

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 68** and ask **Question #1: What is one occasion when you wish you had a guide?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 69**, to the author's observation about travel options. Would you prefer a map, GPS, or a guide?

SAY: "Today we will rediscover that the best guide on the journey of life is the Good Shepherd."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 69: God guides us as He walks with us.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to guide our conversation today and lead us to a better understanding of His constant care for us.

SESSION 5 OUR SHEPHERD



The Point

God guides us as He walks with us.

The Bible Meets Life

The Bible often depicts us as sheep. Left to ourselves, we wander off and place ourselves in harm's way. We can't find our way back. The Bible also depicts God as the Shepherd over us. He is the One

who gently guides us, protects us, and comforts us. Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved psalms in Scripture, and it succinctly captures this picture of God as our loving Shepherd.

The Passage

Psalm 23:1-6

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.

Psalm 23:1-3

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd;
I have what I need.
- 2 He lets me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside quiet waters.
- 3 He renews my life;
he leads me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

KEY WORD: Shepherd (v. 1)—A shepherd was responsible for guiding his flock to sources of food and water, always protecting his sheep from danger.

Verse 1. Our culture usually celebrates the strong-willed and independent man and woman who can fend for themselves and lead others. However, as we look through the wisdom of Scripture and through the lessons of our own life experiences, we learn that no matter how seemingly independent and successful we might become, we will always have needs that are beyond our abilities to fulfill. Ultimately we will always be dependent on God, from whom all good things come (Jas. 1:17), for needs such as guidance, comfort, protection, and provision.

1▶ The Bible uses many metaphors to describe our dependence upon our heavenly Father. The Book of Psalms in particular is full of words used to stress the roles our loving God plays in believers' lives and the variety of ways in which He graciously blesses us. The psalms frequently use such images to describe our needs and God's abundant supply. King David wrote, "The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer ... my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold" (Ps. 18:2). God is also our "hiding place" (32:7). Psalm 46 begins, "God is our refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble" (46:1).

Of all the images in Scripture that the biblical writers used to describe God, perhaps none is more powerful and complete than that of the shepherd. Of all the passages that use this image of a shepherd, none is more lovely than and as widely known as Psalm 23. ◀

Psalm 23 is attributed to King David. Of course, David himself was a shepherd (1 Sam. 16:10-13; 17:34-37) and so would have had firsthand knowledge of the images he wrote of in this psalm. Along with David, many of the Old

STUDY THE BIBLE

Psalm 23:1-3



15 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 74

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Psalm 23:1-3.

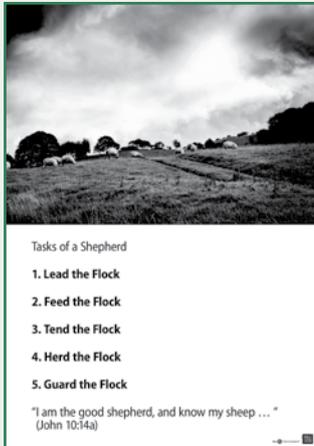
SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** to point out images used in the psalms to describe what God is like. Perhaps none is more powerful than that of the shepherd. One of the key roles of a shepherd was that of guide.

GUIDE: Use **KEY WORD (PSG, p. 70)** for information about the word *shepherd*.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: Enlist two volunteers. Ask one to be blindfolded, ask the other to serve as guide, but use only verbal instructions. Say: "It often feels as if we are unable to see, so we must listen, trust, and obey the voice of the Shepherd."

LEADER PACK: Display **Item 5:**

Tasks of a Shepherd. Refer to the poster as you comment on a shepherd's responsibilities.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible**

Commentary 2 to explain all that a shepherd did:

- *Ensure flock was well fed and find sources of water.*
- *Protect sheep from danger and guard against attacks.*
- *Keep sheep from wandering.*
- *Seek and find lost sheep and return them to the fold.*
- *Lead sheep back to safety.*
- *Guard the flock at night.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 3 to reinforce:

- *Use of Yahweh (the covenant name for God)*
- *My shepherd (personal, intimate)*

Testament patriarchs and other leaders were shepherds, including Abraham (Gen. 12:16), Jacob and his sons (30:31-40; 37:1-2), and Moses (Ex. 3:1). As the people of Israel settled in the promised land, farming became a more preferred way of life and shepherding was left to younger sons (like David) or to hired servants (John 10:12).

