

Psalm 23

Peace in the Valley

Introduction

Psalm 23 is one of the most well-known and recited pieces of Scripture in all of the Bible. Penned nearly 3000 years ago, its message still resonates and connects with audiences today. Pastor Matt Chandler once pointed out that, “Psalm 23 wasn’t so much written as much as it was wrung out of the life of king David.” David started out his life as a shepherd. He would go on to defeat Goliath, save a nation, and ultimately become king. But king David also spent time on the run for his life. He experienced pain and loss when he fell morally. He lost a child to early death. He lost his kingdom to rebellion. You would be hard pressed to find anybody in Scripture who experienced higher mountaintops or lower valleys than king David himself. Here in Psalm 23, we have a shepherd who became a king, writing about a king who became a shepherd. Max Lucado in his book, *Safe in the Shepherd’s Arms*, described Psalm 23 in this way:

Do more beloved words exist? Framed and hung in hospital halls scratched on prison walls, quoted by the young and whispered by the dying. In these lines, sailors have found a harbor, the frightened have found a father, and the strugglers have found a friend.

I’m not sure where you are reading this book today, but this I know to be true: we have a Good Shepherd in the Lord, our God, and our Good Shepherd loves us. He cares for us. He comforts us, and ultimately, He brings peace in the valley. Through the next six chapters, we’re going to take a deeper dive into each verse of Psalm 23. At the end of each chapter, I’m going to share with you the following:

1. Truth to Declare
2. Action to Apply

It is my prayer that God will use this study of Psalm 23 to encourage you to trust Him as the Good Shepherd of your life. If you would like to connect and discuss further, please use my contact information below. God bless!

FOR you,

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Chapter 1

Know the Shepherd

Psalm 23:1 -The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.

In just a few short words, there is such incredible power. Commentators have noted that really all of Psalm 23 is a description of those first two words, “*The Lord*.” The Lord. Yahweh. Jehovah. So many names found in Scripture to describe the Creator, King, Savior God. But here in Psalm 23, we have a picture of a shepherd. It reminds me of a similar picture found in the gospel of John. The apostle John shared the words of Jesus, found in John 10:10-15:

John 10:10-15

10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

4 Reasons God Is a Good Shepherd

Reason #1 – He made us, which gives us identity.

The first reason we can trust Jesus as our Good Shepherd is because He made us. God created the world, but specifically, He created us in His own image. The fact that God created us gives us identity. It's very common in pieces of art to find the signature of the artist somewhere within the painting. In the same way, God has placed His signature on your heart because you were made in His likeness. Take comfort in the fact that your identity is secure because God, the Good Shepherd, made you.

Reason #2 – He bought us, which gives us belonging.

Second, we can trust God as the Good Shepherd is because God bought us. In the John 10 passage, the difference between the hired hand and the Good Shepherd is that one owns the sheep and one does not. For the hired hand who didn't own the sheep, when trouble came, he fled; but the Good Shepherd was willing to lay His life down because those sheep belonged to Him. In the same way, Jesus bought us by paying the highest price... His life. That means that your soul, your being, your humanity is priceless because you were bought with the blood of Jesus. The fact that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, bought you means that you immediately have belonging.

Reason #3 – He knows us, which gives us protection.

Third, Jesus is the Good Shepherd because Jesus knows you. The fact that Jesus knows you means that we have protection. God cares for you. He bought you with his own life. He knows your innermost thoughts, your dreams, and your longings. Would Jesus really go so far to die on the cross to make you His own, but then leave you in times of trouble? Absolutely not. We'll dive deeper into God's protection later in this study, but for now, just take comfort in the fact that God knows us by name, and God protects those who belong to Him.

Reason #4 – He leads us, which gives us purpose.

Finally, we can know that God is the Good Shepherd because He leads us. And if God is leading you, then that means that you have purpose. You were created on purpose and for a purpose. The fact that God made us, bought us, knows us, and leads us is evidence of Jesus Christ truly being the Good Shepherd.

We Are Sheep

The second picture of Psalm 23 is that of us being sheep. What's important about us being compared to sheep? Sheep are the most helpless animals on the planet. They literally need help doing everything: eating, walking, and even sleeping. They need to be groomed regularly. Sheep, when left on their own, are going to die. Sometimes, they fall prey to simple things like flies, but more on that topic later. When we get described as sheep, I don't get too excited about that, do you? Who's getting a tattoo of a sheep? What college mascot is a sheep? *Who are we playing this week, Johnny? The Warriors? No. The Wildcats? Nope. Oh, that's right, we're playing the Fighting Sheep! Baaaaa.* Sheep don't even have a defense mechanism. Some animals protect themselves with spikes on the outside. Sheep? We use their covering to make clothes and pillows. Yet, sheep are well cared for and loved and protected and guided. Why? Because sheep have a shepherd. Thankfully, we are sheep have the Good Shepherd in Jesus Christ. This leads me back to Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

Truth to Declare

If you cannot say that the Lord is your Shepherd,
then you cannot say that I shall not want.

Unless the first phrase is true, the second phrase will never be true. All of us have a shepherd. The question is, *what or who is your shepherd?* If health is your shepherd, what happens when you or a loved one gets sick? If wealth is your shepherd, well, that puts you in a lose-lose situation because if you attain the success and the wealth that you're searching for, you're left feeling empty, but if you fail and you find yourself in poverty, you're left feeling broken. If your shepherd is wealth, you will always be left wanting more. What about relationships? Relationships are a good thing, but even good things placed in the God spot puts you in bad shape because if a relationship is your shepherd, what happens when you experience betrayal? Or what happens when you lose a loved one? Maybe some reading this book have the shepherd of productivity. You are so goal driven and you want to do, go, and attack life with all the energy you can muster. In our world, especially western culture, that mindset often gets rewarded with promotions and recognition. What's the problem with productivity? The problem is that while we like to think we have control of our lives, most of our lives are outside of our control. What happens when we are left battling anxiety that comes from the unknown? Unless you can truly say that the Lord is your Shepherd, then you will not be able to say that I shall not want.

