

## Confidence in God's Shepherding

Devotional Reading: [John 10:1–10](#)

Background Scripture: [Psalm 23](#); [John 10:11–14](#)

### Psalm 23

A psalm of David.

- <sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.**  
**<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,**  
**he leads me beside quiet waters,**  
**<sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul.**  
**He guides me along the right paths**  
**for his name's sake.**
- <sup>4</sup> Even though I walk**  
**through the darkest valley,**  
**I will fear no evil,**  
**for you are with me;**  
**your rod and your staff,**  
**they comfort me.**
- <sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me**  
**in the presence of my enemies.**  
**You anoint my head with oil;**  
**my cup overflows.**
- <sup>6</sup> Surely your goodness and love will follow me**  
**all the days of my life,**  
**and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**



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## Key Text

*Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.—Psalm 23:6*

## Worship in the Covenant Community

### Unit 3: Psalms of Thanksgiving and Praise

Lessons 10–13

### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify poetic repetition in [Psalm 23](#) and its significance.
2. Compare the psalmist's description of the shepherd with the New Testament's descriptions of the ministry of Jesus.
3. Create a reminder of [Psalm 23](#)'s most helpful encouragement for the upcoming holiday season.

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

A. Needy Creatures

B. Lesson Context

#### I. God's Shepherding (Psalm 23:1–4)

A. Provides (v. 1)

B. Leads (v. 2)

*My Experience as a Shepherd*

C. Restores (v. 3)

D. Protects (v. 4)

#### II. The Lord Supplies (Psalm 23:5)

A. Safety (v. 5a)

B. Election (v. 5b)

C. Abundance (v. 5c)

*When an Overflow Isn't Too Much*

#### III. The Psalmist's Future (Psalm 23:6)

A. Accompanied by Blessings (v. 6a)

B. With God (v. 6b)

#### Conclusion

A. Needy for God

## B. Prayer

## C. Thought to Remember

### How to Say It

Philistines Fuh-*liss*-teenz or *Fill*-us-teenz.

Psalter *Sawl*-tur.

## Introduction

### A. Needy Creatures

When my spouse and I became parents, I remember the trepidation we felt. It seemed as if I had never beheld such a helpless creature as our daughter. Nearly all she could do was eat or sleep. I would sit beside her sleeping form, watching breaths move her tiny chest up and down. And I marveled that we begin life in this manner. Our only means of communication is a whimper or a yell.

Humans have a long period of development compared to other living creatures. We enter the world entirely dependent on others and remain so for several years. As time passes, we envision ourselves becoming more proficient at addressing our needs.

The truth is that many parts of our lives are not easy to control: our circumstances, environment, and health, for instance. We also cannot control the people around us. When we do not get our way, it is easy to slip back into our childhood self—the one who cries out for attention when needs are not met. The psalmists found comfort in letting God meet their needs.

### B. Lesson Context

We know less than we would like about where and when the Psalter was assembled. There is clearly a consideration given to an arrangement of its 150 psalms; it is frequently noted that they are arranged in five “books,” the first four of which conclude with “Amen,” meaning “we agree” or “true” ([Psalms 41:13](#); [72:18–20](#); [89:52](#); [106:48](#)).

A connection to David is apparent in half the psalms. His name appears in the superscriptions of 73 of them, with 2 more psalms attributed to him in [Acts 4:25](#) and [Hebrews 4:7](#). Superscriptions are instructions or attributions appearing at the beginning of many psalms. Superscriptions are part of the text, although modern Bibles give them no verse number, and Bible software gives them a verse number of zero.

Although many superscriptions list one or more names, the relationship of the named person to the psalm in view is often unclear. Today’s text is an example. Its superscription reads “A Psalm of David.” This may indicate that David was the author, but the Hebrew preposition behind the English word *of* can also express relation or direction. This means that [Psalm 23](#) could be *about* David or *dedicated to* him.

David first appears in Scripture as a keeper of sheep ([1 Samuel 16:11](#)). During a war with the

Philistines, he continued to be responsible for the care of his father’s flock (17:15, 20). That might seem to have been a safe, behind-the-front-lines kind of job, but in that role as a shepherd, David had fought both lion and bear (17:34–37).

It is also relevant to note that “shepherding” is a common metaphor in the ancient Near East, used especially for kings who protect and provide for subjects. This goes a long way to help explain the depiction of David. His introduction as a shepherd in 1 Samuel guides readers to anticipate that he would make a good king. This was an important development, for when the Israelites first asked Samuel for a king, they contravened the wishes of God (1 Samuel 8). But God nonetheless redeemed the monarchy and made an everlasting covenant with David (2 Samuel 7). Anything either by or about David is, therefore, important to consider.

