

THE
LORD
IS MY
SHEPHERD
HOW GOD LEADS HIS CHILDREN

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the New King James Version of the Bible. Additionally, for the sake of clarity, all Scripture quotations and parenthesized Scripture references have been placed in italics.

“The LORD is my Shepherd” (Psalm 23:1). Those five words provide the introduction to the Bible’s most well-known and universally-loved psalm. In fact, the 23rd Psalm may well be the most familiar passage of Scripture in all of the Bible. For thousands of years, the people of God have found comfort, peace, and assurance in this classic psalm.

One of the most endearing qualities of this psalm is the fact that it was written by King David, a man who had spent many years of his early life as a shepherd in Bethlehem. If anyone understood the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep, it was David. And when he compared God’s children to sheep, he wasn’t exactly paying us a compliment. David knew firsthand that sheep are fearful, timid, dirty, stubborn, and (how shall I say “dumb” without saying the word?)...not very intelligent! He knew that we needed a Shepherd to lead us, and he was absolutely convinced that his Shepherd, God Himself, was the best Shepherd of all.

As David pondered his own relationship with God, it is certainly fitting that he chose the image of a Shepherd to describe God. God’s guidance in David’s life had been very much like David’s guidance of the sheep entrusted to his care. For many years, David had cared for

his sheep. He had protected them, provided for them, nursed them, fed them, and led them. And for all of David's life, God had done those same things for him. Listen to the way David described God's shepherding qualities:

The 23rd Psalm

*The LORD is my Shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.
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.
You prepare a table before me in the
presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD
Forever.*

Think about all the things we can learn by studying this insightful psalm. We discover:

*how to live a life of contentment, joy, and satisfaction with the life God has given us.

*why we are sometimes sick and experience physical limitations that slow us down.

*why we sometimes find ourselves alone... living life at a slower pace than many of our friends who are always “on the go.”

*how to have a hunger for God and a freshness in our spirits.

*how to live a life of holiness.

*how God will literally honor us in the presence of our enemies.

*how to live a Spirit-filled life and minister to others out of the overflow of what God is doing in our own lives.

*how to live a life where the blessings of God actually chase us down.

*how to go to heaven when we die.

*how to face death with perfect peace.

Wow! If we could just learn some of those things, our lives would greatly improve. This amazing psalm is a treasure chest of information for everyone who is willing to explore it. Sadly, most people never take the time to do so.

For whatever reason, the majority of people are reluctant to surrender the control of their lives over to God. When it comes to jobs, money, relationships, and even eternal life, they would rather trust themselves than to trust God. They would rather be their own shepherds, or depend on others to provide for them, than to trust their lives into the hands of a Shepherd Whom they cannot see.

The Bible is clear, though, that “*we walk by faith, not by sight*” (*II Corinthians 5:7*). So what I hope to do in this booklet is to give you some concrete reasons why you should strongly consider making the Lord your Shepherd. And if He is your Shepherd already, my prayer is that this booklet will help you to more fully understand how wonderful our Shepherd really is and how blessed we are to be “*the sheep of His pasture*” (*Psalms 100:3*). Let’s think about some of the benefits we can enjoy when the Lord is our Shepherd.



When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
We Are in Good Hands.

“The LORD is my Shepherd” (Psalm 23:1).

I am so thankful that God is personally involved in our lives. He doesn't just send an angel, or a pastor, or a parent, or a spouse, or a friend to lead us. Each of these people has a role to play in our lives, but God has not delegated the ultimate care of our lives into any of their hands. God Himself is our Shepherd.

And as our Shepherd, He knows each of His sheep by name (*see John 10:3,14*). When we look at a flock of sheep, we see the entire flock. But God sees the individual sheep. He sees each face. He knows each story.¹ Not only does He *lead* us personally, but He also *knows* us personally. He knows our names, our needs, our histories, our futures, and our unique personalities. The One Who is leading us knows us better than we know ourselves. The One Who knows the stars “*by name*” certainly knows ours (*Psalm 147:4*). The One Who “*has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand*” can surely hold onto us (*Isaiah 40:12*). The One Who has the hairs of our heads “*all numbered*” is aware of every detail of our lives (*Matthew 10:30*). Our Shepherd knows us, and He is more than capable of leading us.



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
We Can Be Content in Any Circumstance.**

“I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

When the Lord is our Shepherd, we will always be well-provided for. That’s why David could say, *“I shall not want.”* Phillip Keller explained that when David said, *“I shall not want”* that he obviously meant he was not in need of anything. But David meant more than that. Keller emphasized that David was expressing “the idea of being utterly contented in the Good Shepherd’s care and consequently not craving or desiring anything more.”² In other words, David was content with his Shepherd. For him, God was enough.

Contentment is a rare quality these days. Most people think they will be content *when* their prayers are answered or *when* their circumstances change. They think they will be content *when* they get married, or *when* they have children, or *when* they get the new job, or *when* they buy the new house, or *when* they buy the new car. Most people think they will be content *when* God gives them whatever blessing it is they are hoping for.

But that’s not how contentment works. The Bible says, *“He who loves silver will not be*

satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase” (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Things don’t satisfy. Neither do positions, money, people, relationships, successes, or accomplishments. King Solomon said of all these things: “*Vanity of vanities*” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Without God, things are empty. People disappoint us. And even accomplished goals leave us empty on the inside.

