The Good Shepherd

**SESSION IN A SENTENCE:** The Lord is the Good Shepherd who lovingly cares for His people.

**MAIN PASSAGE:** Psalm 23

In the throes of World War II, with the fate of humanity on the line, the great British Prime Minister Winston Churchill stood up and addressed the House of Commons. His task was a difficult one. He needed to provide his people with hope in the face of the seemingly unstoppable German war machine. But at the same time, he needed to be honest; the English people knew what was happening on the continent of Europe. And so, on January 22, 1941, Churchill stood before the gathered government officials and declared:

“Far be it from me to paint a rosy picture of the future. Indeed, I do not think we should be justified in using any but the most sombre tones and colours while our people, our Empire and indeed the whole English-speaking world are passing through a dark and deadly valley. But I should be failing in my duty if, on the other wise, I were not to convey the true impression, that a great nation is getting into its war stride.”

When have you felt like you were walking through a “dark and deadly valley”? Where did you turn for hope?
Point 1: The Good Shepherd provides (Ps. 23:1-2).

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.

In these first two verses of Psalm 23, we discover three truths about the Lord’s provision to David, and to us:

1. The Lord’s provision is powerful. Of the many different names we have for God, David used the covenant name “the LORD” to open this psalm. This is the name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush: “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). God shared this name with Moses to set Himself apart from the false gods of the Egyptians. The Lord alone is the one true God, the Creator God; He alone is all-powerful.

2. The Lord’s provision is personal. David could have chosen a war metaphor to describe the Lord. “Warrior,” “king,” and “sword and shield” all would have been fitting and were used elsewhere of the Lord (see Ex. 15:3; Ps. 24; Deut. 33:29, respectively). Instead, David opted for a personal one—shepherd—and his use of the personal pronoun “my” heightens this. God wasn’t just a shepherd, He was David’s shepherd.

   How should God’s provision being personal affect the way we view our circumstances?

3. The Lord’s provision is purposeful. Sheep are known for being helpless, so their shepherd is assigned to lead them and make sure their needs are taken care of. He directs them to places where they can rest in green pastures with plenty to eat and they can find refreshment from the quiet waters of a slow-moving stream. Thus, a purpose of the Lord’s provision is to give you all that you need so you will trust and rest in Him.

   Why do we find it difficult to rest in the Lord’s provision?
Point 2: The Good Shepherd guides (Ps. 23:3-4).

3 He renews my life; 
he leads me along the right paths for his name’s sake. 
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.

Countless wrong paths exist in this world, and we have seen people, even ourselves, fall prey to many of them. It is good, then, to be reminded that Christ, the Good Shepherd, leads us along the right paths. Two such paths are the vertical path (walking humbly with our God) and the horizontal path (walking lovingly with each other).

How would you describe some wrong paths in this world?

For David, even in the dark valley, he had nothing to fear. How could he say that? Because the Lord was with him as a shepherd with his rod and staff in hand.

- The rod represented God’s power. A rod was a club that shepherds carried to fend off wild animals that wanted to harm their sheep. The rod was a symbol of safety. Similarly, as believers in Christ, we are told that our Shepherd walks before us protecting us with His power (Ps. 118:6).

- The staff represented God’s grace. The shepherd’s staff was used to pull sheep out of hazardous situations, such as thickets or crevices. So too, for believers, we find ourselves in hazardous situations resulting from our sin, and it is God’s grace that pulls us out.

The Lord’s rod and staff—His power and grace—comfort the believer even in the darkest of valleys because they are not for our harm but for our good.
Point 3: The Good Shepherd loves (Ps. 23:5-6).

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

Israel’s culture valued hospitality, and part of being a gracious host was preparing for and feeding a guest. The Lord’s preparation in this passage, however, was unique because it came in the midst of trouble. The Lord prepared a table in the presence of the psalmist’s enemies. Even while oppressed, David experienced joy, symbolized by his head anointed with oil, and contentment, seen in his cup overflowing. His enemies may have been waiting outside to harm him, but he was inside enjoying a good, bountiful meal prepared by the Good Shepherd, his loving host.

What images come to mind about a table characterized by joy and contentment? Why are these memories meaningful for you?

