

SHEPHERDING

LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: John 10:11-18

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Psalm 23

PSALM 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.
⁴ 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.
⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
⁶ 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 VERSE

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.—Psalm 23:1

LESSON AIMS

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

1. Identify the shepherd and host metaphors.
2. Explain how the psalm's imagery brings comfort, goodness, and mercy to those who trust in the Lord.
3. Tell of a difficult life event when trust in the Lord as shepherd was essential for a God-honoring outcome.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

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- A. Not an Icon, but a Test
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- C. Thought To Remember

Introduction

A. An American Secular Icon—[Psalm 23](#)

William L. Holladay states that [Psalm 23](#) became an American secular icon in the two decades after the American Civil War (1861-1865). Movement toward this status was sparked by Henry Ward Beecher's tribute to the psalm in the years just prior.

The tragic loss of life in that war plus the economic panics of 1873 and 1893 bolstered the popularity of [Psalm 23](#). The general public gravitated toward the lines "the shadow of death" (*KJV*) and "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" for comfort. The psalm's position as secular icon was finalized when funeral homes began to print it on the back of obituary handouts.

B. Lesson Background

Shepherding was a common occupation in ancient Israel through the centuries ([Genesis 12:16](#); [26:14](#); [29:9](#); [30:31, 32](#); [Jeremiah 33:12](#); [Luke 2:8](#); etc.). It should not surprise us, then, that the Bible has scores of references to sheep and shepherds. Sheep were completely dependent on shepherds, making the job of shepherding what we would call 24/7 (note [Luke 2:8](#), which has shepherds "keeping watch over their flock at night").

Since all this was so familiar to the ancient Israelites, the words *shepherd* and *sheep* became metaphors. Moses and David, two of Israel's greatest leaders, had been shepherds in the normal sense ([Exodus 3:1](#); [1 Samuel 16:11](#)) before they became figurative shepherds of God's people (compare [Psalm 77:20](#); [Isaiah 63:11](#); [Ezekiel 34:23](#); etc.). The Old Testament describes God himself with the metaphor of shepherd ([Psalm 78:52](#); [80:1](#); [Isaiah 40:11](#)). In the New Testament, it is Jesus who is "that great Shepherd of the sheep" ([Hebrews 13:20](#); compare [John 10:1-16](#); [1 Peter 5:4](#)).

The psalms are traditionally seen as five books, and [Psalm 23](#) is in Book I. This psalm is part of an early collection of Davidic psalms, namely [Psalms 3-41](#). A later Davidic collection, namely [Psalms 51-65](#) and [68-70](#), is found in Book II. Our approach to [Psalm 23](#) is in terms of two metaphors: shepherd ([vv. 1-4](#)) and host ([vv. 5, 6](#)).

I. Shepherd Metaphor

([PSALM 23:1-4](#))

This psalm's superscription attributes it to David. Those who have an electronic version of the Bible will note that such superscriptions are designated as "verse 0" of the particular psalm in view.

A. Identifications ([v. 1](#))

^{1a} **The LORD is my shepherd,**

The profound nature of the opening statement comes to the fore when we remember that David himself had been a shepherd in his boyhood days (see [1 Samuel 17:34-36](#)) and now he is the shepherd of the people of God ([2 Samuel 5:1-5](#); [7:4-8](#); compare [Psalm 79:13](#)). In proclaiming *the Lord is my shepherd*, the twice-shepherd king of Israel therefore acknowledges that he himself has a shepherd.

That shepherd is none other than God. “He is our God and we are the people of his pasture, and the flock under his care” ([Psalm 95:7](#); [Hebrews 4:7](#) attributes this psalm to David). The king himself admits his own need for the divine shepherd. It is natural for the people of Israel to look to David as their chief earthly shepherd. David’s identification of a shepherd higher yet should keep them from idolizing the king.

What Do You Think?

How do we resist idolizing those who would claim to guide (shepherd) us today?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Recognizing the danger before it happens

Correcting the problem after it happens

Other

^{1b} I lack nothing.

David’s next statement is a roundabout way of identifying himself as one of God’s sheep. David’s shepherding background reminds him that sheep want for nothing only when their shepherd provides for all their needs. He knows that the God of his ancestors supplied all their needs ([Deuteronomy 2:7](#); etc.), and he will continue to do so.