Action to Apply

Know the Shepherd.

The Shepherd made you. He bought you. He knows you. He leads you. If the Shepherd knows you, the question is, do you know Him? We can have peace in the valley of our lives when we know the Good Shepherd. **The key to contentment is knowing the Shepherd.** Do you know Him? You see you were created for relationship with God. But all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and that sin has separated us from Him. We are all sheep who have gone astray as the prophet Isaiah says in Isaiah 53:6. Thankfully, we have a Shepherd who is willing to leave the ninety-nine and to go after the one to bring us back into the fold and into the flock.

In fact, our God loves us so much that even while we were still sinners, He came down to earth, died on the cross, paid the penalty for our sin, and when He rose again on the third day, He not only conquered death, but He covered our sins and set us free! When you admit that you are a sinner – when you believe that Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd and that only through Him we can have comfort, peace, and eternal life – when we commit our lives to Him – John 10:10 tells us that we can have abundant life. Eternity doesn't start the moment that you die. Eternity starts the moment that you accept Jesus into your life. When you do that, your sins will be forgiven. The Holy Spirit will come dwell inside of you, and you will have a renewed and refreshed spirit. You will understand what true peace really is. So don't settle for the hired hands of health or wealth or even relationships. Instead, choose to know the Good Shepherd and you can do that right now.

Will you pray with me? *Dear Heavenly Father, I know that I have gone astray and I feel anxious that I make mistakes, and I know that often settle for "hired hands." God, I want to know You, the Good Shepherd. Jesus, You died on the cross and rose again. It's only through you that my sins can be forgiven and I can experience eternal life. Thank you for forgiving me. Thank you for saving me. Thank you for giving me life. I want to know You more each and every day. May today start my spiritual journey with You. I commit my life to you God, and it is in Your Son's name we pray, amen.*

If you prayed that prayer with me just now, I want you to fill out our next step card found on our website, **missiongrovechurch.com**, or reach out to me using the information in the beginning of this book. We want to connect with you and help you take your next step on your spiritual journey. And if you are already a Christian, but are reading this resource feeling like you've wandered a little bit, I want to encourage you to remember that if the Lord is your Shepherd, you shall not want. The key to contentment is to know Him as your shepherd. Come back to the fold, come back to the Shepherd, and start that relationship again. It's not too late. God loves you and I love you. God bless.

Chapter 2

Trust the Shepherd

Psalm 23:2-He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

Years ago, W Philip Keller wrote an interesting commentary on Psalm 23 entitled, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. I say it's interesting because Philip Keller actually was a shepherd. Now, shepherding was a common profession back in the days of David, but today it's not so commonplace, and that is what makes the insights of Philip Keller so intriguing. What seems unknown to us resonates deeply with actual shepherds. Now when I first read Psalm 23:2, what stuck out to me was that phrase, "He *makes me* lie down in green pastures." Why would a shepherd have to make his sheep lie down in what they were already longing for? Well, I didn't really understand ever having to make something smaller than yourself lie down until I became a parent. Parents, I'm sure you can connect with me on this. There are times, especially during the toddler years, when you have to force your child to take a nap because what they need most in that moment is rest. In the same way, there are times where shepherds force sheep to rest because it's what they need most. The shepherd, Philip Keller, noted that there are four common conditions that keep sheep from lying down on their own.

4 Reasons Sheep Won't Rest

Reason #1 – Fear

What are sheep afraid of? Well, to put it plainly... everything. Sheep have no natural defense mechanisms. When they were moving from one terrain to the next, they can be terrified by literally anything. We, like sheep, are often plagued by fear. Is there a worry that's keeping you up at night? The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and self-control." The Good Shepherd does not lead us to fear. Instead, the Good Shepherd gives us power, gives us love, and gives us self-control. In short, the Good Shepherd gives us rest. Sheep would move from one land to the next, and they would be afraid of everything around them. Therefore, the shepherd would make them lie down and help them overcome their fear. In the same way the Good Shepherd helps us overcome our fear with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Reason #2 – Friction Among Other Sheep

The second condition that Philip Keller pointed out that keeps sheep from lying down on their own is actually friction among the sheep. If there's friction in the flock, there's going to be no sleep for the sheep. Being a youth pastor for many years, I would often go on trips, camps, and retreats where large groups of students would all be sleeping in the same room. Every year in the guys' cabin, there would

always be that one kid that just had too much sugar and couldn't go to sleep. He would be loud, make lots of noise, and he would keep the rest of us up. For my wife and the other female leaders, I know in the girls cabin there was always one event or one drama centered around one or a few girls that would keep the entire cabin up for the night. In the same way, if there is friction in your relationships, it's going to be difficult for you to find rest. Now the role of the Good Shepherd is to step in and mediate where necessary, to separate those that need to be separated, and to draw close that those who need to be drawn close. This is the role of a shepherd, that if the shepherd can ease the minds of the sheep and the shepherd can ease the friction of the sheep, then sleep and rest can be had by all.

