
Psalm 23 Bible Study

Psalm 23:1-6. 4 sessions of about 45 minutes, or one longer session. For small groups and personal study.

Psalm 23 is a psalm of trust. It pictures the LORD as a shepherd who feeds, leads and protects his sheep, even through "the valley of the shadow of death", and then as a host who sets a table and welcomes his guest into his house forever. It does not promise a life without danger. It promises God's presence in it: "You are with me." Later Scripture builds on the picture. In Ezekiel 34 God promises to shepherd his scattered people himself, and in John 10 Jesus calls himself the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

READ TOGETHER: PSALM 23:1-6

¹The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. ³He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for the sake of His name. ⁴Even 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. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Scripture from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain.

BACKGROUND

A psalm of trust

Tyndale's study notes call Psalm 23 a "psalm of trust and confidence in the Lord" that "has been a favorite of God's people for generations. It expresses assurance of God's presence in the midst of adversity." Many people know it from funerals. It was written for ordinary days too.

The psalm is short, six verses, and it moves. It starts in a pasture, goes down into a dark valley, and ends at a table in the LORD's house. Halfway through, the psalm stops talking about God ("He leads me") and starts talking to him ("You are with me").

Shepherds and kings

The psalm's heading links it to David, who had kept his father's sheep and fought off lions and bears to protect them. Shepherding was hard, dangerous work. Smith's Bible Dictionary describes a shepherd exposed to heat and cold, attacks from wild animals and the risk of thieves, who led the flock out in the morning, searched for strays and counted the sheep back in at night.

Shepherd was also a word for a ruler. Tyndale's notes on 23:1-3: "People in the ancient Near East commonly viewed their rulers as shepherds." To say "The LORD is my shepherd" is to say who really looks after you, and who is really in charge.

David replied, "Your servant has been tending his father's sheep, and whenever a lion or a bear came and carried off a lamb from the flock, I went after it, struck it down, and delivered the lamb from its mouth. If it reared up against me, I would grab it by its fur, strike it down, and kill it. (1 Samuel 17:34-35)

God promises to shepherd his people himself

Centuries later, in Ezekiel 34, God condemns Israel's leaders as shepherds who fed themselves and let the flock scatter. Then he promises to do the work himself. Tyndale's notes on the chapter say that "the image of the shepherd perfectly conveys the toughness and tenderness of God's dealings with his people," and point back to Psalm 23 at verses 12 to 16.

For this is what the Lord GOD says: 'Behold, I Myself will search for My flock and seek them out. As a shepherd looks for his scattered sheep when he is among the flock, so I will look for My flock. I will rescue them from all the places to which they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples, gather them from the countries, and bring them into their own land. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines, and in all the settlements of the land. I will feed them in good pasture, and the lofty mountains of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in a good grazing land; they will feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will tend My flock and make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the broken, and strengthen the weak; but the sleek and strong I will destroy. I will shepherd them with justice.' (Ezekiel 34:11-16)

Jesus, the good shepherd

In John 10 Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." Tyndale's notes connect it to this psalm: "The good shepherd leads his sheep, finds food and water, and locates paths in the wilderness (see Ps 23)." He goes further than any shepherd in the psalm. He lays down his life for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd, and the sheep are not his own. When he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf pounces on them and scatters the flock. The man runs away because he is a hired servant and is unconcerned for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know My sheep and My sheep know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father. And I lay down My life for the sheep. (John 10:11-15)

PSALM 23, LINE BY LINE

Six verses, two pictures. The shepherd comes first, then the host. The psalm turns from "He" to "You" in the dark valley.

The LORD is my shepherd (23:1)

The first line names who the shepherd is: the LORD, God's own name. "My" makes it personal. "I shall not want" follows from it. Tyndale's notes say God showed this care to Israel in the wilderness, citing Deuteronomy 2:7, where Moses says "you have lacked nothing." It is a statement of trust, not a claim that life will be easy.

