

The Lord is My Shepherd

April 28, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Psalm 23:1-6

Session Outline

1. The Shepherd (Psalm 23:1-2)
2. His Presence (Psalm 23:3-4)
3. His Blessing (Psalm 23:5-6)

Theological Theme

God knows what we need and, as we trust Him, we reap the benefits of an intimate relationship with the God of the universe.

Call to Action

Consider the agendas, battles, and conquests of your life? Is the Lord the Shepherd of your grand plans? Do you look to Him lead you? Does your cup overflow? With what?





Leader Guide

The Lord is My Shepherd

Introduction

Most people, even those outside the church, have some familiarity with Psalm 23. It is often used to comfort people who lose a loved one or go through hard times that they are not alone and that God cares about them and their circumstances. Maybe the most well-known reference from this psalm is the line about the valley of the shadow of death.

This imagery brings to mind places where the sunlight doesn't go. We all face dark moments in life when we feel the shadows looming and the darkness brings a chill. No matter what our valley of the shadow of death may be, this Psalm reminds us that if we trust God as our shepherd, He knows and He cares, and we are not alone.

-  Why do you think this psalm is such a comfort for people facing hardship and loss?
-  How have you faced the valley of shadow of death in your own life?

Session Summary


Psalm 23 is one of the most known and beloved passages in the Bible. It was written by David and emphasizes some important truths about the Lord. David used imagery to compare God with a shepherd who cares about and watches over his sheep. Having firsthand knowledge of the role of a shepherd, David described the beautiful and personal relationship we have with God.

Psalm 23 also describes the abundant blessings that come through the presence of God in believer's lives. David further gave the image of a host who prepares a bountiful table full of excellent provisions and invites us to enjoy it. It is always in our best interest to follow God and depend on Him every step of the way.


1. The Shepherd (Psalm 23:1-2)

Even after being anointed as the next king of Israel, David's life was anything but easy. He was attacked, chased, threatened, and continually on the run. Once he became king, there were battles, conquests, and plans that come with a growing kingdom. Through the recorded ups and downs of David's life, one phrase is repeated often, "David inquired of the LORD" (1 Samuel 23:4; 2 Samuel 2:1-2). Whether he was shepherding sheep or people, David depended on God and demonstrated what it meant to be a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14).

Psalm 23 starts with a powerful statement of recognition and praise acknowledging who God is to David. Using the analogy of a shepherd, David set the tone for the rest of the Psalm as he showed the Lord as One who constantly watches over, guides, and protects His flock. This image is not limited to Psalm 23 but is used throughout Scripture, as shepherd and sheep were familiar to people in that day.

 What does the imagery of sheep and shepherd teach us about God and about ourselves?

David referred to the Lord as "my" shepherd, not just a shepherd. This is a reminder of the personal relationship between the Lord and His followers. David had experienced an intimate relationship with God, and this Psalm reminds us that anyone who places his or her trust and faith in Jesus also enjoys an intimate relationship with the Lord. Because God is our shepherd, we can say with full confidence, "I have what I need" (v. 1). For David, this was both a statement of reality and a declaration of his trust in the provision of the Lord. Because God is our shepherd, we can resist the desire for more than He provides.

 What does it mean to you that the Lord is "your" shepherd? How have you experienced the reality of His care in this way?

God cares about every aspect of our lives, including our need for rest and nourishment. Although it seems like people should know when rest is needed, the implication is that sheep often miss the obvious and don't always know what is best for them personally. The same is true for us. The true rest we need is often not found in the ways we seek it, but in fellowship with the Lord.

A Beloved Psalm

The pastoral serenity of this psalm has made it a favorite of generations of readers. Verse 6 contains an implicit promise of eternal life.

God not only provides the rest we need but also the conditions for our rest. If sheep are scared, they refuse to lie down. The shepherd finds the perfect places for his sheep to rest and relax that also offer them refreshment in still waters. This indicates the overall care that the Lord demonstrates on behalf of His people. We should not take this to mean that God will always fix our circumstances to give us rest. In fact, the opposite will often be true. But we can be sure that God will give us the rest we need in Him, even in a chaotic and broken world.



Application: Where do you need rest in the Lord today? How will you seek that?