Tom Landry, the legendary football coach of the Dallas Cowboys, learned this lesson. In his twenty-nine year career with the team, he led the Cowboys to twenty consecutive winning seasons. His teams won thirteen divisional titles and five conference championships. Coach Landry also won two Super Bowls in his years in Dallas. When asked what he found at the top of the football mountain, he said, “I found nothing.”³ He used to tell other coaches, “Coach football because you love it. Work hard. Study the game. Do your best. But realize that there is no ‘*there*,’ there.”⁴ In other words, if a coach thinks that happiness comes from winning football games, he is setting himself up for disappointment.

Coach Landry, a dedicated Christian, knew that only God can meet the deep needs of our souls. He didn’t want others to wrongly conclude that his happiness came from football.

He wanted them to know that it came from God.

Blaise Pascal, a well-known French philosopher, once said that there is “a God-shaped void” within every human heart.⁵ King Solomon said the same thing another way when he explained that God “*has put eternity*” in our hearts (*Ecclesiastes 3:11*). In other words, there is an empty place in all of our hearts that only God Himself can fill. And until He fills that empty place, we will spend our entire lives trying to fill it with lesser people and lesser things. Augustine, one of the greatest Christians who ever lived, once said, and I paraphrase, “God has made us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Him.” In other words, only God can fill that empty place in our hearts.

A little boy had memorized the 23rd Psalm. When he was quoting the first verse in his Sunday School class, he said, “*The LORD is my Shepherd; I have everything I want.*” While his wording wasn’t exactly right, his theology was excellent. When the Lord is our Shepherd, we, too, should be able to say, “*I have everything I want.*” That’s how David felt.

The 23rd Psalm was obviously written during Old Testament times, but in the New

Testament, we gain an added insight into this timeless psalm. We discover, as pastor Adrian Rogers said so well, that “the Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New Testament.”⁶ Jesus Himself said, “*I am the good Shepherd*” (John 10:14). He went on to say, “*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me*” (John 10:27). Someone might ask, “How could Jesus be the Shepherd? I thought His Father was the Shepherd.” Jesus answered that question. He said, “*I and My Father are one*” (John 10:30). So, in our day, we could say it this way: *Only Jesus can fill that empty place in our lives. Only He can satisfy us. And He satisfies us with peace, joy, and contentment.*

The way in which Jesus is described in the New Testament as a Shepherd has always been interesting to me. In *John 10:14*, He is described as the “*good Shepherd.*” In *Hebrews 13:20*, He is referred to as the “*great Shepherd.*” In *1 Peter 5:4*, He is called the “*chief Shepherd.*” He goes from *good* to *great* to *chief*! The farther you read in the New Testament, the better Jesus gets!

That’s how it is for those of us who know Him personally. The better we get to know Him, the greater He becomes to us. That’s how the apostle Paul could be locked up in a Roman

prison and say, “*I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content*” (Philippians 4:11).

Contentment in life doesn't usually happen the moment we become Christians. It typically happens later on as we discover how wonderful Jesus is. Contentment happens when Jesus becomes our everything. David had learned that since he had God, he had all that he really needed. That is the greatest discovery any person can ever make. Anything less than Jesus will only disappoint us in the end. But He will never disappoint us. He knows how to fill the empty places in our hearts. He knows how to satisfy that inner longing. Phillip Keller said it best when he said, “Contentment should be the hallmark of the man or woman who has put his or her affairs in the hands of God.”⁷ Amen to that.



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
We Can Lie Down and Rest.**

“He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters” (Psalm 23:2).

Sometimes, God steps in and slows us down. Years ago, I heard a story about Dr. Charles Allen, the late pastor of the First

United Methodist Church in Houston. At one point in his life, he became so worn down physically that he ended up in the hospital. His doctor instructed him to cancel all of his speaking engagements for the next six months. Dr. Allen protested but finally submitted to his doctor's orders. A day or two later, a deacon from Dr. Allen's church came to visit him in the hospital. The discouraged pastor shared with the deacon what the doctor had instructed him to do. He expressed his concerns that he would be letting other people down. The godly deacon lovingly listened to his pastor's frustrations and then comforted him by saying, in essence, "Well, Pastor, remember what the Bible says: '*He makes me to lie down.*' For some reason, God has made you to lie down on this hospital bed. There's a purpose behind this. God will reveal that purpose to you, and He will enable you to have a peaceful and restful spirit during this time." That deacon was right. Only God can calm our restless spirits and enable us to relax. But, sometimes, He has to slow us down first.

I have learned quite a bit about sheep from Phillip Keller's book entitled, "*A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23.*" Keller, whom I have already quoted twice, was himself a shepherd. For years, he worked closely with sheep. As a

result of his experience, he wrote a fascinating and very insightful book on the 23rd Psalm.

In his classic book, Keller explained that sheep would only lie down to rest if they were free from four things. They had to be free from “fear, tension, aggravations, and hunger.”⁸ Only then could they lie down and relax.