If you're experiencing friction in your relationship, I want to challenge you to do two things. First, give that relationship up to the Good Shepherd. You must remember that you cannot be the Holy Spirit for somebody else, and instead, choose to forgive or apologize where needed. Second, I want to encourage you to go to the person with whom you have friction. Do this within reason... if the relationship is not safe, then choose to set up healthy boundaries where needed. But most times in our relationships, we handle conflict by withdrawing, but what happens when we withdraw is that we end up feeling friction, anxiety, and worry that keeps us from truly finding rest. So if you're experiencing friction in your relationships, first, give it to the shepherd and second, when appropriate, go to the person. If you need to forgive, choose to forgive that person, if you need to apologize, own whatever part of the situation that you really did say or do.

Reason #3 – Flies

The third condition is laid out by Shepard Philip Keller is actually flies. Why are flies such a big deal? Well, the truth is that sheep are so annoyed by flies that there have been documented cases where sheep have literally run off a cliff to avoid interacting with a group of flies or where sheep have literally beat their head to death. That seems extreme, doesn't it? Here's the reality though... sometimes the smallest things can have big impact in our lives. I was reminded of this fact when this summer we had the congruence of several factors. First, we had a new dog in our home, and her backyard became her restroom, which attracted flies. Second, we were living in the valley of Phoenix, Arizona, which reaches temperatures that are officially insane. We tried to beat the heat that summer by purchasing one of those wholesale above ground pools for our children. Well, when you have a lot of water that also attracts flies. Third, we had put in a few new plants in the backyard that required much watering. With watered plants, water in a pool, and a dog leaving waste all over the place, our backyard became resort for flies. One morning my wife and I woke up, went into the backyard, and felt them swarm all around us like a sequel to the movie, *The Birds*. A lot of flies can be annoying, but do you know what can also be annoying? One fly. In fact, there was a time when I was on a student trip where I was having a personal quiet time with God and the environment was perfect: I had my bible out, I was praying, I was asking for God's direction in my life, the sun was setting, I was on top of a mountain, and I could see endless miles of forest. It was amazing... but do you know what I was thinking about? One fly kept buzzing in and around my ear. What is that one thing that keeps you up at night? Is it a sinful habit or addiction? Is it something that you keep obsessing over? Sometimes the smallest distractions keep us up. A single fly distracted me from having an incredible powerful time with God. Don't let the flies distract you in this life. Instead give the situation, give the relationship, and give whatever sin you're battling over to God. Whatever is that little fly or group of flies in your life, give that over to the Good Shepherd.

Reason #4 – Famine

The fourth condition that keeps sheep from lying down in green pastures is famine. How can sheep be

hungry when they are surrounded by green pastures? Well, sheep need to be guided in every situation. Sheep will eat anything, everything, and sometimes nothing when they enter into a pasture. A good shepherd would go ahead of them and pull out the poisonous plants so that when they entered a green pasture that they would only feast on what was good for them. In the same way, as that passage states, the Good Shepherd leads me beside still waters. Yes, sheep could drink from running water. However, being by still, calm water should give you a sense of peace and comfort. Sheep would drink anything. They would drink polluted and contaminated water that would cost them their health and maybe even their life.

Let me ask you, what are you consuming right now in your mind and in your heart? Is it costing your spiritual, your mental, and your emotional health? What you think about is like the food and water that you eat and drink on a daily basis.

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Instead of feeding on the contaminated polluted plants and really diluted waters of this world, choose to rest and eat from the green pastures and the still waters that the Good Shepherd has laid out and brought you to. We don't want to lie down on our own. We don't like being told what to do and sometimes fear, friction, flies, or famine keep us from feasting on what God has before us.

Truth to Declare

Rest is about proximity, not productivity.

It's easy with an anxious heart and unsettled mind to think that we have to always be on the go. We will find rest when we stay close to the Good Shepherd, when we allow the Good Shepherd to lead us to still waters. When we allow the shepherd to make us lie down in green pastures. Right now, I want you to pause and take a deep breath... In the business of life, there are times where we forget to pause, but thankfully, we have a Good Shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures and He leads us beside still waters. We can find rest and peace for our souls.

Action to Apply

Trust the Shepherd.

The key to rest is trust. I'm a driven person, so I tend to focus on productivity over proximity. I don't necessarily worry a lot, but I can't turn my mind off. Thankfully, God says it's okay for us to sleep because He doesn't need it. Think about that for a moment. Whether you fall asleep at seven at night or two in the morning, guess what happens? The world continues on. For me, trusting God means trusting God with the future of the church, my family, and my calling. Choose to trust the Good Shepherd today and He will make you lie down in green pastures, He will lead you beside still waters, and when you draw close to Him, He will draw close to you.

Chapter 3

Listen to the Shepherd

Psalm 23:3 - He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

It was a bright Sunday morning in 18th century London, when Robert Robinson found himself in the middle of the streets in a mood that wasn't quite so sunny. He heard the church bells off in the distance, which reminded him of a time, long ago when he firmly believed in God and had a strong faith. Since then, he had left his faith, his family, and he had lost much. And on that particular day, he found himself searching and looking for faith that he once held closely. When all of a sudden, a carriage pulled up beside him and a well-dressed woman spoke outside of the carriage and said, "Excuse me, sir, are you going to church?" Robert, not having anything else to do, agreed to go with her, and entered the carriage. After they exchanged some pleasantries, the woman, with a slight smirk on her face, said, "Robert Robinson, that that sounds kind of familiar." She pulled out a book of poetry that she was carrying with her, and she turned the page to a specific poem and said, "are you the author of this poem?"