2. The Presence (Psalm 23:3-4)

Sheep submit to the leadership of the shepherd and experience the freedom that comes from his guidance. God leads us in the right way. Sheep don't need to know where to rest or eat. They follow the shepherd because he has the answers. This is how we are to live as we follow the Lord and trust in Him. As we follow the Lord is complete trust, He is glorified. The best way to live always gives glory to God. We often believe the lie that satisfaction is found in someone or something else, but we are renewed as we walk the paths that bring Him proper honor and glory.



Where do you feel in need of renewal? How is this found in the presence of the Lord, even in hardship and confusion?


But again, this doesn't mean we will always have an easy or enjoyable life. Life is never all bad or all good. Difficulty resides alongside the good we experience. No one is immune from dealing with tough situations. Even as we follow the Lord, we still pass through dark valleys.

Still, we can be sure we never have to walk through the hard places alone. This portion of Psalm 23 is often used for encouragement when dealing with death of loved ones, but it also applies to any of the hard times that come to believers. Both sunshine and shadows are our reality, and we can trust our Shepherd to walk with us through them all.

Despite the darkness he faced, David declared he had no reason to fear any evil that came his way. He was confident in the care of his Shepherd, and that confidence gave him boldness. David's confidence was not in his own bravery or ability to face the darkness, but that He was accompanied by the one for whom even the darkness is light (Psalm 139:12).

-  When have you been grateful for the Lord's presence during a hard time?


Just as a shepherd used the rod and staff to guide, protect, and lead his sheep, so the Lord guided and directed David. As our Shepherd, God both corrects and guides us while also protecting us. Think about the times in your life when you have experienced the Lord's correction and protection.

-  Application: How do you need to respond to God guiding, directing, or correcting you currently? Why is it important that we not bypass these moments?


3. The Blessing (Psalm 23:5-6)

Finally, David shifted to the image of a host preparing a beautiful table for His guest. Being invited to enjoy the provision and goodness of the Lord is like being invited to an exclusive and bountiful banquet. Our God is a personal God who has the resources to prepare exactly what we need as well as the bounty to bless us beyond our imagination.

But David's words remind us that even in seasons of bounty, there are still enemies waiting to attack. Think about the implications in your own life. God doesn't wait until everything is settled and perfect before He invites you into His presence. He is ready and waiting to spend time with you, to bless you and provide for you regardless of your situation.

-  What does it say to you that God isn't deterred by the presence of enemies, and He is preparing a place for you regardless of circumstance? How does this comfort and encourage you?

The picture of anointing takes the idea of hospitality to another level. Not only does the Lord provide abundantly and bountifully, but the reference to anointing oil is about being refreshed and set apart. God has plans for His children and just as He anointed David for the task of being king of Israel, He also anoints us to fulfill His specific plans. God has set us apart for His purposes and we can trust him at every moment.

-  What are some things God has set you apart for to bring Him glory?

God has called us to be the light in this dark world and when we recognize the anointing of His hand on our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit then we will live out our calling for His glory. This reality alters our perspective as we are reminded that with God, we have everything we need. As David put it, our cup overflows.

God's blessings are not just confined to a moment, but we can live in confident expectation that this will continue all the days of our lives. Goodness and mercy are like twin guardians that escort us throughout our days. David was encouraged by this, and it fueled his confident final declaration in Psalm 23. For the believer, the greatest assurance is found in David's words, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live." This is true on earth and into eternity for all who place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.



Application: How have you experienced God's goodness and faithful love pursuing you?

Conclusion

David walked with the Lord through good times, hard times, devastating times, sinful times, times of restoration, and everything in between. Psalm 23 is full of powerful imagery and theological truths that bring comfort and strength to Christ followers at any stage of life.

Using the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep David stressed the provision and care the Lord has for His people. Just as sheep who trust and follow their shepherd receive what they need to be safe and secure, those who follow the Lord will receive what we need to be safe and secure in Him regardless of our circumstances.

David also likened the Lord to a host who sets a bountiful and elaborate banquet table for His people. God can provide all we need, no matter what we face. Interestingly this feast is set with full awareness that there are enemies lurking about, but God is not deterred by anything that the enemy might bring. In the end, we can be sure that God's goodness and love will accompany throughout our lives and into eternity with Him.

- ❓ Which of the images in Psalm 23 impacts you the most? Why?
- ❓ Where do you feel the presence of hardship and threats in your life? How can God's promised presence be a comfort in this?
- ❓ How can you seek to have a gospel conversation with another person by sharing the encouragement of Psalm 23?

Prayer of Response

Praise the Lord and thank Him for providing for and watching over you. Confess the ways you need Him as a sheep needs its shepherd.

