

August 10, 2025

GOD'S CARE: PSALM 23

Introductory Activity

Introduce: Relate the first sentence of the introductory paragraph on page 96 of the ETB PSG. "The Roman philosopher Lucius Apuleius is credited with being the first to say, 'Familiarity breeds contempt.' It means people can become so familiar with something that they begin to lose appreciation for it; they start taking it for granted."

Discuss: What are some things in everyday life for which familiarity might result in a lack of appreciation? (Allow time for discussion.)

Explain: Our Explore the Bible curriculum notes that many people are familiar with the Twenty-Third Psalm. Their familiarity with the text might cause their appreciation for the content of the psalm to dissipate. That may be true to an extent, but in his book *A Shepherd Remembers*, first written in 1937, Leslie Weatherhead reminds us of the enduring quality of art.

Discuss: What are some things from a person's past (songs, pictures, places) that, when rediscovered or experienced for the first time in years, might reignite our love of it or remind them of something pleasant? (Allow time for discussion.)

Explain: Weatherhead points the reader to Handel's *Messiah*, writing, "If our mood be right, it is almost certain that some new beauty, undetected before, will find its way to our hearts and receive recognition for the first time."¹ The same can be said of Psalm 23. If our mood be right, we can find new beauty for the first time.

Transition: The twenty-third psalm is a thanksgiving psalm. It was probably written as a means of personal, not corporate, thanksgiving. The psalm is more than just a means of thanking the Lord, though. It sits in the middle of a trilogy of psalms that each point us to Christ. "In Psalm 22 we meet our suffering King. In Psalm 24 we see our sovereign King. In Psalm 23 we witness our Shepherd-King" (Exalting, 170). Let's look at this familiar psalm and see what it can teach us. Most fundamentally, we will discover that "God is our good Shepherd who leads us daily" (ETB PSG, 96).

1. GOD'S PROVISION (PS. 23:1-3)

Read or have someone read Psalm 23:1-3.

Explain: Traditionally, we have credited King David with authorship of this psalm, and that makes sense if you consider his humble beginnings. He begins the psalm by declaring that the Lord is his shepherd.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Psalms Vol 1* (Preaching Vol 1)
- *Preaching the Word: Psalms Vol 2* (Preaching Vol 2)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 1-50* (Exalting 1-50)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 101-150* (Exalting 101-150)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 119* (Exalting 119)
- *Two Horizons OT Commentary: Psalms* (Two Horizons)
- *New American Commentary: Psalms 73-150* (NAC)

¹ Leslie Weatherhead, *A Shepherd Remembers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1960), 20.
J Cardinell, 2025

Ask: What comes to mind when you think of a shepherd? (Allow time for discussion.)

Explain: In the Ancient Near East, when someone thought of a shepherd, they had two opposing ideas. First, shepherding had a negative connotation. "In the ancient world, being a shepherd was one of the lowest jobs. If a family had sheep the youngest son was the shepherd—none of the older brothers would want to do it" (Preaching, 245). That is why we find David away from home I Samuel 16, when the prophet comes to anoint a son of Jesse as king. Second, shepherding had a positive connotation. "In the ancient world a king was called the shepherd of his people. Israel certainly thought David was their shepherd" (Preaching, 243). So while calling the Lord a shepherd might initially shock someone because of the lowly association, it was a way of calling Him King.

Discuss: What is implied when David, the king, calls God his Shepherd-King?

Explain: In this first statement in Psalm 23, we see that the shepherd needs a Shepherd. The king needs a King. No one, regardless of this innate ability, intense strength, or immense wealth, can accomplish his God-given task without a Shepherd to guide and care for him.

Examine: Ask the group to look back at verses 1-3 and call out the ways the Shepherd-King cared for David. (Allow time for answers.)

Explain: In these three verses, we see that the Lord cares for His people in many ways. Let's look at each of them.