Robert looked down and he began to cry. He said, "Yes, ma'am, that was me. I wrote that when I was 22. But that was long ago." He began reading the poem he wrote from what seemed like a lifetime ago:

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace'
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.*

(Robert's eyes slipped to bottom of the page)

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

As Robert was crying, the lady asked, "Why such tears? These are such beautiful words."

He replied, "But those words prophesied exactly what I did. I was prone to wander. I left the God of my first love."

The woman encouraged him, “Robert, you also wrote the end of that verse. Here’s my heart. Lord, take it, seal it. Take it and seal it for thy courts above. It’s not too late to give your heart back to God.”

As the story goes, that on that day, the author of such a great hymn renewed and restored his faith in God and gave his heart back to Him. Today, we look at Psalm chapter 23:3, “He restores my soul. He leads me down paths of righteousness. For his name’s sake.” Let’s break down those two sentences. First, He restores my soul. Notice who does the restoring. It’s not that we pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps. The Good Shepherd restores or brings our soul back to life. You have a body, but you are a soul. The fact that God restores our soul means that He brings back our innermost being and our biggest desires. Notice the first four letters of “restore” spell “rest.” When you rest in God’s pastures and you drink from His stilled waters, guess what happens? Your soul is restored.

The definition of restoration is “to bring something back to its intended purpose.” You might picture somebody restoring a piece of furniture or an old car. The practice of restoring something is bringing an object back to its original beauty. That is what God does when He restores our soul. No matter how far you’ve gotten away from God, I want you to know today that God is not far from you. The Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine, goes after the one, and then brings him or her back into the fold. I am so thankful that we have a God who leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one. We all are that one sheep that strays at one point in our lives and God leads us back to Him, but he doesn’t just lead us back to Him. He doesn’t just simply restore our soul.

Second, the passage says that He leads us down paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. It’s important to note that God leads us. It’s not that we lead God. Do you live your life running around doing what you want, and then ask God to bless it? Don’t choose your desires over the desires of the God who made you and loves you. We are to follow the Good Shepherd, not the other way around. And the fact that there are paths of righteousness means that there are other paths out there. Have you ever found yourself down a wrong path? You will never be in step with the Holy Spirit and down a wrong path at the same time.

Galatians 5:16

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

This is a promise and a solution for you to remain on the path that God has called you to. When you connect with the Word of God and walk in the Spirit of God, you remain on His path. God cares for you, He knows you, and He calls you by name. But we must remember that God also leads you for His name’s sake. Your story is for God’s glory. Picture a newspaper for a second based on how you live: how you spend your money, how you spend your time, and how you speak to others, and your thought life. What would get the headline on your personal life newspaper? Would *you* be the headline or would *God* be the headline? You see, God does not lead you for your sake. God leads you for His sake. Because if you live only for your story, your story will always be limited to your resources, your successes, and your failures. But if you attach your story to God’s story, then your story becomes limitless, and literally, all things are possible through Him who called you. Shepherds know that sheep are prone to wander, and sheep often find themselves in difficult circumstances. When shepherds are leading sheep down paths of righteousness or down to greener pastures, here’s what’s an amazing truth: **there is no path that a sheep will be on, that a shepherd has not already walked.** The shepherd goes ahead of the sheep to prepare the path for them. That means that whatever path you’re on right now, God has gone ahead of you, has been there, and has prepared you to walk in it and to

walk through it. Your difficult circumstance right now might have actually been ordained by God. Next chapter, we're going to talk about what it means to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but for now, I want you to declare this truth:

Truth to Declare

If you stay close to the Guide, you don't need a map.

If you stay close to the guide, the guide who restores your soul and leads you down paths of righteousness, not for you, but for His namesake. Every situation in which you find yourself, God has gone ahead of you and prepared you to walk in and to walk through it. I like a plan. I'm a planner. I like bullet points. I like notes. I like directions. I like instructions. So one of the things that was tough for me when I was a youth pastor happened when we would go on mission trips. We would go and be picked up at the airport by our guide or by the ministry leaders whom we were serving with in a particular country. I would have a sense of unsettled anxiety when I didn't know the exact lay of the land where we were going. But after a few mission trips, I realized that if I got in the same vehicle as the pastor or the guide, I didn't have to worry about the map or where we would go because he knew where we were going and he prepared for us in advance the ministry for us to perform. Now, this illustration goes much deeper. In April of 2011, I took a spring break trip with students to perform gospel dramas down in San Salvador, El Salvador. While we were down there, the American president actually made a visit to the country at the same time. Now that was a cool coincidence until I learned that when the US president visits a foreign nation, it is common that that country shuts down its streets nearby where the president is traveling. All the plans that we had for that day were cancelled and put to the side. I was frustrated because here we had flown thousands of miles to present the Gospel and our plans, everything that we had prepared for, were completely wiped out by something outside of our control. Our guide on the other hand, took that as an opportunity to take us to a school that had never received an outside group before. We gathered our students together and let me tell you, we were not drama experts. We would mess up our parts and sometimes miss our cues, but we tried our best, and at the end of each presentation, we would share the Gospel and the local pastor would invite those watching the assembly to come forward to receive Christ. Before we started our first assembly, I gathered our team together and I said, "Guys, let's pray for a mighty move of God. Let's pray for 20 people to get saved today!" In my head I thought, *now that's bold prayer because in American culture a lot of times when you're going day in and day out sharing the gospel or loving on people, you don't necessarily see people respond right away... so 20 was a big prayer.*

