

Confidence in God's Shepherding

Minnie leaned in and blew out the eight and zero candles. Applause filled the room. She smiled as she looked around at family, friends, and neighbors who had come to the civic center for her birthday celebration.

Minnie thought she was coming to the civic center on this Saturday afternoon for a water aerobics class. Her youngest daughter, Courtney, had picked her up. Minnie still loved the water. It was what kept her in shape.

When Minnie was directed to one of the large meeting rooms, she was met with a chorus of "Surprise!"

"Speech! Speech!"

"I'm grateful to have so many people I love under one roof," said Minnie. "God is good all the time, and all the time . . ."

"God is good!" said the crowd in unison.

"God has been good to me all the days of my life," Minnie continued. "He has been my constant, my portion, my helper, my keeper. His goodness, mercy, and love have followed me. I don't know how much longer I have to be here, but God's love will be with me until the end, and then forever in heaven."

"We hope to have you here for at least another 20 years!" her son, Cameron, said in his baritone voice.

1. *In your childhood, did one or both of your parents cause you to feel protected and safe? What did they do to provide you with that environment?*

2. *Think of a frightening circumstance you have experienced. How did it affect you?*

3. *Do you trust that God will protect you when you face difficulties? Do you seek God when trouble arises, or do you tend to rely on yourself for solutions?*

The Shepherd Provides

Psalm 23:1–4 KJV

A Psalm of David.

1 The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie
down in green pastures: he
leadeth me beside the still
waters.

3 He restoreth my soul: he
leadeth me in the paths of
righteousness for his name's
sake.

4 Yea, though I walk
through the valley of the
shadow of death, I will fear
no evil: for thou art with
me; thy rod and thy staff
they comfort me.

Psalm 23:1–4 NIV

A psalm of David.

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I
lack nothing.

²He makes me lie down in
green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet
waters,

³he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right
paths
for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

The psalmist begins with a simple identification: His shepherd (using a singular possessive) is “the LORD” (v. 1). David was himself a shepherd; he views Yahweh as his own shepherd, who provides for every need.

The statement “The LORD is my shepherd” contains the name of God, Yahweh. It is the same name that God revealed to Moses on Mount Horeb (Ex. 3:1). The name Yahweh is related to the Hebrew verb “to be,” and it expresses God’s unequalled and unparalleled nature. Moses was sent before Pharaoh to display God’s power and His name’s honor, since God intervened to rescue the Hebrews from slavery (Ex. 9:16). The same idea is in Psalm 23, when God’s actions are attributed to “his name’s sake” (v. 3). As a gentle companion and shepherd, God will not abandon His sheep, because He is Yahweh.

The first requirement for a sheep’s survival in arid lands is water. Rainy seasons will produce “green pastures” in

Canaan, and the sheep are prompted to recline amidst an abundant supply of food (v. 2). The shepherd leads the sheep to “quiet waters” for a drink. This could mean a natural body of water, one free of fast-flowing rapids that could frighten the sheep. But since herdsman of the region relied on wells to water flocks, “quiet” (NIV) or “still” (KJV)—a noun in the original language—could mean a resting place, as the Hebrew word appears elsewhere (Gen. 49:15; Num. 10:33; Deut. 12:9; Isa. 32:18). It is a place where the sheep feel free to lie down, a place of peace.

Once the immediate physical needs are met, the sheep are calm and untroubled (v. 3). The “soul” refers to a person’s entire being in this context. Translations will sometimes render the same word as “life” (compare Gen. 9:4; 19:17–20; 32:30; 44:30). It means that the psalmist—the sheep—feels rested to his very core. And the shepherd leads the way on an excellent trail. “Right” (NIV) or “righteousness” (KJV) frequently describe God’s faithfulness (compare Ps. 9:8). A faithful or righteous shepherd—as Yahweh certainly is—finds faithful or righteous paths for the sheep to walk.

The psalmist praises God for the protection found in His presence (v. 4). The divine shepherd does not avoid dark valleys, places that hold food or pools of water. Yet the dark valleys cast long shadows and bring a threat of predators, such as bandits or wild beasts. Without the shepherd, the sheep would be helpless. But the shepherd has come prepared—his “rod” and “staff” make the sheep feel secure. The rod is for protection, in case predators or thieves attack. The staff is for leaning on when climbing rocky ground. The shepherd can use the staff to pull a sheep back to safety. As a good shepherd, God has planned the journey and is prepared, whatever may come.

4. *Which needs does the psalmist say that the shepherd meets?*

5. *Why is God like a shepherd?*

6. *Where does the shepherd lead the sheep?*

The Shepherd King

Psalm 23:5–6 KJV

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Psalm 23:5–6 NIV

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

⁶Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Verses 1–4 compare God to a shepherd. But verses 5–6 introduce a set of images that do not apply to sheep or shepherds. After all, when do sheep dine at tables or drink from a cup (v. 5)? In verses 5–6, the psalmist compares God to a magnificent host. This could be another role-reversal for King David, since kings were expected to have large tables to host many guests. Now perhaps David imagines himself to be the guest at God’s table.