Green pastures and quiet waters (23:2)

The shepherd "makes me lie down" and "leads me." Tyndale's notes say "sheep rest after they have eaten their fill," and that "the shepherd seeks out peaceful streams for his flock." The sheep's job is to follow. The shepherd finds the food, the water and the rest.

He restores my soul (23:3)

The shepherd brings his sheep back to life and leads them on right paths. He does it "for the sake of His name." Tyndale's notes explain that "the Lord's name guarantees the relationship; he guards his reputation against any accusation of his abandoning his people." His care rests on who he is, not on how well the sheep are doing.

The valley of the shadow of death (23:4)

The psalm does not skip the dark place. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown describe the valley as a deep ravine where wild animals could hide, "well calculated to inspire dread." The fear is real, but the psalm says "I will fear no evil" and gives one reason: "for You are with me." Here the psalm turns from talking about God to talking to him.

Your rod and Your staff (23:4)

Tyndale's notes say "the shepherd used his rod and staff to fend off danger." Smith's Bible Dictionary adds that the shepherd's staff was both a weapon and a crook for managing the flock, and that he counted the sheep by passing them under the rod. What might look like a threat is a comfort to the sheep.

A table before my enemies (23:5)

The picture changes from a shepherd to a host. Tyndale's notes: "A feast demonstrates the Lord's care and mercy toward his people. Although enemies can watch, they cannot trouble the guests." The enemies are still there. The meal goes on anyway.

Oil and an overflowing cup (23:5)

A good host poured oil on a guest's head. Tyndale's notes say the custom "showed guests honor, hospitality, and refreshment." The cup does more than fill. It overflows. The guest is treated as someone the host is glad to have.

Goodness and mercy, all my days (23:6)

Enemies were in view in verse 5. In verse 6 it is goodness and mercy that "follow me all the days of my life." Tyndale's notes say God "actively bestows care that is greater than the temporary trials imposed by enemies." The psalm ends with a home: "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

The good shepherd (John 10:11-15)

Jesus takes the shepherd picture and goes past it. A hired hand runs when the wolf comes. Tyndale's notes on John 10 say the good shepherd "stands between his sheep and danger" and that "Jesus will never do this; he will always stand between his sheep and danger." He knows his sheep, they know him, and he lays down his life for them.

SESSION 1 OF 4

The LORD is my shepherd

Read Psalm 23:1-3. See what the shepherd does, and what that says about the sheep.

Also read: 1 Samuel 17:34-37; Isaiah 40:11; Deuteronomy 2:7.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. List every verb in verses 1 to 3 that the shepherd does. What does the sheep do?
2. Who is the shepherd, according to verse 1? Why does the name matter?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Rulers in the ancient world were called shepherds. What is the psalm saying when it calls the LORD "my shepherd"?
4. Does "I shall not want" mean the writer never lacked anything? Read Deuteronomy 2:7. What kind of provision is in view?
5. The shepherd guides "for the sake of His name." Why might it be good news that God's care rests on his name and not on our performance?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Where do you need the shepherd to make you lie down and rest right now?
7. Who or what do you look to as your shepherd when things get hard?

SESSION 2 OF 4

Through the valley

Read Psalm 23:4. See how the psalm faces danger and death, and where it finds courage.

Also read: Isaiah 43:1-2; Romans 8:35-39.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What changes in verse 4 in how the writer speaks of God? Compare "He" in verses 2 and 3 with "You" in verse 4.
2. What reason does the writer give for not fearing evil?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Why might the psalm switch to speaking to God at the darkest point?
4. The psalm says "through the valley," not around it. What does that say about what God promises and what he does not?
5. A rod and staff could hit or guard. How are they a comfort here?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. What valley are you, or someone you love, walking through? What would it mean to say "You are with me" there?
7. Write verse 4 out by hand this week and put it somewhere you will see it.

