The Good Shepherd

Summary and Goal
In this final session from the life of King David, we turn our attention to one of his most famous writings: Psalm 23. This psalm is beloved for many reasons, and countless believers throughout history have been both challenged and comforted by its words. But more than that, in Psalm 23, the former shepherd boy turned king points us to a greater Shepherd and King who was to come. In this session, we will see that the Shepherd about whom David wrote would provide for His people, guide His people, and love His people. We will see that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who accomplished all of this by laying down His life so that He might provide eternal life for us.

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

Session in a Sentence
The Lord is the Good Shepherd who lovingly cares for His people.

Christ Connection
Jesus is the Good Shepherd who provided salvation for us by laying down His life (John 10:7-15). Because of the Good Shepherd, we may live with the hope that we will dwell with God forever.

Missional Application
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.
Group Time

EXPLAIN: Share the context and the quote in the DDG (p. 84) in which Winston Churchill addressed his challenge of instilling hope in his people while being honest about their difficult situation in World War II.

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.”

INTERACT: Ask group members the following questions.

When have you felt like you were walking through a “dark and deadly valley”? Where did you turn for hope? (be prepared to give answers of your own to jump-start the conversation)

SAY: As believers in Christ, we too are not promised a rosy picture of the future in this life. However, unlike Great Britain and her allies in World War II, believers have a Good Shepherd who provides for them, guides them, loves them, and assures their victory. Therefore, we do not look over life’s difficulties but through them to Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

SUMMARIZE: In Psalm 23, the former shepherd boy turned king points us to a greater Shepherd and King who was to come. In this session, we will see that the Shepherd about whom David wrote would provide for His people, guide His people, and love His people. We will see that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who accomplished all of this by laying down His life so that He might provide eternal life for us.

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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.

EXPLAIN: Note that three truths about the Lord’s provision are discovered here. Then use the paragraphs in the DDG (p. 85) and the leader content below to help explain the Lord’s provision as powerful and personal.

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.

3. The Lord’s provision is personal. David had been a wildly successful warrior in Saul’s army, so he knew firsthand the power of warrior imagery. Yet he chose to describe God as a shepherd. Having been a shepherd prior to becoming a warrior, David was well-acquainted with a shepherd’s responsibilities and expectations. He knew how difficult sheep were to lead and that their sole chance of survival rested on the effectiveness of their shepherd. He understood that shepherds were with their sheep up to twenty-four hours a day, which explains why Jesus in the New Testament could say, “My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). David chose the metaphor of a shepherd because it communicates a personal God who cares deeply about His people. The Creator God is not a far off, detached monarch; He is an up-close and involved protector of those who belong to Him.
INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

? How should God’s provision being personal affect the way we view our circumstances? (God knows us and knows what we need in life and what we don’t need; we can trust that our circumstances, no matter how pleasant or dire, are tailor-made for our good and God’s glory; finding ourselves in a situation of lack should drive us to God not with complaints but with prayers for His provision and our contentment)

EXPLAIN: Use the paragraph in the DDG (p. 85) and the leader content below to help explain the Lord’s provision as purposeful.

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.

• The Lord’s provision is purposeful. David knew that sheep are inherently timid and are usually too afraid to lie down, even for their own good. But in a rare moment of confidence and trust in their shepherd, sheep will lie down when they experience “freedom from fear, tension, aggravations, and hunger.” Though David’s path likely was difficult as he wrote this psalm, he was convinced that the Lord was providing what he needed for his good. The level to which you believe this is the extent to which you will trust Him and step out in obedience.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

? Why do we find it difficult to rest in the Lord’s provision? (we have not allowed ourselves to be trained by His provision in the past; we struggle to trust someone else with our needs; we have little faith in our God’s ability and desire to care for us; we believe our sin will make God vindictive; because God doesn’t always provide like we think He should)

SAY: The Lord our shepherd has promised to provide every one of our needs according to His riches and glory in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19). As a Christian, contentment in the Lord begins with a confidence in the Lord’s provision. All that we need, He gives, and all that He gives has a purpose. We should receive the Lord’s provision with gratitude and joy and use it to bring glory to the One who provided it to us (1 Cor. 10:31).
Point 2: The Good Shepherd guides (Ps. 23:3-4).

READ Psalm 23:3-4 (DDG p. 86).

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.

EXPLAIN: Reference the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 86) as you highlight two right paths on which Jesus leads us: the vertical path and the horizontal path.

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).

• The Vertical Path. The first four of the Ten Commandments describe our vertical relationship with God (Ex. 20:1-11), a path we are to walk along with humility (Mic. 6:8). One of the best ways to do so is to walk daily in His Word. Psalm 119:105 reminds us that God’s Word is a lamp to our feet and a light on our path. As we spend time reading the Bible, we will see how we are to live in relationship with God and walk along His path, the right path He has given us.