Memory Verse

*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.*
— Psalm 23:6

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Psalm 1-50* by J. Josh Smith and Daniel Akin
- *Be Worshipful* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Psalms Chapter 1-41* by J. Vernon McGee

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Psalms

Purpose

There are myriad messages scattered through the 150 psalms, but overall, this record of the responses of God's people in worship and prayer serves the purpose of teaching us how to relate to God in various circumstances of life. The psalms also demonstrate God's sovereignty and goodness for his people in order to instill confidence in those who trust in him.

Author

Since the book is a collection of many different psalms written over a long time, there is not just one author for this collection. By far the most common designation in the titles is "Of David," which may refer to David as the author of those psalms. David's role as a musician in Saul's court (1Sm 16:14–23) as well as his many experiences as a shepherd, a soldier, and a king make him a likely candidate for writing many of these psalms.

Setting

The book of Psalms consists of many different hymns and prayers composed by individuals but used by the community. If one were to take the names in the titles as authors, the date of composition ranges from the time of Moses (fifteenth century BC) to a time following the exile (sixth century BC or later). Some of the titles do contain historical information that might indicate the setting of the composition, although even this (like the authorship) is ambiguous. They might not refer to the date of composition but to the setting of its contents, being composed some time after the events had taken place. This is a more likely scenario since some of these psalms describe life-threatening situations, where composing a psalm in the heat of the moment would not have been a top priority. In many cases, these psalms include thanksgiving sections as well, showing that they were written after God had answered the prayers.

Special Features

The word for psalms in Hebrew is *Tehil'm*, which means "praise." The English title is derived from the Greek translation (LXX) *Psalmoi*, which means "Songs of Praise." Praise directed to the Lord, the God of Israel, is certainly the primary emphasis in the Psalms. Some have referred to the Psalms as Israel's hymnbook, which is partially true but overall is insufficient to account for all that is in the Psalms. More than one-third of the collection is made up of prayers to God. Therefore, it contains both hymns and prayers that were used in the context of Israel's worship.

Extended Commentary

Psalm 23:1-6

23:1 The Lord is often referred to as the shepherd of his people, Israel (74:1; 80:1; Is 40:11; Ezk 34:11–16). In the ancient Near East, kings were commonly known as the shepherds of their people. Since the Lord is the true King, the title shepherd is most appropriate.

23:2–3 Lets me lie down is a Hebrew form implying causality, showing that God is the cause of the refreshment. On renews my life, see note at 19:7–9. Right paths might have a twofold idea. In keeping with the shepherd and sheep image, it can mean safe paths that are free from danger. In the larger context of Wisdom literature it refers to paths of righteousness, though usually that would contrast one path of life with another leading to death. The former idea is probably the primary meaning here.

23:4 Some argue that the Hebrew term *tsalmaweth* is related to an Akkadian word (*tselem*) that means “deep darkness.” Others say it comes from two Hebrew words, *tsal* and *moth*, and means “shadow of death.” It occurs approximately twenty times in the OT. It is clear that it implies intense darkness that represents extreme danger (Jb 10:21; 28:3; Jr 2:6). “Darkest” fits this specific context, since it is in the darkest valley where the greatest danger (such as a predator) lurks. As the psalmist encounters this challenge, he switches from the third person to the second person—he stops talking about the Lord and talks to the Lord.

23:5 The image shifts from shepherd to friend. The identification of the Lord with a shepherd emphasizes his care and protection, but he is much more than that for a person who is in close fellowship with him. While protection from enemies is still implied, it is intensified with the image of a banquet (table) that is served while the enemies look on. In Jewish society oil was a symbol for rejoicing (104:15) and was also used in the welcoming of guests (45:7; 92:10; Lk 7:46).

23:6 The verb pursue is commonly used for attackers, but here the Lord’s goodness and faithful love are personified as the ones who chased the psalmist throughout his life. As long as I live represents the Hebrew “for the length of days.” This is equivalent to the parallel all the days of my life. Though some translate this as “forever,” it is nowhere else used that way but always refers to one’s earthly life (91:16; Pr 3:2, 16). Dwell (Hb *yashav*) is similar to the word for “return” (Hb *shuv*). In this verbal form, it differs only in the vowels. It is possible that the request is to return to the sanctuary of the Lord throughout one’s life, although the preposition in argues for the idea of “dwell.”¹

References

1. Kevin R. Warstler, “Psalms,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 837–838.