In addition to his joy and contentment, David was confident in the Lord’s goodness and faithful love in the midst of his troubles. God is good and God is love, and David had experienced God’s goodness and love in the past. But David also knew he needed God’s love, mercy, and grace day by day. That was precisely what God would pursue him with throughout the rest of his life.

God Is Love: To say that God is love is to say that God is the essence of love, or that ___________ love both resides and resonates within God Himself—one God in three Persons. The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn’t the giving of earthly goods but the giving of Himself in ___________ so that we might become _________________ to Him.

Voices from Church History

“Christ’s love towards us, and not our love towards Christ, is the true ground of expectation, and true foundation of hope ... To look inward to our love towards Christ is painfully unsatisfying: to look outward to Christ’s love towards us is peace.”

—J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)
My Mission

Because the Good Shepherd has laid down His life for us, we follow Jesus’ guidance, knowing He is always with us, so that we may demonstrate His immeasurable goodness to those around us.

• What step of faith will you take because the Good Shepherd provides for, guides, and loves His sheep?

• What are some ways your group can encourage one another to follow the Shepherd’s guidance in His Word?

• How will you lay down your life to share the gospel with someone else this week, following in the example of Jesus, the Good Shepherd?

Voices from Church History

“There is a difference between him, who is led by the good Shepherd, and him, who is led captive by the devil at his will; between him, who feeds in the green pastures, and him, who feeds on vanity. Oh that men saw this difference as they ought.”

–William S. Plumer (1802-1880)
Here we see David say that he had all that he needed (v. 1). Although there is no settled view as to what David’s situation was when he wrote Psalm 23, the truth of the passage remains applicable and steadfast despite the bleakness of his circumstances. Consider, for instance, one possible context for the writing of this psalm: David on the run from his son Absalom (2 Sam. 15–16). One of the last things we would expect to hear him say was that all of his needs were met. Instead, we would expect a psalm seeking to understand where God was during this time and when He would step in and provide David with a need that he lacked: peace with his own family.

But in this scenario we see the importance of distinguishing our needs from our desires. God has promised to supply all our needs (Phil. 4:19), but not all our desires. Peace with family was one of David’s desires, a noble one even, but it was not a need. And sometimes God will not give us our desires even if they seem to be good desires and even if we have the best of intentions for wanting them. The reason is simple: because our desires don’t always align with God’s will. Our desires, as good as they may seem, are not always what will bring God glory, nor will they always bring us good. And so, God, our loving Father, will withhold these desires from us when needed.

However, there is a time when God has promised to give us our desires. Here is what David wrote in Psalm 37:4: “Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart’s desires.” Notice that this is not an unqualified promise. There is a condition, and it is an important one. Only when we delight in the Lord, when the gospel is in the process of transforming us and we are fixated on following God’s will and seeking His glory, only then will our heart’s desires be given. Why? Because then our desires will align with God’s.

What are some of the desires of your heart? Are they in line with seeking God’s will and bringing Him glory?
Day 2: Read Psalm 23:3-4

Small words have quite a bit to say, such as here in verse 4. Notice David’s assumption of going through the darkest valley, not “if” he would. That’s not an unimportant difference.

David, or more precisely God through him, was teaching us something quite important in this idea. Trusting in Christ does not shield us from danger, pain, and adversity. In fact, the Bible has more to say about how these things will increase, not decrease, because of our faith. We need to understand this. We need to accept this. We need to embrace this. God uses our difficulties for His glory and our good. And David shared one way He does: In these dark times, we can find ourselves more desperate for God and more aware of His presence. Yes, the valleys are dark, but God is with us, carrying His rod and staff. In His presence and in His power we find peace.

What has God taught you and how has He brought good through times of adversity you have experienced?

Day 3: Read Psalm 23:5-6

Our God is a pursuing God. We run. He chases. Over and over again. We see this most clearly, perhaps, in the Book of Jonah. Jonah ran in the opposite direction God had ordered him to go. God thus chased Jonah down and brought him to repentance so that he might be used in God’s plan to bring others to repentance as well.

What was it that led God to chase Jonah down? David answered that here in Psalm 23. It is God’s goodness and faithful love, often translated as “mercy.” It was for Jonah’s own good that he ended up going to Nineveh. It was love that chased him down. God would have been quite unloving to allow His prophet to run from Him—the greatest good—and live in disobedience to Him. So the storm God threw at the boat was good, and the fish He sent to swallow Jonah was good—because they were each used by God to bring Jonah back to where he needed to be.