During the first assembly in a hot, not air-conditioned hall filled with old wooden seats, we presented the Gospel and the pastor invited people to come down... and 30 people come down! They were crying, we were praying with them through translators, and the people began filling out connection cards so the local pastors could follow up with them. I'm thinking, *Wow God, that was amazing!* At the end of second assembly the pastor gave an invitation and 30 more people responded. In the third assembly, 60 people come down, which was over half the people that was in the room. People are crying, I was crying, and I'm not even a crier. Intense military guards with guns outside the assembly hall began peering their heads in and our students began sharing Gospel bracelets with them and even the guards were getting saved. Over the next five hours, we witnessed 241 people pray to receive Christ! That was more than 12 times what I had asked God to do. When we went up to the principal at the end of the day and thanked her so for letting us be there and we asked, "Is there anything that we can do to pray for you?" The principal responded, "Within the leadership of the school, we have been praying for over a year for a group to come and share the Gospel with our students." God had ordained our day and prepared

our path well before we could see what was in store for our team. I didn't feel good because I didn't know the plan. I prayed and asked God to go with our mission team when we left the states. Here's the reality. God was already there in the mission field. God was already in that school, in that city, in that community, ready for us to walk into the plans He had prepared in advance for us. We have a Good Shepherd who restores our souls, who leads us down paths of righteousness, and who leads us not for our sake, but for His sake. When we live in God's story, our adventures become supernatural.

Action to Apply Listen to Shepherd.

Listen to the Shepherd. Listen to His voice. **The key to the path is the person of Jesus.** Be close enough to Him to understand and obey His directions. He has prepared the path ahead of you, each and every step. We might not like or expect every twist and turn. In fact, in the next chapter we're going to discuss what it means to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But I promise you this, there is no place that you will set your foot that God has not gone ahead of you and prepared you. Therefore, if you're walking in a difficult circumstance or situation right now, I want you to know that God believes that He is strong enough to handle it. You might be able to handle it in your own strength, but you can face what path is before when you listen to the Shepherd.

Chapter 4

Turn to the Shepherd

Psalm 23:4 - Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

Have you ever read the *Peanuts* comic strip? You know the one with Charlie Brown, Lucy, Snoopy, and the whole gang? I saw a photo where Snoopy was typing on a typewriter on his dog house, and he was writing the first line of his story. He wrote, "It was a dark and stormy night."

Lucy entered the scene and said, "That's a terrible way to start a story. It's so trite. You should write, 'Once Upon a Time.' The best stories always start with 'Once upon a Time.' Yeah, do that." And she leaves the scene.

In the last square of the comic strip, Snoopy can be seen typing, "Once upon a time, it was a dark and stormy night."

Some of our days start like that, don't they? As much as we want to be happy and jolly and jovial. We have to walk through very difficult circumstances and to be honest, when we are facing difficult circumstances, it's not enough to simply talk about God. We start talking directly to Him. This is exactly what David does in verse four of Psalm 23. In the first three verses, he refers to God, the Good Shepherd, in third person. But as he enters the valley of the shadow of death, he switches to 2nd person and speaks directly to God. It's important for us to know as Christians that when we walk through this life that we will have both green pastures AND dark valleys. Jesus once told His disciples in John 16:33:

John 16:33

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world
you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

In Psalm 23:4, we read, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For You are with me, Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." It should be noted that shepherds in and around Israel would have to move sheep from one pasture to the next depending upon the weather and field conditions. There were only two main rainy seasons in that area of land. Oftentimes, between those two rainy seasons, the shepherd would have to take the sheep from high ground to low ground and the only path to go from high ground to low ground is through a deep valley. Now valleys were

terrifying for sheep because of the unknown. In the valley was darkness. In the valley were wolves and other animals that could attack. The path would often be uneven, sheep could feel uneasy, and thieves could be hidden in nearby caves, waiting to snatch sheep from a distracted shepherd. The valley for sheep was a very scary place. But it was walking through the valley that oftentimes would lead sheep to the greenest pastures and the calmness waters.

Within the passage, I want to notice a few things. First, it says, “even though I *walk* through the valley,” which that’s present tense. This means that while you’re facing present-tense, difficult situations, you also have present-tense promises and power from God. When you become a Christian, life is not about waiting until you die so you fly up to a cloud and learn how to play a harp. The Christian life is about experiencing heaven now: God’s kingdom coming down, His power and His Spirit coming within you, and having a personal relationship with the God who is walking with you through the valley.

Next, notice that we do not go *around* the valley, but *through* the valley. We do not just stay stationary in one spot, but we move through the dark times in our life to get to greener pastures on the other side. What keeps us from fear? It’s the very presence of the Good Shepherd.

A Shepherd’s Rod & Staff

Purpose of the Rod – Protection, Inspection, and Discipline.

Phillip Keller, the modern shepherd and author mentioned earlier in this study, noted that because shepherds in those days had to continually move the sheep from one land to the next, they had to travel light. For those reasons, a shepherd didn’t bring a lot of tools with him to manage the sheep. Two of the tools that he used to take care of them were a rod and a staff.

A rod was used for protection, inspection and discipline. It was like a club or a stick. It was used for protection to literally beat the wolves or animals away from the sheep. It was used for inspection because as the wool would grow out of a sheep, the shepherd could take the rod and comb it through the wool to find parasites or ticks or bugs. Also, when it came to counting sheep, they would often pass the sheep underneath the rod as each one would enter through the gate. This is most likely how the shepherd was able to count the 99 and figure out that one was missing in the story found in Luke chapter 15. Finally, the rod was used for discipline. I shared previously how sheep were prone to wander, so a little *whap!* of the rod from time to time would get the sheep back in line. Isn’t it interesting that a rod brings comfort to sheep? Something used for discipline actually brings comfort.