We, too, need to be free from these same things. We need to be free, first of all, from fear. Fear is a horrible thing. It torments the mind and drains the soul. We have fears of the future, fears of the unknown, and fears of something bad happening. None of these fears is from God. The Bible says, “*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind*” (II Timothy 1:7). So anytime you have a fearful thought come into your mind you need to say, “That thought is not from God. Instead of worrying about this thing, I choose to hand it over to You, Jesus. I trust You with this. You handle it.” When you deal with fear like that, you will be able to rest better. You will be able to relax. You will “settle down” on the inside.

Not only do we need to be free from fear, but we also need to be free from strife and tension with others. One of the things Satan uses to keep us “stirred up” in our spirits is bad

feelings towards other people. When there is tension in the sheep pen, the sheep cannot rest. I should probably write an entire booklet on this subject. How many Christians have a hard time even worshipping God because of somebody else in the church? Our souls are not at rest when we are having *imaginary conversations* in our minds with someone who has rubbed us the wrong way. And yet, sometimes we have those *imaginary conversations*. Keller said that any time he, as a shepherd, walked into the sheep pen that the sheep immediately put their focus on him and their fighting ended. He explained it this way: “Whenever I came into view and my presence attracted their attention, the sheep quickly forgot their foolish rivalries and stopped their fighting. The shepherd’s presence made all the difference in their behavior.”⁹ Think about that. The shepherd’s presence stopped the sheep from fighting with each other.

If you are having bad feelings towards someone, change your focus. Stop focusing on that person, and start focusing on your Shepherd. As you focus on Him, whatever was bothering you will gradually become of no importance to you at all. That’s why the Bible says that we should always be “*looking unto Jesus*” (*Hebrews 12:2*). When I am focused on

my Shepherd, it is much easier for me to unconditionally love my fellow sheep!

Sheep also have difficulty resting when little annoyances and aggravations invade their world. When sheep are having to deal with parasites, fleas, flies, and ticks, they are totally unable to rest. They are constantly trying to rid themselves of these little pests. The shepherd does everything within his power to relieve his sheep. He sprays them, dips them, and does anything else that is necessary to keep his sheep free from these annoying insects.

Sometimes, we as Christians are “bugged” by little things as well.¹⁰ We need our Shepherd to help us. And He does. Keller explained that the Holy Spirit “is often symbolized by oil—by that which brings healing and comfort and relief from the harsh and abrasive aspects of life.”¹¹ So when something starts to “bug” you, tell your Shepherd about it. He will enable you to move on in life without being so consumed by these disturbances. He will smooth out those little annoyances caused by difficult people and troubling circumstances that sometimes drive us all crazy. He will make it where these aggravations don’t bother you quite as much.

The one other thing that can prevent sheep from relaxing is hunger. If a sheep is hungry, he has difficulty sleeping. Most people sleep better on a full stomach. That is true physically and spiritually. Sometimes, though, we are starved spiritually. We are malnourished and don't even know it. God wants to lead us to the "*green pastures*" of life. He wants to take us to the place of peace, assurance, abundance, victory, and consistency. But we don't get to those lush pastures overnight. Keller explained that our heavenly Shepherd is constantly working "to clear the life of rocks of stony unbelief" and "to tear out the roots of bitterness. He attempts to break up the hard, proud human heart that is set like sun-dried clay. He then sows the seed of His own precious Word, which, if given half a chance to grow, will produce rich crops of contentment and peace."¹² So, if you're going through a difficult time, rest assured that God is leading you to a better place. The difficult journey you are now taking will be well worth it when you get to the place of victory that God is leading you to. Let God's Word nourish you on this journey. I would recommend reading five psalms a day. That would take you through the entire *Book of Psalms* in a month. There is something about the psalms that helps us to connect with God. In the psalms, we find encouragement, strength, and hope. We

discover that life is indeed worth living and that “*green pastures*” are in our future.

And so are “*still waters.*” Sheep cannot drink from a running river. They need still, quiet waters. These waters are a clear reference to God Himself. After all, Jesus is the “*living water*” (*John 4:10*). He alone quenches our spiritual thirst. We just have to find that “quiet place” where we can meet with Him.

So many times in life when we think about where God is leading us, we wonder, “What does He have in store for me? Who will I meet along life’s way? Where is God leading me?” Well, God is certainly leading us to meet people. He is leading us to the right places. But one of the greatest lessons I have ever learned in life is this: *God is primarily in the business of leading us to Himself.* The Bible refers to God as our “*true Pasture*” (*Jeremiah 50:7, NIV*). Think about that. Above all else, our Shepherd is leading us into a deeper relationship with Himself. He knows that it is there, in His presence, that our souls will be fully satisfied. God is our *Shepherd*, but He is also our *Pasture*. That is an amazing thought. So the next time you wonder what God is doing in your life, be assured of this: *He is leading you closer to Himself!* His own presence is His greatest blessing. He doesn’t just give us

peace. The Bible says that Christ “*Himself is our peace*” (Ephesians 2:14). The “*green pastures*” represent Jesus. And so do the “*still waters.*”



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
There Is Always a Second Chance.**

“He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:3).

Perhaps the main thing we have in common with sheep is that “we are prone to wander.”¹³ The Bible says it this way: “*All we like sheep have gone astray*” (Isaiah 53:6).

By nature, sheep wander. So do humans. We often do the things we thought we would never do. We sometimes do the things we don't even really want to do. The apostle Paul had this problem, too. In total frustration he penned these words: “*For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do*” (Romans 7:15). Our fleshly instincts sometimes pull us away from God.