The “table” that God prepares is full of so many good things that it makes “enemies” jealous (v. 5). Since the previous verse described a passage through danger, these enemies might be highway robbers or thieves along the road. David made enemies while on his way to becoming king. David composed Psalm 63 as he fled into the wilderness, and it speaks of enemies seeking his life (Ps. 63:9–10).

But under the safety of God his host, the psalmist receives oil on his head (Ps. 23:5). The word “anoint” is not the same word for anointings of kings or priests. It is part of the table imagery, a blessing that God provides His guest. In ancient cultures, pleasant-smelling oils could be applied to the honored guests of a special meal. Psalm 104:15 says that God gives “oil to make their faces shine.” Oil for the head is a luxury, a show of God’s hospitality.

Likewise, God shares a cup of wine that is filled to

the brim (v. 5). For a weary traveler fresh off the road, a healthy cup of wine is welcome indeed! Abundant wine is a frequent image of God's provision (see, again, Ps. 104:15).

But the meal was also the seal of David's alliance with God. In ancient Israel, covenants were sometimes concluded with a meal that expressed the bonds of friendship (Ex. 24:8–11). The word translated "love" in Psalm 23:6 is the word used throughout the Old Testament for the friendly relations between the two parties of a covenant.

In the final verse, the psalmist turns his attention from the present to the future. Instead of being chased by evil (v. 4) or by enemies (v. 5), the psalmist expects that "goodness and mercy" (KJV) shall chase after him. The God who sends these good things to follow will also open His "house" as a place to reside. God's presence is not only available now; it is a gift that unfolds into the future. The psalmist expects to never leave the presence of God again. David would not have to beg God for evidences of His care; God would be eager to give them.

The Good Shepherd provides, and He protects the

sheep in the field. He also provides for his guests and protects them in the tent. This psalm is a beautiful picture of God's care and concern for His "flock."

7. What images of God are found in verses 5–6?

8. Is the psalmist speaking about the past, the present, or the future?



A wadi (gorge) in Israel where a shepherd might lead his sheep to find water and grass—a "valley of the shadow of death" (v. 4 KJV).

Photo: arie tennbaum/Israeli Pikiwiki project

God Protects Us amid All Kinds of Fears

People experience fears from all sorts of situations. Some fears might be phobias, such as intense fears of germs, snakes, or spiders. Other people might experience worry over whether or not they'll be able to make their next set of bills. A person might experience debilitating fear over a bad diagnosis. Many people experience anxiety over public speaking, confrontation, or other uncomfortable situations. People who suffer from fear may feel that they are being tormented, and their joy has been stolen.

For chronic fear, some people are forced to turn to doctors and medication to alleviate anxiety. There are folks who may suffer fear and stress from situations in life that are terribly difficult to navigate. How do you cope with fear in a world where there are many real things to be afraid of?

One way is to remember the words voiced in 2 Timothy 1:7: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (KJV). David feared for his very life, but he didn't allow that fear to control his life. He cried out to God. He sang to God. He prayed to God. And he attested to the benefit of trusting God in the midst of his fears: "I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears" (Ps. 34:4) The best way to deal with fear is to present it to God in prayer, believing that He is a loving good shepherd, who will take care of His sheep, no matter what circumstances we face.

9. *Do you watch the news or upsetting shows? What kinds of events that you hear on the news cause you to fear?*

10. *What are some strategies that people use to cope with fear? Are they effective?*

11. *How do you combat fear in your daily life? Do you take your worries to God in prayer?*

A Man After God's Own Heart

The psalmist understood that God was his divine shepherd. He would guide him rightly, take care of him in any circumstance, and provide for him—even into eternity. Christians can look at his life as an example of how to interact with and place trust in Yahweh in all circumstances.

► *Reflect on a time when you were fearful. Did you take your fear to God in prayer? Did you find peace? Brainstorm how you can handle a problem you may be facing now, or in the future, by allowing God to shepherd you through it.*

Areas where you can allow God to become your shepherd:

Strategies for building a closer relationship with God:

KEY VERSE

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

—Psalm 23:6 KJV

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

—Psalm 23:6 NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of November 4 through November 10

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Revelation 19:1–10—The Lord God Almighty Reigns.
- Tue.** Psalm 147:1–6, 12–20—How Good to Sing God's Praises.
- Wed.** Psalm 148—Praise God from Heaven and Earth.
- Thu.** Luke 1:46–55—My Soul Magnifies the Lord.
- Fri.** Luke 1:68–79—Blessed Be the God of Israel.
- Sat.** Psalm 146—Praise the Lord, O My Soul!
- Sun.** Psalms 149–150—Let Everything that Breathes Praise God!