

# Praying the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm

Introduction

The Best-Known Lesson in the Bible

You will do more than read Psalm 23; you will learn to pray its meaning from your heart

## PART I

### What the Shepherd Does

Lesson 1

#### **The Lord Is My Shepherd**

*Your relationship with God is not a prize to be won but rather a gift to be received.*

Lesson 2

#### **I shall Not Want**

*You will have many earthly desires in life, but you shall not want for anything the Shepherd gives.*

Lesson 3

#### **He Makes Me to Lie Down in Green Pastures**

*You will have all the spiritual food you need when you have a proper relationship with the Shepherd.*

Lesson 4

#### **He Leads Me Beside the Still Waters**

*You will never thirst again when you drink the water your Shepherd provides.*

Lesson 5

#### **He Restores My Soul**

*You will live again because of the Shepherd's protection and provision.*

Lesson 6

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Lesson 7

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PART II  
What His Sheep Receive

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Lesson 9

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*Evil is real and should be feared, but it is no threat to you when the Shepherd is with you.*

Lesson 10

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*The Shepherd is with you at times when you count on Him – and at those times when you ignore Him.*

Lesson 11

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*Depend on the Shepherd's club to protect you and His staff to guide you.*

Lesson 12

**You Prepare a Table Before me in the Presence of My Enemies**

*When you emerge from the valleys of life, a table of food will be waiting for you that demonstrates to your enemies the provision of God.*

Lesson 13

**You Anoint My Head with Oil**

*The Shepherd will wash your wounds with healing oil and give you a position of honor at the banquet.*

Lesson 14

**My Cup Runs Over**

*You will know more satisfaction with the Shepherd than with anyone or anything else in life.*

Lesson 15

**Surely Goodness and Mercy Shall follow Me All the Days of My Life**

*Once you belong to the Shepherd, goodness and mercy will pursue you for the rest of your life.*

Lesson 16

**And I Will Dwell in the House of the Lord Forever**

*You will be more than a guest in the Shepherd's home; you will live there as His child forever.*

## Part I

### What The Shepherd Does

The opening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is the "He" section, which describes the Shepherd's ways of caring for us, His sheep. He does everything for us; we are not required to do anything but follow. He provides and protects when we stay close to Him.

Hence, the theme of this portion is *relationship*.

He is my Shepherd and Lord.  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.  
He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness.

Why does the Shepherd do all of these things for His sheep? The Lord does it for His purposes, "for His name's sake" (Psalm 23:3). The Lord has His own reasons for protecting and comforting us. Why? Because that is His nature.

### Lesson 1

#### The Lord Is My Shepherd

A Sunday School teacher visited a young boy from his class who was dying. *What hope can I give him?* the frustrated teacher thought. He did not know what to say to the boy, because he did not know how to help prepare a young soul to die. Toward the end of the young boy's visit, the teacher said to him, "Remember, the Lord is your Shepherd."

Then, to make it practical so the boy would remember the lesson, the teacher asked the little boy to hold up five fingers. Pointing to each of the boy's fingers, the teacher repeated five words: "The Lord is my Shepherd." Then the teacher asked the boy to repeat the phrase, touching each finger as he said a corresponding word. When the little boy counted to the ring finger – the fourth finger – he grabbed his own chubby finger with his other hand, repeating, "My...my Shepherd. The Lord is *my* Shepherd."

The next morning the little boy did not wake up. He was asleep in Jesus. The parents found his chubby hand still holding that fourth finger. Truly, in death the Lord was his Shepherd.

The LORD is my Shepherd;  
I shall not want (Psalm 23:1).

When you say "my Shepherd," you are admitting that you are a sheep – or at least that you act like a sheep and have the needs of a sheep. If you have the characteristics of a sheep, your biggest need is to belong to a shepherd, because sheep cannot make it in the world without someone to lead them, protect them and care for them.

What kind of shepherd would you choose if the choice were yours to make? Obviously, sheep do not choose their shepherd, but let us just take a couple of minutes to play What If? If you were a sheep, what kind of shepherd would you pick?

Before you answer, let me tell you what kind of shepherd most sheep would want to avoid. Your shepherd would not be like a businessman, because he would want to make profit off of you. Your shepherd would not have the manner of an army sergeant, as he would want to lead you into battle. Your shepherd would not be like a coach, as he would want you to win the big game. And you would not want a king, because he would want to rule you.

You would want none of these! You would want a personal shepherd who loved you, not one who made money off you. You would want a shepherd who would protect you, not one who would get you killed in battle. You would choose a shepherd who know what you liked to eat and where you liked to go. You would seek someone who knew how to care for you when you were sick. He should know how to protect you from parasites, predators and poison weeds. You would choose a shepherd who would find comfortable places for you to sleep. Of you became lost, you would want an unselfish and brave shepherd who would come looking for you.

*Lord, I'm glad You first chose me.*

Isn't it good to know that you do not have to worry about choosing the right shepherd because the Shepherd has chosen you?

When you say "my Shepherd," you are not just telling everyone that the Lord is your personal Shepherd. You are telling the world that you belong to the Shepherd who owns everything.

*Lord, I want to be Your heir.*

### What is your Shepherd's name?

You have a wonderful Shepherd. Do you know His name?

Because a person's name usually tells something about him or her, you ought to know your Shepherd's name. Why? So you can know Him better.

- a. Your Shepherd's name is *Immanuel*, which means "God with us." He is not just the Lord Most High, exalted in heaven.

"Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

Lord, thank You for coming to show me how You would live in the flesh.

- b. Your Shepherd's name is *Redeemer*. When you landed in the pawnshop of sin, your Shepherd walked in with the pawn ticket that paid the price for your release. The Bible says you were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:19). Lord, I'm glad Your blood paid the price for my sin.
- c. Your Shepherd's name is *Deliverer*. Because you disobeyed God's laws, you were destined for punishment. You were heading for hell. What did your Shepherd do?

He went after you, and the Bible says He delivered you “from so great a death” (2 Corinthians 1:10).

*Lord, I'm glad You delivered me from hell.*

- d. Your Shepherd's name is *Savior*. The Bible says we all have sinned; this includes you (see Romans 3:23). Because the wages of sin is death (see Romans 6:23), you were lost with no hope; but your Savior reached His hand down to save you.

And we have seen and testify that the father has sent the Son as Savior of the world (1 John 4:14).

### How do you describe your Shepherd?

Is he tall, skinny, old or athletic? If you have a shepherd, you ought to know what he looks like. You will learn His description by learning of the things He does for you.

- a. Your Shepherd is described as “the door” (John 10:7, 9) and “the way” (John 14:6). Although “narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, there are a few who find it” (Matthew 7:14), He will lead you to heaven.  
*Lord, show me the way.*
- b. Your Shepherd is described as “the light of life” (John 8:12). This is a dark, scary world when you do not know where you are going, and there are dangerous pits along the way. When you get lost in the valley, your Shepherd will light your way.  
*Lord, shine some light over here on my feet.*
- c. Your Shepherd is described as “the resurrection” (John 11:25). One day you will die, but your Shepherd died so you might live. And when you die, He will raise you up on the last day.  
*Lord, I'm counting on You.*
- d. Your Shepherd is described as “the bread of life.” When you get hungry along life's path, do not complain. Go looking for your Shepherd because He said, “He who comes to me shall never hunger” (John 6:35). Isn't it good to know that your soul will never be hungry because He will satisfy you? You may miss a meal or two – some martyrs even starved to death physically – but your Shepherd will give you real soul-satisfaction.  
*Lord, I want to be satisfied with You.*
- e. Your Shepherd is described as “living water” (John 4:10). Do you ever get thirsty? Not thirsty in your throat, but thirsty in your soul? That is soul-thirst. It is when you have taken a drink of cool water, but your heart is still empty...your soul is still scared...you still do not know what to do. Your Shepherd said, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst” (John 4:14). Are you feeling a little dry? Do you need some of the Shepherd's water to soothe your parched soul?  
*Lord, I gladly drink from Your cup.*

When you know the Shepherd, He gives you enjoyment that is greater than fun. He gives you satisfaction and contentment. Jesus calls it peace: “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27). You can have an experience that is greater than fun – a trusting relationship with your Shepherd. When you rest securely at His feet, you do not need anything, you do not lack anything and you do not fear anything. Life is peaceful at His feet. You can say, “I shall not want today.” As long as you make the Lord your Shepherd, you will always know peace and contentment.

## Lesson Two I Shall Not Want

A well-known minister stood before a Sunday School gathering of small children and asked, “How many of you can quote Psalm 23?” Several of the children raised their hands, among them a beautiful little blonde-headed girl who could not have been much more than four years old. The pastor was surprised that such a young person would know Psalm 23. So he asked her to come to the front of the room to recite it for the class.

Standing before the class with hands clutched behind her back, the young girl smiled, and the minister smiled back. Then, with great confidence, she said only this: “The Lord is my shepherd. That’s all I want.”

The little girl had the words mixed up, but she got the message right.

The most important thing to understand about Psalm 23 is our relationship to the Shepherd. When we get Him, everything else is secondary. Without the presence of our Good Shepherd, what do we have? Nothing. Everything in this psalm is about our relationship to the Shepherd and His relationship to us. The little girl was right. If you take the Shepherd out of the psalm, there is no promise of anything. Why? Because Psalm 23 is about the Shepherd, the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. To get all the blessings of the psalm, you must become preoccupied with Jesus Christ – you must relate to Him.

When the Shepherd gives you eternal life, He has given you everything because He has given you His life. Now you are His sheep, so you belong to Him. He is not going to let you starve; the Shepherd will feed you. The secret is found in *relationship*; to have the benefits of Psalm 23 you must be related to the Shepherd. Remember, you cannot enjoy the *blessings* of the Shepherd if you have not received His offer of *salvation*.

*Lord, thank You for being my Savior.*

Once you admit “The Lord is my Shepherd,” everything else changes. Psalm 23 becomes personal for you. Jesus reminded us of the personal relationship between shepherd and sheep when he said, “He calls his own sheep by name” (John 10:3). Does He know your name?

“The sheep follow Him for they know his voice” (John 10:4). How close must sheep be to their Shepherd? They must be close enough to hear His voice. Are you close enough to hear His voice?

*Lord, keep me close enough to hear what You say.*

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.” Ask yourself the question, *Want What?* David left the sentence incomplete so you could fill in the blank. *I shall not want money...security...fame...things...retirement...vacation.* What is your greatest want today?

Remember when you went to the carnival as a kid and were worried about losing your money? You placed it in your deepest pocket, but you were afraid of losing it on the rides that turned upside down. So you gave it to your father to keep for you. Now take the most precious thing in your life today and give it to your

Shepherd for safekeeping. Let your Shepherd worry about those things. Then you can say, "I shall not want."

*Lord, keep my money safe for me.*

You do need certain things, and the Shepherd knows this. Let Him provide all the things that you need. And when you realize that he provides good things for you to use, you can say, "I shall not want."

It is all right to have things. But know why you have them, who gave them to you and how to use them properly. Make sure that your stuff is always secondary, and be sure that your possessions never possess your heart. Let the Shepherd own your heart and fill your life. When you become preoccupied with Jesus Christ, your Shepherd, then things become secondary – they are only means to an end.

*Lord, I yield my things to you.*

What are our wants other than tangible things?

- a. Sometimes the thing we want is not a toy, a new car or any tangible thing. What we want most is relief from pain. A baby cries because an open safety pin is scratching his leg. His mother doesn't know what is wrong, so she gives the baby a bottle; but he continues to cry. So the concerned mother tries a rattle, then a pacifier, but her baby continues to cry. The mother takes her baby into her arms to rock him, but the baby continues to cry. Sometimes what you want most is relief because you are hurting. Perhaps you have lost a parent to death, or you have broken up with your girlfriend or you have lost a lot of money. What is your loss? When you are in right relationship with the Shepherd, He becomes more important to you than anything and anybody. You may lose things, but the loss won't affect you as much if you are close to the Shepherd. He is the most important thing in life. Your concerns will virtually disappear because the Shepherd works all things for good for those who love Him (see Romans 8:28). Know that the Shepherd loves you, He will take care of you and He will keep you from all danger.
- b. Sometimes your deepest wants come from being scared. The teenage boy frets about losing his car because he can't imagine what life would be like without one. A teenage girl can't face life without her friends. What happens when fears become wants? They evaporate when you come close to the Shepherd. When you learn that He will protect you, you begin to ask yourself, *Why should I be afraid?* Walk close to the Shepherd. When He is nearby, you can say confidently, "I shall not want"

Lord, make me want to be close to You all the time.

What do sheep do when they need something? If they are hungry, they scoot close to the shepherd who feeds them. If they are scared, they huddle next to the shepherd who protects them. Where do you huddle when you have needs? When you say "I shall not want," you are describing the Lord's sufficiency to meet your needs. When the Lord is your Shepherd, He will supply the things you need to remain in fellowship with Him.

## Lesson Three

### He Makes Me To Lie Down in Green Pastures

I was a summer-camp counselor leading a group of boys, all 12 years old. The hardest task for me was to make them lie down in their bunks for the mandatory nap each afternoon between two and three. This was the hottest hour of the southern Georgia day, with temperatures often reaching above 90 degrees.

No external source could make 12-year old boys go to sleep in their bunks at two in the afternoon. So I brought extra desserts from the kitchen with which to bribe them to stay in their bunks. I figured 12-year-old boys are always hungry.

Then I used peer pressure, telling them, “We can’t go swimming at three if anyone cuts up, sneaks out or causes a commotion. If one guy cuts up for five minutes, we will all have to wait until five minutes after three.”