## I. God’s Shepherding

(Psalm 23:1–4)

### A. Provides (v. 1)

#### 1. The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

The first verse introduces a reversal: whereas David had been a *shepherd* himself (Psalm 78:70–72), God is David’s shepherd. The metaphor of God as a shepherd is frequently used by Old Testament writers (examples: Genesis 48:16; 49:24; Psalm 28:9; Isaiah 40:11). Thus, the psalm is spoken or sung by an individual sheep of the metaphor. It would be strange for a shepherd to care for only one sheep. The psalmist does not feel the need to tell of any others. He focuses on the relationship between one sheep (himself) and the shepherd.

David was familiar with the role of shepherd, and he understood the great responsibility of providing for the needs of a flock. As domesticated animals, sheep are less able to provide for their own needs. However good David may have been as a shepherd in meeting those needs, the psalmist depicts God to be all the more mindful in that regard. This confidence is evident in the phrase *I lack nothing*.

Whatever need may arise for the speaker, God is ready and able to meet this need (compare Deuteronomy 2:7; 8:9; Psalm 84:11). A good shepherd will do this, but a bad shepherd will be far away when needs arise (compare and contrast Ezekiel 34:1–16; Jude 12). God is not distant (John 10:7–16; 1 Peter 2:25).

#### What Do You Think?

How do you practice finding contentment in the Lord?

#### Digging Deeper

Write a brief prayer identifying situations in which you need the Lord to guide you to greater trust in him.

### B. Leads (v. 2)

#### 2a. He makes me lie down in green pastures,

The phrase *green pastures* reflects an image of ideal summertime abundance in the land of Canaan. But such abundance can be hit and miss in its semiarid climate as it experiences little or no rainfall for five months of the year. Shepherds constantly had to scout the best locations for grazing sheep ([Genesis 13:5–6](#); [37:12–17](#)).

*Makes me lie down* reveals the causative force of the Hebrew verb. Sheep are at ease as they are provided rest alongside their food.

### **2b. he leads me beside quiet waters,**

While sheep have the ability to survive without water for up to seven days, they are likely to consume a significant amount when the opportunity arises. The imagery of *quiet waters* is unusual since the flowing water of a river or stream is the preferred image for needs that are met ([Psalms 36:8](#); [46:4](#); [Revelation 7:17](#)). At least two interpretations of *quiet waters* have been proposed.

One reading holds that the shepherd brings the flock to a natural body of water free of fastflowing rapids—hence “quiet.” A difficulty for this interpretation is that shepherds tended to rely on wells to water flocks ([Genesis 29:1–8](#)). Moreover, fast-flowing water was not common in this land.

Another way of understanding the image is to take the word *quiet*—a noun in the original language—to refer to a place of rest. This is a frequent translation of this word elsewhere (examples: [Psalm 95:11](#); [Isaiah 32:18](#); [66:1](#)). It reinforces the image of a place where sheep feel free to lie down, unthreatened.

Whichever interpretation most accurately conveys the psalmist’s intended imagery, the central message remains that the shepherd leads the sheep instead of driving them. This presents a picture of tender direction, as depicted in [Isaiah 40:11](#). Furthermore, this picture is deeply rooted in the theology of the exodus, when God guided the Israelites through the wilderness ([Exodus 13:21–22](#)).

## **My Experience as a Shepherd**

I once owned sheep. My wife and I have a seven-acre field that we allowed a neighbor, who owned sheep and cattle, to cut for hay. He was not wealthy but wanted to give us something for the hay. Thus, he gave us two sheep.

While it seemed a blessing initially, it quickly became a burden. We put the sheep behind fences to keep them safe. But that required a fair amount of fencing. I didn’t have money for fence posts, so I cut down some small trees, stripped the limbs, and made posts out of those. The cobbled-together result kept the sheep in for several days, but they eventually figured out how to squeeze underneath the fence. Once they did that, they were everywhere. After a couple of years of “shepherding,” we gave up and returned the sheep to the neighbor.

The wonderful thing about God is that he is a much better shepherd than I ever was or would be. He always has the resources to lead the sheep to safe places and to provide for them (us). That fact is beyond question. The only question that emerges concerns the extent of our faith in this truth. How strong is your trust?

—C. S.