HOW TO SAY IT

Crimean Kry-*mee*-un.

Davidic Duh-*vid*-ick.

Yahweh (*Hebrew*) Yah-*weh*.

B. Actions (vv. 2, 3)

^{2a} He makes me lie down in green pastures,

The phrase *green pastures* may bring up mental images of lush, rolling meadows that extend as far as the eye can see. But in reality the land in ancient and modern Israel often bears little resemblance to such an ideal. It is a semiarid climate that experiences little or no rainfall for five months each year. Shepherds lead nomadic lives as they move frequently from place to place in search of suitable grazing for the sheep (compare [Genesis 37:12-17](#); [47:4](#)).

So shepherds often have to settle for the scarce grass that is found on “the hills” and in “grasslands of the wilderness” ([Psalm 65:12](#); [Joel 1:19, 20](#); [2:22](#); compare [Job 39:8](#)). The shepherd has to be skillful in finding adequate grazing in such places and be ready to move on when the likelihood of overgrazing presents itself (compare [Genesis 13:5-9](#)). But that’s the point! God is able to provide sources of food that are more than adequate for the psalmist’s needs.

The Old Testament sometimes describes God’s ideal for the future in terms of abundant pastureland ([Isaiah 49:9](#); [Jeremiah 33:12](#); etc.; contrast [Isaiah 13:20](#); [Jeremiah 25:36](#); etc.). That abundance is accompanied by the blessing of allowed rest, the sense of *makes me lie down* (compare [Isaiah 65:10](#); [Ezekiel 34:14, 15](#)).

NEW GREEN PASTURES

My husband’s position was eliminated when the college where he taught downsized. To say we were devastated would be an understatement. We struggled with the stress of uncertainty. Realizing that a move was likely, we thought about the friends we would leave behind and the disruption to our children’s lives. We pondered the unknown, about moving to a place where we knew no one.

We did it, though. Another teaching job became available at a Christian college halfway across the country, and we moved. We felt sure that God had opened that door for us, and so we followed him. Leaving loved ones took courage, and we mourned the loss of their constant company. But we believed that God would provide for us in our new area of ministry, our new pasture.

Two years later, I can say that stepping out in faith changed our family for the better. We love our new jobs and have much more family time than before. We have new friends we love, and we have been able to keep up with our old ones as well. Following God as sheep follow the shepherd can bring us to places where we can heal from hard times and experience God’s presence anew.—L. M. W.

What Do You Think?

How can we improve at recognizing when God is leading us toward “green pastures”? What can

happen if we don't?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding job relocations
- Regarding spiritual nourishment
- Regarding ministry service
- Other

^{2b} he leads me beside quiet waters,

The importance of *quiet waters* is seen when we consider that the alternative of flowing streams introduces the elements of unreliability and danger in Palestine. A shepherd who seeks a flowing stream that was usable previously may find only a dry streambed on arrival (compare [1 Kings 17:7](#); [Job 6:15-17](#); [Jeremiah 15:18](#)). At the opposite extreme, rainfall in the mountains or hills may turn dry streambeds or gently flowing water into deadly flash floods. Even today, tourists are warned about hiking through dry streambeds because of the possibility of being swept away should such a flood come (and tourist hikers have indeed drowned).

This distinction between nonflowing and flowing water should not be overemphasized, however, since positive images of the latter are to be found in many passages (examples: [Deuteronomy 8:7](#); [Psalm 1:3](#); [126:4](#)). Such images sometimes occur in parallel with those of nonflowing water ([Isaiah 41:18](#); etc.). Of greater importance is recognizing that the *he leads me* phrase of the half-verse before us stands parallel with “he makes me” in [verse 2a](#). Thus the image of rest is continued. The place of abundant food and water is not a place where one hastily washes down a doughnut with a cup of coffee before rushing to the next appointment. It is, rather, a place of repose and respite.

What a picture! Surely the Lord takes care of “his flock like a shepherd” ([Isaiah 40:11](#))!

^{3a} he refreshes my soul.

A consideration of the word *soul* is in order for understanding what the psalmist says is restored. The Hebrew word behind our English translation *soul* occurs about 500 times in the original, and it signifies different things depending on context. It can refer to the “life” of a person ([Genesis 32:30](#); [44:30](#)); the “life” of an animal ([Leviticus 17:14](#)); “me” ([Numbers 23:10](#)); etc.