Then I would pass out wholesome comic books and allow them to trade after they finished reading one. I didn’t make them stay in their bunks against their will; I just gave them enough perks to make them *want* to do it. In the same way, the Lord doesn’t force us to lie down in green pastures; He just gives us perks to do it (e.g., tender grass, cool shade, clean water, the pleasure of His company).

Have you ever wondered why sheep lie down? Usually, we see sheep standing as they graze in the pasture. But in Psalm 23:2, the Shepherd “make me to lie down in green pastures.” Sometimes sheep grow tired, and the shepherd knows when it is best for them to lie down. Some people love to serve the Lord, but they don’t know how to rest in the Lord. There comes a time when the Lord must “make” them lie down in green pastures. Even the Lord Jesus said, “Come aside...and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). Do you need spiritual rest?

Most sheep lie down because they are sleepy, they don’t sleep well standing up. God has programmed humans so they need about eight hours of sleep each day. As much as you fight sleep and eschew rest, there comes a time when the Lord makes you sleep.

*Lord, I rest in You.*

#### **Why do sheep lie down?**

- a. When I was in college I hated the idea of going to sleep; there was so much I wanted to do for God. Sure, I devoted quiet time to Bible study and prayer, but I felt I was wasting time if I slept. But then one day I realized that sleep was part of God’s plan for all people, including me. If you are a good steward of your body, you will sleep when you need rest. And then as a good steward of your time, you will use your waking hours for His glory.

*Lord, restore my body with sleep.*

- b. When sheep sense danger, they may lie down in tall grass to hide from predator. When sheep are standing tall, it’s easy for a predator to take them down; but nestled among the grass, sheep can hide from danger. Don’t display fleshly courage by seeking out danger. Rather, learn when to hide. Sometimes it’s all right not to fight, as we are told to flee temptation (see 2 Timothy 2:22)

- c. Because they finished everything they have to do for the day. Now it's time for rest, sleep, food or just to be near the shepherd. When the shepherd is sitting down, it is only natural for sheep to come and lie next to him. Just like humans crave love, so sheep want the affection of the shepherd as they huddle close to him and lie at his feet. Are you resting near your Shepherd?

*Lord, I need you.*

- d. When a sheep is lying down, it's not looking around. When a sheep rests, it's not terribly curious, nor will it wander off. When sheep are standing, there is more likelihood of them straying. While standing, a sheep might look around, and it usually goes where it looks. Isn't that like you and me? We look at tempting things long before we go after them. Are you straying from your Shepherd?

### **When the Shepherd leads his sheep to green pastures:**

- a. He doesn't wander around until he stumbles across a pasture. The shepherd knows where he's going. The Bible says that God always leads us, which involves a choice on our Lord's part (see 2 Corinthians 2:14). The Shepherd knows where all the pastures are located and which one is right for us. Therefore, the Shepherd takes us to the best pasture – at the right time, with the right food – for today.
- b. The Shepherd doesn't take us to a pasture that is best for other sheep. That's because He knows you by name and loves you. He takes you to choice pastures that have everything you could ever want.  
*Thank You, Lord, for providing for my needs.*
- c. The Shepherd doesn't take you to good pastures of the past – places where you used to feed and enjoyed. Past pastures may not be the best for today. The Shepherd daily chooses today's best.
- d. The Shepherd doesn't lead you today to next season's pastures. If He took us to tomorrow's pastures and the grass was not yet green, what good would that do? Timing is important for the shepherd; he must choose when a pasture is best for his flock.

While the shepherd makes the sheep lie down in green grass, he is not seen picking the grass for the sheep. The sheep must bend down, bite and chew. In the same way, the Lord doesn't give you eternal truth without your involvement. You must *hear* the spoken Word of God and give attention to understanding it. Then, you must *read* the written word to better understand what God is saying to you. You must study each book, each Lesson and each verse of the Bible.

### **Why does the Shepherd lead his sheep in green pastures?**

The shepherd does not lead his sheep over hill and stream just to show them the pasture. He leads them down into the pastures so they can feed and grow in health and strength. So the Lord does not want you to just enjoy Christianity from afar. Rather, you should walk into a church, learn the Word and serve God there. Christianity is not a museum to be admired; rather, it is a restaurant where we feed our souls. The Shepherd chooses the pasture for you; you choose if you will eat.

*Lord, I will eat in Your pastures.*

### **Why do we need to lie down repeatedly?**

The words “lie down” have the meaning of repeated action. You are to lie down many times, but that does not mean you are to stay down. There is a time to sleep, but you do not stay in bed all day. There is a time to rest in the pasture, but sheep do not spend their lives resting. The Lord will make you lie down and rest today, but He will do it again tomorrow. The Lord will make you lie down and eat tender grass today, but He will repeat the process tomorrow.

Some people think it would be wonderful if they could go to church one time and learn enough about God so they would never have to attend again. They want a car that never needs gasoline – a perpetual motion machine. But that’s not the way the Lord does it. He makes you lie down repeatedly. Why? Because He wants you to enjoy relationship with Him each day. Repeatedly!

Although the Lord makes His sheep lie down, He does not force us to do it. There is no picture in the psalm of the shepherd pushing his sheep to the ground. He is not tipping them over, nor is he pulling their feet out from under them. Just being in a lush green valley where there is food gives the flock a desire to lie down. If the shepherd has led them through a dangerous valley or through a dry, arid desert, then they will want to lie down when they get to green pastures. The shepherd makes them lie down not by force but rather by providing food. Similarly a mother does not hold her hand over her baby’s eyelids to force sleep on him, but instead, she feeds him so he will fall asleep naturally.

*Lord, I will lie at Your feet.*

### **So how does the Shepherd make his sheep to lie down in green pastures?**

If it’s been a long, hot day, he finds cool, soft grass for the sheep to lie down in. If his flock has not had a good meal, he finds green grass for them to eat. If they have been lost, he brings them home to his pastures. Then the shepherd doesn’t have to force them to lie down; all he has to do is lead them into green pastures where they will want to lie down.

He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing. Zephaniah 3:17

## Lesson Four

### He Leads Me Beside the Still Waters

A sixth-grade boy faced the elementary-school Olympics with uncertainty. For the past three years he had won, leading the boys his age. But it wasn't just that the boy was faster than all the other boys his age. No, he received some extra encouragement from his dad who had been a long-distance runner in college. As the boy ran against his opponents, his father ran ahead of him, yelling encouragement. "You can do it. Come on! Watch the finish line." When distractions caused the boy to look around, the father clapped loudly and pointed to the finish line.

But today was different. The boy felt squeamish when he woke up; he wasn't sick, he just had an uneasy stomach. The boy was afraid he would lose for the first time.

"Don't worry," his father said, "I'll run ahead of you like always." When the starter's gun sounded, the boy dashed out to the lead, but he kept looking around at his opposition. His father ran fast, but the boy didn't keep up. He was busy watching the other boys. The father yelled, clapped his hands and whistled, but still the boy could only manage to come in third place. The father had tried to lead his son, but the father couldn't win the race alone. When the boy took his eyes off his father, he lost the race.

#### **Why does the Shepherd lead the way for you?**

When the Shepherd leads you, that means He goes first. Why? If there is danger lurking nearby, He will face it first. Sometimes there are snakes hidden near the water's edge. If you follow the Shepherd to the cool pond of water, He will deal with the serpents first. You will not know where the serpents are lurking, but He knows, because He knows all things. He can deal with them.

*Thank You, Lord, for anticipating danger for me.*

There is another reason why the Shepherd leads the way: You don't always know what is good for you, nor do you know the way. The Lord knows the way to the good water, so follow Him. There is an old song about the Lord knowing the way through the wilderness. The chorus reminds us that all you have to do is follow him.

Sheep have no sense of direction. They can't find their own way, they need a guide to lead them to water. You are like that. You have no sense of spiritual direction on your own. Yes, you may realize when you are lost, and you know when God is far off, but you will never find Him on your own. God has given you a conscience to tell you when danger is nearby. You are lost, you are miserable and you ask, What now? That's when the Shepherd comes to you and leads you to green pastures and cool, still waters.

Will you follow? Or will you stand there in the wilderness, confused and scared?

*Lord, thank You for coming to me when I didn't know what to do.*

The Shepherd does not stand near the water and call for you to come and drink. Most sheep would never find water if their shepherd did not lead them to it. If a shepherd remained in the wilderness, using his staff to point in the general direction of the water, the sheep would not find it. The shepherd must guide his sheep toward the water, making sure the sheep are with him and are following him. Sheep will follow their shepherd when he guides them.

*Lord, make sure I follow You.*

### **Where is the Lord leading you?**

A shepherd does not lead his sheep into the deep water, for they might drown if they venture in over their heads. He does not lead them into a rushing stream, for they might be swept away by the swift current. He leads them beside still waters. It is in a pool of still water that sheep can drink until their hearts are satisfied.

*Lord, there is a pool of still water somewhere. Lead me to it.*

Once the sheep arrive at the pool, the shepherd doesn't scoop water into his hands for each sheep, nor does he use a cup from which they can drink. They may need water but do not yet realize it; they may not be ready to drink. You can lead the proverbial horse to water but you can't make him drink; neither can you make sheep drink. All you can do is lead them to a place where you can satisfy their thirst.

### **And how does the shepherd lead his sheep?**

Slowly. When a shepherd leads his flock, some sheep are too young to keep up, so the shepherd walks slowly. Other sheep have been injured and are too lame to move fast. The shepherd walks before them, but he does not outdistance them.

### **Why does the shepherd lead his sheep slowly?**

So they can see him and be near him. The shepherd wants his sheep close by for fellowship because he loves them. He doesn't want to lose a single one. But he also wants them close for protection. When a small lamb falls too far behind the flock, a wolf can easily snatch it. A crippled lamb cannot run away from danger, so the shepherd keeps it close by for protection.

*Lord, Keep me close to You so I don't get hurt anymore.*

### **What are the advantages for being close to the shepherd?**

Sheep that stay close to the shepherd reach the water first. Those closest to the shepherd also get to the best pastures first. They get the tenderest grass and the coolest water. But most of all, they get to enjoy it with the shepherd by their side. He has led them there. So if you stay close to your Shepherd, He will make sure you are fed daily, that you have enough to eat and that you have the best. Have you been hungry lately? Perhaps you are hungry because you are too far away from the Shepherd.

*Lord, I like eating and drinking by Your side.*

### **What do you need to learn from your Shepherd?**

You may need to learn to trust Him. If your Shepherd leads you into a storm or into the barren desert, He will also lead you out. Eventually, He will lead you to still waters.

*Lord I've had plenty of storms. I need still waters.*

### **Where does the Shepherd do not lead you?**

Notice that the Shepherd doesn't lead you beside the ocean. You go to the seaside to run in the sun, get a suntan or play in the water. Fun is not what you need from the Shepherd today. You don't need the Good Shepherd to find you a playground. What you need is for the Shepherd to lead you beside still waters so you can rest and recharge your batteries.

*Lord, I need renewal.*

Notice that the psalm doesn't say the Shepherd leads you to a waterfall. When you sit next to a waterfall, you can enjoy the rushing water, the power, the mighty noise and the movement. A waterfall reminds us that God is the powerful Creator, and there are times when we need to remember that He is Almighty God. As the water rushes over the waterfall in its hurried pace to get somewhere else, it reminds us of our tumultuous life, flowing toward an unknown tomorrow. There are times when we need to remember that life is rushing by and that we need to make the best use of our time. But not today. This day we need to rest beside still waters where our souls may be restored.

*Lord, if I can rest today, I'll work hard tomorrow.*

Also, the Shepherd doesn't lead us beside a lake. True, a lake may be still. But when we think of a lake, other thoughts come to mind. We think of a beautiful sunset over the face of the deep water, wildlife in its marshes and even the soft lapping of water upon a sandy beach. When we sit beside a lake, we can meditate on God who is the Creator of it all. But today you need comfort and refreshment. You need the Lord to lead you beside still water so you can drink. You need your soul restored.

*Lord, I need rest.*

You know in your heart that still water will refresh and restore your soul and make you new again. You are hot and tired from life's journey. But one drink makes the long worthwhile. And the next time you are hot and thirsty you won't mind so much the long distance and the dangerous trail, because you know you are heading home to lie in peaceful green pastures near the Shepherd and to drink from still ponds. My soul is restored because I'm home.

*Lord, this is good water.*

## **Lesson Five**

### **He Restores My Soul**

David knew the spot well. It was a quiet pool of water that was constantly filled by the small stream flowing in Wadi Kelt. The young teen liked the pool best, even though it was a long walk from his home. Because of the Artesian springs, the pool always had pure water that bubbled out of the heart of the earth. The pool kept the surrounding trees alive in the hottest summers with its life-giving water. When the other pools dried up and the hot breezes killed the surrounding vegetation, David knew he would find food and water for his sheep in the Wadi kelt.

David slowly led his sheep over the scorched fields. He didn't walk so fast that he would outdistance the young, nor did he wish to push his older sheep too hard in the blistering sun. David heard his sheep bellowing for a drink but he didn't stop. The wise, young shepherd knew they would soon find relief.

Then David's young eyes spotted the green trees gently being pushed by the hot afternoon wind. When the older sheep picked up the scent of water, their pace quickened. When they arrived, some sheep went straight for the waters. Others began gnawing at the tender grass. Before long, all the sheep were surrounding David, lying in the grass, doing what the young shepherd wanted. David wanted them to eat, drink and rest. There would be no more hot travel today. Now it was time for relaxation and sleep.

The smell of the cool, black earth filled David's nostrils. He felt the soft grass as he laid among his sheep. The aroma of tender grass was perfume to the young shepherd. Just as David led his sheep to a special place for rest and restoration of spirit, so our Shepherd leads us to special places to rest our bodies and revive our hearts.