- David says, "I have what I need. As followers of Christ, we have probably heard that God promises to provide what we need but not necessarily what we want. Jeff Anderson says that this line written by David was "both a declaration and a decision. David was not saying that he had everything he wanted. But he confessed he lacked nothing necessary" (ETBC, 104). However, for those who seem to be lacking even the necessities of life, statements like this can feel like the writer is gaslighting them. Danny Akin narrows the meaning of necessity when he writes, "In this life we may not have all that we want, but we will always have everything we need for joy and *the fulfilling of the Lord's perfect will in our lives* (Rom 12:2)" (Exalting, 172 emphasis mine) Sometimes fulfilling the Lord's perfect will, living out God's plan, or expanding God's Kingdom will *necessitate* a lacking of "necessities." In those times, we must make "both a declaration and a decision" that "I have what I need."
- In verse 2, David writes, "He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters." In a land like Israel that "only gets twenty-five inches of rain a year and little or no rainfall during the months of May to October" (ETBC, 105). Green pastures and water are constantly moving targets. The shepherd must know where these are and lead the sheep to them. The green pastures are more than a place

Notes:

"David himself was the shepherd of Israel. In Psalm 23 David is also a sheep—the Lord is his Shepherd." (Preaching, 243)

"So Psalm 23 is about God caring for his people by caring for their king. Through David, God himself was the true Shepherd and King over all his people. (Preaching, 244)

"Like David, Christ was both a sheep and a shepherd." (Preaching, 244)

to eat. They are a place to rest safely. Quiet waters also represent more than a source for drinking. Sheep do not like rushing waters that can sweep them away. Instead, the shepherd must find a well and spring or sometimes build a stone "dam" to create a safe place to drink (cf. ETB LG, 114). "In David's case, green pastures and quiet waters are not just a place of repose; they are places of safety from his enemies (see v. 5). (ETBC, 104) The enemies of sheep (and men) are more than wolves (or "roaring lions"). "When sheep lie down [Philip Keller, the author of *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*] says, it is because they are safe and satisfied." (See Keller's quote in the Notes Box.) Johnston concludes that "lying down implies that sheep are free from fear, friction, flies, and hunger. Their shepherd cares for them "physically, medically, socially, and emotionally" (Preaching, 246). Our Shepherd-King cares for us likewise.

- In verse 3 David says, "He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name's sake." There is a lot here. Let's begin with renewal. "The Hebrew word for *renews* denotes an about-face, and also is translated 'restored' (1 Sam. 7:14), 'return' (Gen. 8:9,12), and even 'repent' (1 Kings 8:47)" (ETBC, 105). In conjunction with the rest of the verse, the Shepherd-King's renewal relates to the right path or "the paths of righteousness" (KJV). When we wander from the right path, He renews/restores/returns us to the one leading to green pastures and quiet waters. It is important to note how the Lord directs us on the right path. David says the shepherd *leads* the sheep. If we consider a sheep dog, we might picture the dog coming up the rear, herding sheep in a direction. God does not herd His people. The Shepherd walks in front of the sheep. As long as the sheep follow the Shepherd, they will stay on the right path.

Discuss: "What do these metaphors for God teach us about his character and being?" (Exalting, 178) What can they reveal to us about ourselves as followers of Christ?

Summarize Transition: The first thing we should note is that the caring Shepherd is the Lord (see LORD in verse 1). The promises of Psalm 23 are made to those who follow Him. Many people claim the care of the Lord, but they refuse to follow Him. For those who do follow Him, David declares they have what they need to follow Him. They have security while they follow Him. And they have guidance so that they know how to follow Him. He is a God who provides, holds, and leads His people. Sometimes, though, life still threatens to overwhelm us. That is why the next verse in Psalm 23 is important.

2. GOD'S PROTECTION (PS. 23:4)

Read (or have someone read) Psalm 23:4.

Explain: We should read verse 4 in light of verses 2 and 3. The Shepherd-King makes green pastures and quiet waters, that is, safety and repose,

Notes:

"It is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met. Owing to their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free from fear. Because of their social behavior within the flock, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind. If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when free from these pests can they relax. Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger." (Keller in Preaching, 246)

While many people know the psalm, we should not forget that it "was written by David about Christ for Christians." (Preaching 243)

"Many people have take false comfort from Psalm 23. they want to believe that God is their Shepherd, but they do not listen to Christ or follow him." (Preaching, 245)

possible. To get sheep to those places, He leads them. Sometimes getting to those places requires leading them through "the darkest valley."