• The Horizontal Path. We are also to walk lovingly with each other, as summarized in the last six of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12-17). We were not created for isolation; we were created to be in community, reflecting the nature of our triune God. The church, therefore, is a vital part of a believer’s journey with God into spiritual maturity. Again through God’s Word, we are told to encourage each other (1 Thess. 5:11), love each other (1 John 4:7), forgive each other (Col. 3:13), accept each other (Rom. 15:7), serve each other (Gal. 5:13), speak the truth to each other (Eph. 4:25), and pray for each other (Jas. 5:16).

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How would you describe some wrong paths in this world? (broad paths leading to death and destruction; paths of selfishness; paths on which you follow your heart; paths focused on fame and fortune; paths for sexual fulfillment apart from God’s will; paths of bitterness; paths of hate; the hell-bound path)
EXPLAIN: Use the paragraphs in the DDG (p. 86) to explain why the Lord’s **rod** and **staff** provided David with comfort and boldness even on the path in the dark valley.

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.

INSTRUCT: Allow group members a moment to reread the Scripture passage and to draw in the space provided in their DDG (p. 86) a meaningful visual element from the passage surrounded by words or pictures that elaborate on it (examples: a dark valley filled with words describing their own dark valley; a rod surrounded by words describing God’s power). Ask for any volunteers to share about their drawing, but don’t force any responses.

EXPLAIN: Emphasize that God’s guidance is for our good, but God’s ultimate motivation is His glory.

- No doubt the Lord our Shepherd leads us on right paths and protects us with His rod and staff for our good, but we should take note of the ultimate motivation for His guidance: His name’s sake (v. 3). All that God does is for our good and especially His glory, and these are not mutually exclusive.
- We are not the center of the Lord’s universe; He is. This truth should keep us from thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought and getting puffed up with pride (Rom. 12:3). He created us for His glory and redeems people for the praise of His glorious grace. In a world that makes everything about you, God doesn’t. Much of our culture is about exalting humanity, but the gospel is about exalting God!
Point 3: The Good Shepherd loves (Ps. 23:5-6).

SAY: In these final two verses of Psalm 23, the imagery shifts from primarily one of a shepherd relating to his sheep to a friend or host relating to another friend or esteemed guest.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Psalm 23:5-6 (DDG p. 87).

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.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 87) to point out the significance of the Lord’s hospitality toward David in the presence of his enemies: he experienced joy and contentment.

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.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following questions.

What images come to mind about a table characterized by joy and contentment? Why are these memories meaningful for you? (be prepared to give answers of your own to jump-start the conversation, hopefully ones that communicate the love felt around a table)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 87) to emphasize David’s confidence in God’s goodness and faithful love, also translated as mercy.

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.
• David had recognized God’s goodness and love in choosing him to be king, in defeating Goliath, in his friendship with Jonathan, and in sparing his life from Saul. But perhaps there had been no greater evidence of God’s goodness and love than in God’s forgiving David of his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah. To pardon David of such heinous sins was an undeserved act of God’s love that surely reverberated throughout the rest of the king’s life. God’s pardon had been sweet, and because of it, David was able to experience a renewal of his fellowship with God (Ps. 51).

• There is no sin so small that God’s love and goodness aren’t needed. There is no sin so great that God’s love and goodness can’t cover it.

**FILL IN THE BLANKS:** Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 87).

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**God Is Love:** To say that God is love is to say that God is the essence of love, or that perfect 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 Christ so that we might become reconciled to Him.

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**Essential Doctrine “God Is Love”:** To say that God is love is to say that God is the essence of love, or that perfect love both resides and resonates within God Himself—one God in three Persons. The imperfect love that human beings share between one another is a dim reflection, a sign that points to the perfect love that resides within God. The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn’t the giving of earthly goods but the giving of Himself in Christ so that we might become reconciled to Him.

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**SAY:** Goodness and faithful love followed David then, and goodness and love follow believers now because the greater David, the greater Shepherd, followed His Father’s plan to the point of death, even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). The first David took a life to cover his sin, but the second David gave His life to cover our sins and to shepherd us in the right paths on the way to His eternal home.
EXPLAIN: Winston Churchill’s words during World War II brought comfort, encouragement, and hope to his people, but not a sure hope. Psalm 23, however, encourages believers to look to Christ as the Good Shepherd who loves us and laid down His life for us, His sheep (John 10:7-15). We are to read this psalm and have a sure hope that we will dwell with God forever. Therefore, just as Jesus laid His life down, we can lay our lives down for the sake of sharing the gospel with the countless sheep among the nations who do not yet know the Good Shepherd.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 88), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

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?

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You are the eternal Son of God and our good and faithful Shepherd. Though we, like sheep, have gone astray, You took on human flesh and became the Good Shepherd we needed, laying down Your life for our good and for Your Father’s glory. You are with us always, even through the darkest valleys, as You lead us by the Holy Spirit according to Your goodness and faithful love. Amen.