#### **Have you ever been lost?**

Have you ever been so disoriented that you didn't know where you were going? No one ever intends to get lost. You've never said, "I plan to get lost going to the store." No! You unintentionally get lost. It just happens. Your landmarks are moved or your directions are faulty. Sheep are like that, they never intend to stray. They follow the next bite of grass....and the next... and eventually they're lost.

The shepherd always takes the initiative to go after his sheep. He will search, call for them and look in every conceivable place until he finds his lost ones. When the lost sheep are found, what happens?

**Does the shepherd punish the sheep for getting lost?** Does the shepherd make the sheep sleep outside the fold? No! What does the shepherd do? He restores them.

How does the shepherd restore them? Lovingly! They don't come sneaking into the fold with their tails between their legs. They are the center of rejoicing. The shepherd is happy, and the other sheep know the shepherd would do the same for them, so they are happy too.

*Lord, thank You for forgiving me when I stray.*

#### **Have you ever needed restoration in your spiritual body?**

Remember the last time you were sick – a hacking cough, fever or diarrhea? You felt terrible. You didn't want to go to work, eat or play golf. You felt so bad, you couldn't sleep.

But eventually you *did* sleep; and when you woke up, you felt better. The fever had broken, and your body was restored. In the same way, the Shepherd can restore a wandering soul. He can give you spiritual health.

*Lord, I want to be strong.*

**How does the Shepherd restore your soul?** Does the Shepherd use good news, a hot meal, coffee or an unexpected phone call? Mostly the Shepherd uses spiritual resources such as the Word of God, prayer, Christian fellowship and worship. As you rest in the Lord, the Shepherd will restore your soul.

What does the word “restore” mean? *To make new.* One of the recent Bible translation reads, “He renews my strength” (Psalm 23:3, NLT). When you restore the paint on your car, it looks like new; and when you run hand over the surface, it feels as good as new. When the Lord restores your soul, you’re like new – you have a new start or a new beginning.

When the Shepherd says He restores your soul, what does the word “soul” mean to you? It’s more than restoring your mind, for your soul is more than your thought patterns. Your soul includes the mind but is much deeper. Your mind expresses itself through thoughts, and your mind communicates with others through words. But your soul is the part of you that creates words, thoughts and ideas.

Your soul is also more than just your emotions. When you say, “I love you with all my heart,” you are expressing the warm feelings of your soul. Your deep love commitments come from your emotions, but your soul is more than those fiery emotions of love and jealousy and those black feelings of hate. Your emotions serve to ventilate your soul, but your soul is more than your emotions.

Going deep within, you will find that your will, the power to make decisions, is also an instrument of your soul. Your dreams, your values, the attitudes that influence your everyday life – these are all expressions of the soul. The soul is who you are when no one else is around. When you really get dissatisfied with yourself, remember, He restores my soul.”

## Lesson Six He Leads Me In The Paths of Righteousness

Why does the Lord lead you to green pastures and still waters? Because He loves you and cares that your needs are satisfied.

*Lord, thank You for loving me and caring for me.*

Why does the Lord protect you from the dangers of temptation and evil? Because He is a holy God who will punish sin.

*Lord, thank You for forgiving me and keeping me from judgment.*

Why does the Lord lead you in paths of righteousness? Because He is righteous and wants you to be like Him. He wants you to think right, live right, and decide right. The Lord wants you to walk rightly in the right paths.

What the Shepherd wants, He wants for all His sheep.

The LORD is my Shepherd;

I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures

For rest and restoration.

He leads me in right paths (Psalm 23:1-3).

He said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End" (Revelation 1:8). He knows exactly what will happen tomorrow, so He is qualified to be the perfect guide for your life. Let Him lead you. When you can't trust the Lord with your future, it's called unbelief. Do you have a doubting heart?

Some don't trust Him with their future because they know they can't play around with sin if He is in control. If you won't trust Him, it's called *rebellion*. Do you have a sinful heart?

It's unbelief when you *can't* trust the Lord.

It's rebellion when you *won't* trust the Lord.

The Shepherd leads us to right paths because we don't know where we are going. Think for a moment about all the things you must do today. You have errands to run, family responsibilities and obligations at work. After that, you may have things to do for the church, your kids' sports teams or your friends. Then there are the things you do for yourself – education, entertainment, hobbies or self-improvement. You will do what you have to do, but are you doing what you should do for God? Will you trust the Shepherd and follow Him along the right paths?

*Lord, be my Shepherd and lead me to do the right things.*

You are doing a lot of things, but are you doing them "rightly"? In this busy life, we have so much to do that we give a lot of things a lick and a promise. Are you halfheartedly giving halftime to your projects? When it comes to the church, do you give much effort? Oftentimes in our busyness we don't pray effectively, we don't study the Bible deeply, we don't serve with excellence. We need the Shepherd to guide us in order to walk rightly on the right paths.

*Lord, I need to do things better.*

Where does the Shepherd lead you? He leads you in paths of righteousness. While the word “righteousness” scares many, it simply means that He leads you in the right paths. Technically, these paths conform to the right things God wants done. And if they are done for God, then they will be right for you.

Notice the Shepherd doesn’t necessarily lead us in easy paths, beautiful paths or even prosperous paths. While right paths may be desirable at times, and often there are observation points from which to see the beautiful sights in this world, sometimes right paths are hard to walk. Sometimes we must walk through difficulties and tragedies. Sometimes the Shepherd has to lead you up steep slopes through rocks. The right path can be a difficult path.

Doing the right thing has to do with character. But how do we define character? (So few people today have it.) Character is habitually doing the right thing in the right way. The Shepherd will always lead you to do the right thing in the right way. He will never lead you to the wrong destination, nor will He teach you to do the things the wrong way. He will lead you rightly so you will develop the habit of doing things His way.

Remember, the Shepherd doesn’t lead you in the right paths just to please Himself, although the Shepherd does it for His name’s sake. He has you on the right path for your good. The Shepherd has a plan to work all things together for good. The paths he chooses for you are for your good as well as for His good purpose.

Psalm 23 describes the Shepherd leading His sheep, not driving them. Why? When a shepherd uses his staff to drive his sheep toward a certain destination, they scatter to all directions.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way (Isaiah 5:36, NIV).

Sheep are not smart enough to understand that the shepherd is herding them to good pastures or cool water. Sheep have minds of their own.

*Lord, I’m stubborn and rebellious. Forgive me when I refuse to follow right paths.*

Shepherds in David’s day didn’t round up sheep the way a cowboy rounds up cattle into a corral or pen. Sheep weren’t fenced in for feeding and water. The shepherd led his sheep from one pasture to another so they could feed themselves.

Look again at the text: The shepherd doesn’t transport his sheep from one place to another in a wagon or truck. No! The sheep walk from one place to another. The shepherd walks before them, leading them to the next place of food, knowing the only way to get the sheep to a green pasture is to lead them there. Remember, the key to your spiritual life is a correct relationship with the Shepherd. You must follow where He leads. When you are in a right relationship to the Lord, He will lead you to the place of food and rest.

### **Where is your Shepherd leading you today?**

Psalm 23 doesn’t show us the shepherd telling his sheep where to go. No, that would also be useless. The shepherd can point with this staff, but the sheep won’t understand his motions. The shepherd can speak, yell, or even gesture, but sheep don’t understand gestures. Sheep understand one thing: example. They follow where the shepherd goes. Where is your Shepherd leading you today?

Maybe you don't know where He's going, but are you willing to follow Him anywhere? Your Shepherd may be leading you toward a dark valley filled with frightening death shadows. If He is leading you toward a storm, it's for a purpose. Green pastures like just on the other side of the threatening valley. Are you willing to follow?

Are you willing to obey your Shepherd even when you don't know where He's going? Have you realized that your Shepherd won't always tell you how to walk and when to follow Him? That's something you already know. He just expects you to do it. Many times your Shepherd won't tell you where He is going; He just expects you to follow Him.

When you think about paths of righteousness, where do you think they lead? Some people think the Lord will only lead us to Sunday School or to worship services. Others think the Lord also leads us to revival meetings or a Christian camp. Usually people associate some form of religious service with paths of righteousness. But that's not it. The paths of righteousness are everyday trails. Some lead to the grocery store. Some lead down to the expressway to work. Other right paths are taken by planes and trains.

It's not only where the Shepherd leads you, it's how He leads you and when. If the Lord is your Shepherd, he wants to lead you all the time, to every location, by many different means of transportation. It means the Shepherd wants to lead your outward obedience and your inward attitude. When you are following the right paths, you have the right responses of mind, will and emotions.

A minister must follow the Shepherd on right paths for the ministry, and a mother must follow right paths for training her children. There are right paths for janitors, farmers, engineers. What is the best path for you? Only one person knows what is best for you: your Shepherd. And to find the right path for you, you must get close to your Shepherd and let Him lead you constantly.

*Lord, I realize You have a right path for me. Help me find it and follow it.*

If there are right paths, then there are also wrong paths. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." You may think you are following right paths because of momentary success or excitement, but do you know whether your path leads to life or death? Is there a green pasture in your future? Will you dwell in the house of the Lord forever?

You can't always tell if your path is a right path by looking down at your feet. Your feet may feel like they're on the right path, but feelings are deceptive. You could be going in the wrong direction. Make sure you are on the right path; look at the horizon toward your destination. Where are you heading? Unless the Lord is your Shepherd, you probably don't understand the future, nor will you reach the right destination.

**What kind of paths are you seeking?** Exotic paths? Fun paths? Successful paths? Prosperous paths? Power paths? There are all kinds of paths that you can tread upon in this life, and sheep who don't look around can easily get lost. If you are lost and you are not sure where you are going, you need to lift your head. Look first at the Shepherd before you look down at your feet, then look back to check your bearings. And finally, look to the destination; look to the future.

You may think you're on a good path, but you don't know what the Shepherd knows. Unless you follow the Lord as your Shepherd, you will miss the right path for you.

## Lesson Seven For His Name's Sake

I learned early the importance of a family name. Because our family name was important to my mother, it became important to me. My mother was the tenth child born to Eula and Robert McFaddin of Clarendon County, South Carolina. Originally, the land in the county was given as a grant by the king of England to the MacFaddins during colonial times.

When I was a young boy, my mother stood me before a 10-foot-tall granite stone in the McFaddin Cemetery. The stone traced the family lineage all the way back to the original John McFaddin, who first carved a farm out of the wilderness. Mother told me of my ancestors fighting off Indian raids and later fending off the British during the American Revolution. She pointed at the names of my ancestors, carved in granite. She said, "One day your name will be carved in granite stone somewhere. You're a Towns." She transposed my loyalty from her maiden name to her married name. "Make me proud of you."

She constantly reminded me during my childhood that I had her blood flowing through my veins. "You're a Towns. You can do anything you set your mind to do," she would say. Little did I realize at the time that my mother was planting the seeds of dreams in my heart that would grow to influence my adult actions. I tried not to act "ugly" (a southern expression for naughty behavior) because I was a Towns. Because of my mother's expectations, I tried to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles when I found myself in difficult circumstances. I wanted to make my parents proud of me.

In the same way, the Lord wants us to meet His expectations and to live for Him for His name's sake.

He leads me in right paths, for the sake of His many names (Psalm 23:3, paraphrase).

Shepherds risk their lives to protect their sheep because losing a sheep is like losing a part of themselves. A shepherd loves his sheep, he will risk everything for them. His love motivates him to learn all about sheep and how to care for them, because it's not just an occupation. Each sheep is a part of his heart. He knows their weaknesses and which ones tend to stray. He knows the strengths of those that remain close to him. He knows what they like to eat and what they shouldn't eat. It's a shepherd's nature to know such thing.

### **What are the Shepherd's many names?**

When you say "The Lord is my Shepherd, you are saying in Hebrew Jehovah-Roi. This is one of the names of God. This name suggests that the Lord is powerful to protect His sheep from danger. But the name also means the Lord is tender to care for them and provide for their every need.

*Jehovah-Roi, protect me from evil.*

Because the Lord has a shepherd's heart, He wants you to have the best to eat and drink. Have you been lately? Perhaps you've strayed from the Shepherd's fold and you are eating old, dead, dried-up grass. That's not what the Shepherd has for you. Remember,

Psalm 23 is about relationship, and if you remain in the fold – and if you stay near the Shepherd – you will have good food.

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!  
(Psalm 34:8).

The Shepherd will provide you with good food for the sake of His name.

*Lord, let me eat near You.*

Because the Lord is your Shepherd, you can now say, “I shall not want.” When you think of God’s provision, think of His name *Jehovah-Jireh*, which means, “The Lord Is My Provider” (see Genesis 22:14). Jehovah-Jireh provided Israel with food for 40 years as they wandered in the desert wilderness. Jehovah-Jireh also provided Israel with water from a rock when there was no water in the desert (see Numbers 20:7-11). The very nature of a shepherd is Jehovah-Jireh, to be a provider. If Jehovah-Jireh can do that for so many people (more than one million) for so long, what can He do for you? Jehovah-Jireh will provide for you. Why? For His name’s sake.

*Thank You, Jehovah-Jireh, for everything.*

Because the Lord is your Shepherd, He makes you lie down in green grass. He is *Jehovah-Adonai*, your Master, which means He knows what is best for you. Even more, the Master wants obedience and knows if you are lying in green grass and if you are close to His fee. Why does He make you lie down? The Shepherd wants you to have rest and peace.

That’s why He has another name, *Jehovah-Shalom*, meaning “The Lord Is Peace” (see Judges 6:24). When you lie serenely beside still waters, thank God for providing you with peace in a world where there is so little peace. The Shepherd’s name is “The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, KJV). You will finally have peace when you intimately know the Shepherd.