The word *soul* is therefore quite flexible! With all these potential choices of meaning, it can be difficult to know where to start. When we're stumped in such an instance, a safe approach is to begin by ruling things out; that is, start by determining what it *cannot* mean in the context at hand.

In that regard, we can be certain that the word *soul* as used here does not refer only to the spiritual side of the psalmist's being, with the physical side left out. The context of the psalm addresses the entirety of the psalmist as the object of the loving shepherd's restoring care. Many psalms plead for God's restoring favor (compare [Psalm 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.

Sheep by nature tend to act as a group rather than independently. This means that a herd of sheep will tend to follow a leader. But which leader? In 2005, nearly 1,500 sheep jumped off a cliff (with 450 dying) when they blindly followed the foolish path of a dominant member of the flock. All this happened while the Turkish shepherds, their usual leaders, were away at breakfast.

Traveling correct paths requires proper leadership. Different Hebrew words stand behind the two translations *leads* and *guides* in [verses 2b](#) and [3b](#), but the psalmist intends them to mirror each other. We see this also in [Psalm 31:3](#) (also by David), where the same two Hebrew words are similarly translated. Perhaps the wording of [Exodus 15:13](#) is David's model.

Regarding the nature of *the right paths* wherein the psalmist is led, compare [Proverbs 8:20](#); [12:28](#); [16:31](#); [Matthew 21:32](#); and [2 Peter 2:21](#). The phrase *for his name's sake* confirms the moral tone of the paths in view. Sometimes God takes action (or does not take action) specifically to protect the honor of his name. What David acknowledges in the verse before us he also acknowledges and/or requests outright in [2 Samuel 7:23-26](#); [Psalm 25:11](#); [31:3](#); [109:21](#). Jesus, the good shepherd, always desires to lead us down the right path. But that becomes reality only as we choose to “listen to his voice” ([John 10:3](#)).

C. Confidence (v. 4)

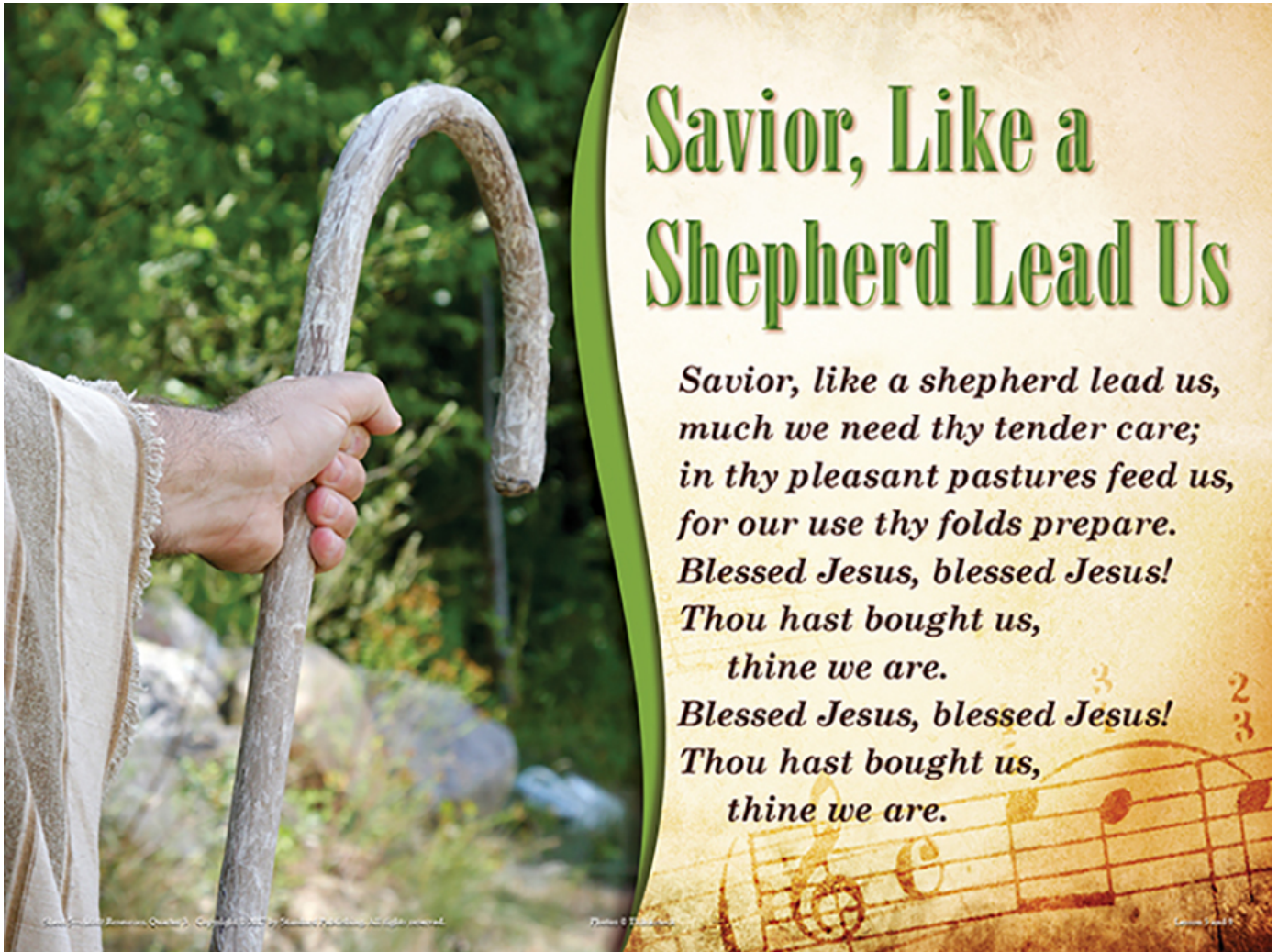
^{4a} Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil,

