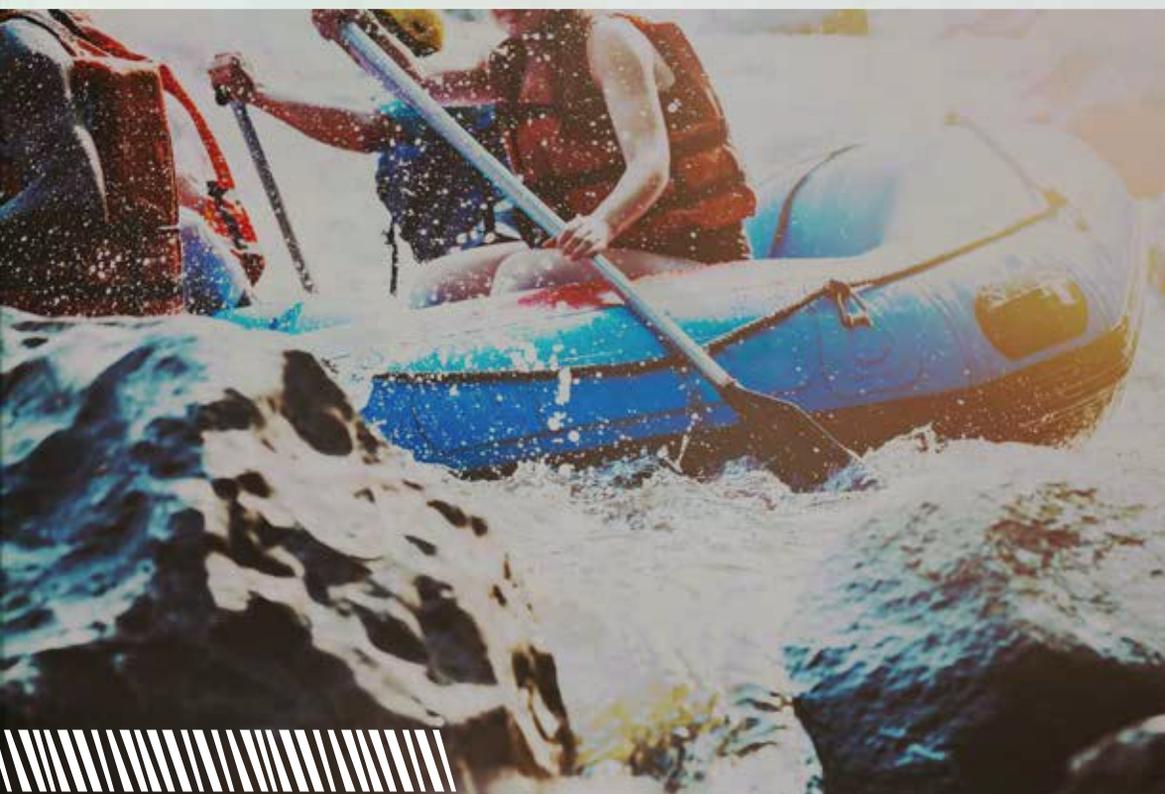


5

Our Shepherd



When has a guide made an experience memorable?

QUESTION 1

God guides us as He walks with us.



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.

Let's admit it: 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.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Psalm 23:1-3 (CSB)

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.

David very well may have written Psalm 23 during the latter years of his reign as Israel's king. It clearly has the ring of personal experience. It testifies to a faith tested by trials and a life matured by the passing of years.

David had experienced conflict—both internal and external—including wars; family division; and personal disappointments, discouragement, and despair. He faced issues that would equal or exceed anything we might experience today. His hands had been soiled by the murder of Uriah. His adulterous relationship with Bathsheba had ignited family fighting that led to ongoing conflict among family members. David experienced sin and the deep sorrow its consequences bring; he knew the pain of one son's death and the rebellion of another who tried to take his kingdom.

Yet this psalm affirms that, through it all, David knew God as his tender Shepherd.

The profound impact of Psalm 23 is not discovering that God cares like a shepherd, but the intimacy of the truth that He is *my* Shepherd. It is *my* Shepherd who “lets me lie down in green pastures” (v. 2) and who “leads me beside quiet waters” (v. 2). David knew he belonged to the Lord and that gave him calm assurance in the midst of trials.

David's simple expression of absolute trust was stated in profound simplicity: “I have what I need” (v. 1). He mentioned the green pastures and quiet waters first because they are fundamental needs of the sheep if they are to survive and grow. Sheep cannot continue to follow the shepherd without sufficient rest and adequate food. 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.

In what ways have you experienced God's guidance in life?

QUESTION 2

The phrase “He renews my life” (v. 3) can convey two ideas. Renewal can refer to a straying sheep that has been brought back to the fold; it also may point to the deep and constant renewal available to all sheep that remain in intimate relationship to the shepherd. The two pictures are intertwined. God desires abundance for all His sheep, even the straying ones. “He leads me along the right paths” (v. 3) simply means that, as long as we are following the Shepherd, we will be safe and productive because of His presence.

The final phrase of verse 3—“for his name’s sake” (v. 3)—serves as a refrain. Throughout this study we have seen that God’s name reveals His character. The Good Shepherd would never lead His sheep in paths that would prove harmful or destructive because it is contrary to His character. He gives the guidance we need “for his name’s sake” (v. 3).