Use your holy Imagination: Imagine that you are a sheep in a large flock. At daybreak, the shepherd calls. You hear his voice, and you know his voice. So, you begin to follow him (John 10:26; 8:47). You munch on a little green grass as you follow the shepherd. But you notice the grass is getting sparser. Then you are walking on dry, rocky ground. The next thing you know, you are descending a narrow path down into a dry wadi (a canyon cut by running water during the wet season). It gets dark as you descend. Since you are a smart sheep and understand human language, you know this is not what the shepherd promised you last night when he sang to the flock. He promised green pastures and quiet waters. He promised to lead you on the right path. Now you are walking on dry ground in a dark canyon. It feels like you are walking "through the valley of the shadow of death." You begin to get afraid that something bad is going to happen. You might break your leg if you slip over the edge of the path going up and down. A lion might be hiding in the dark crevasses along the side of the wadi. So, you peek your head up above the rest of the flock and see the shepherd ahead of you. He is standing on a large rock, looking back at the flock that follows. You see him there, and hanging from his side is a rod, a club-like object that can knock the teeth out of a lion's mouth. You see the staff in his hand that can pull you up if you fall into a ravine. When you see that, you feel comforted, and you follow him as he leads you through the dry land toward the green pastures and quiet waters ahead.

Explain: Sometimes getting to where God wants us to be requires us to traverse dark valleys. Dark valley can be scary. David felt this way once too. In 1 Samuel 21:10-15, we are told a story about David. At this point, he was on the run from Saul. He did not yet have an army. He was at the end of his rope before His story was even starting. He was so desperate that he went to Gath, the homeland of the giant he had killed. When he got there, the people recognized him. They knew he had killed Goliath. They also heard rumor of him killing 10,000 more of their people. David was in a dark valley facing real enemies. It is about this time that he writes the words of Psalm 56. In that psalm, he asks one question twice. "What can mere mortals do to me?" (v. 4b) "What can mere humans do to me?" (v. 11b) In answer to his own question he wrote, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid." (vv. 3-4a) The shepherd, on his way to being a king, knew that he could trust the Shepherd-King to guide him through the darkest of valleys. "God's protection does not mean the absence of trials, but the confidence that God will strengthen and shelter us during our trials." (ETC, 107)

Summarize and Transition: There is one more thing we should take note of in this verse. Remember the shepherd is leading, not herding, the sheep. Every step the sheep take is one the shepherd has already taken. He knows

Notes:

"[T]he valley of the shadow of death' (v. 4) is as much the Shepherd's right path as the green grass and quiet waters." (Preaching, 249)

"We are going through the deep, dark valleys *because* our good shepherd is leading us! the dark valley is part of the path of righteousness." (Exalting, 175)

"God's protection does not mean the absence of trials, but the confidence that God will strengthen and shelter us during our trials." (ETC, 107)

"A narrow valley hedges in. a dark valley is even worse. But even in our darkest hours we do not have to fear. 'When I am afraid, I will trust in you...in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?' (Ps. 56:3-4)" (ETBC, 107)

"One of the greatest problems in the valley is fear." (Preaching, 249)

He cares for us in this live "because life can get as bad as death." (Preaching, 250)

the way. He knows the dangers, and He is leading them on the right path to avoid those dangers. God has always led this way. He led the people through the desert by going *before* them. In Jeremiah 2, the prophet speaks to the nation. This is many years after the people followed the Lord through the desert, and many years after they took the land, and many years after David ruled over them. Since those days, the people had stopped following the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah speaks God's words to them. In verse 2, he says, "I remember the loyalty of your youth, your love as a bride—how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown." In verse 6 the Lord says, "They stopped asking, 'Where is the Lord who brought us from the land of Egypt, who led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and ravines, through a land of drought and darkness, a land no one traveled through and where no one lived?'" The people had stopped following the Shepherd-King. Instead of being faithful sheep, they had become like "a wild donkey at home in the wilderness." (v. 24) Now they would reap the results of their actions. In verse 37, the Lord pronounces judgement on the people. They left the path and accused the Lord of being a "wilderness" and "a land of dense darkness." (v. 31)