So what is God's response to our wandering? Does He just let us go? Does He condemn us? Does He wash His hands of us? Praise God that the answer to all of those questions is, “No.” When we wander away,

God comes looking for us. Jesus once asked this question: “*What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?*” (Luke 15:4). The implied answer is obvious: *Faithful shepherds always go after wandering sheep.*

When a sheep wanders from the fold, the shepherd immediately begins to worry. He worries that the sheep will fall down and be unable to get back up again. A sheep in this fallen condition is said to be a “cast” sheep or a “cast down” sheep.¹⁴ Keller explained that the word “cast” is “an old English shepherd’s term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and cannot get up again by itself.”¹⁵ If the sheep stays in this condition for very long, it will certainly die. This gives new meaning to the familiar psalm which says, “*Why are you **cast down**, O my soul?*” (Psalm 42:5, *emphasis mine*).

When we wander away from God, we are always on the way down. And if we stay down long enough, we might not be able to get back up again. So the Shepherd comes to our rescue. He restores us to Himself.

The Hebrew word for “*restore*” is “*shūwb.*” The word literally means to “*return to the starting point.*”¹⁶ That’s what restoration is all about. God finds His wandering child and brings him back to the starting point again. It’s like He hits the “reset” button. God is a God of restoration and new beginnings. The Bible says that God will “*restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten*” (Joel 2:25).

If you think about it, the Bible is a story of restoration. God restored David, Jonah, and Peter. He let them all “start over” after they sinned. And He will do the same for you, too.

I heard Pastor Ed Young tell a story about restoration that I found very interesting. In the 1970s, when the Watergate scandal shook the nation and President Nixon was impeached, Billy Graham was invited to go to Washington to meet with the dishonored President and then to spend the night at the White House. Somehow word of this got out and many within the ranks of conservative Christianity were upset that Dr. Graham was planning on making this trip. One of the pastors who was upset was Ed Young himself. As a result, he called Billy Graham’s office and expressed his concerns to Dr. Graham’s assistant. He said something to the effect, “Please tell Dr. Graham that we

think it is a huge mistake for him to align himself with the fallen President. Dr. Graham is the leader of the Christian world, and his presence at the White House is going to send out a signal that we don't want to send out. It is going to send out a political signal that he still supports President Nixon." The staffer that took Dr. Young's call responded by saying, "Dr. Graham is not going to Washington to try to send out a signal. He is going there to try to comfort a man who is in desperate need of help. Dr. Graham has always believed that wandering sheep need the Shepherd the most."

In recounting that story, Dr. Young said that phone call was a turning point in his life and ministry. When he hung up the phone, he decided that he would spend the remainder of his life trying to rescue wandering sheep instead of worrying about what signals he might be sending out to other Christians. Certainly that, at least in part, explains the phenomenal growth his church, Second Baptist Church in Houston, has experienced through the years. God has used Dr. Young to rescue a lot of lost sheep. He truly has our Shepherd's heart.

In 1995, on one of my first trips to Israel, I saw a statue of a shepherd carrying a sheep. I thought it was odd that the sheep wasn't

walking so I asked the guide about it. He said, “Sometimes a sheep will repeatedly wander from the flock. The shepherd will rescue him, rescue him, and rescue him again. But if the sheep continues to wander, the shepherd will sometimes gently break one of the sheep’s leg bones and then carry the sheep for four to six weeks until the bone heals. A sheep who has been carried by his shepherd for that long never wanders away again.” I was so touched by that story that I got an olive-wood figurine of a shepherd carrying a sheep. It is in my office today as a constant reminder of that story.

Sometimes, God has to gently break one of our bones, so to speak. He gets our attention. He slows us down. He carries us in His arms. He restores our souls. He gives us a second chance. And we never want to wander away from Him again.



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
Purity Is Possible.**

*“He leads me in the paths of
righteousness for His name’s
sake” (Psalm 23:3).*

One of the things we need to understand about our Shepherd is this: *He only wants what*

is best for us, and He knows that sin is never best. God will always lead us away from sin and *into* a lifestyle of holiness, purity, and righteousness. When we walk along “*the paths of righteousness,*” we bring great glory to His name.

In the book of Jeremiah, God said, “*Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls*” (Jeremiah 6:16). God wants us to walk along the paths of purity. We should be pursuing those paths. Jesus said, “*Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they shall see God*” (Matthew 5:8, *emphasis mine*).

Years ago, I heard a story about Augustine. Before his conversion, he was a worldly and immoral man. His mother, though, never stopped praying for him. And eventually, her prayers were answered, and Augustine was saved. One afternoon not long after his salvation experience, he was walking down the street. He noticed one of the prostitutes he used to spend time with walking his way. He crossed to the other side of the street, lowered his head, and hoped that she would not see him. But she did. She began to call his name, “Augustine, Augustine.” He kept walking. She finally said, “Augustine, it is I.” To which he responded, “Yes, but it is no longer I.”

Friend, that's how you walk along the paths of righteousness. When temptation presents itself, you walk away from it as quickly as you can. And you walk towards God instead. In Christ, we are new creations (*see II Corinthians 5:17*). We are not the same people we used to be. We now have a new power, through the indwelling Holy Spirit, to walk away from temptation. We don't have to sin! We can walk along those "*paths of righteousness.*" They are God's best paths for us to travel.



