all their needs supplied. This affirmation is often repeated in Scripture. (See Ps. 34:9-10; Matt. 6:33; Phil. 4:19.)

**[Verse 2]** Pastures for grazing were not abundant in Israel, so a shepherd had to lead his flock to wherever such pastures were available. **Green pastures** emphasizes an abundance of food. The sheep under the great Shepherd's care are provided with more than they need and are satisfied.

The great Shepherd's flock grazes under the protection of His omnipotence, allowing those under His watchful care to **lie down** in peace. **Beside quiet waters** echoes the first line of this verse. Like sheep beside a refreshing source of water, those who follow the Shepherd find contentment and rest.

**[Verse 3]** As the shepherd ensured that the sheep were refreshed, so David could say of the Lord that **He renews my life**. David knew from his own experience how God had restored and refreshed his life after difficult and exhausting situations. After God (through Nathan the prophet) had confronted David of his sin with Bathsheba (see 2 Sam. 12:1-12), David confessed his guilt (see v. 13; Ps. 51) and asked God to "restore the joy" of his relationship with God. (See Ps. 51:12; 32:1.)

The wise shepherd knew the safest and easiest routes to lead his flock to new pastures. Because sheep lack a sense of direction and are prone to becoming lost, they are in constant need of a shepherd. The wise and caring shepherd always led his flock in the right paths. David knew firsthand that his Lord was that kind of Shepherd. For those under the Lord's care, **right paths** indicate living in the right or wise way instead of the wrong or foolish way.

David also knew that God would be his faithful Shepherd **for his name's sake**—because of His name *Yahweh*, God's covenant name emphasizing His faithfulness. Because God, by His very nature, is characterized by faithfulness, He can be depended upon in all things. God is always faithful to those who come under His authority and protection.



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## Psalm 23:4-5 Commentary

**[Verse 4]** The task of the shepherd included guiding the sheep through any difficulties they encountered. In the process of leading his sheep to new pastures or safe places to drink, the shepherd sometimes had to take his sheep through valleys or dry stream beds with high rock walls where the sun could not reach. Dark places suggest danger, either from thieves or predators. However, David wrote that he would not be afraid when God led him along dark or frightening paths because he knew God, his Shepherd, was always with him. The shepherd carried a **rod**, a thick piece of wood usually about two feet long, that he used as a weapon against predators, such as lions or bears. The shepherd used his **staff** to guide the sheep along the right paths. He would simply press the staff against their sides to assure them of his presence and to push them in the right direction. The staff was also used to free sheep caught in thickets and pull out sheep who had fallen into ditches or holes. David knew firsthand what a protecting, guiding, and comforting Shepherd God had been to him. Over and over God had protected David from wild animals (see 1 Sam. 17:34-37), from the enemies of Israel (see vv. 36-51), and had established him as king of Israel. (See 2 Sam. 7:8-11.) David was confident that God would continue to guide, protect, and empower him. Like David, we can be confident that God will do the same for us as well as we follow Him.

**[Verse 5]** At this point David shifted his thoughts of God from the image of a shepherd to that of a generous host. One of the normal acts of hospitality in the Middle East was to invite a traveler into your home for a meal. The meal provided was the freshest and best the host could offer. David described God as his Host at a lavish feast: **You prepare a table before me.**

One of the responsibilities of a host was also to provide protection for his guest. Genesis 19:1-8 describes how Lot insisted that two angelic visitors to Sodom stay at his house and how he “prepared a feast ... for them” (v. 3). Another duty of the host was to provide for the safety of his guests. Lot told the townspeople these visitors had “come under the protection of” his home (v. 8). In the same way a host would prepare a feast for a guest and provide for his protection, David spoke of God as his Host who had prepared a table for him. And even though his **enemies** were near, David knew he was under God’s constant and all-sufficient protection.

Another act of a good host was to pour olive oil mixed with some type of perfume over the head of his guest. This was also known as anointing the guest. Anointing someone with oil was a symbolic gesture of honor (see Luke 7:44-46) and rejoicing. (See Ps. 45:7; 92:10.) David felt so blessed by being in God’s presence that he was overwhelmed by God’s favor toward him. That’s why he could say that his **cup overflows**. God had lavished His goodness on David. Paul expressed the same attitude in describing how God has lavished on us “the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7) by sending Jesus to die for us. (See vv. 5-8.)



## Psalm 23:6 Commentary

**[Verse 6]** God not only makes covenants; He faithfully keeps them. He provides us with security. God had been faithful in making David king over Israel and enabling him to defeat Israel's enemies. "The LORD had given [David] rest on every side from all his enemies" (2 Sam. 7:1). God's **goodness and faithful love** would constantly **pursue** David for the rest of his life. When David wanted to build a house for God (the temple), God told him that building Him a house could wait. Instead, God would build David a house, a kingdom that would last forever. (See vv. 11-16.)

David went on to say that he was confident that he would be able to  **dwell in the house of the LORD**  throughout his life. How could David dwell in the Lord's house if there was no house or temple during his lifetime? The temple in Jerusalem would not be built until the reign of David's son, Solomon. (See 1 Kings 5-7.) What did David mean?

After David became king, he moved the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and set up a tent to house it. (See 2 Sam. 6:12-17.) Though David knew that God was not limited to any one location, possibly David felt the presence of God most strongly in that dedicated space. Perhaps David was reflecting on the privilege of going into this holy place so that he could seek God's guidance. (See Ps. 27:4-6.)

However, in the context of Psalm 23 with its emphasis on God's constant presence even in the dark valleys, dwelling  **in the house of the LORD**  may mean more than dwelling in a physical structure. Look back at Psalm 19:1-6. David had seen the glory of God's creation as he tended his sheep. David had experienced God's powerful presence/deliverance when he had fought Goliath. David had known God's guidance when he went into battle against Israel's enemies. David had learned that God's people, those who seek, trust, and obey Him, are always in His presence. That's how David knew that he would always be near to the Lord who was his Shepherd.

Centuries after David wrote Psalm 23, one of David's descendants stood in Jerusalem and declared that He was "the good shepherd" (John 10:11,14). Like any good shepherd, He was willing to lay down His life for the sheep. (See v. 11.) Not only was He willing, He promised that He would do just that. (See v. 15.) Jesus kept His promise when He died on a cross outside the city as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). However, that was not the end. He arose from the dead and continues to be the good Shepherd for everyone who listens to His voice calling them and decides to follow Him. To those who follow Him, Jesus gives eternal life, and they will never perish. (See 10:27-28.) Like David, who was so confident about the Lord's constant provision, protection, and guidance, those of us who follow Jesus can be confident no one will snatch us out of God's hand. (See vv. 28-30.)

Read the article "Sheep: A Metaphor for God's People" in the Spring 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" (Summer 2017), "Valleys and Pastures: A Geographical Overview of Ancient Israel" (Winter 2014-2015), "The Staff: More Than a Walking Stick" (Spring 2014), and "Why Anoint?" (Fall 2013) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator).