What Is the Shepherd’s Rod for Christians Today?

The Word of God

What brings comfort to Christians in the middle of our valleys? What offers protection, inspection and discipline? I believe it’s the Word of God. Think about it for a moment. When you are facing temptation, you can use the word of God to defeat Satan and overcome that temptation. This is exactly what Jesus did in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1). When Satan tempted Jesus, Jesus did not respond with pride, but with Scripture. In the same way, the Bible can protect your mind, can protect your heart, and can protect your soul. When you’re not feeling good enough, remind yourself of your identity in Christ and the promises of God.

Along with protection, the Bible is also good for inspection. When you read the Word of God and apply it in your life, it’s like looking into a mirror of your soul. You don’t simply read the Word of God. You allow

the Word of God to read you. What has God called you to do? Is there a sin that you need to confess? Is there a promise that you need to believe? Is there an action that you need to take? The Word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), and it's useful for rebuke and for inspection in our lives.

Finally, the Word of God is good for Christians because it disciplines us. Through studying God's commands, we can see God's heart, and we have a standard from which we can live. We should not fear the discipline that comes from God's Word, but instead, we should allow God's Word to bring us back into the flock. Consider these verses that speak of God's discipline:

Hebrews 12:6

For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives.

John 15:2

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Purpose of the Staff – Guidance & Relationship

In the days of David, the second piece of equipment shepherds used with their sheep was a staff, which was basically a long stick with a hook on the end. This hook served two purposes. First, it was used to help guide the sheep as they walked through troublesome terrain. Sheep would often stumble and fall while walking the narrow paths in the valley, so the shepherd would use the hook to literally guide them on the right path. Second, the shepherd used the hook to draw the sheep close to himself when he was getting ready to take care of one of their needs. The act of drawing the sheep close demonstrated his care and love for the sheep. The actions of *guiding* and *drawing close* builds trust between a shepherd and his sheep.

What is the Shepherd's Staff for Christians Today?

The Spirit of God

What guides Christians and draws us close to the Good Shepherd today? I believe it is the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit leads us. The Holy Spirit empowers us. The Holy Spirit draws us close to Him. Jesus promised His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to help draw them closer to God the Father. Here are just a few verses that share the importance of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers:

John 14:16-17

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

John 14:26

26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

2 Timothy 1:7

7 for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Could the name, “valley of the shadow of death,” sound any more intense? It doesn’t seem to get more extreme than that, right? Now, what does that phrase actually mean? Does it mean actually mean David was facing death itself? This Psalm is often quoted at funerals, and we know David faced many life-threatening situations. However, rather than a metaphor for death itself, it seems more likely that David penned this powerful poem about a specific situation he was facing. And in this situation, he most likely was experiencing some kind of “dark night of the soul.” Having been written in the midst of extreme difficulties, this poem offers us insight and encouragement in how we can respond in the midst of our own extreme difficulties.

Maybe some of you reading this right now have experienced your own dark night of the soul. And when you’re walking through the valley of the shadow of death, do you know what can bring you comfort? It’s the rod of God’s Word and it’s the staff of God’s spirit. If you walk in Spirit and you live in God’s Word, they will bring you comfort in your darkest night.

Truth to Declare

Jesus dealt with the substance of death, so all that remains is its shadow.

Are you facing cancer? Are you walking in a difficult relationship? Do you feel far from your faith? Are you struggling financially? Whatever your “valley” is right now, I want you to remember this: Jesus dealt with the substance of death, so all that remains is its shadow. Think about that, Jesus dealt with the substance of death. So all that remains is its shadow. Shadows are scary, but they’re not substantial. Let me prove it to you. Would you rather be hit by a car or hit by a car’s shadow? The shadows are scary, but they don’t represent the object itself. Psalm 22, which comes directly before Psalm 23 has been described as a Messianic psalm. Also written by David, it foreshadows and prophesies about the future death of Jesus Christ. In fact, when Jesus was on the cross, He cried out, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” Do you know where those words came from? Those words come from Psalm 22. Did David know when he wrote those specific words that they would be uttered by our Savior on the cross hundreds of years later? Probably not. Do you know who did? God knew. And God also knew David would write about the valley of the shadow of death just one poem later.

Here’s an interesting thought that came to me during my study of Psalm 23. Shadows don’t exist in the dark. Have you ever been walking through your house in the middle of the night, with all the lights off? You will not see a shadow. Here’s why this is important. **Shadows only exist when light is present.** Let me say that again, because that statement is incredibly powerful if you grab ahold of this truth. Shadows only exist when light is present. This means that if you’re walking through the valley of the shadow of death, shadows do exist. However, we must remember that if shadows exist, then light is close by! We have light because we have the light of the world (John 8:12), the Good Shepherd. And

if the Good Shepherd is with you, then you have no reason to fear. When Jesus died on the cross and rose again, He conquered death. That's why the writers of the New Testament could write things like, "O Death, where is your sting" (1 Corinthians 15:55)? The apostle Paul writes in Philippians 1:21, "For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." I love that verse. In fact, Philippians 1:21 is my personal life verse. But the only way you can say "to die is gain" is if that first part is also true. Is your life in Christ? Is your life invested in the causes of Christ? Because if you do that, what's the worst thing that could happen to you? If you lose everything and die, you get to be present with Jesus in Heaven. Heaven will have no more mourning, no more cancer, no more poverty, no more racism, brokenness, sins, addiction... the list could go on and on. What is in Heaven? There will be acceptance. There is complete love. There is joy. There is purpose. All because you are forever with the Good Shepherd. Therefore, even though we walk through the valley of the Shadow of death, we remember that Jesus dealt with the substance of death so all that remains is its shadow. And shadows are scary, but they're not substantial. And if there's a shadow in your life, there must also be light. Look for the light in your life. The Good Shepherd will comfort you with His rod and staff.