*Jehovah-Shalom, thank You for rest of heart that You give me because of Your name’s sake.*

Maybe you are one of the sheep that likes to see what enticements lie in other pastures. Have you been running ahead of the Shepherd? Maybe you are the sheep that likes thrills and excitement. You are a “party sheep,” and you’ve been straying into dangerous mountain trails. You’ve even gone some places where there are no paths, and you’ve fallen a few times. Now you are bruised and battered.

You need to know the Shepherd’s name, *Jehovah-Rophi*. That means “The Lord Is My Healer” (see Exodus 15:26). When the Shepherd finds you, does He punish you for going to the wrong places? NO! The Shepherd restores you to the flock; you are brought back with the other sheep. Why does He forgive you and restore you? Because His name is Jehovah-Rophi; He is a healer and restorer.

*Jehovah-Rophi, keep me from disease and heal me in sickness.*

Now it is the season when the Shepherd must move the sheep from one pasture to another. There are many paths and you could get lost if you don’t stay close to the Shepherd. Some would like to stay in the old pastures, but there is no food in old pastures; sheep will eat grass right down to the roots. After a period of time you must be moved to a new pasture of fresh green grass, and you can’t find the way by yourself.

The Shepherd will lead you in paths of righteousness. Why? Because His *Jehovah-Tsidkenu*, which means “The Lord, Our Righteousness.” When you broke His laws, the Lord

substituted Himself on the cross at Calvary for your punishment because He is righteous. Then the Lord gave you His righteousness so you would be perfect (see Matthew 5:48; Hebrews 10:14). Now you can walk in the paths of righteousness because of the sake of His name.

*Jehovah-Tsidkenu, thank You for making me righteous.*

Some refuse to walk in right paths but instead choose to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Are you in a black valley? You've created this mess by yourself, but don't fear. Even I the valley, the Bible promises, "You are with me" (Psalm 23:4). Why would the Shepherd go after you when you're in trouble? Because that's His nature. He's *Jehovah-Shammah*, which means "The Lord Is There," or "The Lord is With Me." The Lord is with you in the dark valley because of the sake of His name.

*Jehovah-Shammah, be with me even to the ends of the earth.*

What's chasing you in the valley? Is there a death shadow pursuing you like a lioness running down an antelope? Do you feel a demon from hell nipping at your heels? You are running as fast as you can, but the death shadow is gaining ground. When you feel like you are almost being eaten alive, remember His name *Jehovah-Tsebaoth*, "The Lord, My Warrior." The Lord will fight for you in the black valley, because that's His name.

*Lord, come quickly. I'm losing; please fight for me.*

If you've lost a battle, lift up your head to see the Shepherd running to your rescue. He has a rod and staff to protect you. Why does He carry you? Because His name is *Jehovah-El Elyon*, which means "The Lord God Most High," or "The Lord God, My Defender" (see Genesis 14:22). He protects you because His name says He will.

*Jehovah-El Elyon, I am confident in Your care.*

When you come out of death's dark valley, what's waiting for you? Not punishment – just the opposite. The Shepherd has a table loaded with good food waiting for you – cheese, meats, ripe fruit. And delectable desserts. The Shepherd will feed you in the presence of your enemies (see Psalm 23:5) to demonstrate that He can both provide for you and protect you.

So eat all you want. Why? Because His name is *Jehovah-Nissi*, which means "The Lord, My Banner" (see Exodus 17:15), or "The Lord Who Rallies Us to Himself." After a battle the troops rally around their standard, or banner. But as Christians we don't rally around a flag fluttering in the breeze; we get close to the Shepherd, where our hope is restored after the battle. We want Him to know we are grateful. He lets us get close because of His name.

*Jehovah-Nissi, it's been tough. Can I get closer?*

When you are wounded in the battle, He anoints your head with oil (see Psalm 23:5). The Shepherd douses you with cleansing oil to remove impurities from your wounds and he anoints you with healing oil to make you healthy again. Why does the Shepherd do this? Because His name is also *Jehovah-Mekaddesh*, which means "The Lord Who Sanctifies" or "The Lord Who Makes You Righteous." It's His nature.

*Jehovah-Mekaddesh, I am honored to be your sheep.*

Look down the table. The Shepherd is filling your cup – not someone else's cup – to the brim. Notices that your cup is not partially filled. The Lord is pouring so much into your chalice that it is beginning to overflow. Wow! Now you realize the Shepherd loves you and treats you special. Why is He doing this for you? Because that's the way he does things. His name is *Jehovah-El Shaddai*, which means "The Lord, My Nourisher" (see Genesis 17:1,2). The Lord loves to give thirsty people something to drink. He is the almighty One who supplies all your needs.

*Jehovah El-Shaddai, fill my cup.*

As the Shepherd leads you from one pasture to another, you don't have to worry about death shadows tracking you down. When you follow the Shepherd's leadership, His "goodness and mercy" will follow you (Psalm 23:6). Why? Because He is *Jehovah El Elobim*, which means "The Lord is Strong to Protect" (Joshua 22:22). The Shepherd looks after His sheep because His reputation is at stake. He will protect you for His name's sake.

*Jehovah-El Elobim, I rest in Your protection.*

The Shepherd would prefer to live in a house, away from the rain and wind and protected from the snow. He wants an abode where no snakes or scorpions can slip under his tent or crawl under his blanket. So here's good news: The Shepherd is going home and taking His sheep with Him! The sheep are going to live in a house, but not just any house. They will live in God's house! And the greatest thing about God's house is that He lives there.

Why does the Shepherd take His sheep to His eternal home? Because His name is *Jehovah El Olam*, which means "The Lord God of Eternity" (see Psalm 48:14). Some scholars translate this "The Lord God of His Secrets." The Hebrew word *olam* can be translated either "eternity" or "secret," which might suggest that the Lord God has many secret things to share with you when you get to His house. Why would He do that? Because the Shepherd's name is *Jehovah-El Olam*. He will take you to live with Him forever – because of His name's sake.

THE SHEPHERD'S MANY NAMES

The LORD is my shepherd  
(Jehovah-Roi, my Protector)

I shall not want  
(Jehovah-Jireh, my Provider)

He makes me to lie down in green pastures  
(Jehovah-Adonai, my Master)

He leads me beside the still waters  
(Jehovah-Shalom, my Peace)

He restores my soul;  
(Jehovah-Rophi, My Healer)

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake  
(Jehovah-Tsidkenu, my Righteousness)

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death  
(Jehovah-Shammah, my divine Presence)

I will fear no evil; for You are with me;  
(Jehovah-Tsebaoth, my Warrior)

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.  
(Jehovah-El Elyon, my Defender)

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies  
(Jehovah-Nissi, my Encourager)

You anoint my head with oil;  
(Jehovah-Mekaddesh, my Righteousness)

My cup runs over  
(Jehovah-El Shaddai, my Nourisher)

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
(Jehovah-El Elohim, my Protector)

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.  
(Jehovah-El Olam, my Eternity)

## Part 2 What His Sheep Receive

The relationship between the sheep and the Shepherd is two-way. In the first half of the psalm, we see all the great things our Lord does for us, without us having to do anything.

The second half of Psalm 23 is the “I” section. Because the Shepherd has done everything for me, I am now responsible to follow Him closely so He can provide for me and protect me.

What does this mean for me, His sheep?

I will fear no evil

I will have Him with me always.

I will be comforted by His rod and staff.

I will eat from a prepared table.

I will have my head anointed with oil.

I will have goodness and mercy follow me.

I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

## Lesson Eight

### Yea, Though I Walk Through The Valley Of The Shadow Of Death

Shadows scared me nearly to death when I was a youngster. Because we lived next to a cemetery, I believed that the threat of spirits from dead bodies was ever present. But it was the threat of live burglars that frightened me most.

The moon shining through our pear tree cause strange shadows to dance on the cheap paper shade that covered my bedroom window. I was certain the shadows were those of a robber trying to break into my room. The wind outside made the “burglar shadows” jump, and the limbs scratching on the screen frightened me even more. My mouth would turn to cotton, so I couldn’t yell for mother, and I was too scared to move. I would sweat, vowing not to move, so the burglar would think I was asleep.

The next morning – an eternity later! – I would wake up and everything would be all right.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me (Psalm 23:4).

Even when walking through a dark, dangerous valley, I will not be scared of death shadows, because You are with me (Psalm 23:4 – paraphrase).

Up until now the Shepherd has been leading you. He always leads His sheep to a grassy pasture and a pool of still water. So how did you end up in a dark valley full of shadows and death? The Lord didn’t lead you there. You *chose* the path of darkness...the path of shadows...the path of death. Notice that the psalm declares, “Yea, though I walk through the valley.” There’s no Shepherd out in front, You chose the valley because you strayed from the Shepherd.

Are you walking in a shadow today? How dare are your shadows? Remember, the Shepherd is Jesus. He is the light of the world. His light will dissipate any shadow! Whether your shadows are black or just gray, the Shepherd can illuminate your path.

*Lord, shine some light over here.*

A shadow isn’t real; it’s only an illusion. When something blocks the light, it makes a shadow. Or worse, when something distorts the light, what happens? Distorted shadows. If shadow looks like a friendly hand, you reach out to shake it; but your hand is empty. And if the hand looks threatening, as if it is going to choke you, you perspire, your heart beats faster, you might even yell out in fear. The shadow is not real, but the fear it inspires is very real.

Why do shadows scare us? Remember when you walked home from school on a late winter afternoon? The night came early, and the bitter wind cut through your jacket. The streetlight through the bushes created scary goblins in the shadows. Your pulse beat faster, your mouth went dry, and you wanted to run. You thought if you ran quickly past the shadows the boogeyman wouldn’t get you.

**Why Shadows Scare you:**

You're afraid of the unknown.

You feel defenseless.

Your active imagination thinks you'll die there.

You know evil hides in darkness.

Walking home through the dark shadows, you may think a mugger is hiding in the darkness. You begin running madly to get away, but you fall. You scratch up a knee and ruin a good pair of pants. It's often been said, "What you don't know can't hurt you," but that's only half right. What you don't know may not hurt you, but it can make you hurt yourself.

But even though there is probably nothing in the dark shadows, don't play in the darkness. Why? Because men love darkness more than light, as their deeds are evil (see John 3:19). Have you ever thought about how thieves sneak in under the cover of darkness? How houses of ill repute are dimly lit? How more crimes are committed at night than under the glaring sun? We innately know there's a dark side and a light side to our personalities. We are like Jekyll and Hyde or Beauty and the Beast. The Bible calls this condition the "old man" and the "new man" (Colossians 3:9, 10). Our evil deeds come from our evil nature, and we don't want anyone to know about the dark side of our personality.

Are you scared of shadows? How about the shadow of death? When you are close to someone dying, his or her shadow falls over you. Remember, the Lord is our light and life. Why should we fear?

**Why Does Death Scare Us?**

Our physical eyes can't see the other side.

We do not want physical pain.

We do not want to give up anything.

We have not finished all we have set out to do on Earth.

Because of sin, we have doubts.

Psalm 23 doesn't talk about walking through a valley of death; it says you will walk through a valley of shadows that are about death. To the unsaved, death is real. But if you walk with the Shepherd, death is only a shadow. Since shadows are created when something obscures the light, your death will obscure the light only for a moment. You will walk into that dark shadow, momentarily losing perspective of what you see in this life. But the instant you lose sight of earthly things, the shadow of death melts in the light of the other side. You walk through a doorway with the Shepherd into the other side.

Are you afraid of dying? Death seems inevitable to us who are alive because everyone we've ever known dies. Besides being real, death is frightening. Even for Christians, death is a fearful thing. We know some who have descended into a valley of pain, and none of us are very good with pain. Others have gone through a long, debilitating illness as their physical body wasted away. They were weak and ugly, and they lost the power of memory. The valley of death scares us all.

*Lord, remind me that death is only a shadow.*

### **So what can you do when shadows scare you?**

*Seek the Lord's presence.* He brings light in your darkest night. Then claim again the promise that "You are with me" (Psalm 23:4). Remember, there is no darkness in God's presence, nor is there any shadow. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12)

*When entering your personal "death valley," pray.* If you find yourself in the middle of a dark night, pray. If you want to get out of the valley, pray.

*Trust Him to help you find the path out.* If the valley has hemmed in and the mountains are too high to climb, remember that a valley can be a path through the mountains. If you can't see the other side, keep following the valley. Claim the promise, "You are with me." The Shepherd won't let you get lost.

*If you are on the wrong path, turn around.* There are usually box canyons and false trails in the mountains. Not all openings between the mountains will get you to the other side. The easy path may not be the right valley, because it may end abruptly. What do you do then? Turn around – repent – and retrace your steps back to the Shepherd.

*Know that God will never abandon you.* Anticipation can help you mentally prepare for your valley troubles. God promises that you will walk *through* the valley – not just into the valley to be left there, but through it to green pastures. If you are in the valley of the shadow of death, remember that God will never abandon you in the valley. He will bring you out to the other side. God promises to be with you through your trouble.

*Thank You, Lord, for leading me through the dark night.*

## Lesson Nine I Will Fear No Evil

Sheep walk confidently through the threatening shadows of a valley because their shepherd is with them. When darkness obscures the path, the shepherd guides them. When predators lurk in the shadows of nearby caves, he protects them. If they fall into a crevice, he will rescue them. If they grow hungry or thirsty, he knows where to find green pastures and still waters.

