**OPEN THE CONVERSATION**

Take some time to build relationships with the students:

1. Ask for each student’s high and low from the week.
2. ***Icebreaker Activity: Word Association***
   1. With all players in a circle, choose one person to go first. The first player chooses a random word to say out loud and play moves around the circle with each person quickly responding to the word before with a new word that has some connection. A player is eliminated if 1) they take more than 3 seconds to make a connection or 2) they repeat a word that has already been said in the game.
   2. EX: Athlete —> soccer —> field —> baseball —> Nashville Sounds etc.

**INTRODUCTION**

Author and Bible scholar A.W. Tozer once said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” Have you ever stopped to consider how you might answer that question? What is it that comes to your mind as you think about who God is? Do you think of his love or maybe his judgement? Is he someone to fear or do you think of him as friend? Today we’ll see with King David, if there was one word he might have used to describe who God is, it just might be “shepherd.” In Psalm 23, David writes about God’s character using the imagery of a shepherd who tenderly cares for and watches over his sheep. With God, he knew he was provided for and protected. And this is something that’s not just true for David, but for us. God knows us deeply and he cares for us personally. We’ll learn in Psalm 23, that as we learn to trust in Him, we reap the benefits of an intimate relationship with Him!

**No filter…what one word would you use to describe God?**

***READ PSALM 23:1-6***

1. **What does the imagery of sheep and shepherd teach us about God and about ourselves? What difference does it make that the Lord is “your” shepherd?**
2. **Where do you feel the presence of hardship or threats in your life? How can God’s promised presence be a comfort in this?**
3. **As our Shepherd, one of the good gifts God desires to give us is rest. In what ways does our culture pull us away from that rest? Where do you need rest in your life today and how can you seek that from Jesus?**
4. **Like a shepherd with a staff, part of God’s guidance sometimes involves redirection and correction. How can we find hope and comfort even in God’s correction in our lives?**
5. **How have you experienced God’s goodness and faithful love pursuing you?**

**WRAP UP**

**Put** **today’s** **lesson** **into** **action**: Consider your life. Is the Lord the Shepherd of your plans? Do you look to Him lead you? Does your cup overflow? With what? What can you share with someone this week about what you’ve learned?

*Ask for any prayer requests and pray for one another.*

**EXTENDED CUT**

Psalm 23 is a beautiful and well known psalm, written by King David. Throughout the psalm, David uses the imagery of a shepherd to describe God’s care for his people. Being an agrarian society, this would have been a familiar image for the people to understand and relate to, but especially David, who grew up working as a shepherd before God chose him to be the King of Israel. David knew from first-hand experience, the life and job of a shepherd to care for, protect, lead, and guide the sheep. Some of the key themes that can be observed in the psalm are 1) that abundant blessings come through God’s presence in our lives. 2) Our best comes from following God and depending on Him for every step we take.

**What does the imagery of sheep and shepherd teach us about God and about ourselves? What difference does it make that the Lord is “your” shepherd?**

The image of sheep and shepherd reveals something about our own insufficiency and dependence upon God as our shepherd. In most ways, sheep are vulnerable creatures, depending on the care and guidance of the shepherd. When it comes to danger, they are almost completely helpless to defend or protect themselves. This is the job of the shepherd, to look after and protect his sheep. The imagery invites us to trust in God’s provision and guidance and acknowledge our own need for his care and leadership. It also reminds us of the personal nature of our relationship with God. He isn’t just “a shepherd” but he is *our* shepherd. John 10:3 tells us “he calls his own sheep by name.” He knows us deeply and cares about the details of our lives.

**Where do you feel the presence of hardship or threats in your life? How can God’s promised presence be a comfort in this?**

In this psalm, David assures both us and himself that even in the darkest valleys of life - the places we never thought we’d find ourselves, where there seems to be no light at all - God goes with us. His presence offers a sense of security and peace, enabling us to face life’s challenges with courage, knowing that we never have to walk through the hard places alone. Our shepherd promises to not only go with us, but to lead us to safety and ultimately provide for all that we need. Despite the darkness he faced, David declared he had no reason to fear any evil that came his way. He was confident, not because of his own bravery or ability to face the darkness, but because of the care of his Shepherd.

**As our Shepherd, one of the good gifts God desires to give us is rest. In what ways does our culture pull us away from that rest? Where do you need rest in your life today and how can you seek that from Jesus?**

“Busy” is one of the words we hear most often these days. Even in middle and high school, you may feel the pressure to live up to the expectations of those around you, to just keep doing more, and striving to achieve. And if you aren’t busy with school, extracurricular activities, a job, etc. then our minds are certainly kept busy as we endlessly scroll and take in information on our phones. Always processing something. Never truly resting. Yet in this Psalm, we’re reminded that this is one of the good gifts God desires to give us. Maybe you feel mentally worn out, or physically exhausted, or even both! If that’s the case, this psalm reminds us that God cares about every aspect of our lives, including our need for rest and nourishment. Although it seems like we 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.

**Like a shepherd with a staff, part of God’s guidance sometimes involves redirection and correction. How can we find hope and comfort even in God’s correction in our lives?**

A shepherd’s staff was a long, slender stick, often hooked at the tip, and used primarily to direct the flock. Sheep are notorious wanderers, so the staff was an important part of how the Shepherd could keep them out of danger and close to him. It’s never easy to receive correction. But God’s faithful care of his sheep also requires gentle correction to keep his sheep safe and close to him. Hebrews 12:5-6 tells us, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.” It is because of the Lord’s love for us that he kindly redirects and guides us in the right direction. We can be hopeful and comforted by God’s correction because it’s an indication of his love for us and a demonstration of his desire for us to remain near him.

**How have you experienced God’s goodness and faithful love pursuing you?**

James 1:17 reminds us that “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” In other words, everything in our lives that we get to enjoy, is because of a good Father who has provided for and blessed us with so many gifts! When we bring this perspective into our everyday lives, it becomes even easier to see his faithful and loving hand in our lives. But our biggest blessing is the fact that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) Though undeserving because of our sin, Jesus graciously gave up his life that we could receive salvation and have a relationship with him. We can live in confident expectation that God will continue to pour out his goodness and mercy on us all the days of our lives. Not because of anything we do to earn it, but because it is his nature as our Good Shepherd.