## C. Restores (v. 3)

### 3a. he refreshes my soul.

The psalmist is calm and untroubled as God's provision for physical needs coincides with God's provision for non-physical needs. The same thought, using the exact two Hebrew words translated *refreshes* and *soul*, appears in [Psalms 19:7; 116:7; Proverbs 25:13; and Lamentations 1:16](#). Many psalms plead for God's restoring favor (compare [Psalms 6:4; 25:16; 31:2; 69:16; 71:2; 86:16; 88:2; 102:2; 119:132](#)). This one, however, views that favor as an accomplished fact.

### 3b. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

The imagery of shepherding continues. One way of thinking about God's leading *the right paths* is to imagine forks on the road of life. When a fork is encountered, one must choose which way is the right one (compare [Psalms 5:8; 85:13](#)).

But we should not miss a distinction between the closely related words *right (eous)* and *righteousness*. We can do no better than listen to the apostle John on this point: "If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.... Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous" ([1 John 2:29; 3:7](#)).

A faithful or righteous shepherd—as God is—leads the faithful of the flock into right paths. God proves to be faithful; it is not in his nature to be otherwise!

#### What Do You Think?

How is God's name and reputation enhanced by guiding you along the right paths?

#### Digging Deeper

What part do you play, if any, in enhancing God's name? Cite verses that support your answer.

## D. Protects (v. 4)

### 4a. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

The psalmist continues by now emphasizing the protection side of God's shepherding. We would all prefer that there would be no more dark valleys of life. Nevertheless, there are, and there will be, until Jesus returns. There is no promise that the Christian will not have to endure such valleys—quite the opposite ([Matthew 10:22; 24:9](#)). But we do indeed have a promise of God's presence ([28:20; John 14:16–17; Hebrews 13:5](#)).

The presence of God should signal the absence of *fear*. Fear is a God-given emotion that helps protect us. When our fear is justified because of real and imminent danger, it can save our life (assuming that fear doesn't turn into panic). Fear (and its lack) can be related to *evil* in several ways. First, a person might fear neither evil nor God because he or she has embraced evil ([Psalm 36:1–4](#)).

Second, a godly person can fear evil by deciding to avoid it because getting too close to it runs the danger of falling into its clutches ([Proverbs 14:16; 16:6; 1 Corinthians 15:33](#); etc.). Third, a godly person doesn't fear evil because he or she knows that God's presence is stronger than any evil that may lie

in the path ([Psalm 49:5–6, 15](#)). This third option is in view here.

### What Do You Think?

Identify dark valleys you have encountered or currently face.

### Digging Deeper

Does God lead you differently if you entered that valley because of your own choices? Explain your answer.

#### **4b. your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

*Rod* and *staff* are tools of the shepherd. The Hebrew word that is translated “rod” also can take the sense of a “scepter”—a sign of authority (example: [Psalm 45:6](#)) that might be used to inflict pain or punishment ([2:9](#); [89:32](#)). The word translated “staff” refers more to a walking stick or a cane ([Exodus 21:19](#); [Zechariah 8:4](#)). The psalmist is comforted by the fact that God has these metaphorical tools at his disposal.

## II. The Lord Supplies ([Psalm 23:5](#))

### A. Safety (v. [5a](#))

#### **5a. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.**

With a new verse comes a change in metaphor. Sheep do not dine at tables, so the shepherd imagery seems to have given way to something new. God is now depicted as a gracious host who has prepared a fine meal for the psalmist to enjoy. This could signify a role-reversal for King David since kings were known to have splendid tables to feed many people (compare [1 Kings 4:27](#)). Preparation *in the presence of my enemies* could be intended to make these enemies jealous or simply to show that God was not hiding the display of his favor. Because of God’s protection and provision, they can do nothing to harm the psalmist.

The verse just prior to this one bridges the two images. In verse [4](#), the psalmist spoke of a death-defying journey through shadowy places. And now he imagines a feast for himself, the weary traveler. Roads and mountain paths were dangerous in ancient times. Much later, under Roman rule—when roads had greater security for travelers—Jesus still would speak of thieves on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho ([Luke 10:30](#)). Enemies on the road were a danger for all travelers.

It is impossible to say whether the psalmist has particular enemies in mind, perhaps the literal foes of David. His anointing as king made several enemies, not the least of which was his predecessor, King Saul ([1 Samuel 16:13](#); [19:1](#); etc.). A related text refers to a time “when [David] was in the Desert of Judah” ([Psalm 63](#); see [Lesson Context](#)), and it speaks of enemies seeking his life ([63:9–10](#)).