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
There Is Victory in Every Valley.**

"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).

Wouldn't it be great if we never had a problem? Wouldn't it be great if we never got sick? Wouldn't it be great if we never lost a loved one...never lost a job...never were misunderstood...never were talked about negatively by others? Wouldn't it be great if we never were excluded from the group...never felt lonely...never got sad...never experienced pain? Wouldn't it be great if life could be like that? Yes, *it* would be great, but *we* wouldn't

be great. God has chosen to use those difficult, painful, confusing, lonely, valley experiences of life to make us into the people He wants us to be. Whether we like it or not, the valley is the place where God becomes real to us.

David's use of pronouns in the 23rd Psalm has always been interesting to me. In the first three verses of the psalm, he referred to God in the third person. David said, "**He** makes me...**He** leads me...**He** restores my soul..." But in verse four, in his valley experience, he started referring to God in the second person. As David described "*the valley of the shadow of death,*" he said, "**You** are with me." God became real to David down in that valley. It was in the valley where David stopped talking *about* God and started talking *to* God.

Shepherds lead their flocks through the valleys because they know that in those valleys there is an ample supply of water and plenty of green grass. Shepherds also know that valleys are the safest route to the top of the mountain.¹⁷ Even though the sheep cannot see it at the time, the valleys are always leading them onward and upward.

All of us love to be on top of the mountain. In our minds, we even equate God with mountaintop experiences. After all, it was on a

mountain where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel. Jesus was even transfigured on a mountain. But did you know that God also rules and reigns down in the valley?

The Syrians once said that the God of Israel was “*God of the hills...but He is not God of the valleys*” (1 Kings 20:28). They were wrong in their assessment, and, as a result, they were defeated. The God we serve is both the God of the hills and of the valleys. He lives on top of the mountain, but He also dwells down in the valley.

There are several thoughts I want to share with you from this fourth verse of Psalm 23. First, no Christian is exempt from valley experiences. David said, “*Yea, **though** I walk through the valley...*” He didn’t say, “*Yea, **if** I walk through the valley...*” It’s **though**, not **if**. No follower of God, in Bible times or in modern times, has ever been exempted from the valley. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Peter, James, John, Paul, and even Jesus all had their valley experiences. If *they* didn’t get a pass, neither will *we*. So don’t be surprised by your valley experiences. After all, you’re in good company!

Another thing we need to remember is that no Christian is ever abandoned in the valley. David said that God was with him. And He is with us, too. Friends may forsake us. Family may abandon us. Health may fail us. But God will remain with us. In fact, His presence will become so very real to us that the valley will lose its grip of fear on us. With His *rod*, He will protect us from anyone or anything that threatens us. With the hook of His *staff*, He will pick us up when we fall, and He will draw us closer to Himself.¹⁸ He will not abandon us in the valley. Instead, His presence will actually become more real to us.

It is also comforting to know that every valley experience has a purpose. God doesn't let us experience loneliness, loss, heartache, and pain just to see if we can take it. God's not like that. There is always something good God wants to do for us in the valley. The Bible says that sometimes our faith is "*tested by fire*" (*I Peter 1:7*). Just as gold is purified and refined in the fire, so are we. In the first real valley experience that I ever had, God taught me that He is absolutely in control of my life and that He is all I really need to be complete and whole. Those truths have been anchors for me for well over twenty years. In one of my deepest valley experiences, God completely removed my doubts and replaced them with

a strong and steady faith in Him. As a result of that faith, God has filled my heart with indescribable peace. In another valley experience, God put life in a much clearer perspective for me, and He taught me to cherish each day as a gift from Him. I, like you, have been through some pretty deep valleys. But in retrospect, I can honestly say that God has used every one of them to my advantage. My valley experiences haven't done me anything but good. I'm none the worse for them. Just the opposite. I'm all the better. And you will be, too, if you will view your valley experiences as opportunities for growth.

Something else that encourages me is that no valley experience lasts forever. David said, "*Yea, though I walk **through** the valley...*" He didn't say, "*Yea, though I live forever **in** the valley...*" No way! Valleys are temporary. They are simply those experiences we must go through in order to get to the place where God wants us to be. Remember this: *Whenever you are in the valley, you are surrounded by mountains.* And around one of those bends is your destination. So, if you are in the valley today, don't give up. The best is yet to be!

Not even the death experience itself is final. With Jesus as our Shepherd, we will pass right through that valley. David described death


as “*the valley of the shadow.*” That’s an interesting way to think of death. Someone has said: “The shadow of a dog can’t bite you. The shadow of a bee can’t sting you. And the shadow of death, if you’re a Christian, can’t hurt you.” I like that!