*Lord, guide me through life's threatening problems.*

When we say, "I will fear no evil," it may sound as if we are trusting in our own courage. But only bullies who don't understand the complexities of life would boast, "I am not afraid of anything." Never could a sheep make that boast, because of all the animals, sheep are among the most helpless. They cannot stand courageously against a lion that could rip them apart with a swat of his mighty paw. Nor can sheep walk fearlessly into battle against any other animal. How could they? They have no weapons – no means to defend themselves and nothing with which to attack their predators.

Yet the Bible tells us that we can say with confidence, "I will fear no evil." Does this mean we, as the Lord's sheep, should never get scared? No! Many sheep have quivered in the face of approaching death. There are many things to be fearful of, but you should never fear evil. If you fear the Lord who is your Shepherd, He will take care of evil.

Does this mean that sheep should have courage? Yes! Because you belong to the Shepherd, you can testify, "I will fear no evil." The Shepherd can fight the lion for you.

*Lord, teach me to let You fight my battles.*

Sheep spend their days nose down in pastures of fresh, green grass, paying no attention to perimeter defense. Almost anything could destroy them. When a sheep hears the roar of a bear or lion from behind nearby rocks, what does it do? The sheep lifts its head from grazing and looks around to see that the shepherd is nearby. When it sees the shepherd, the sheep calmly goes back to grazing, because the shepherd is close by to protect the sheep.

The Bible describes the devil as a roaring, hungry lion that walks about seeking whom it may devour (see 1 Peter 5:8). Have you heard a lion's roar in your soul lately? Did it send a shiver up your spine? Did you look around to make sure the Lord was nearby to protect you?

*Lord, come over here near me.*

When you hear the lion roar, can you say, "I will fear no evil"? You can if you are in a right relationship with Jesus, the Shepherd. When you are near to the Lord, you are safe. The question is not whether you can protect yourself from the evil one. The question is, do you belong to the Shepherd? If you do, He can fend off all your enemies.

Jesus said to John on the Isle of Patmos, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death" (Revelation 1:17, 18). What does this say to you? Jesus holds the keys to death. He knows when you are going to die, and nothing can destroy before that time. Trust the Shepherd to protect you until then and to guide you through the experience.

He has promised:

In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:2,3).

When it comes time to die, look around for the One who has the keys in His hand. Listen for His words as He cries out, "Hold on! I am coming. I'll open heaven's door." Because you already know that you'll go to be with the Lord when you die, you should say, "I will fear no evil."

Since the Shepherd knows everything from the beginning and what will happen in the end, you ought to feel safe trusting Him with all your life.

You cannot see what God sees, but there is one thing you can do that will help you get rid of fears: Look at them through the eyes of Jesus. He knows all about your fears, and He knows they are nothing. When you look at your fears through His eyes, they seem so small. He is omnipresent and can detect whatever is lurking on the perimeter of your life. He has omniscient knowledge about everything that will happen, so He can guide you to safety. He has omnipotent power to accomplish His will in your life. And when life is over, he will make sure you arrive at your destination in heaven with Him.

*Lord, because You know everything, I trust You with my future.*

When David said, "I will fear no evil," notice the things he left out. He could have said, "I will fear no evil," notice the things he left out. He could have said, "I will fear no man," "no circumstance," "no sickness," "no problem," or even "I will not fear death." Why did he single out evil? Because evil comes from the one who wants to harm us. The fear of death can be evil in the hands of Satan; but the event of death may be good in God's hands, for death may stop suffering or loneliness. Death may stop a sinner from further sin that would have brought dire consequences to his family.

All of us must die, but none of us has to fear death because Jesus holds the keys to death. When things get scary and you're afraid of dying, hang on until the One with the keys gets there.

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Actually, the only thing we have to fear is God Himself. Jesus told us, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). You are afraid of the wrong thing: You are afraid of the devil, but all he can do is kill the body. You should fear God. He can cast you into hell where body and soul are lost.

*Lord, I was afraid of You until the blood of Jesus cleansed me of sin.*

The last petition of the Lord's Prayer is about the devil: "Deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13). Every day I pray for God to deliver me from evil one. When I do, then I can confidently say with the psalmist, "I will fear no evil."

Why do I not fear the evil one? Because greater is He who is within me than he who is in the world (see 1 John 4:4). Two little boys were fighting, and the bully threatened the smaller boy. But the spunky little guy didn't back down, saying, "My dad can whip your dad!" So I will fear no evil because my Father in heaven can whip the father of lies from hell.

## **Lesson Ten** **For You Are With Me**

What a wonderful promise: “Thou are with me” (Psalm 23:4, KJV). But the promise is even greater when you examine the different places where the Lord goes with you. Most people think of God being near only in church or when we pray. And, of course, we expect the Lord to be with us when we go to present the gospel to the lost or when we perform a good deed of mercy. But Psalm 23 tells us that the Lord is with us both in difficult places and in restful pastures.

The Lord is not a fair-weather friend who jumps ship at the first sign of a storm. Can you think of any person the Lord has ever left? Not me! There are plenty of illustrations in the Bible of people leaving God and for many different reasons. The prodigal son left for the pleasures of sin. King Saul left because of his jealousy of David. Judas left for money. Paul wrote, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world” (2 Timothy 4:10). But the shepherd won’t forsake his sheep, and the Lord won’t leave you.

*Lord, thank You for this promise.*

Jesus spent a morning preaching to the multitudes, and then He directed His disciples to head to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He needed rest. But a storm would hit the lake as the disciples crossed to the other side. Jesus must have known about it; He knows all things. Nevertheless, He sent the disciples into a coming storm. The best part of the story is that Jesus went with them into the storm, even though He was asleep (see Luke 8:22-25).

Have you ever noticed how storms bother us more than they bother the Lord? Jesus knew the storm was coming, but was he concerned? No! He went to sleep. Doesn’t that say something about the troubles in your life? Your storms bother you a lot more than they trouble the Lord.

*Lord, help me see my storms through Your eyes.*

What did the disciples do when the waves became rough? They didn’t turn to the Lord for help when the storm suddenly broke around them. They leaned against the oars, they hoisted the sails, they bailed water ... and bailed water ... and bailed water. They did everything they could to get out of trouble. That is, they did everything but ask the Lord for help. They reacted probably just like you react when you get into trouble. You do everything you can think of to solve your problem. You forget that the Lord is with you in the boat. You forget that the Lord knows about the storm and the he sent you into the storm. But He is with you.

*Lord, let me never forget Your presence is with me when trouble comes.*

Only when the disciples asked for help did the Lord awaken and calm the sea. Though the disciples were probably irritated when they yelled, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” (Luke 8:24), at least they went to Jesus with their predicament. Did Jesus care that the disciples were irritated? No. Did He care whether they perished? Yes! He cares for His own.

*Lord, thank You for caring for me.*

Maybe you are walking toward a storm without even realizing it. There is no great rebellion or sin in your life, so you don’t think you are straying from the fold. You are just going your own way, doing your own thing. Then suddenly you realize that the dark night of trouble is upon you. Even then, the Lord is with you.

*Lord, help me see Your presence in my life at all times.*

An earthly shepherd can't know everything, and he may not realize it at first when one of his flock wanders off. But no one can wander from the heavenly Shepherd. He does know everything! He knows when you disobey Him and when you go off to feed yourself on the husks of this world. Do you realize that the Lord goes with you when you sin? Nothing happens in your life that catches the Lord off guard.

*Lord, I'm grateful that I can't wander away without Your knowing it.*

If the Lord knows all things and is always with you, then why doesn't He stop you from wandering? Why doesn't God do something to keep you from sinning? That's a good question. Your answer is found in the essence of Christianity. Theologically, the answer is human responsibility. The heavenly Shepherd lets His sheep make some decisions because they are responsible for their walk with Him.

The Lord did not design us to act like stuffed animals – the kind that grandmothers bring as gifts for their grandchildren. While a stuffed sheep is a nice toy to keep a grandchild happy, it's not God's plan for you and me. We are not stuffed sheep. The Lord wants you to love Him, obey Him and worship Him. The Lord wants you to be an acting, thinking, responding person. Because the Lord wants something from you, He created you with the freedom of choice. You can choose – or refuse – to love Him.

So now you can give the Lord something that He wants. God has everything except your worship. The Father wants to hear you say "Thank You" and "I love You." The human response of fellowship can't come from a stuffed sheep; it comes only from the heart of one who is made in His image. It comes from one who has the ability to say yes or no.

### **What does the Shepherd do when you begin to stray?**

First, He speaks to you through your conscience, saying, don't do it! But you go there anyway. Next, the Shepherd speaks to you through His Word, the Bible. You know what is right because you hear the Word preached in church or sang the message of Scripture in hymns. But still you disobey. Sometimes the Shepherd speaks to you through the laws of government, and at other times He speaks through the natural consequences of your rebellion.

*Lord, when I stray, come after me.*

Some sheep ask, "Where was God when I strayed?" The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm has the answer: "You are with me." The heavenly Shepherd was with you from the moment you began to stray. He was your conscience telling you to stop. He spoke to you through the Bible and through your memory. He tried to stop you through circumstances. The Shepherd takes care of you in many ways, even when you don't see His hand working in your life.

Lord, I've strayed. Thank You for Your faithfulness in coming after me.

The heavenly Shepherd walks patiently with you through the dark valley, waiting for the occasion when you finally realize your sin...when you are sorry for your disobedience...when you turn back to Him...when you repent and seek His fellowship. When that moment of realization comes, cry out like a lost sheep. He will be there to help you.

The prodigal son demanded his share of the family inheritance and then squandered it on riotous pleasures and fair-weather friends. When his money ran out, his friends left him and ended up feeding pigs. When he was hungry, he had to eat pig food. Then, the Bible declares, "he came to himself" (Luke 15:17). The prodigal son was fed up with his life, so he cried out, "I will arise and go to my father" (Luke 15:18). Have you been there, done

that? Have you come to yourself in the pigpen? Are you willing to return to your heavenly Father? He awaits you with open arms.

*Lord, search out any hidden sin in my heart that keeps me from You.*

**Why does the Lord go with His sheep when they wander away from His sheepfold?** Because He wants to be there when they come to their senses. The eternal Shepherd is with you so He can receive you back to Himself. Then He will bring you out of the dark valley. Have you been lost in any dark valleys lately?

## Lesson Eleven

### Your Rod And Your Staff, They Comfort Me

The shepherd is not afraid of danger, because he knows the safest trail through the valley. The shepherd is courageous because he has a club – a rod – to drive away the enemy. The shepherd loves his sheep; and he is not reluctant to use his rod, nor is he fearful to attack an enemy. And because he knows how to use the rod, enemies keep their distance. He knows the ways of the predators.

*Father, because You know the enemy, I will walk with You.*

The shepherd also carries a staff to guide the sheep in the right paths and to rescue them when they fall into cracks and crevasses.

*Lord, teach me to be cautious about temptation of sin and help me to aggressively overcome its dangers.*

Yea, 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 (Psalm 23:4).

People usually think of the rod and staff as being the same thing, but actually they are two different instruments carried by the shepherd. Before the days of pistols and rifles, the shepherds had to make their own weapons. Many shepherds didn't have an ax or a knife to fight off the predators, so they used the best means available. The shepherd's rod was usually a thick, heavy stick – sometimes with a heavy knot on one end, carved from a root or tree joint – that was used to club an enemy. The shepherd could send a wolf running with a good, hard *whack!*

Using the best tools available, shepherds become skillful in defending their sheep. Some shepherds preferred to carry a short heavy club, so that in a close battle they could smash the predators at a distance. Many shepherds kept a shorter club fastened to their belts, always ready to defend the sheep.

*Lord, I thank You for Your weapons that can protect me.*

The rod is an important instrument for a shepherd. Moses was a shepherd in the Sinai Desert for 40 years. When God called him to service, Moses hesitated. God told him to throw his rod on the ground, and it became a serpent. This was a miraculous demonstration of God's authority in Moses' life (see Exodus 4:1-5). Later, to demonstrate God's power to Pharaoh, Moses' brother Aaron threw his rod to the ground and it, too, became a snake. The sorcerers of Egypt duplicated the feat with a pseudomiracle, a magic trick, but God demonstrated His greater power as the serpent of Aaron swallowed up the serpents of the magicians (see Exodus 7:81-12).

For Jewish shepherds, the rod was not just a weapon; it also contained the family genealogy. Just as some American families write their genealogy in the family Bible, so the head of each Jewish family carved his genealogy on his rod (see Numbers 17:2). When a father was about to die, he would pass his rod on to his sons, and it was kept in the family to remind them of their lineage. Some believe that when Moses wrote the genealogy of the various families of Israel, he was copying the names from the family rods.

One of the basic teachings of Psalm 23 is that the shepherd has a way to teach us. When a Jewish son misbehaved, he was disciplined with the family rod. The son was not

beaten just to inflict pain, but rather, the rod reminded the disobedient son of family expectations, family tradition and family authority. “He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly” (Proverbs 13:24). Has God had to discipline you latterly?

*Lord, keep me in close relationship with the Shepherd.*

The shepherd also had a staff, usually as tall as his head – sometimes taller – with a hook, or crook, at one end. The staff was made when a stick was tender, supple and green; it was bent into a crook and allowed to harden. The staff was used for directing the sheep. When sheep didn’t follow their shepherd, he would reach out with the staff to direct straying sheep back into the fold.

The shepherd often used the staff as a walking stick to steady himself when climbing over large rocks or when small gravel shifted under his feet. The crook at the end could be used for rescuing a lamb that had slipped off the path or fallen into a creek. The shepherd tenderly placed the crook under the lamb and lifted it back to safety.