2▶ The basic meaning of the Hebrew word translated **shepherd** is to graze (or feed). It also has the general meaning of to rule over, emphasizing care and concern. In biblical times, a shepherd was completely responsible for the animals in his (or her) care. His primary responsibility was to ensure that his flock was well fed. At the start of each day, he led his flock of sheep¹ out of the sheepfold to sources of food and water, all the time protecting his sheep from danger. While they were grazing, the shepherd guarded against any attacks by wild animals or robbers and watched over the sheep so that none wandered away from the flock. If one or more did wander off, the shepherd was expected to seek out the lost sheep and return them to the flock. At the end of the day, the shepherd led his flock back to the sheepfold, counted them to make sure all were present, and stood guard over them through the night.

Since sources of pasture would change according to the seasons, shepherds had to keep moving their flocks to new areas. Thus one of the key roles of a shepherd was that of a guide. This image of a shepherd as a faithful guide and provider was applied to Israel's kings and leaders (2 Sam. 5:2; Jer. 23:1) and to God (Isa. 40:10-11). Paul admonished the leaders of the church in Ephesus to "shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28). Today we use the term "pastor," which is derived from a Latin term meaning "shepherd," to identify leaders of local church congregations. ◀

3▶ Notice two key elements in the opening line of Psalm 23. Instead of saying that *God* was his shepherd, David used God's covenant name **the LORD** (*Jehovah* or *Yahweh*). David emphasized that his Shepherd was the only true God (Deut. 6:4), the God who had revealed Himself and His name to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:13-14) and established His covenant with the people of Israel (19:3-6). Instead of referring to **the LORD** as *the* shepherd, David described Him as **my shepherd** (emphasis added). David was confident that the true God knew him personally and was always near. ◀

4▶ 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. God had certainly blessed David, taking him from the life of a young shepherd first to the court of King Saul (1 Sam. 18:1-5) and then to the throne itself as the king of Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-5). God protected David through the years when Saul hunted David seeking to kill him (1 Sam. 26) and gave David constant victories in battle (2 Sam. 8). However, David's life was not without pain and suffering. As a result of David's acts of adultery and murder (11:1-12:13), God punished him with persistent strife within his family (12:10-11), leading to the loss of several of his sons (12:14-19; 13:28-29; 18:9-15). When David acted foolishly, God punished the nation with a deadly plague (24:1-15). Yet, 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.

The truth behind this imagery applies to believers today as well. Just as 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 (Ps. 34:9-10; Matt. 6:33; Phil. 4:19). However, when David said he had what he needed, he was not referring specifically to material prosperity, the usual goal of our modern culture. Rather, as one commentator notes, "All God's sheep, precious to him ... will lack nothing that is good and necessary for enjoying life to the fullest."² Furthermore, they shall have the joy and peace that only the Lord can supply (John 14:27; 15:11; 16:33).

Verse 2. Verses 2-4 of Psalm 23 continue to expand on the metaphor of the Lord as David's Shepherd. Verse 2 refers to how a good shepherd provides food and water for his sheep. **Green pastures** were not abundant in the arid land of Israel and required great effort to find. The shepherd had to lead his flock to wherever pastures for grazing were available. At times, shepherds would create their own pastures, clearing out brush and large rocks, preparing and seeding the soil, and providing water by channeling small ditches from nearby streams to water the grass. The emphasis in this verse is on the abundance of food in these "green pastures." The sheep under the great Shepherd's care are provided with more than they need and are satisfied.

Because sheep are easily frightened and annoyed, they would seldom lie down even if they were in a lush field of grass. The shepherd would have had to ensure the sheep were not near swarms of pesky flies, no infighting was going on in the flock, and no predators were near. Then the sheep could feed to their contentment and rest. The great Shepherd's flock grazes under the protection of His

GUIDE: Refer group members to the following quote on **PSG page 70:**

"The profound impact of Psalm 23 is not discovering God cares like a Shepherd, but the intimate truth that He is my Shepherd.... David knew he belonged to the Lord, and that gave him calm assurance in the midst of trials."

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 4** on pages 76-78 to explain the phrase: *I have what I need.*

- **Food**—green pastures
- **Water**—quiet waters

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 71** to highlight the following explanation:

"[Food and water] are fundamental needs of the sheep.... The shepherd must put himself at risk and often travel great distances to meet these basic needs, but he does so because his care and focus are on the sheep. The implication of the psalm is that we find sustenance only when we, the sheep, follow our Shepherd. Our satisfaction level is directly related to our proximity to the Good Shepherd."