### What Do You Think?

What verses encourage you to wait for God’s action against your enemies rather than taking revenge yourself?



## Digging Deeper

What can you learn about God while you wait for his action?

### B. Election (v. 5b)

#### 5b. You anoint my head with oil;

The host honors the guest by anointing his *head* with oil (compare [Psalms 45:7; 92:10](#)). Given the fragrances that were available to add to olive oil (see [45:8; Proverbs 7:17](#)), such anointing is a soothing and refreshing experience for a weary traveler. This anointing was not done for Jesus when Simon the Pharisee hosted him for dinner, an intentional oversight noted by Jesus ([Luke 7:46](#)).

The psalmist possibly intends a double meaning: he may be recognizing David's physical anointing to be king over Israel ([1 Samuel 16:3, 12–13](#); compare [2 Samuel 5:3](#)) while acknowledging God's continual anointing in spirit. The latter projects an image of God as a hospitable host, with all the trappings of a grand meal involved. Since pouring oil happened in various contexts, the image fits both.

### C. Abundance (v. 5c)

#### 5c. my cup overflows.

The psalmist continues to acknowledge God's benevolence as host. Presumably, the host has given the guest a large cup of wine (compare [Jeremiah 35:1–5](#)), and the guest is satisfied. The Hebrew word translated *overflows* occurs elsewhere only in [Psalm 66:12](#). There, it is translated “place of abundance” in the context of being rescued by God. This cup of satisfaction is equivalent to the waters of [Psalm 23:2b](#), above.

### When an Overflow Isn't Too Much

The abundance of an overflowing cup might seem silly or even wasteful to some. But an “overflow” of water is a truly happy thing for my family! We live more than half a mile from the nearest water line, and to extend it to our house would cost thousands of dollars. Digging a well is not financially feasible either. So we use a cistern: a 1,500-gallon polyethylene tank that holds our water supply.

We have run out of water on occasion. Manually filling the tank means eight trips of 20 miles each to the nearest potable water filling station. That's a considerable use of gasoline! And don't even bring up the issue of winter weather!

So we rejoice when it rains so we can fill the tank to capacity. It means a couple of months of not worrying about running out.

We don't think about it much when we have enough to keep body and soul together. When that is not our situation, we might sink into worry (contrast [Matthew 6:25–34](#)). We often forget that our divine host has plenty of resources. While there will always be times of scarcity, our God occasionally gives us an overflowing cup. The prime example in which an overflowing cup was given was when God sent his Son into the world to save it. When times get tough, is that fact the first thing you shift

### III. The Psalmist's Future (Psalm 23:6)

#### A. Accompanied by Blessings (v. 6a)

##### 6a. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,

The text has twice mentioned hardship: danger in the dark valley (Psalm 23:4) and enemies in sight of the host's table (23:5). If the psalmist feels that he is being chased by death and evil, then he imagines that God's *goodness and love will* pursue him all the more. It's insightful into God's character to see how the two Hebrew words translated as "goodness" and "love" are paired in other passages (see 69:16; 86:5; 100:5; etc.).

#### What Do You Think?

What gives you confidence that goodness and mercy follow you when circumstances suggest otherwise?

#### Digging Deeper

How would you counsel someone who has lost sight of God's mercies because of present hardships?

#### B. With God (v. 6b)

##### 6b. and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The final line provides a fitting conclusion for the psalm as it vividly depicts nearness to God. The psalmist shared a table with God and expected to remain *forever*. He did not expect to be shown the door. A *house* for any god in the ancient Near East was a temple. But in David's lifetime, God had no temple, and he denied permission for David to build one for him (2 Samuel 7:1–7). This fact of history points to *the house of the Lord* being the heavenly dwelling.

## Conclusion

#### A. Needy for God

Psalm 23 is short, at only six verses. By contrast, the 150 psalms in total average about 16 verses each. But the influence of Psalm 23 is not limited by its length. The striking elegance of how the psalm begins results in many Christians memorizing its opening line easily and effortlessly: "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing."

However, if we limit ourselves only to that opening line, we miss the second important image of the psalm: that of God as host. Of course, it would be strange to imagine sheep dining at tables. This is a poetic text, and the juxtaposition of metaphors enhances the meaning. Two images—God as shepherd and God as host—collectively portray the Lord as caring and thoughtful toward his people.

What the psalmist proclaims is more radical than readers typically grant. He lived in a world where food and drink were not always easy to find. He saw enemies behind each corner of the road, not from a sense of paranoia. Nevertheless, he trusted that he was loved and remembered by God. He saw that God was with him, satisfying all needs.