Action to Apply Turn to the Shepherd.

Turn to the Good Shepherd wherever you are, in whatever darkness you might be fearing, feeling, and fighting right now. Is it depression? Is it worry? Is it difficulties? Lean into that situation and draw close to the Good Shepherd because it's the very presence of Him that will bring you peace. **The key to comfort is the presence of Jesus.** All throughout Scripture, we see the power of God's presence. God's name, Emmanuel, from the Christmas story, means "God with us." Also, here are two additional examples of God's presence being with His people. First, God brought comfort to Joshua before He led the Israelites into the Promised Land. Second, God brought comfort to the disciples before sent them out to launch the movement known as the Church. Notice how both passages share a common source for comfort and courage:

Joshua 1:9

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Matthew 28:19-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

If you're walking through a valley right now, I pray that you will turn to the Good Shepherd and trust that He is with you.

Chapter 5

Don't Give Satan a Seat

Psalm 23:5 - You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

What is the favorite meal that you have ever had? I have a few meals that come to mind, but one that specifically stands out to me is the night that I got engaged to my wife, Samantha. I had just proposed and put a ring on her finger. We were going to celebrate with an incredible steak dinner at a revolving restaurant in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio. We saw the sunset from the 20th floor, and we were so excited. The restaurant sat on top of a hotel, and the restaurant rotated around the city, giving the view of the Ohio river on one side, and downtown Cincinnati on the other. Everything lit up, the sun was going down, and sparkles of light flickered from her “massive” diamond (*massive meaning what I could afford on a college kid's budget*). Do you know what made that meal so memorable? Yes, the steak was awesome, but it was more about the occasion and being with my fiancée that made the night special. Also, it seems that the best restaurants are often very pricey and require a reservation in advanced to go there.

Preparing the Table

As we continue our study of Psalm 23, we're going to look at the greatest meal you could ever have... dinner with the Good Shepherd. This is the best meal you could ever have and the most expensive meal you could ever experience as it cost Jesus Christ His life. David writes in Psalm 23:5, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” Shepherds would lead sheep to flatlands for green pastures, and another word for flatland is “mesa or table.” Preparing a table could refer to shepherds preparing the fields for their sheep, but I personally believe David is moving his writing from the field to the valley to the home. I say that because he uses words that are very personal. He continues talking to God in second person referring to Him personally and addressing Him directly. Also, we see words like “table” and “cup,” and then in verse six, he refers to “dwelling in the house of the Lord.” When you add up the imagery of a table, cup, and house, the message literally comes home.

How does God prepare a meal or a table before you in the presence of your enemies? Thinking back to my engagement dinner, we loved our view. Does it seem weird to you that the view in verse 5 was that of enemies? Actually, I believe the Good Shepherd did *not* prepare this meal so that you can view your enemies. Instead, I believe He did so in this location so that your enemies could see you! He's

showing your enemies that you cannot be touched, and that you belong to God. What feels like struggle on the outside of your circumstances could actually be a feast on the inside if you dine with the Good Shepherd.

Anointed with Oil

Now we've talked several times throughout this Bible study about those pesky flies that come into play for sheep. In the days of David, shepherd would place oil on the heads of their sheep to keep the flies away. Also, in religious circumstances, people would often get anointed with oil during times of fasting and prayer. When you combine these two pictures, we get this incredible cleansing picture of what God can do in our lives. God anoints us, and then He protects us. When you have dinner with the Good Shepherd and He's anointed your head with oil, surely your cup will overflow.

Truth to Declare

Jesus prepares a feast in the middle of your fight.

If you're battling something right now, remember that God not only walks with you through the valley of the shadow of death, He has also prepares a feast for you in the middle of your fight. God wants you to know that it's going to be okay. So take with Jesus, and choose to enjoy your meal. I promise you the food will be delicious.

Action to Apply

Don't Give Satan a Seat.

The key to enjoying a feast is knowing who's at your table. A invitation to feasting with Jesus sounds great, but here's the challenge: don't give Satan a seat at your table. Previously, we've talked about knowing the shepherd, trusting the shepherd, listening to the shepherd and turning to the shepherd in difficult times. This action to apply is the one defensive verse I'm going to offer to you during this study. Don't give Satan a seat. He will not sit down at your table unless you let him. What do you think would have happened if during my engagement dinner with my fiancé I had invited a complete stranger to join our table? Imagine if that stranger not only sat down next to me, but started eating my food and drinking out of my cup. What if the stranger leaned over to Samantha and started questioning our relationship, "Wow, do you really want to end up with that guy?" You can imagine how crazy that would have been, and how that would have ruined our special night. Thankfully, that did not happen to us, but yet this is exactly what we do all the time in our minds. Jesus has prepared a feast in the middle of our fight, and there are times where we invite Satan to sit down right next to us. Have you ever had a thoughts that went like this? *I'm not good enough. I'm just not good enough. God could never use me, She could never love me. I'm never gonna get that promotion. Gosh! Everybody hates me. I hate everybody.*