PACK ITEM 10: HYMN HANDOUT: Pass out copies of this hymn and sing it together.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 89-91), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 92) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 89-91) will help group members get into God’s Word and study it for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 92) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 89-91) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 2 as a part of point 2 in the session: 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.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 1:** “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.”
- **Day 4:** “Our powerful Creator is also our gentle Father. He is always there for us, always knowing what we need, and always ready to provide.”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member’s DDG (p. 92) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

- **Encourage group members to live as representatives of God’s shepherding goodness by speaking the truth of God’s Word into others’ lives.**
- **See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.**
Additional Commentary

Point 1: The Good Shepherd provides (Ps. 23:1-2).

“Because the Lord is his shepherd, the psalmist can declare, I lack nothing (23:1b). In the dry climate of West Asia, sheep were very dependent on their shepherd to find food, water and protection. Each day, he would lead the flock to new green pastures, which often provided only enough grass for that day (23:2a). Yet the phrase he makes me lie down shows that the sheep had enough to eat. The sheep also needed daily access to quiet waters, calm streams or pools in contrast to rapidly flowing water that could endanger them (23:2b).”

“This hymn is usually classified as a psalm of confidence in the Lord’s care. It uses two images: the Lord as Shepherd who cares for the sheep (vv. 1-4), and the Lord as Host who cares for his guest (vv. 5-6). These images would be familiar from everyday experience (for David’s own, cf. 1 Sam. 17:34); but they also evoke other ideas common in the ancient Near East (including the OT), with the deity as shepherd of his people and the deity as host of the meal. In worship, the faithful celebrate God’s greatness and majesty; and when they sing this psalm, they see his majesty in the way he personally attends to each of his covenant lambs. He is the shepherd for Israel as a whole; and in being such, he is the shepherd for each faithful Israelite as well.”

“Psalm 23 reflects David’s experience (cf. 1 Sam. 17:34-37). The shepherd image implies that God accepts the responsibility to care for those who know him. His priorities are to keep them spiritually healthy and growing (food, water, rest, restoration and guidance, Ps. 23:1-3). Though they are not protected from “the darkest valley,” the shepherd is always there to protect them through it (Ps. 23:4). Rooted in ‘goodness and mercy’ (Ps. 23:6), the preplanned richness of God’s care gives David confidence to face whatever the future may bring. All that matters is to be with him.”

Point 2: The Good Shepherd guides (Ps. 23:3-4).

“Shevet means rod. It indicates shepherds’ rods (Ezek. 20:37), used for counting (Lev. 27:32) or protection (Ps. 23:4). Shevet is also associated with applying discipline (Prov. 13:24). Used symbolically of fury’s power (Prov. 22:8), shevet as scepter connotes discipline (Isa. 11:4) or punishment (Job 37:13). Assyria was the rod of God’s anger against Israel (Isa. 10:5). Shevet can be a military weapon, a club (2 Sam. 23:21) or spear (2 Sam. 18:14). Shevet as a symbol of power meant scepter (Gen. 49:10) or staff (Judg. 5:14) of rule. It could represent one kingdom’s destructive power over another (Isa. 14:29). A scepter of justice implies righteous rule (Ps. 45:6). Shevet apparently became identified with those ruled in the most common denotation tribe. The phrase ‘tribes of Israel’ occurs forty-eight times (Gen. 49:28). Israel can be a shevet (Jer. 10:16).”
“Moreover, this good shepherd restores my soul. This statement is subject to different interpretations. It may picture the straying sheep being brought back to the fold (cp. Isa. 49:5; Ps. 60:1). In Hebrew vernacular these words can mean ‘brings to repentance’ or ‘brings to conversion’ (cp. Hos. 14:1-3; Joel 2:12). Psalm 19:7 uses this same wording to picture the spiritual renewal or revival of a believer. But since the word for soul (Heb. nephesh) is accurately translated ‘life,’ this may mean that the Lord restores the psalmist to physical health. Either interpretation is certainly true.”

“The ‘darkest valley’ (sometimes translated the ‘valley of the shadow of death’) does not mean that the psalmist died, only that he might find himself in a situation where death was a distinct possibility. The phrase ‘the darkest valley’ alludes to the deep canyons in the wilderness into which one might fall and not escape unless God intervened.”

**Point 3: The Good Shepherd loves (Ps. 23:5-6).**

“His experience of the Lord’s blessing convinced the psalmist that the Lord will never leave him nor forsake him (23:6a). Goodness and love, literally ‘well-being and covenant loyalty,’ will not just follow him but pursue him (the same Hebrew verb is often used in reference to pursuit of an enemy). The psalmist’s enemies are no longer pursuing him; their place has been taken by God’s goodness and covenant loyalty! And this pursuit will continue not just for a few hours but for a lifetime.”

“The ‘house of the LORD’ is the sanctuary where people worshiped. (The temple, in the Hebrew OT, is usually called beth Yahweh, ‘the Lord’s house.’) After his meditations, David desired to return to that holy place where he could avail himself of the blessing of God’s presence. In the Christian application of the psalm, the hope is for complete communion with the Lord in the abundance of His blessing. While popular thinking often relates this verse to heaven, the phrase ‘in the presence of my enemies’ (v. 5) suggests an earthly setting, since the believer’s enemies are not present in heaven.”

References

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?