The darkest valley is often thought to refer to situations where physical death is very possible or even likely. Although *darkest valley* can refer to danger that threatens one's physical life (compare [Job 10:21, 22](#); [Psalm 107:10-16](#)), it also can be understood in a figurative sense (see [Job 16:16](#); [34:22](#); [Isaiah 9:2](#); [Luke 1:79](#)). Bible students who are confused by this ambiguity are not alone! Jesus' disciples often misunderstood his use of figurative language ([Matthew 16:5-12](#); [John 11:11-14](#); [16:25-29](#); etc.).

Metaphors function as figurative, symbolic language by stating or implying comparisons. In the context at hand, the psalmist compares himself with a sheep who is under the care of an expert shepherd. *The darkest valley* compares his life journey with the nature of terrain that

actual sheep must enter to find sustenance. Whatever dangers lurk in these places, the expert shepherd knows how to avoid or neutralize them.

At first, we may think that the presence of the word *evil* tips the scale toward understanding *the valley* as standing for the spiritual dangers of living in a sinful world. Though the Hebrew word is translated in a number of ways (examples: hurt, harm, wickedness, etc.), this word *evil* is best understood by its context. It can refer to physical harm or difficulties in some cases (examples: [Genesis 26:29](#); [47:9](#); [Exodus 32:14](#)) while referring to issues of sin elsewhere (examples: [Genesis 13:13](#); [39:9](#); [Numbers 32:13](#)).



Visual for Lessons 5 & 9. Use these lyrics as a road map: draw attention to thoughts that reflect various points in the text as they are encountered.

Ultimately, it is the phrase “the right paths” in [verse 3b](#) that leads us to think that the psalmist is using *the valley* to symbolize spiritual danger. Even so, the possibility of physical danger’s inclusion in the reference cannot be dismissed (compare [Jeremiah 2:6](#)). We are at least aware that the phrase *the darkest valley* has a more than one possible meaning.

**4^b for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.**

The word *for* marks the twenty-sixth Hebrew word of this fifty-word psalm. David does something interesting just after crossing this midpoint: he switches from addressing God with third person “he” to second person *you*. This change serves to heighten the closeness David has or wants with God: *you are with me*.

The *rod* in which the psalmist takes comfort is the shepherd’s weapon to protect the flock (compare [Job 21:9](#); [Isaiah 10:5](#); etc.). The shepherd uses the crook of a *staff* for rescuing sheep that have wandered off and gotten themselves stuck in relatively inaccessible places.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can we be God's instruments of comfort to those in a dark valley of life?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding physical issues (sickness, etc.)
- Regarding mental issues (depression, etc.)
- Regarding spiritual issues (doubt, etc.)
- Regarding relationship issues (marriage, etc.)