When followers of the Lord are walking through dark valleys, we can become fearful. We can be tempted to leave the right path that God has for us. The fear causes us, like the Israelites, to forget that God has led us through similar places before. He has proven Himself trustworthy, but we are tempted to strike out on our own like a "wild donkey." This will only lead to ruin and destruction. Take comfort and lift your head above the flock and keep your eyes on the one carrying the rod and staff.

3. GOD CARES (PSALM 32:5-6)

Read or have someone read Psalm 23:5-6

Explain: In verse 5, the psalmist provides the reader with a change of setting. "After passing through death, the picture changes to a man welcoming special guests to his home... This is far better than being a sheep with a shepherd" (Preaching, 250). The host in these verses is the LORD. We can also see a clear allusion to Christ as our Lord. Like the Shepherd-King, the Host provides protection and care. This can be seen in the multiple ways he demonstrates his hospitality.

In the first half of verse 5, we read, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." This is a clear picture of God's care. In poetic language, David wants us to picture the host providing a lavish meal for the weary traveler. "Spiritually speaking, the Lord filled the banquet table with plenty of delicious food that He prepared Himself." (ETB LG, XX). This is also a picture of God's protection. "One might think with God as our Host all our enemies would disappear. That is not the case. But, our enemies are ultimately powerless to harm us in any eternal sense." (ETBC, 109)

Notes:

Read: Matthew 10:28-31 (See Notes Box)

Not only does God protect and care for us, He honors us. In the second half of verse 5, we see another of the host's hospitable acts. David writes, "You anoint my head with oil." "He publicly acknowledges us as honored guests with an ancient ritual of hospitality: oil, mixed with perfume, would smooth the skin and give off a sweet fragrance." (Exalting, 176) Don't forget that this is done in the presence of his enemies. The Host not only protects the guest. He purposefully honors him before his enemies.

The hospitality continues in the concluding action of verse 5. The guest's "cup overflows." It was customary for "the banquet host [to make] sure to keep the cups of the guests filled to the brim." (ETB LG, 118) Not only is the guest welcomed with a great feast, not only is he protected, not only is he honored, he also has more than he needs.

Discuss: Consider your life. You might be walking through a dark valley. You might simply be a weary traveler. You might be facing enemies or lacking resources. How do you respond to the promise that God will provide care, protection, honor, and abundance?

Explain: David responds in praise and commitment. In verse 6, he says, "Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life." God's goodness and faithful love are His faithful covenant love. We experience those in His grace and mercy poured out on the cross. I picture these as hounds on the hunt. Instead of hunting to harm, the hounds named Goodness and Faithful Love pursue God's people seeking to bless them. David concludes with the thought of any guest staying with a hospitable host. "I could just stay here forever." But it is more than just residing in a place. He desires the Lord's presence more than a place.

Summarize and Transition: When we understand that the Shepherd-King and Host desire the best for us and that only He can provide the best for us, we will desire nothing more than to be in His presence. We appreciate His presence in the good times of green pastures. We long for His presence when we are in the darkest valley and the presence of our enemies. Jesus told us not to worry. In the concluding statement in the gospel of Matthew, He said, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20b)

CONCLUDE

During those times in life when we have it all together and everything seems like green pastures and banquet tables, we might wonder sometimes why we need a shepherd. The Apostle Peter reminds us that a Shepherd-King is necessary in 1 Peter 2:25. "For you were like sheep going astray, but you have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

Challenge

- Do you need to return to the Shepherd?
- Do you need to submit to faithfully following Him as he leads you during the dark times?
- Do you need to spend time thanking Him as the true provider of your green pastures and banquets?

Notes:

Matthew 10:28-30

²⁸ Don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

²⁹ Aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's consent. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head have all been counted.

³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.