*Lord, because I will need to be rescued many times in my life, keep coming after me.*

Are you a sheep that wanders from the shepherd into the dark valley? When the enemy appears, what instrument do you use to defend yourself? Do you use your skillful arguments? Your money? Your position? Your education? So often we depend on our own tools and not on those of the Shepherd. The Shepherd’s rod is available to defend us, but the club is wielded by the Shepherd, not the sheep.

Notice in God’s Word does it mention a sheep carrying a club to defend itself. Nor do they have a staff for rescuing another sheep. Sheep have to depend entirely upon their shepherd for direction and safety. How about you? Are you depending entirely upon the Shepherd for your direction and safety?

*Lord, help me learn the folly of self-defense. Teach me the security of Your defense.*

The staff is the most recognizable symbol of shepherding; we have all seen pictures of a shepherd holding a staff with its crook at the upper end. When you walk through the valley of dark shadows, glance up every once in a while to see the staff of your Shepherd high in the air. Watch for the Shepherd’s crook in front of you. When you see it leading the way, you have nothing to fear.

*Lord, help me to keep my eyes on you.*

A shepherd lifts up his staff over the sheep to bless them. When Joshua led the Israelites into battle against the Amalekites, Moses went up onto a hill to watch the battle and to pray for victory, Moses said, “I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand” (Exodus 17:9). When Moses held up the staff in his hand, Israel prevailed in the battle; but when Moses lowered his staff, Amalek beat back the forces of Joshua. So two companions held up Moses’ arms until the victory was realized, because the uplifted staff was symbolic of God’s blessing.

*Lord, raise Your staff over me.*

In this world, we live with more stress and pressure than ever before. There seem to be more temptations around every corner waiting to tear us down, and we often have more bad days in life than good days. We seem to be constantly climbing over problems – mountains that block us from moving forward in God’s plan for our lives. Isn’t it good news that the Shepherd will comfort you both on the path and when you get the green pastures?

*Lord, I know trouble is coming. Help me get ready for it.*

**Isn't "comfort" a strange word to be used in this psalm?** Isn't comfort something you expect from a bowl of chicken soup or a warm bed? How can you be comforted when you're walking through a dangerous valley – or when you're climbing, crawling and running through the obstacle course of life? The problem with the word "comfort" in Psalm 23 is that in our modern language it suggests the wrong thing – it suggests resting. Technically, the word "comfort" here can be translated "help". You could read this promise, "Your rod and Your staff, they help me."

If a wolf attacks, you don't want to try hiding under the covers of a comfortable bed; the wolf will find you and devour you. Instead, you want the help of a fearless shepherd wielding a lethal club. Once the shepherd swings his club and the wolf runs away, then you are comforted. So in that sense, the club is a comfort to you. So when you think of the word "comfort," think of the results the sheep experiences when the shepherd's club protects it from the wolf.

### **THINK CAUSE AND EFFECT TO UNDERSTAND COMFORT**

#### **Cause**

Thy rod helps me.  
Thy staff directs me.

#### **Effect**

I feel comforted.  
I feel assured.

Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Comforter, much like the club and staff are a means of comfort. Jesus promised, "I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter...the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16, 17, KJV) The Comforter is not like a blanket on a bed, nor is the Comforter a person who comes to soothe you when you are emotionally upset. "Comforter" comes from the Greek word *parakletos*, which means "helper." The Holy Spirit helps you live the Christian life. He helps you through difficult times, and you are comforted. This is why He is called the Comforter.

When sin sneaks up to deceive you, the Holy Spirit is there to use His club to protect you from evil. How does the Holy Spirit keep believers on track? He uses negative influence, conviction, to warn you of sin and keep you pure and holy.

But the Holy Spirit also employs a positive influence, guidance, to lead believers into the truth. His guidance is similar to the shepherd staff that gives direction to the sheep.

**So how does Jesus the Shepherd comfort you?** By the ministry of the Holy Spirit who comes to warn you when you stray into sin, and by the Spirit's ministry of directing you into the will of God.

Some sheep in the field don't follow close to the shepherd because they're afraid of him. Perhaps they're afraid because he yelled at them when they strayed. Has the Lord ever yelled at you? Sometimes you are like the sheep, straying too close to the edge of the cliff, in danger of toppling over. For your own safety, the Shepherd yells, "Come back!" But you misunderstood His intent and though the Lord was angry with you because He shouted at you.

*Lord, help me always understand when You shout at me.*

The Shepherd has a club to protect you, but He would rather not use it unless He has to. No right-thinking shepherd ever picks a fight with a wolf, bear or lion. The shepherd could be wounded in a battle, and some of his sheep could be hurt or maimed. There seems to be a lot of sin around you, and Satan seems to be having his day. Have you ever thought that maybe the Lord hasn't picked His final fight yet with Satan because He is protecting His sheep on the earth? When it comes to the final days and the Lord pours out

His tribulation on the earth, Satan will lash out God's people in retaliation. That final judgment is coming, and God will be ready for the confrontation. Just make sure the Lord is your Shepherd, so when that day finally comes, you will be on the Shepherd's side.

Jesus tells about the many enemies of His sheep. Sometimes Satan poses as an "angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14) and comes in among the sheep to destroy them. The enemy is like a thief sneaking into your house at night to steal your property (see John 10:10). Sometimes false teachers sneak into churches to steal sheep from the Lord. False teachers are like muggers who sneak up behind you to club you and steal your money. They deny the essence of Christianity, robbing the Bible of its supernatural nature. They deny the essence of Christianity, robbing the Bible of its supernatural nature. They deny the miracles and the power and necessity of the Lord's death and resurrection.

The hireling is also an enemy of the sheep. He watches sheep just for the money; so when the wolf comes, the hireling runs away, because he is more interested in self-protection than in guarding the sheep (see John 10:11-13).

The wolf is Satan who comes to "steal, kill and destroy" (John 10:10). The enemy will steal sheep because he wants their allegiance, often to help him steal other sheep. But Satan is the natural enemy of the sheep. He will kill you for no other purpose than to destroy your life.

### **WHO ARE THE ENEMIS OF THE SHEEP**

The stranger (John 10:5)	-	unprepared ministers
The thief (John 10:10)	-	false religious teachers
The hireling (John 10:12)	-	uncommitted ministers
The wolf (John 10:12)	-	Satan

When everything goes right in your life, you don't seem to need the Shepherd. You satisfy your appetite in green pastures and drink from pools of still water. You sense no danger, no anxiety and no fear. You think you don't need the Shepherd anymore, and you soon forget about Him. But when the first sign of danger arises, you desperately look around for Him in the dark of night. Isn't it true that some of the greatest lessons you have learned were in the darkest time of night?

Lord, help me learn so I don't need to go through the darkness.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.  
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned,  
Nor shall the flame scorch you (Isaiah 43:2).

## Lesson Twelve

### You Prepare A Table Before Me In The Presence Of My Enemies

In Psalm 23, the sheep do not eat until they have been lead through a threatening valley of dark shadows. Exiting danger, the sheep enter a lush green pasture that provides more than enough food. This is a picture of a table of food spread before them. Now the enemies of the sheep can't attack them; they can only watch from a distance as the sheep graze peacefully in a bountiful pasture.

*Thank You, Lord, for the joy of anticipation.*

You prepare a table full of food to feed me in the presence of my enemies  
(Psalm 23:5).

Notice where your table full of food is located – not in a secluded castle in a faraway land, but in the presence of your enemies. Usually when you come through a scary valley – a dangerous situation – you come out the other side running. Maybe you are not literally running, but on the inside your heart is racing. When running from danger, you are not thinking about a meal. All you are thinking about is escaping the predator that is dogging your footsteps. You are obsessed with the need to escape to some protected spot. You want to climb a tree and death shadows can't climb; you want to hide behind a protective wall that death shadows can't penetrate.

*Thank You, Lord, for Your guidance through my dark days.*

Being scared to death takes your mind off your hunger – frightened people do not think about food. But the Shepherd thinks differently. He not only wants His sheep to feel safe, He wants to provide a place for them to eat until they are satisfied. A table full of food makes them feel confident and victorious. Because the Lord is your Shepherd, He will lead you from a threatening situation to where you will enjoy an abundant meal.

*Lord, thank You for making me feel secure.*

But there's one thing better than food at His banquet: the intimate fellowship you share with someone you love as you eat a meal with Him. You will commune with your Lord at the banquet table: "My beloved is mine and I am his" (Song of Songs 2:16). At the Shepherd's banquet table, you will get close to Him, learn from Him and become like Him.

*Lord, forgive me for not always feeling on the bread of life.*

As you run from danger, God does not give you a quick squirt of water from a plastic bottle like you're a boxer between rounds. You are not like the marathon runner swigging water as he frantically dashes toward the finish line. The next time you are running scared, remember what's waiting for you outside the valley: a full table and an overflowing cup.

*Lord, I hear You saying, "Come, sit down and eat."*

Think of an antelope being chased by a lion – it doesn't have time to drink and eat. When we are in danger, most of us tend to panic when we feel that time is running out. In desperation we cry, "I must do something!" Our hearts point...we swear...we gasp big gulps of air. We keep saying, "I've got to get away!" Stop and let the Lord feed you and give you a gigantic drink of refreshing water. Relax. You don't need to "eat and run." Take your time for s spiritual feast, because the Lord has spread a table in the presence of your enemies and your cup overflows.

You need to tell yourself that it's okay to pause and breath. God has invited you to a great feast of spiritual food, but do you know how to find His restaurant? The meal is called Communion, where you get to know God intimately. Nothing else in life satisfies like knowing God; and no food will taste as good as obeying His commandments: "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!" (Psalm 34:8).

When you pick out a restaurant, what are you looking for? Good food, good service and a nice atmosphere. The ambiance, or setting, is just as important as the food, because good food can't be enjoyed in filthy surroundings. Nor can you enjoy a meal when you're surrounded by people yelling or fighting. To enjoy a meal takes more than good food in your mouth; it involves the entire experience. So why does the Shepherd feed us in the presence of our enemies? Isn't that a strange setting in which to throw a feast?

Why would God feed His sheep in the presence of our enemies? Perhaps it's a victory banquet, and God is telling our enemies that He can protect His sheep from them. Perhaps it's the other way around. Maybe God is telling us that He has conquered all our enemies, so we will trust Him the next time we are in a dark valley. The Shepherd knows His sheep. He knows we will stray again into the dark valley, and He knows there will be dark shadows pursuing us in the future.

*Lord, deliver me constantly from the evil one.*

When the psalmist uses the word "presence," what does he mean? Obviously, when two people meet, they are in each other's presence. But the enemy of the sheep is not sitting next to them at the banquet table. Sheep and predator are not even in the same pasture. Or to put it in today's terminology, they're not even on the same block. When you eat in the presence of your enemies, that means they can see you – but only from a distance. Perhaps the wolf is on a cliff or the bear is lurking in some dark woods. They are in the presence of the sheep, or in their sight line, but sheep and predator are worlds apart because of the shepherd. Is the Shepherd protecting you?

*Lord, I feel safe in the Shepherd's care.*

David uses the words "my enemies" (Psalm 23:5), which refer not just any enemies but rather personal enemies. Perhaps the enemies were those who had a vendetta against David's life – i.e., Saul or Absalom – or murderers set to kill David. Do you have enemies? Do you have someone who particularly hates you? If you have enemies, God will give you a feast so they can look on to see His protection.

The word "enemies" has an unusual ring to it. David doesn't tell us we will eat in the presence of evil persons, although there is much evil in the world. David doesn't mean we will eat in the presence of robbers. After all, robbers merely want to steal from you; they probably don't hold a grudge against you. David chose the word "enemies" to show that there is hatred or animosity between the predator and the sheep. Remember, there are people in this world who hate God's sheep. They hate sheep just because they're sheep. And they particularly hate you, because you are the Lord's sheep.

*Lord, I belong to You. Protect me.*

You probably live your life as a series of threatening valleys and enjoyable banquet tables. Like other believers, you are not exempt from dark days. As Job observed, "Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble" (Job 14:1). Because the Shepherd loves you, He won't let you spend your whole life in the middle of storms. Sun will shine upon you some of the time. You may go through a dark valley, but there will be a sunny pasture waiting for you on the other side of your trouble.

*Lord, help me make it through.*

**Why do some sheep have more valley experiences than others?** Only the Shepherd knows. Why do some sheep have more banquet days than others? The Lord has a different purpose for each life. What's His purpose for you? No one can answer but the Shepherd, so get close to Him.

Perhaps you are constantly threatened by death shadows and the night terrifies you because you've never learned to walk alongside the Shepherd. You are in more danger than others because you walk too close to the edge of the precipice.

*Lord, keep me close to You.*

When you have finished eating from the Lord's table, do not jump up and start running again. Do not look around nervously for the death shadow or listen for the voice of the enemy. The Shepherd has said, "Surely goodness and mercy will follow [you] all the days of [your] life" (Psalm 23:6). If you think the death shadow is still following and you are still trying to escape, you are looking for the wrong thing.

Learn to look to God, and when you find Him you'll realize the sound behind you is not the enemy. It's the sound of God's goodness and mercy following you according to His promise. And He will send goodness and mercy to follow you all the days of your life. He will protect you and take you to live with Him in heaven when this life is over.

Now, come to His table. Your cup is full, the food is warm and ready, and it's time to sit down and eat. The Lord is there, for He has said, "I will be with you."

## Lesson Thirteen

### You Anoint My Head With Oil

You needed oil today. Why? Because you came through a death valley where the thorns scratched you legs. You fell in a ravine and ripped your arm. When you came out of the valley, the Shepherd anointed your wounds. He poured oil on them to cleanse them and prevent infection and disease. The oil was soothing. It relieved irritation and began the healing process.