That is what God does for us too. He chases us when we run. He throws storms our way. He delivers us in ways that might seem like anything but kind acts of His love. But whether we see it or not, God’s goodness and faithful love always run beside us.

How have you experienced God chasing after you?
Day 4: Read Isaiah 40:1-11

There are times when we are keenly aware of our need of the almighty strength of God’s arms. We need His power to sustain us. Perhaps we are facing a situation that overwhelms us. Perhaps we are facing down an adversary that we know we cannot beat. In these times, we scan the horizon for our Rescuer to step in and bring His full strength to bear. This is what is in mind in verse 10.

But there are also times when we need God’s strong arms not for their strength but for their comfort. We need His love to lift us up. Perhaps we feel alone. Perhaps we have failed yet again. In these times, we fall to our knees and long to feel the embrace of our loving Father. This is what is in mind in verse 11.

In this coupling, we are reminded of the great character of our God. Our powerful Creator is also our gentle Father. He is always there for us, always knowing what we need, and always ready to provide whatever that is in that moment.

How have you experienced God’s power and love when you needed each?

Day 5: Read John 10:1-21

In describing Himself as the good shepherd, Jesus made an interesting contrast between Him and a hired hand (vv. 12-13). A hired hand, Jesus contended, was not reliable because he didn’t care about the sheep. And why should he? They wouldn’t be his sheep. So if a wolf came along to snatch a sheep, the hired hand would not risk his own life to save that sheep. Instead, he would run off and likely plead his case later to the owner of the sheep of how much danger he had been in.

But Jesus is no hired hand. He is the good shepherd because the sheep are His. He owns them. He loves them. And that is why He sacrificed His life rather than preserve it.

We need to see Jesus for who He truly is, but it cannot stop there. We also need to see ourselves for who we truly are. Do you? Do you see yourself as the beloved sheep you are? Do you understand that Christ’s love for you is fixed because you are His and He is yours? Jesus is no hired hand who will run off and abandon you. And neither are you some random sheep.

How can you tend to see yourself incorrectly at times? Why?
Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- The Good Shepherd provides (Ps. 23:1-2).
- The Good Shepherd guides (Ps. 23:3-4).
- The Good Shepherd loves (Ps. 23:5-6).

How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?

How should the metaphor of God's being a shepherd inform how we think about ourselves morally and spiritually? In what ways does the metaphor illustrate our constant dependence on God?

What habits or disciplines should we develop in order to remind ourselves that we and others are like sheep? Why is this a necessarily humbling and unflattering process?

Notes
UNIT 10
SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

UNIT 11
SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4

SESSION 5

SESSION 6

UNIT 12
SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4
3. Martin Luther, Luther’s Large Catechism, trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis, MN: The Luther Press, 1908), 44.
In this volume of The Gospel Project, we cover the roughly one hundred and twenty years of Israel’s heyday: the united monarchy. After decades of the devastating cycle of sin and deliverance and being ruled by a series of judges, the Israelites called on Samuel to appoint a king for them—one like those of the nations around them. God warned His people that what they were requesting would lead to heartache and trouble, but they insisted. So God, in His kindness, gave them what they wanted in order to teach them to trust Him.

What followed was a series of three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon, each ruling for about forty years. In some ways, these kings provide us with examples to follow: the fierce determination of David not to stand for anyone impugning God’s character; the mercy and kindness David showed to a foe and his family; the wisdom of Solomon. But we also discover that each of these three men fell woefully short of being the king God’s people wanted and needed, each one proving God’s warnings true. Bookending God’s people crying out as one for a king at the start of this volume, by the time we finish, we encounter God’s people being divided into two kingdoms.

Our takeaway is clear: The hope of humanity does not rest in any human king or leader but is fixed solely and securely in the King of kings, Jesus Christ. But at the same time, we see that God delights in using His people despite their failings. God would fulfill His covenant with David, even though he committed adultery and murder. This reaffirmed the promises God had made to Abraham generations before. And though Solomon would succumb to polygamy and idolatry, God used him to build the temple, a place for God’s people to worship and be in relationship with God.

So consider as you study: What might God do through us?