If you've ever experienced negative talk, where do you think that comes from? I can tell you that it does not come from the Good Shepherd. It comes from the evil one. The best way for you to avoid negative talk is to simply don't give Satan a seat. He might pass by your table, but don't let him sit down. Make Satan watch you eat because Jesus prepared a table in the presence of your enemies. Jesus is not scared of your enemies, so you shouldn't be either. Don't let Satan sit down and speak to you, getting in between you and the Good Shepherd who loves you. Don't let negative self-talk come between you and God. Don't let self-doubt, worry, anxiety, guilt, and shame keep you from the life that God has called you to. Remember, even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you will fear no evil. Why? Because the rod of God's Word and the staff of God's Spirit will comfort you. You must then

believe that God has prepared a table for you. Yes, it's in the presence of your enemies, but it's not so you can see your enemies. It's so that your enemies can see you. They can't touch you. If you don't give Satan a seat, if you allow God to anoint your head with oil, watch as your cup begins to overflow.

Chapter 6

Follow the Shepherd

Psalm 23:6 -.Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Have you ever experienced deja-vu? It's the feeling you get when you go to an unfamiliar place, but yet it feels strangely familiar. Author Steve Moore wrote about the opposite effect called vuja-de, which is where you experience something that is very familiar, but you find something new. To experience vuja-de is to look at the rhythms, routines, and mundane things of life and from a different perspective so that you experience new life and see those same activities through a different lens. I believe God is speaking into your life right now. I believe God can work in your heart and in your mind and ultimately in your hands, which means your activities your relationships matter to God. I believe God can breathe new life in your seemingly ordinary routines. David believed this when he wrote, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." In this verse, we see two sentences about two different periods of time. The first sentence is about the present tense. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. The second sentence is about future tense. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. From these two verses, we see that we can have abundant life now which leads to eternal life forever. You have goodness and mercy now and dwelling with the Savior forever.

Goodness and Mercy Follow

Did you know that over time, if a shepherd takes good care of his sheep, those sheep will re-fertilize and replenish the land, leaving it better off than before they came to it? While sheep don't have much to offer, what they do is eat a variety of plants and that they move from one pasture to the next. They glean the land and ultimately fertilize the land so it becomes even greener pastures when they leave. In the same way, if you are a follower of Jesus, you have been called to make your community better. We have the opportunity to bring light, hope, and love into every conversation and every situation. Notice that in Psalm 23:6, goodness and mercy follow David.

Truth to Declare

When you follow Jesus, goodness and mercy follow you.

When you follow Jesus, goodness and mercy follow you. In the Gospels, you can read about all kinds of incredible miracles performed by the disciples, but what I find interesting is the fact that the disciples did not follow miracles. The miracles followed the disciples. They went from town to town, preaching the good news about the resurrection of Jesus, and the miracles happened all around them.

Matthew 4:19

And He said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

In this verse, Jesus shares with us three key relationships for following Him. First, we're called to follow Jesus. He did not ask the disciples to follow a set of ideas. Jesus told the disciples to follow *Him*. Our first relationship is with God. Second, Jesus spoke to *them*, meaning He doesn't call us to ministry alone. We need to have fellowship with other believers. Finally, Jesus told the fishermen that they would be *fishers of men*. Jesus used the imagery of their profession to share with them that the Gospel is meant to be shared with others. We are called to share the message of Jesus with unbelievers. We should not place expectations on people who don't follow Jesus yet. It's not our job to be the moral police. It's our job to share and show the love of Jesus with every person around us. We have been blessed to be a blessing, which means we are *for* people because God is *for* people. The first relationship is with God. The second relationship is with other believers. The third relationship is with unbelievers as you fish for people. When you pursuing all three relationships, guess what happens? Surely goodness and mercy will follow you.

Action to Apply Follow the Shepherd daily.

Being a disciple does not happen in a day, but rather it happens daily by deciding with your heart, mind, soul, and strength to love God with all that you are so that you can love people the way Jesus loved us. **The key to abundant life is to follow Him.** If we do that as Christians, then goodness and mercy will follow us. Overtime, we will begin to see our communities get better as we become more like Jesus. Let's seize the *vua-de*, and look for opportunities to allow God to breathe new life into our relationships. Let us look at something routine and find a new opportunity to show and share the light of Jesus Christ with everyone around us. If we do that, we will experience joy and we will experience peace beyond anything that this world can have and offer. And at the end of the day, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Conclusion

As we wrap up this Bible study time together, it is my prayer that you find a fresh start for your spiritual journey and a renewed Spirit in your calling for Christ. In verse one, we saw that we are called to know the Shepherd. The key to contentment is to know the Shepherd. In verse two, we are called to trust the Shepherd. The key to rest is trust. In verse three we learned that we are called to listen to the Shepherd. The key to the path is the person of Jesus. In verse four, we learned that we should turn to the Shepherd. The key to comfort is the presence of the Shepherd. In verse five, we talked about having a feast in the middle of your fight. Don't give Satan a seat. The key to enjoying a feast is to know who's at your table. Finally, in verse six, we shared that when you follow Jesus, goodness and mercy follow you. The key to abundant life is to follow Him daily.

Understanding Psalm 23 doesn't mean that you won't struggle. It doesn't mean that you won't stray. It doesn't mean that you won't face difficult circumstances in the future. However, it is my hope that studying and learning more about Psalm 23 has helped prepare you for the difficulties of life and has helped you grow in your faith. If you have been encouraged in this study, I challenge you to share this message of the Good Shepherd with the people around you. I'm praying for you, and God bless!