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary 5 to provide an explanation to the following phrases from verse 3:

- *He renews my life.*
- *He leads me along the right paths.*
- *God is faithful for His name's sake.*

GUIDE: Refer group members to the author's comments on **PSG page 71** to provide further insight about the phrases from verse 3.

DISCUSS: Question #2 (PSG, p. 71): When have you experienced God's guidance?

(Alternate: When have you had your soul restored?)

TRANSITION: "In the next verses we will see that God Himself is the One who guides and protects His sheep."

omnipotent power, allowing those under His watchful care to **lie down** in restful peace.

Besides a supply of grass, sheep also needed water. The shepherd's job was to know where to find clean water in either streams or wells and to lead his flock to those places. If the source of water was a well, then like Rachel (Gen. 29:1-10) the shepherd would have had to draw up water and fill troughs for his flock. **Beside quiet waters** echoes the first line of this verse. Like sheep beside a peaceful, refreshing source of water, those who follow the great Shepherd find contentment and rest. ◀

5 ▶ Verse 3. Once the sheep were fed and watered and had laid down in contentment, they would be refreshed and soon be ready to travel on to other pastures. 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 with his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:1-12), David confessed his guilt (v. 13; Ps. 51) and asked God to "restore the joy" of his relationship with God (Ps. 51:12). After receiving assurance of God's forgiveness, David sang, "How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" (Ps. 32:1).

Left to themselves, sheep will overgraze a pasture. Therefore the wise shepherd regularly moved his sheep on to new places to feed. He had already scouted the land to know where other pastures could be found. He also knew the easiest and safest route for the next journey. **Right paths** can also be translated "paths of righteousness" (NASB). However, the sense in this passage is not about moral rightness but about living in the right or wise way instead of the wrong or foolish way. 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.

David also knew that God would be his faithful Shepherd **for his name's sake**—because of His name Yahweh. Yahweh is God's covenant name and emphasizes 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. ◀

Psalm 23:4-5

4 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.

5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

6 ▶ **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. For the shepherd and his sheep, the danger could come 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 not hit the sheep but 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 (1 Sam. 17:34-37), from the enemies of Israel (vv. 36-51), and had established him as king of Israel (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 ◀

7 ▶ **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 never the leftovers but the freshest and best

STUDY THE BIBLE

Psalm 23:4-5



10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Psalm 23:4-5.

GUIDE: Refer group members to the author's descriptions of the shepherd's rod and staff on **PSG page 72.**

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 6** to provide further explanation of verse 4.

GUIDE: Refer members to the explanation on **PSG page 73** of how a host made someone an honored guest in verse 5:

- *The table is laid "in the presence of my enemies." It appears the enemies are present as captives.*
- *The anointing oil was a sign of celebration and divine favor. When Samuel took oil and anointed David king over Israel, the Spirit of the Lord took control of David (1 Sam. 16:13).*
- *An overflowing cup was a sign of God's fullness of blessing.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 7** on page 79 and this page to provide an explanation of verse 5.

DISCUSS: Question #3
(PSG, p. 72): **When have you experienced God's presence in a dark valley?**

(Alternate: *When have you said, "my cup overflows"?*)

TRANSITION: "In the next verse we will see words of assurance for the future."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Psalm 23:6



10 minutes

READ: Read Psalm 23:6.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 8** on this page and page 81 to provide an explanation of verse 6.

DISCUSS: Question #4
(PSG, p. 74): **Which of the Shepherd's actions is most meaningful to you right now?**

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. When evil men came to do harm to his guests, Lot told them that 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 perfume over the head of his guest. This was known as anointing the guest. Anointing someone with oil was a symbolic gesture of honor (Luke 7:44-46) and rejoicing (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 lavished on us "the riches of his grace" by sending Jesus to die for us (Eph. 1:5-8). ◀

Psalm 23:6

6 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.

8 ▶ God not only makes covenants; He faithfully keeps them. God had been faithful in keeping His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had been faithful in keeping His word to Moses that He would deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and lead them to the promised land. 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. 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 (1 Kings 5–7). What did David mean?