SESSION 3 OF 4

A table and a house

Read Psalm 23:5-6. See God as a host, and the home the psalm ends in.
Also read: Isaiah 25:6-8; Luke 15:3-7; Revelation 7:17.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What three things does the host do in verse 5?
2. What follows the writer in verse 6? For how long?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Why might the host set the table "in the presence of my enemies" rather than somewhere they cannot see?
4. Enemies are in verse 5, goodness and mercy in verse 6. What does that contrast say about the life of someone who trusts God?
5. Read Isaiah 25:6-8. How does that feast help you read the table and the house in Psalm 23?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Where have you seen goodness and mercy following you this year?
7. Who could you welcome to your own table this month?

SESSION 4 OF 4

The good shepherd

Read Ezekiel 34:11-16; John 10:11-15. See how God promised to shepherd his people himself, and how Jesus fulfills that promise.

Also read: Ezekiel 34:1-10; 1 Peter 5:2-4; Hebrews 13:20.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. In Ezekiel 34:2-6, what had Israel's leaders failed to do?
2. In Ezekiel 34:11-16, list everything God says he himself will do.

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Read John 10:11-15. What does Jesus do that the hired hand will not?
4. Jesus says "I am the good shepherd" after God said "I Myself will search for My flock" (Ezekiel 34:11). What is Jesus claiming?
5. 1 Peter 5:2-4 calls church leaders to shepherd the flock. What do Ezekiel 34 and John 10 say about how they should do it?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Ezekiel 34:16 names the lost, the strays, the broken and the weak. Which one describes you right now?
7. Close by reading Psalm 23 aloud together as a prayer.

ONE-SESSION PATH

Psalm 23 in one evening

Read all of Psalm 23:1-6. About 45 to 60 minutes.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. List every verb the shepherd does in verses 1 to 4.
2. Where does the psalm switch from talking about God to talking to him?
3. What does the host do in verse 5, and what follows the writer in verse 6?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

4. Rulers were called shepherds in the ancient world. What does it mean to say "The LORD is my shepherd"?
5. The psalm goes "through the valley," not around it. What does God promise, and what does he not?
6. Read John 10:11-15. How does Jesus go further than the shepherd of Psalm 23?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

7. Which line of the psalm do you most need this week, and why?
8. Close by reading the psalm aloud together as a prayer.

FOR THE LEADER

- Read the psalm aloud at the start of every session. Many people know it by heart, so invite them to say it together.
- For some people Psalm 23 is tied to a funeral or a loss. Let them say so. The psalm makes room for grief. It goes through the valley, not around it.
- Do not spend the session on sheep facts. A few sentences of background are enough. The point is who the shepherd is.
- Keep the psalm's first meaning in view before moving to Jesus. It is a song of trust in the LORD, Israel's God. Session 4 shows how John 10 builds on it.
- If someone shares something that needs more than a group discussion, follow up with them privately and involve your pastor.

WHERE CHRISTIANS READ IT DIFFERENTLY

Is the valley about death, or about any dark time?

Many readers take it to mean any time of danger or grief. Others hear it first as death itself, which is why the psalm is read at funerals. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown hold both: the phrase covers any great danger, but "does not exclude the greatest of all." Either way, the comfort is the same: "You are with me."

One picture or two?

Most readers see the image change at verse 5, from a shepherd with his sheep to a host with his guest. Tyndale's notes take it that way: verses 1 to 3 evoke "images of the Good Shepherd," and verses 5 and 6 the "messianic banquet." A few read the whole psalm as shepherd imagery. The meaning is close either way: the same God who leads also welcomes.

Is Psalm 23 about Jesus?

Its first meaning is David's trust in the LORD, Israel's God. Christians have long read it alongside John 10, where Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, and Hebrews 13:20, which calls him "that great Shepherd of the sheep." Most hold the two together: the psalm is about God, and Christians see that same shepherding care in Jesus.

Does "I shall not want" promise that believers will never lack anything?

Christians broadly read it as trust that God gives what is truly needed, not as a promise of comfort or wealth. The same psalm includes a dark valley and enemies at the table. The writer's confidence rests on the shepherd's presence, not on easy circumstances.

SOURCES

Berean Standard Bible. Berean Bible. Public domain. Scripture text of Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34:11-16, John 10:11-15 and 1 Samuel 17:34-35.

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