The same can be said of us today as we place [Psalm 23](#) in our hearts. By meditating on it, we can be encouraged to present our everyday needs to God, expecting trust to be honored. God is righteous and faithful.

However, this psalm would be misapplied if taken to endorse laziness or blind optimism. God provided for David's every need, but David remained in the wilderness for a long time! He was fleeing from men who wanted to murder him, and at every turn, he must have wondered whether he was on the path God provided. His faithful reliance was tested by desperate circumstance rather than by mere inconvenience. Thus, [Psalm 23](#) can speak clearest to those who genuinely don't know where their next meal is coming from or are in real and present danger of being victimized. But whether that scenario or the looming challenge of a figurative wilderness to risk wealth, reputation, etc., [Psalm 23](#) is ready to speak to us.



Visual for [Lesson 10](#). *Before closing in prayer, allow time for learners to offer their own silent thanks for Jesus' shepherding his flock.*

In this era of the new covenant, we remember that the shepherd who is God is also the shepherd who is Jesus. Like the image of the Psalm, Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.... I lay down my life for the sheep" ([John 10:14–15](#)). This profound act of God's provision in that last line goes beyond what any ordinary shepherd would think to offer; just the thought strains the credulity of the metaphor. No earthly shepherd would be expected to die for sheep! However, Jesus was no earthly shepherd—he was (and is) the Son of God. He is pursuing us with more goodness and mercy than we would know to anticipate. Yield to his offer!

## B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your presence! Your provisions astound us. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, who set the example of trust as he paid sin's price. We pray in his name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

God has provided, is providing, and will provide.

## Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

### Into the Lesson

*Option.* Display a peaceful nature scene and play sounds of gentle water flowing as students arrive for class. Encourage students to sit quietly as you wait for everyone to arrive.

Allow a few minutes for pairs from last week to discuss their experience waiting quietly on the Lord (see the [Involvement Learning](#) page for [lesson 9](#)).

Say to the class, "Sometimes we need to seek out the rest that God intends for us. Other times, we are aware that the ways he leads us are for our own good. Today we'll look at one of the most familiar Bible chapters to discover how God promises his loving care to those who follow him."

### Into the Word

Divide the class into groups of three to pursue one of two Bible studies. Make sure about half of the class does each one.

*Sectional Study.* Distribute a handout (you create) with three headings in a chart: *Shepherd* (vv. 1–3); *Companion* (v. 4); and *Host* (vv. 5–6). To the left of these headings, write the following prompts: *What God Does*; *Main Thought*; *Encouragement for the "Sheep."* Learners should fill out the chart according to these prompts; encourage drawing in other verses that come to mind in the process.

*He, You, and I.* Distribute a handout (you create) with three prompts: *"He" Statements* (statements about who God is or what he does); *"You" Statements* (expressions directed to God); and *"I" Statements* (how "I" interact with the Lord). Learners should describe the relationship between the Lord and the psalmist.

*Option.* Distribute the "The Good Shepherd" exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Assign some students to work on this instead of the other two prompts or in addition to them.

After several minutes, call the class together for the groups to report. Encourage groups to jot down the main ideas they hear from others' presentations. After volunteers have presented, allow for discussion about the main points and any questions the class may have. Consult the commentary as

necessary.

## Into Life

*Option.* Extend the above discussion by reforming the class into groups of three. This time, assign one of the key ideas from [Psalm 23](#) to each group: Shepherd, Companion, Host. Ask group members to brainstorm with each other ways God has functioned in their assigned role in their lives. Ask volunteers to share how they need God’s presence in their lives in one of these three roles in the coming weeks. As they share, jot down their needs on your board.

Conclude your discussion by calling on class members to make a list answering the question, “So what?” Ask them to name what the promises of this psalm can mean to believers today. Encourage them to reference promises fulfilled in Christ.

*Alternative.* Distribute the “Personal Paraphrase” exercise from the activity page. Allow one minute for learners to complete, assuring them they will not be required to share their answers, though the opportunity will be extended. Allow learners either to pair up to share their responses *or* spend a few minutes in quiet individual prayer.

Distribute blank recipe cards to the class. In light of the approaching holiday season, ask each learner to write a short “recipe” that will help them remember important encouragement from [Psalm 23](#). Allow volunteers to share their recipes. Suggest that learners slip their recipe cards into a cookbook or other spot where they will see it throughout this season. Then close by praying [Psalm 23](#) together as a class.

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To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(November 3—Confidence in God’s Shepherding\)](#)

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