In Israel, there is an actual valley called “*The Valley of the Shadow of Death.*” I’ve seen it. It contains a fresh water spring. The top of the valley is situated between Bethlehem and Jerusalem at approximately 2,700 feet *above* sea level while the bottom of the valley is located in Jericho at approximately 1,300 feet *below* sea level.¹⁹ The valley is so steep that there are always shadows in it. Thieves and robbers, especially in Bible times, would hide in the cracks and crevices of the valley “ready to pounce on an unsuspecting sheep or shepherd.”²⁰ But this valley was the best way for shepherds to get their sheep to Jericho in the winter (where the grass was always green) and to higher ground in the spring (where new life was beginning to bud).²¹

It was in this valley, Bible scholars tell us, that young David learned to trust God more deeply. With his life in peril, he had to rely on God to get him safely through. “*The Valley of the Shadow of Death*” was a real place. It was the place where David learned that even

shepherds need a Shepherd. You can almost hear him saying to himself as he led his sheep through those dangerous twists and turns, “*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.*” God’s presence in that valley calmed David’s nerves. His presence calms our nerves, too.

When we get to the place where we can trust God with our death, we can more easily trust Him with our lives. If we can look out into the future at our own “*valley of the shadow of death*” experience and smile because we know that Jesus will be there with us, then we can face anything in life with confidence, assurance, and peace. It is the presence of our Shepherd, both in life and in death, that causes us to exclaim with David, “*I will fear no evil; for You are with me.*” When the Lord is our Shepherd, there truly is victory in every valley.



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
We Will Be Honored in Unusual Ways.**

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5).

Remember, valleys always lead to mountaintops. And that’s where the shepherd

is ultimately leading his sheep. Interestingly enough, the land at the top of the mountain is called the “tablelands.”²² Ideally, it would be a flat piece of land where the shepherd would have gone in advance to kill poisonous weeds, snakes, and anything else that would threaten his sheep. He would have cleared the terrain and prepared it for the arrival of his beloved sheep. The shepherd would have even cleaned out “the water holes, springs, and drinking places for his stock.”²³

When the sheep arrived at the top of the mountain, they discovered several things. First, they discovered that the table was set. The tableland is definitely a prepared place. Before their arrival, the shepherd had gone to great measures to get everything just right for his sheep. There would be plenty of grass to eat, plenty of water to drink, and plenty of room for the sheep to run and play. And interestingly enough, all of this took place in the presence of the sheep’s enemies.

Max Lucado pointed out that a shepherd is especially concerned with a brown snake called “the adder.” Adders live in holes underneath the ground. They frequently slither out of those holes and bite the sheep on their noses. The bite can sometimes be deadly. To protect his sheep, the shepherd pours oil around the top of

each adder hole that he discovers on the tableland. The slickness of the oil makes it more difficult for the snake to squirm out, and the scent of the oil drives the adder away. The shepherd then puts some of the oil on the tip of the sheep's noses. Thus, the shepherd prepares a wonderful table for the sheep in the presence of the adder, the great enemy of the sheep.²⁴

Our Shepherd does the same for us. He literally prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. I think about Joseph in the Old Testament. You talk about a man who had some enemies. His brothers treated him horribly and then sold him to a group of slave traders who were headed to Egypt. In Egypt, he was falsely accused of rape. As a result, he was thrown into prison. As a Jew living in Egypt, he was already an outsider. Now, as an accused rapist, he must certainly have been one of the most unpopular men in the country. But in all of his troubles, the Bible repeatedly says that *"the LORD was with him"* (Genesis 39:23).

In time, Joseph was released from that prison cell, and he was promoted to a position of great influence. He actually became the second most powerful man in all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

Joseph then got married. He and his wife became the proud parents of two sons. The oldest son's name was "*Manasseh*." The youngest son's name was "*Ephraim*." The name "*Manasseh*" literally means "*making forgetful*." Joseph said, "*For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house*" (Genesis 41:51). The name "*Ephraim*" literally means "*fruitfulness*." Joseph stated, "*For God has caused me to be fruitful **in the land of my affliction***" (Genesis 41:52, *emphasis mine*).

Think about that. God had been so good to Joseph that he had forgotten about all of his earlier troubles. That doesn't mean that he was unable to remember them. It just means that the pain he had experienced was gone. Joseph's emotional wound was healed. Only a scar remained. That's why he named his firstborn son "*Manasseh*." His mind was no longer dominated by his earlier problems.

Additionally, God had chosen to bless Joseph right there in the place where his enemies had tried to destroy him. It is as though God said to Joseph, "Egypt has been a difficult place for you. You were falsely accused here. You were imprisoned here. Many assumed the worst of you here. Others forgot about you here. But since you have

remained faithful to Me, I am going to bless you right here in Egypt. The place of your *persecution* will be the place of your *promotion*.” That’s why he named his second son “*Ephraim*.” God had made Joseph fruitful in the land of his affliction. How do you think Potiphar’s wife (the one who had falsely accused Joseph) felt when he became the Prime Minister of Egypt? God had indeed prepared a table for Joseph in the presence of his enemies. Our Shepherd always does that for His sheep.



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
Our Lives Will Be Anointed and Our
Cups Will Overflow.**

*“You anoint my head with oil; My
cup runs over” (Psalm 23:5).*

Not only does He set a table for us, but our Shepherd also anoints us with oil. Oil serves several purposes for sheep. First, it drives away the insects. Second, it softens the blows the rams (male sheep) inflict on each other during mating season as they compete for the ewes (female sheep). The rams compete by head-butting each other. So the shepherd puts oil on their horns so the blows are not as painful. The oil causes their horns to slide off of each other instead of being such a direct

blow. But the head-butting can still cause injury, and that brings about the third benefit of oil...to heal wounds.²⁵

We, like those sheep, need the fresh oil of God's Spirit to help us with the same problems. We need His Spirit to help us when the little "insects" of life distract and upset us. We need His Spirit to protect us from the unavoidable blows of life. And we need His Spirit to heal us when our hearts and our spirits have been wounded. We need God to anoint us with His Spirit. We need that heavenly oil.