After David became king over all of Israel, he moved the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and set up a tent to house it (2 Sam. 6:12-17). Though David knew that God was not limited to any one location, even a holy place where God had promised to meet with His people Israel and where they were to worship Him, possibly David felt the presence of God most strongly in that dedicated space. Perhaps David was reflecting on the great privilege of going into this holy place so that he could worship God and seek His 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 (v. 11). Not only was He willing, He promised that He would do just that (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 on the third day 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 He gives eternal life, and they will never perish (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 that no one will snatch us out of God's hand (vv. 28-30).

1. While shepherds could be responsible for other animals (primarily sheep, goats, and cows, but also horses and camels), for the sake of simplicity sheep will just be referenced in this session.
2. Stephen J. Lawson, *Psalms 1–75*, vol. 11 in Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 126.

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 75** to show how Scripture speaks figuratively of shepherds:

- *God called the Persian king Cyrus one who would act as a shepherd (Isa. 44:28).*
- *Isaiah referred to Moses as a good shepherd who brought his people up out of the sea (63:11).*
- *The Lord promised to give His people good shepherds who would feed them with knowledge and understanding (Jer. 3:15).*
- *Scripture frequently points to God as our Shepherd. "He protects his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment. He gently leads those that are nursing" (Isa. 40:11).*

DISCUSS: Question #5 (PSG, p. 76): How can our actions and attitudes demonstrate that we serve the God who is our Shepherd?

(Alternate: How have you seen God's goodness and faithful love pursue you?)

DO: Encourage members to complete the activity "**My Cup Overflows**" on **PSG page 76**.

LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:**
God guides us as He walks with us.

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 77)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Encourage group members to reflect on this familiar passage and apply these truths to their current stage of life. Remind them of God's faithfulness in the past and that He will remain faithful all the days of their lives.

PRAY: "Father, thank You for being our Good Shepherd. Help us to remember You lead, guide, and protect us all the days of our lives and we can depend on You to be faithful."

How does a relationship with the Good Shepherd make a difference in your life? What are some things you can do to align your life with Him as you walk together?

- ▶ **Rest and trust.** Since the Good Shepherd provides everything you need, could it be that your unrequited "wants" may simply be the Good Shepherd protecting you from something that may have been harmful to your spiritual condition? When God doesn't provide what you think you need, trust His goodness. Thank Him for His protection.
- ▶ **Stay close.** Sin will keep you from experiencing all the good the Shepherd desires for you. Acknowledge and confess any sin that keeps you separated from the One who desires to lead you to still waters.
- ▶ **Slow down.** If you are rushed and harried, it may be that you aren't taking time for the Shepherd to feed you and restore your soul. Slow down and spend time in His Word. Make changes to your schedule to ensure more quality time in God's Word.



BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



A common theme in early Christianity, this statue depicts "The Good Shepherd" carrying a sheep across his shoulders; dated 4th–5th centuries AD.

In Canaan the land did not provide long-term green grass to feed the sheep. The shepherd was always looking for fresh pastureland. The Hebrew word in Psalm 23:4 is *gay*. It usually is translated "valley" and refers to "elongated, flatbottomed depressions" and "a deep ravine, gorge, or valley."

The Hebrew word *tsalmaveth* is translated "shadow of death" and is found in Job 3:5: "May darkness and gloom reclaim it." Job was picturing the shadow of death as darkness and gloom. This is the word in Psalm 23:4.

People in Old Testament era had a limited understanding of death and what happened to a person at death. Shadows or uncertainties surrounding death thus produced a sense of darkness, gloom, and distress. The Hebrew word translated "death" in Psalm 23:4 can mean "deep shadow," "darkness," "terrors of the darkness," or "characterizing the world of the dead."

The valley was probably a deep ravine, so narrow that only one sheep could get through at a time. In such a valley of shadows, a shepherd would have had difficulty seeing how to get the sheep through safely. The shepherd knew that the shadows could hide robbers and animals which made these valleys places of fear. The shepherd knew, that going through the valley of darkness or the shadow of death to get from one grazing area to another was necessary.

The excerpt above is from the article "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" (Summer 2017), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

Left to ourselves, we wander into sin and death. Christ the Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep, and He brings us safely into His presence when we trust Him as Lord and Savior.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, "Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All," on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.

**GROUPS
MATTER.**

Grow with other group leaders at the [Groups Ministry blog](https://www.lifeway.com/groupministry).

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