II. Host Metaphor

(PSALM 23:5, 6)

Some students believe that the shepherd metaphor extends throughout [Psalm 23](#). But the content of [verses 5, 6](#) favors a shift to a host metaphor; it mirrors the shepherd metaphor but is more condensed.

A. Vindication (v. 5a)

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

Tables of food are prepared by those who host banquets, feasts, or other meals for visitors. To do so is part of one's obligation to extend hospitality in various contexts of the ancient world ([Genesis 19:1-3](#); [Judges 19:15-21](#); etc.). The meal is often an elaborate meal, with nothing but the best from the host (compare [Genesis 18:3-8](#); [19:3](#); [24:31-33](#), [54](#); [Proverbs 9:1, 2](#); [Luke 15:23, 27, 30](#)).

God is presented in the Old Testament as a gracious host to ungrateful people as they journeyed toward the promised land ([Psalm 78:19](#)). But David does not have such an attitude! He is secure enough in the divine shepherd to dine even while *enemies* are present. In writing another psalm, David prays against his enemies that "the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap" ([Psalm 69:22](#)). The provision of food mirrors that in [Psalm 23:2a](#), above.

A TABLE PREPARED

The Tatar people had lived in the Crimean Peninsula for generations before Stalin came to power. After World War II, he decided that they had collaborated with the Germans. To repay their supposed treason and to remove any ability for them to self-organize, his forces rounded up people at gunpoint and relocated them to central Asia. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, survivors moved back to Crimea and began to build villages.

One summer, I walked down their dusty streets. I noticed many times that entire families lived in one-room cinder-block buildings or even large tents. Women cooked and did laundry outside, exposed to the elements. Despite their circumstances, they almost always invited me to sit down for tea or coffee. Often they served me homemade cherry preserves and desserts. Think about it: people who had nothing, who had experienced trauma and despair, offering us such expensive hospitality! Like the host in [Psalm 23](#), they prepared a table for us and treated us well.

God used the example of these hosts to teach me a lifelong lesson. What do you suppose that lesson was?—L. M. W.

B. Reward (vv. 5b, 5c)

5b You anoint my head with oil;

The host honors the guest by anointing his *head with oil* (compare [Psalm 45:7](#); [92:10](#)). Given the fragrances that were available to add to olive oil (see [Psalm 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](#)).

David (the psalmist) possibly intends a double meaning: he may be recognizing his 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.

5c my cup overflows.

Presumably the host has given the guest a large cup of wine (compare [Jeremiah 35:1-5](#)), and the guest is well satisfied as a result. The Hebrew word translated *overflows* occurs elsewhere only in [Psalm 66:12](#), there translated "place of abundance" in a context of being rescued by God. The host has given the guest more than enough to satisfy his thirst. This cup of satisfaction is equivalent to the waters of [Psalm 23:2b](#), above.

C. Deliverance (v. 6)

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

Surely there is no doubt about the very characteristics of God that are *goodness* and *love*! Instead of worrying about any enemies who may be in temporary pursuit, the psalmist focuses on the goodness and love that follow him permanently. These two are equivalent to the rod and staff of [verse 4b](#), above. God is the divine host who will always be there for his guest.

In numerous other places, the Hebrew verb translated *will follow* is rendered in terms of pursuit or chasing after (examples: [Genesis 14:15](#); [Deuteronomy 11:4](#); [1 Kings 20:20](#)). David knows what it's like to be both the pursuer ([Psalm 18:37](#)) and the pursued ([1 Samuel 23:7-29](#)). We will be pursued by God's goodness and love when we walk the "right paths" ([Psalm 23:3b](#)).

What Do You Think?

When was an occasion that God's goodness followed (even pursued) you, but you didn't recognize it at the time? How did you grow spiritually from the experience?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In your preteen years
- In your teenage years
- During various stages of adulthood

^{6b} and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The shepherd and host metaphors mirror each other yet again in that the verb behind the translation *dwell* is from the same root as the one translated "refreshes" in [Psalm 23:3a](#). The verb at issue is extremely common in the Old Testament; it is quite often used in the sense of returning (examples: [Psalms 6:10](#); [18:37](#)). But commonly used words are particularly subject to taking different meanings, depending on context (see discussion on *soul*, above). The old Greek version of the Old Testament affirms *dwell* to be a proper translation. Even without that version, we recognize that *return* better fits a context of a journey home, while *dwell* suggests a final destination.