David knew firsthand the importance of a fresh anointing. He was actually anointed on three separate occasions. He was anointed by Samuel when God chose him to be Israel's next king (*see I Samuel 16:13*). Many years later, he was anointed again when he became the king of Judah (*see II Samuel 2:4*). Years later, he was anointed a third time when he became the king of all Israel (*see II Samuel 5:3*).

Each time that God gave David a new work to do, He gave him a fresh anointing. The oil was a picture of God's Spirit. We, like David, need a fresh anointing in our lives as well. We need to be so filled with His Spirit that the little things of life don't bother us, the blows of life don't crush us, and the wounds we receive from

others don't make us bitter. We need a fresh anointing. Each day we need to be anointed with "*the oil of gladness*" (Psalm 45:7).

Not only does God anoint our heads with oil, but He also gives us blessings that truly amaze us. That's what He did for David. And David could only say, "*My cup runs over.*"

In Bible times, the overflowing cup represented the full favor of the host at a dinner party. In the Middle East at that time, if a host wanted his guests to stay at the dinner table he would continue to fill their cups with whatever they were drinking. The full cup was the host's way of saying, "I'm glad you're here. I want you to stay longer." But if the host wanted his guests to leave, typically because it was getting late, he would no longer refill their cups. The empty cup was the host's way of saying, "I'm glad you came, but the party's over. It's time for you to leave." If, though, a host was really enjoying the presence of his guests, he would let them know it by filling their cups not only to the brim, but also to overflowing. When their cups were running over, they knew they had the full blessing of their host. They knew he was enjoying their presence.²⁶

That's the message God sent to David. He caused David's cup to overflow. David knew

he had the full favor, blessing, acceptance, and love of God on his life. Not only was *David* enjoying *God's presence*, but *God* was enjoying *David's presence* as well. Their relationship was strong and mutually satisfying. God Himself had become David's greatest blessing. He is ours as well. I could never say it enough: *The greatest thing God could ever give us is a personal relationship with Himself.* It is in His presence that we find what we are looking for...peace, purpose, and Someone Who will never leave us. We also find Someone Who never wants *us* to leave *Him*. Our cups, like David's, are overflowing. Our Host enjoys our presence.



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
Blessings Will Chase Us Down.**

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

At the beginning of this psalm, God was *leading* David. He was leading him to the green pastures. He was leading him to the still waters. He was leading him to walk in paths of righteousness. He was leading him through the valley and up to the tablelands. Now, at the end of the psalm, we read something we wouldn't expect. We read that there was a

sense in which God was *following* David. How could God be *leading* and *following* at the same time? Well, He's God. And God is big enough to be in *front* of us and *behind* us at the same time. The Bible says, "*The LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard*" (Isaiah 52:12, *emphasis mine*).

As we *follow* the Lord, He is actually *following* us. He is following us with goodness and mercy. Max Lucado said that "goodness and mercy are the two sheep-dogs that guard the rear of the flock."²⁷ He went on to describe "goodness and mercy" as "the celestial escort of God's flock."²⁸ With God's *goodness*, He blesses us. With His *mercy*, He forgives us. How wonderful to be followed by both *goodness* and *mercy*.²⁹ The word "*follow*" literally means "*pursue*."³⁰ Goodness and mercy actually *pursue* the obedient Christian.

I saw a video of a sheep-dog in Britain following a flock of sheep. The dog was doing his job. He was keeping the sheep together. He was keeping the sheep moving in the right direction. It was a beautiful picture of how God's goodness and mercy are always following us. But a strange thing happened. After a while of moving forward, the sheep actually turned around and started chasing the dog. It was the funniest thing to watch. I have

never seen such aggressive sheep. But as I thought about what I was watching, it actually became convicting to me. I thought to myself, “How many times do we stop following God and start chasing His blessings instead? How often do we seek *God’s blessings* when we should be seeking *God Himself?*” The only way that goodness and mercy will *follow us* is if we will continue to *follow God*.

It was interesting to notice in the video that the sheep never caught the dog. The dog somehow evaded them. In our lives, if we take our eyes off of God and begin chasing His blessings, we will discover that they will evade us as well. But, if we will *follow God*, we will always *be followed* by goodness and mercy.

I never will forget an experience I had one day at a car wash. I was waiting in line for my truck to be washed. When it was time for me to pay, I rolled down my window and handed the attendant five dollars. He said, “Your car wash has already been paid for. Have a great day.” I asked, “Who paid for it?” He said, “The man in the pick-up truck behind you.” I looked in my rearview mirror and saw a friend smiling from ear to ear. He seemed to be even happier than I was. He waved at me and then I went on through the wash. As my truck was being washed, I thought to myself, “God just

gave me a glimpse of His goodness and mercy. He is not only leading me, but He is following me as well. His blessings are chasing me down.” I left that car wash with more than a clean truck. I left with gratitude in my heart to God for sending a friend to pay for my car wash, and for reminding me that He has me covered...both *in front* and *behind*. Thankfully, as David said, we can expect such blessings to continue all the days of our lives. His goodness and mercy will *follow us* all the way to heaven, and they will completely *overtake us* once we arrive there.