Psalm 23:4-5 (CSB)

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.

In verses 1-3, the shepherd is pictured as a guide who scouts the landscape to lead his flock to food, water, and rest. Now he is seen as coming alongside the sheep to personally escort the flock. When the sheep face the testing of a dark valley, he is by their side. David had experienced this in his own relationship with God; notice the pronoun “I” in verse 4. David may have been thinking of those personal moments when he had gone through dark valleys.

The rod and staff were the tools the shepherd used to protect and guide his sheep. The rod was a short, club-like stick worn on the belt for use against animals and thieves. The staff could serve as a walking stick, but when necessary, the shepherd employed it to keep the sheep from straying off the path. The staff of guidance may sometimes seem like a painful form of discipline until we remember that the shepherd’s singular desire is to protect his sheep.

When have you experienced God’s presence in a dark valley?

QUESTION 3

When we feel the pressure of the staff and know the Shepherd is prodding us back into line, we might be tempted to react in anger. But we can trust our Shepherd is concerned for our care and protection. God's discipline is always motivated by His unchanging love. He guides us back onto the right path so that we will know His presence and experience His protection.

In verse 5, the imagery of the sheep and shepherd is exchanged for an even more intimate picture. David now pictured himself as a guest in the Lord's house. In the world of the Old Testament, to be invited to someone's table created a bond of friendship and mutual loyalty. The host didn't simply invite the guest to share his table and his home; he made him the honored guest at the feast. The picture of a well-set table, the festive oil, and the brimming cup moves us beyond surviving trials as in verse 4; it gives us an image of joy, victory, and abundance.

Psalm 23:6 (CSB)

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.

The promises of this psalm continue to heap up one on the other. We are not simply promised a celebratory meal which will soon be over. We are not simply guests; we are residents. We will live with Him as long as we live—which is forever!

"Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life" (v. 6). "Faithful love" (often translated "lovingkindness") refers to God's covenant love promised to His own people. Throughout Scripture, we see the people of God continually relying on the bedrock truth that God is faithful; He exhibits His goodness and faithful love to His people.





Which of the images in this passage is most meaningful to you right now?

QUESTION 4

David concluded that he would live in the presence of God with His unending goodness and faithful love “as long as I live” (v. 6). This phrase is literally “a length of days,” which is not explicitly an expression for eternity. However, since God’s covenant love has no end, the logic of the statement implies an eternal dwelling with God.

All these promises have flowed from the understanding that “the LORD is my shepherd” (v. 1). The Hebrew word for shepherd, *rohi*, literally means “to feed” or “to lead.” In Ezekiel 34:1-16, we find one of the most significant passages about God as our Shepherd—our Jehovah-Rohi. God the Shepherd contrasted Himself with the false shepherds in Israel who had neglected His flock. God pronounced woe on shepherds who had fed themselves and not the sheep. They had neglected the sickly and ignored those who have been scattered. Because of the shepherds’ inattention, the sheep had become prey for every beast of the field. In contrast to the false shepherds, God searches for His sheep, feeds them in good pasture, and leads them to rest.

Our study would be incomplete without turning our attention to John 10 where Jesus used the image of “the good shepherd” to describe His own ministry. He contrasted the good shepherd to the stranger, the thief, the robber, and the hired hand. A thief and a robber desire only to steal and kill the sheep, and a hired hand flees when the sheep are threatened. In contrast, the Good Shepherd is willing to lay down His life for the sheep. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

Jesus, God in human flesh, fully revealed what it means to address God as Jehovah-Rohi.

How can our actions and attitudes demonstrate that we follow God as our Shepherd?

"The paradox is this: if we never need rescuing, we'll never know the Rescuer!"

BETH MOORE

QUESTION 5

GOD OUR SHEPHERD



Consider the following statements. Then, rate yourself on each scale.

When I need guidance, I go to God and His Word first.



I'm confident in God's ability to lead me through difficult times.



I experience victory over temptation and struggles by leaning on God's presence and security.

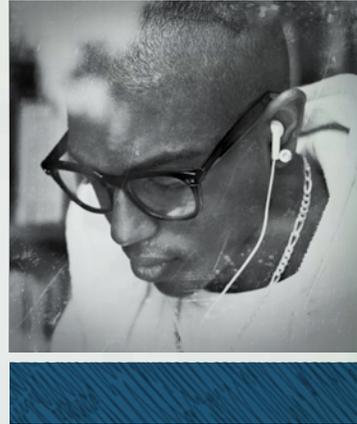


LIVE IT OUT

How will a relationship with the Good Shepherd make a difference in your life?

- » **Rest and trust.** As the Good Shepherd, God provides everything you need. Identify one need or decision you're currently facing and take it to Him in prayer each day for the next two weeks. Watch closely for His answer and choose to trust Him to provide exactly what's needed.
- » **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 if necessary to ensure more quality time in God's Word.

Life is full of twists and turns—a reliable guide makes all the difference. **God is our Good Shepherd who guides us, protects us, and comforts us. He is our Jehovah-Rohi.**



My thoughts