*Lord, cleanse me from any sin or imperfection that would infect me.*

The Shepherd remembers that at special banquets, certain honored guests have oil poured upon their heads in recognition of their attendance at the meal. It is an oil of acceptance and honor, and the one who is anointed with oil is given special recognition by all the other guests at the banquet.

*Lord, thank You for Your unique anointing on my life. May I fulfill Your purposes for my life.*

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

The first thing on the mind of sheep after they leave a dark, threatening valley is their appetite and thirst. After he has seen to those needs, the shepherd has another concern. He examines the wounds of his animals. He knows that if impurities are not washed away, a wound will get infected. He also knows that oil will speed the healing process. So while the sheep are eating in the pasture, the shepherd is busy cleaning their wounds with oil. Each wound is carefully washed. Now healing can begin.

*Jehovah-Rophi, thank You for healing me.*

Do you have any wounds that might fester? Have you received any dirty cuts from gossip? Have you been rouged up by the opposition? Maybe you have some gashes or burn marks because someone told lies about you. What are you going to do about these problems? Let the Shepherd pour out His oil of cleansing to rid you of any dirty sin or damaging wounds. Forgive those who have lied against you and those who have gossiped about you. Pray for those who have abused you.

Sometimes when you pray good for your enemy, you are praying “coals of fire on his head” (Romans 12:20). But don’t pray for judgment on your enemies; pray instead for God to bless them. Sometimes the only way for God to bless them is to deal with their sin. But judgment is not your concern. Get everything between you and God straight, then let God deal with things between Him and them. Ultimately, we want our enemies to turn and follow the Shepherd as we follow Him – even those who have sinned against us the most. When you pray in the Holy Spirit, His oil will cleanse you from impure attitudes that could otherwise destroy your life if you were to allow them to fester.

*Lord, cleanse my attitude.*

But the shepherd pious on oil for more than just cleansing; he knows oil feels good. Left unattended, the sheep’s wounds will burn, itch and sting. Sometimes a wound throbs with unceasing pain. Have you ever had a headache you couldn’t get rid of? Have you ever worked so hard around the house that every muscle in your body ached? What about emotional problems? Have you ever had a heartache that wouldn’t go away? Have

problems ever invaded your dreams so you could no longer sleep? What you need is oil from the Shepherd. You need the oil of the Holy Spirit to soothe your pain.

*Lord, thank You for pouring the oil of the Holy spirit on my life.*

Do you need some oil today? Make sure you are resting near the Shepherd so He can reach out to pour oil into your wounds. There is no advantage to sitting by yourself, away from the flock and away from the Shepherd. Don't hurt just for the sake of hurting – that's neurotic. Lift your head, look around to find the Shepherd, then cozy up close to Him so He can anoint your wounds with oil.

*Lord, here I come!*

As I mentioned earlier, in Bible times honored guests were anointed with oil. They were given a special place at the table and special portions of food that others did not receive. Do you feel like you have been eating at the foot of the Lord's table? Maybe you feel like you have been eating in the kitchen! But the Shepherd has a special place for you, and He has a special plat of food. Come, there is a chair reserved for you. Eat from the best china and use the silver utensils. You are an honored guest, because you are one of His sheep.

*Mmm, this food is good, Lord. Thank You for accepting me.*

Some scholars think an aging David wrote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm while fleeing from his son, Absalom, who had rebelled against his father and taken over the kingdom. Let's travel back for a moment to steal a glimpse at what David might have experienced during this difficult time in his life.

As David writes about the Lord as his Shepherd, his thoughts take him back to when, as a mere 16-year-old boy, he was anointed as the future king of Israel. It was near the Kidron Valley in Bethlehem where the prophet Samuel had come to the house of Jesse, David's father, under the direction of God. There in the presence of his father and brothers, Samuel poured oil over David's head and anointed him into the office of king (see 1 Samuel 16:1-13).

Now, many years later, David has only a handful of loyal followers, as he is forced to abandon his throne and the security of Jerusalem. The elderly David has been forced to flee down the same Kidron Valley toward the plains of Jordan. Imagine it: As David turns to look back up at Jerusalem, he knows he is leaving the city that stands for the central authority of his kingdom. All the symbols of his power have been stripped from him – there's no throne, no crown, no scepter, no walls of Jerusalem to protect him. David has lost all his outward authority, yet still – still! – he can write, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

God had placed David into the office of king, but now his son Absalom is trying to kill him. Absalom has taken over the office with crude force. With tears in his eyes, David remembers, "You anoint my head with oil."

In biblical days oil was a symbol of kingly authority, because oil was special to God. In Israel at that time, candidates for prophet, priest and king were inducted into these divine offices by anointing with oil; prophet, priest and king all had oil poured on their heads.

What does memory do for David? He remembers that God took the initiative to anoint him. Memory can do the same for you. Remember that it was your heavenly Shepherd who came looking for you when you strayed from His fold. Remember that it is the Lord who has always loved you and cared for you. He brought you back to Himself – not to punish you but to give you food to eat and water to drink. In spite of everything you have done, the Lord anoints your head with oil.

*Lord, I don't know why You anoint me with oil, but thank You.*

**Do you understand the full meaning of oil upon the head?** The angel told Mary that her son Jesus would sit upon the throne of David – her Son would be the Anointed One. That phrase, “Anointed One,” is “Messiah” in the Hebrew language and “Christ” in the Greek language. When we use the word “Christ,” we are actually saying “the Anointed ON” When we say “Jesus Christ,” we are saying, “Jesus the Anointed One.”

We have already said that prophet, priest and king were the threefold anointed offices in Israel. But what does that mean to you and your walk with the Shepherd? The Lord anoints you with oil to give you a special position in relationship to Him. First of all, because you belong to Jesus, you are “in Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:30). You are in the Messiah, the Anointed One. Jesus told His disciples about their special position: “You in Me, and I in You” (John 14:20) describes the intimacy all believers would have with God’s Son. So when you read about the Lord anointing you with oil, remember that you are in Christ and that He is in your heart.

How close are you to God the Father? You are as close as His Son, for you are in His Son, and He is in you: “Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Lord, anoint with the oil of Your presence.

There is another meaning associated with oil. In Scripture, oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. When we are anointed with oil, it is a picture of the Holy Spirit coming into our lives. When you first accepted Christ as your Savior, the Holy Spirit entered your soul, bringing with Him eternal life. When you face special tasks of service, you can be filled with the Holy Spirit to do the job for God. The New Testament mentions that the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit when they ministered for the Lord (see Acts 2:4; 4:8, 41). Then there are other times when you just want the fullness of the Holy Spirit in your life. You want His anointing. Have you had the Holy Spirit poured out on you lately?

*Lord, I want the anointing.*

When the shepherd anoints his sheep with oil, he doesn’t anoint all his sheep. He can’t anoint those that are straying, nor can he anoint those that are busy eating and drinking. If you are out of arm’s reach of the Shepherd, how can He anoint you? If you are not in the pasture, there is no way He can anoint you. The key to being anointed by the Shepherd is relationship. You must be close to Him. Are you within arm’s reach of the Lord?

*Lord, I’m coming over by You. Will You anoint me?*

**To receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit you must recognize that there are steps – things you must do to get it.**

*You must want it.* Do you honestly want the Holy Spirit in your life?

*Get within arm’s length of the Shepherd.* You need to be close enough for His loving arm to reach out and pour the oil of the Holy Spirit on you. Isn’t this a good time to move close?

*Seek the Holy Spirit’s oil.* You have to know where the spout is located and then stand under the flow. Seeking God has always been a key to revival – both personal and group revival. Seeking God means spending time in prayer and meditation. It means worshiping God and enjoying fellowship with Him. When you see the oil pouring out somewhere else, go there to stand under the spout. When you see others with oil on their heads, go talk with them, pray with them and find out how they obtained the oil. Maybe they will help you position yourself for the outpouring of His oil.

*Open up your life to the Holy Spirit.* You can't open your life until you pay attention to the Shepherd. This means yielding, surrendering, dedicating or consecrating yourself. You become passive and let God take over the rule of your life.

*Ask for it.* "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2).

*Receive it by faith.* What do I mean by faith reception? Think of pouring syrup from a jar. (This comparison is used because syrup's consistency is similar to that of a heavy oil). When you tip the jar of syrup it takes a few seconds before the syrup actually starts dripping from the spout onto your waffles. When you have asked for the fullness of the Holy Spirit, you may not get it immediately. It's not because the Shepherd can't give it immediately. Maybe He is not ready to give it because you're not ready to receive it. Maybe you have hidden sin in your life that needs uncovering and cleansing. Maybe you are not yet close enough to Him. Maybe the Shepherd is looking for faith on your part to believe that you will receive. So when you tip the jar and the oil doesn't come out immediately, keep praying, keep believing – you need patience. Wait for the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and it will come if you wait long enough.

*Keep your cup under the spout.* Don't go running all over the place looking for other oils that run out faster. You can't come to church once or try God for one day or pray once for an answer. The Lord is looking for true believers – those who mean business. If you didn't get your cup filled, don't go looking elsewhere for fun and pleasure. That's not the answer.

*Finally, you must act on the anointing when it comes.* When you get the Holy Spirit, use the anointing for the reason that He was poured out upon you: to receive God's blessings and share them with others. Rejoice in the Lord, worship God, then serve other people.

## Lesson 14

### My Cup Runs Over

It's been a long, hot trip through the barren desert. Your Shepherd is up ahead, guiding you and the flock to lush green pastures. You begin to realize how thirsty you are. Then a familiar, welcome scent reaches your nostrils: water. The thought of water makes you walk faster, more confidently. Then you see it – a pasture and a cool, still pond of crystal-clear water. The pasture is like a table spread before you with all the enjoyable food you can eat. The pool of pure water looks like a cup – your favorite cup – that's running over with your favorite drink. The pool is large and deep, but you can see clear to the bottom. You know you could never drink it all. It's all you can drink – and more.

*Lord, thank You for good water to drink when I'm thirsty. Thank You for providing even more than I can drink.*

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies....my cup runneth over (Psalm 23:5, KJV).

Consider the phrase “my cup.” When you come to the Lord's table, you don't see a strange cup, a new cup or a beautiful cup. While these may be nice, when you're thirsty, you want to drink out of *your* cup. Have you ever noticed how many people have a favorite cup for drinking their coffee? Many people keep a favorite coffee cup at work so they don't have to drink from a paper or Styrofoam cup.

*Thank You, Lord, for letting me drink from my cup.*

The psalmist didn't say, “My cup ran over,” describing the past blessings of God. Some people always talk about what God did for them in the past. Some have never washed out the foam from yesterday's blessing. Each day they go to the shelf and inspect their cup to see if the foam from a previous blessing is still there. They may even run a funder around the inside of the cup to get any lingering taste. Find the spout that's pouring out today's blessing and get your cup refilled. Then you can praise God and say, “My cup is running over now!”

*Lord, let it flow.*

Some say, “My cup will run over.” Right now their life is empty and they are thirsty. If you pressed these people, they would have to say, “My cup is empty.” But as soon as they confessed their thirst, they would optimistically predict, “My cup will overflow someday.” Do you live in the future? Do you plan to have the power of God someday? Do you plan to study the Bible all day or go to a retreat center where you will fast and pray for a day or even several days? Don't rob yourself of today's blessing by living in hope of a future that may never get here. My friend John Maxwell says, “Life is a journey, not a destination.” You have a full cup today.

*Lord, fill my cup now.*

Still other people think they have many cups. They pray optimistically, “Lord, fill up all my cups.” But that's not what the psalmist says. He describes one cup: “My cup runneth over.” Some people have “church cup,” and they want it filled on Sunday. They have another called the “Job cup,” which they want filled on payday. The student wants his “school cup” filled on exam day. And young people want their “happiness cup” filled on

date night. There are almost too many mention – sports cups, family cups, hobby cups, etc. Many have a cup hidden away in a closet that is locked. It's a lust cup or addition cup.

The problem is you really only have one cup, and it's you. All that you think and do touches every part of your life and then ricochets back to touch the original part. Your one cup is your whole life. God doesn't just fill one area of your life; He takes complete control or nothing at all. He fills all – or nothing at.

When you say "My cup runneth over," you're saying God influences all of your life with His presence. The phrase "runneth over" could refer to the source of the blessing. Perhaps it means God has so many blessings that He can pour them out on us and still have more. Remember, God doesn't have a warehouse of blessings, that will run empty sometime in the future. The Shepherd doesn't store up His blessings in any case. He is the Blesser, He is unlimited and His blessings are unlimited. If God had a pitcher of blessings, it would never run empty. Don't worry about getting left out – God will never run out of blessings.

When Jesus was thirsty, sitting on the edge of the well in Samaria, a woman arrived at the well with a bucket. Jesus said, "Give me a drink" (John 4:7). The woman at the well had been married five times and was now living with a man who was not her husband. She was probably suspicious of men and of Jesus in particular. After all, Jesus was a Jew and she was a Samaritan.

"How is that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" she asked.

Jesus answered, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water" (John 4:9, 10).

What does it mean that your cup will always be filled? God will always pour out a blessing. That doesn't mean you won't have financial problems, health problems or family problems; but when troubles come, you will have spiritual blessings from an overflowing cup.

**So how do you get your cup filled?** *First, you have to want a full cup.* This means you must get honest with yourself and God. You need to confess, "I'm thirsty, and I want a drink of water." The Bible says, "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." (Psalm 81:10). If you want a drink of water, the Shepherd will give it to you.

*The second step involves loving God.* Do you love the Lord who shepherds You? Jesus said, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23). Receive that promise. If you love Jesus, both He and the Father will make their home in our heart. That's the same as filling your cup. You are the cup, and Jesus fills you with Himself. That's abundant blessing!