**When the Lord Is Our Shepherd,
Heaven Is Our Home.**

*“And I will dwell in the house of the
LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6).*

Can you say that? Can you say that you will dwell in God’s house forever? Heaven is a real place. It is just above us. There are millions of people there. Jesus is there. One day, we will be there, too. If we could somehow learn how to live in this life with a heavenly perspective, then we would enjoy our lives a lot more, and we would invest them in things that really matter. You always get a broader view of a city from an airplane than from a car. In a car,

you can see what is in front of you and around you. But in an airplane, you can see the big picture of the city. If it would ever “click” for us that we are just passing through this world, and that our real home is in heaven, then we would have the perspective that God wants us to have. We would see life more clearly.

The word “ *dwell* ” literally means “ *to sit down* ” or “ *to settle.* ”³¹ One day, we will “settle down” in heaven. In the meantime, let’s make sure that we don’t “settle down” too much down here on earth. The hymn-writer had it right when he said, “This world is not my home...I’m just passing through.”³² And so are we. We are on our way to heaven.

If you can say that you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, not only will you have a clearer perspective of life, but you will also have complete confidence in death. David said, “ *I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* ” He didn’t say, “ *I might dwell ...* ” or “ *I hope to dwell...* ” He said, “ *I will dwell* ” in heaven forever.³³ He knew that his “ *forever* ” was there, not here. In heaven, not on earth.

And that confidence gave David something to look forward to. No matter what life hit him with, he knew his trials were only temporary. He knew something better was awaiting him.

Friend, if you are saved, something better is awaiting you, too. If you are one of God's sheep, you should be able to hear Him saying to you: "A better day is coming. Your body won't ache forever. Your questions won't go unanswered forever. Your tears won't flow forever. Your life on earth won't last forever. Heaven isn't far away." You should be able to hear God's Spirit saying things like that to you because Jesus said, "*My sheep hear My voice*" (*John 10:27*). That's one of the ways we know that we're saved. We can hear God's Spirit speaking to our hearts.

As I have thought about how to end this booklet, it seems best to me to end it where we began. In the opening line of the 23rd Psalm, David said, "*The LORD is my Shepherd.*" That statement is the key to the entire psalm. If the Lord is your Shepherd, then all of the truths in this psalm apply to you. But if He isn't your Shepherd, then these truths don't apply to you.

Is the Lord your Shepherd? Do you know Him personally? Do you regularly hear His voice? If not, now would be a wonderful time to make Him your Savior, Lord, and Shepherd.

Jesus is the greatest Shepherd of all because He laid down His life for the sheep (*see John 10:11*). Only a loving Shepherd would make

such a sacrifice. But death couldn't hold our Shepherd in the grave. He conquered death with His glorious resurrection.

Jesus is alive today, and He stands at the door of your heart and knocks (*see Revelation 3:20*). He wants to come in. And He will come in if you will ask Him to. The Bible says, "*Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved*" (*Romans 10:13*). If you would like to know for sure that Jesus is your Shepherd, that your sins are forgiven, and that heaven is your home, then pray this prayer:

"Dear Jesus,

I need a Shepherd to guide me. I need You to save me. I am truly sorry for my sins. Please forgive me. I ask You to come into my heart and make me a Christian. I ask You to save me, and I trust You to do it. Welcome to my heart, Jesus. Begin now to make me the person You want me to be.

*In Your Name I Pray,
Amen."*

If you just prayed that prayer, Jesus just saved you. You are now one of "*the sheep of His pasture*" (*Psalm 100:3*). As you begin to get to know your Shepherd more intimately, be sure to read His Word (the Bible) every day.

Spend some time each day in prayer. And ask Him to help you learn how to identify His voice. The voice that will lead you to the green pastures, the still waters, and the paths of righteousness. The voice that will lead you through the valleys and up to the tablelands. The voice that will one day call you home...to be with Him...forever...in heaven. Learn to listen to your Shepherd's voice. He will *always* lead you along the path that is *best* for you.

¹ Max Lucado, *Safe in the Shepherd's Arms*, J. Countryman, Nashville, 2002, p. 73.

² W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1970, p. 26.

³ Bobby Bowden, *The Wisdom of Faith*, B & H Publishing Group, Nashville, 2014, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 13.

⁶ Adrian Rogers, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, 1999, p. 16.

⁷ W. Phillip Keller, p. 30.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 35.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 43.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 44.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 47.

¹³ Adrian Rogers, p. 34.

¹⁴ W. Phillip Keller, p. 59.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1990, p. 113.

¹⁷ W. Phillip Keller, p. 83-88.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 98-99.

¹⁹ Adrian Rogers, p. 63-64.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, p. 64.

²² W. Phillips Keller, p. 103.

²³ Ibid, p. 108.

²⁴ Max Lucado, p. 81-82.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 87-89.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 97-98.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 105.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Adrian Rogers, p. 98.

³¹ James Strong, p. 52.

³² Albert E. Brumley, *This World Is Not My Home, Hymns of Faith*, Tabernacle Publication Company, Carol Stream, Il., 1980, p. 230.

³³ Adrian Rogers, p. 100.

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