As David expresses his conviction about where he *will dwell*, we wonder if he is referring to an earthly location or a heavenly one. *The house of the Lord* is the same as the temple (note interchangeable terminology in [Ezra 3:8-12](#)), although that structure does not exist in David's lifetime. After it is built, people of that era view God as dwelling both in it and in Heaven ([1 Kings 8:13, 27](#); [Psalm 27:4](#); etc.). Therefore to try to determine with certainty which is meant here is probably to miss the main point: the psalmist desires to be in the presence of God, wherever that may be, *forever*.

What Do You Think?

What specific things can we do to prepare better to dwell with the Lord forever?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding the imperative of holiness ([1 Peter 1:15, 16](#); etc.)
- Regarding the imperative to love ([John 13:34](#); etc.)

Conclusion

A. Not an Icon, but a Test

The metaphors of shepherd and host remind us that God is our trustworthy provider. For all physical and spiritual needs, he is the source.

The ultimate question, then, does not concern God's trustworthiness, but ours. Do we yield to his shepherding leadership, or do we rebel? Do we accept his provisions with a sense of accountability, or with a sense of entitlement? Do we walk only in his paths of righteousness, or do we take little "side trips" occasionally? Think carefully—living eternally in his presence is at stake!

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, refresh our lives with your Spirit as we gladly walk in the right paths you establish. Let us realize that those paths lead us to enter your presence and dwell with you forever. We pray this in the name of the good shepherd, Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The shepherd is trustworthy, but are the sheep?

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Before class, create a list of songs about loneliness. Here are a few:

- “Alone Again (Naturally)”—Gilbert O’Sullivan
- “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”—Elvis Presley
- “Heartbreak Hotel”—Elvis Presley
- “Eleanor Rigby”—The Beatles
- “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”—Hank Williams
- “Only the Lonely”—Roy Orbison

Play one or two of these songs to begin class. Discuss some thoughts and feelings about loneliness in these songs.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Puzzling” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs to discover a quote about loneliness from Teresa of Calcutta.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study saying, “Being truly alone is a frightening thought. Perhaps that is why a song in the Bible is probably the most widely known of all psalms. Let’s see why it is so comforting.”

Into the Word

Divide your class into three groups, and give each group paper and pen. Each group is assigned a section of the lesson text and should try to summarize the lesson text with a brief help-wanted ad as describing God’s role found in its section of the Scripture. Assignments and sample help-wanted ads follow:

Group 1—Guide ([Psalm 23:1-3](#))

Seeking a reliable guide to lead expeditions along routes that provide adequate places for rest, food, and water. A guide should have a reputation for choosing the best routes to lead his party safely and efficiently to a chosen destination.

Group 2—Protector ([Psalm 23:4](#))

Seeking a fearless bodyguard. Qualified applicant should be able to protect and direct the client in the most dangerous of situations, ensuring that no harm come to him or her.

Group 3—Host ([Psalm 23:5, 6](#))

Seeking an experienced party planner. A qualified host must be able to ensure adequate provisions for the safety and comfort of his guests, regardless of the length of the event.

Allow time for groups to share their help-wanted ads and summarize their Scripture assignments.

Into Life

Close the class by having students brainstorm a list of ways that they can be, in a small way, a [Psalm 23](#) shepherd to someone. That list may include mailing a postcard; visiting a home, hospital, or senior-care facility; sending a sympathy card; sending an encouraging e-mail; taking someone out to lunch or bringing food to an individual and his or her family.

When the list is complete, distribute index cards and pens. Ask each student to write the name of two or three individuals they know who need care of some sort. Have them write an item from the brainstorm-created list that would best serve each of those individual’s needs.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “[Psalm 23](#) Mission” activity from the reproducible page. Have learners review the roles of God as a *guide*, *protector*, and *host*. Encourage them to think of someone they know in need of care and to write that person’s initials in front of one or more of those tasks.

Close either activity with prayer. Say, “Lord, you want me to be a shepherd to others. I am thinking of the needs of _____.” [Allow students to bring a person’s name to the Lord silently.] “Help me as I minister to _____ in this way.” [Allow students to silently pray about an act of service they will undertake this week.]