*The third step is to ask God to fill your life.* If you are empty, it's because you have never asked God to fill your life. "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Why don't you pray right now for God to fill your cup?

*Lord, fill me.*

*There's a fourth step to having and overflowing cup: You must receive what the Shepherd offers.* When someone offers you a cup of coffee or hot chocolate, what do you do? You reach out and take it! You can't drink from the cup until you receive it. If you fight the entrance of God into your life, then you can't be filled.

The Shepherd will not compromise. He will not pour pure water into a dirty vessel. Why should His pure water be contaminated by your dirty cup? But then, the Shepherd

never asks His sheep to “do the dishes.” He knows sheep can’t wash dishes! If sheep have dirty cups, they can’t clean them up by themselves. So the task of cleaning the cup belongs to the Shepherd.

What must you do to get clean? You must ask Him to cleanse your cup. All you have to do is be willing to get rid of sin. Determine that you want a clean cup and ask the Shepherd to wash out the dirt. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

*Lord, come wash my dishes.*

Now that you are ready to have your cup filled and overflowing, I hope you have not missed the point that your overflowing cup is your whole life. When He fills your cup, He fills every part of your life. Some people want God to fill their mouths but not their hearts. So they go to church and say the right things, but they hold evil thoughts in their hearts. Other people want God to fill their hands for work in church, but their eyes still desire sin. Still others want God to fill their feet to do good deeds, but they are not willing to have God cleans their attitudes. If you don’t offer the total cup to God – your whole life – He can’t fill it for you. Where is your cup? Why don’t you hold it up to God with both hands?

Some people want God to fill their cup to the brim, but not a smidgen over. These are believers who fulfill every obligation at church but don’t go the extra mile. They only do what is required of them. They give exactly a tithe of their income but not a penny more. But you can’t bargain with God. You must give Him everything, so He will fill your life to overflowing. He will pour so much blessing into your life that it will spill over!

Have you ever spilled any blessings into someone else’s cup? When your cup runneth over, splash it around and let some others get wet!

Can you feel spring in the air? Your spirit is refreshed by the gentle breeze that blows over the hills and the palette of clouds that cut the heat, making it a perfect day. Your Shepherd is nearby, and there is enough food to eat and water to drink – you don't have a worry in this world.

You never plan to leave the Shepherd, nor do you intend to stray away from the flock. Sometimes you get so busy feeding yourself, however, that you just wander away. But when you begin to stray, goodness and mercy pursue you and bring you back into the fold.

*Lord, thank You for good things that keep me near You and for Your mercy that pursues me when I stray.*

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life (Psalm 23:6).

As you begin following the Shepherd, something is nipping at your heels. You are scared momentarily, because you think death and destruction are on your trail. But in fact it is the Lord's sheepdogs. Goodness and Mercy. They are right behind you to make sure you stay in the flock. Why are you worrying? God's goodness is giving you wonderful things to keep you in the flock, and God's mercy is overlooking your failures. These two sheepdogs will pursue you – not just today but for the rest of your life. Don't worry, you have the Shepherd up front guiding you and his two sheepdogs following you to make sure you keep up with the flock.

*Lord, why am I worrying when You are taking care of me?*

The first sheepdog is Goodness. The shepherd sees one of his sheep wander after some foreign grass just a little away from the flock, so he sends his sheepdog to chase the wandering sheep back to the flock. The shepherd doesn't throw a rock or stick at the sheep to hurt it. He doesn't want to hurt his sheep, nor does he want anything else to hurt it. The shepherd doesn't say, "if the sheep falls into the ravine, that will teach it a lesson."

The Shepherd does good things for his sheep – even when they stray too far away. "The goodness of God leads to repentance" (Romans 2:4). What good thing has the Shepherd done for you lately? Are you in good health? Do you have shelter against the rain? Have you eaten today? Do you have a family who loves you? Look at all the good things you have. A good God wants to do good things for you.

*Lord, give me an eye to appreciate all the good things You do for me.*

The second sheepdog pursuing you is Mercy. The Shepherd has mercy because "God is rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4). When you are rich with something, you have an abundant supply to share with others – and God has an abundant supply of mercy. Unlike the shepherd who has a few things tucked into a bag to help him with his duties, God has more than just a pocketful of mercy. The very nature of God is mercy. God has more than just a warehouse full of mercy. God is a factory, a mercy maker, and He will never run out of it.

As a matter of fact, when God began listing His qualities to describe who He is, He listed mercy first. Moses asked to see the glory of God, so the Lord descended in a clout to Mt. Sinai to answer him, proclaiming, "The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth" (Exodus 34:6). First, God says He is merciful, but He adds that He has abundant goodness. That is where the two sheepdogs get their names.

And when they are playfully running after you, they don't have a separate agenda from the Shepherd. They do the same things the Shepherd does for His sheep. The Shepherd has taught His sheepdogs well: They do good things for the sheep, and they show mercy to His charges.

**There are two sides to mercy, just as there are two sides to a door.** *The first side of the door is God's side:* Mercy reveals God's character. He loves you and chases after you with good things. If you have sinned against Him, the Shepherd has something good for you: He has *forgiveness* in His Shepherd's bag. If you have turned your back on God, the Lord has *restoration* in His satchel to bring you back into the fold. If you deserve punishment for your rebellion, the Lord has *grace* in His bag, not a whip with which to beat you.

*Grace* is God's way of giving you the exact opposite of what you deserve, rather than punishing you for being a stray sheep. In mercy the Shepherd hugs you close to Himself and rejoices over you. What do you and I describe when a child misbehaves or runs away? Punishment. What do we get when we run from God and then come back repentant? Restoration and fellowship! That's mercy.

*Lord, have mercy on me!*

*But there is a second side to the door of mercy – our side.* You felt threatened in the dark valley with death shadows chasing you, but what do you feel now? Relief! When you are relieved, your pain, distress and fears are removed. When the Shepherd shows mercy to you, you anxiety melts and you experience relief.

Paul understood mercy when he said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief...for this reason I obtained mercy" (1 Timothy 1:15, 16). Before his conversion, Paul hated Christ. He persecuted the Church and was responsible for the death of Stephen, one of Christianity's most promising young leaders. What a terrible blow to the Church! Did God punish Paul for blasphemy and murder? No! God forgave his sins so he could say, "I have obtained mercy."

Have you ever noticed how few things in life are "for sure"? Someone once said that nothing is certain except death and taxes. However, the psalmist uses the word "surely." The Shepherd is telling you that some things are certain: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow." No matter where you go, they will follow you, sticking to you like a glue. You can't shake the Shepherd's sheepdogs – they'll stick with you forever.

The psalmist doesn't say they might follow. A conditional promise could become an unfulfilled promise if we were to stray from the Shepherd. If the psalmist had said "might follow," it would have meant, "if we follow the Lord, then His sheepdogs will follow us." But that is not the message of Psalm 23. This is a psalm of relationship. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you, even when you stray into the valley of the shadow of death. The Lord is with you, and goodness and mercy will still chase you.

Why goodness and mercy together? Because goodness is what your mother gave you when you were hungry. She prepared hot biscuits, cold iced tea – and there was even a dessert after the meal. The kitchen was warm, your bed was clean and because your mother was good, she gave you good things. Likewise, the Shepherd does good things for you because He is good.

But there was another side to your mother: She was merciful. When you scraped your knee, she applied medicine to the wound and wiped away your tears. She didn't scold you for being careless. When you failed at sports or any other endeavor, your mother listened to you. The Shepherd is like that. He is good to the sheep that follow close to Him, but He is also merciful to those who stray into the dark valley. He brings you back safely to the fold, all the while rejoicing over you.

*Lord, I praise You for being both good and merciful.*

God's sheepdogs are following you, but maybe you don't realize it. Perhaps you don't see the Lord working in your life. You go around being terrorized by evil, when the Bible says, "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4, KJV). You are continually obsessed with the evil death shadow that you think is chasing you. You need to remember that you belong to the Shepherd, and He take scare of His own.

How far will the sheepdogs pursue you? Maybe you think Goodness and Mercy pursue you only when you go to church or do something good for God. You think God is not near on a stormy Monday morning or worse, when your car is stuck in a snowbank. You think that God has deserted you, if you think about Him at all. But remember that the Lord is with you in the valley, and He sends Goodness and Mercy to chase after you when you slide backwards. On good days and bad, Goodness and Mercy are following you – just turn around and see.

*Lord, open my eyes.*

## Lesson Sixteen

### And I Will Dwell In The House Of The Lord Forever

Although David conceived of Psalm 23 when he was only a boy shepherding sheep for his father, he wrote it while fleeing from Jerusalem as an elderly man. As he escaped down the Kidron Valley, David looked back over his shoulder toward the fortified walls that he had built surrounding Mount Zion. Maybe David thought he was getting his last look at the city of David.

He had done everything he wanted to do except build a temple. When David began gathering materials to construct a magnificent temple to Jehovah, God stopped him, saying, “Your son Solomon will build My temple” (see 1 Chronicles 28:6). As David took his last look at Jerusalem he prayed, “May I dwell in God’s house forever.”

*Lord, that’s my prayer, too. I want to live with You forever in Your home.*

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

The capstone of David’s rebuilding of Jerusalem was to be the Temple. It was to be the crowning pinnacle of his life’s ministry. But now David is escaping beyond the Jordan with nothing but a dream in his heart: to live in God’s house. David doesn’t weep over his lost palace, his servants or the adoration of the fickle crowd – the same crowd that was now praising his son, shouting, “Long live king Absalom” (see 2 Samuel 16:16). David has a passionate hope – to live in God’s house – that will keep him alive as he sleeps this night on the ground.

To understand the vast ramifications of this final verse of Psalm 23, you must remember where shepherds live. They don’t live in a house. They sleep in a tent, usually a cold tent. Many times their only source of heat is a fire – if they have one – at the tent’s door. They sleep on hard, unforgiving ground, not in a soft, warm bed. Would you like to live the rest of your life in a tent?

*Thank You, Lord, for a roof over my head, a floor under my feet and a bed to sleep in.*

Sometimes the shepherd has to sleep under the open sky, his roof the stars. His only protection from the cold is the tunic that also protects him from pouring rain and beating sun. Nor does he have a change of clothes. A shepherd sleeps outdoors with no walls to keep out snakes, scorpions and other venomous creatures. So what is the shepherd’s ultimate dream in life? “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

*Lord, I want more than a house to live in. I want to live with You.*

The word “I” has deep meaning for David. He will dwell in God’s home; he will fellowship with God. He wants it for himself – not for his sons, not for other shepherds, not for Israel in general. This is personal for David.

What do you want from God for yourself – not for your family or your Sunday School class? Relationship is always personal, and you can have a personal relationship with God. You can dwell with Him forever.

*Lord, I must know You; I must live in Your presence.*

The word “dwell” here does not mean to sleep. While we do sleep in a house or apartment, the word “dwell” means more. Some seem to think “I will dwell” means “I rent

space in God's house; it's mine for a short while." When David pens this remarkable psalm, he is not dreaming of a temporary stay in God's house. He wants to settle down in it and make it his permanent residence.

*Lord, I want to dwell in Your presence forever, never to leave it.*

The word "dwell" suggests a place of rest. Where do you rest best? Usually we rest most soundly in our own bed at home. While camping is exciting and we relax during a camping vacation, have you ever said, "I need some rest to get over my vacation? Why is that? Probably because you worked or played too hard on your vacation, and now you need to go home to rest. The word "dwell" suggests you are going to sleep in your home and you're going to get some rest. Are you tired from too much stress? Maybe you're tired from too much play. What you need is to rest with God in His house. Heaven is called a place of rest (see Hebrews 4:1-10). The Lord makes a place for us, heaven, where we will one day rest from the trials we have now on Earth.

*Lord, I need rest. Help me take advantage of the opportunities that are mine.*

"Dwell" is a wonderful word to a shepherd. It means more than a place to stay awhile or a place to sleep for the night. The word "dwell" suggests to "abide in a home" or to "settle down with your family" or to "feel secure." Because most shepherd had no home to go to at night, they probably dreamed of a warm, quiet place where they could rest each evening. What is your dream?

David had a passion to live in the presence of the Lord; intimacy with God was his constant dream. David wanted to dwell forever in the house of the Lord, wherever that was. David constantly worshiped the Lord from his heart and blessed the Lord at all times. Do you have the passion of David to dwell in God's house and enjoy His presence? The good news for us is that we do not have to travel to Jerusalem or any other specific location to dwell in His presence. He meets His sheep where they live!

*Lord, I love You. I want to dwell in Your presence to worship You.*

When David said "I will dwell," he was making a faith promise. David knew God had blessed him and that the Lord was his Shepherd. David had such a strong relationship with the Lord that he had confidence he would one day return to the holy city to live with God.

Notice David didn't say, "I want to dwell." There are many things in life that you want but don't get. You may want a new car, a bigger house or the latest electronic gadget. You crave or desire something, not knowing if you will get it. When David said "I will dwell" he was making a statement in bold faith that God would one day return him to Jerusalem and to the house of God. He knew he would live with God forever.

*Lord, I know You will take me to heaven.*

But there's another important meaning to the phrase "I will dwell." It is a statement of commitment. David was making a promise to return to God's house. This is something he had to do. When David said, "I will dwell," he was committing his wealth, his armed men, even his own life, to do whatever it would take to return to Jerusalem and the house of God.

Like David, we can conclude by saying, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." This statement is the perfect ending to the most beloved passage of Scripture. Like David, we can be assured that through all of life's valleys and green pastures, our eternal home awaits – and we will dwell there forever with our Shepherd.