

The Shepherd's Crucible



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 23, Rom. 12:18–21.*

Memory Text: “He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake” (*Psalm 23:3, NKJV*).

Sophie leaned back against her bedroom door and slid to the floor. Tears were welling up fast, and it was only a moment before she was sobbing. “How could he? How could he!” Sophie had just received news that was breaking her heart. Someone she thought was a friend, someone she respected and trusted, was spreading awful gossip about her in order to ruin her reputation and the work she had been doing. Grabbing her Bible off the bed, she suddenly found herself staring at some very familiar words: “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” (*Ps. 23:3, 4, NKJV*).

“Surely this can’t be!” she blurted out to herself. But the logic seemed inescapable. The Shepherd in the psalm was guiding His sheep in paths of righteousness, but these very paths also seemed to wind their way into the valley of the shadow of death. Could it be possible that even this painful betrayal by a friend, this dark valley, could be used by God to train her in righteousness?

The Week at a Glance: At what times have you grown more spiritually—through the easy times or the harder ones?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 6.*

A Guide for the Journey: The Shepherd

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (*Ps. 23:1, NKJV*).

Some children were asked to draw a picture of God. Each one drew a heart somewhere in it. When asked why, they declared unanimously that God is love.

It is easy to have a good opinion about God and His purposes when everything is going well. As we grow older and life becomes harder and more complicated, our view of God often changes. God doesn't change (*Heb. 13:8, James 1:17*); we do.

Because of the pastoral lifestyle of the people in Old Testament times, Psalm 23 uses the image of a shepherd to describe how God cares for us. The symbol of a shepherd is used for God—in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It's a wonderful and changeless picture. Before we look at Psalm 23, let's survey how different Bible writers understand the work and character of the Shepherd.

What do you learn about the Shepherd from each text?

Isa. 40:11

Jer. 23:3, 4

Ezek. 34:12

John 10:14–16

1 Pet. 2:25

What does the Shepherd do to care for His sheep in Psalm 23:2–6?

What does it mean to you to know that there is Someone like this caring for you? How could you encourage someone whose own picture of God has been obscured because of his or her struggles?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** *Psalm 23:3*

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: That God is present and active in good times and bad.

Feel: A desire to follow God's guidance wherever it leads.

Do: Resolve to seek and choose God's will for our lives despite hardships.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. The Shepherd (*Ps. 23:1*)

A The image of the shepherd spoke to the daily lives of the psalmist's audience. Is there a comparable image that might speak better to moderns, who think food and clothing come from the local store?

B The idea of a shepherd and his/her sheep implies a certain type of relationship. What is the role of the shepherd? Of the sheep?

C Do you think the idea of God as a shepherd and His people as sheep would have been surprising and/or disturbing to the psalmist's audience? Think about it.

II. Paths of Righteousness (*Ps. 23:3*)

A We all know that the best path between two points is a straight line. Does this sound like the paths of righteousness described in Psalm 23?

B If the paths of righteousness sometimes take us through bad or dangerous spots, what makes them righteous?

III. In the Presence of My Enemies (*Ps. 23:5*)

A In theory, it is best to be on good terms with everyone. In reality, the only way to do that is never to leave home. How could following paths of righteousness be more conducive to making enemies than friends?

B How does Psalm 23 suggest that we relate to our enemies?

C Like the psalmist, how can we be better aware of God's presence throughout our journey?

► **Summary:** In addition to being one of the most beloved biblical texts, Psalm 23 is an excellent sketch of the Christian's spiritual journey, with much to tell us about God, life, and how these things relate to us.

Locations on the Journey

“He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake” (*Ps. 23:3, NRSV*).

Imagine the “paths of righteousness” (*vs. 3*) stretching out before you, way out into the distance. You cannot see the end, but you know that at the end of the journey is home, God’s house. As you focus a little closer to you, do you see where the paths lead to? You can see some places clearly, but other parts are totally obstructed by large or dangerous obstacles. Sometimes the path disappears over a ridge. Some parts of the path are easy to walk along; others are difficult. It was just like this as Israel traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land, and it is described the same way in this psalm.

Identify from Psalm 23 the locations that David sees the sheep passing through when following the paths of righteousness as they make their way to the house of the Lord.

But why are these paths called “paths of righteousness” (*NIV, KJV*) or “right paths” (*NRSV*)? Here are four important reasons. First, they are the right paths because they lead to the right destination—the Shepherd’s home. Second, they are the right paths because they keep us in harmony with the right Person—the Shepherd Himself. Third, they are the right paths because they train us to be the right people—like the Shepherd. Fourth, they are the right paths because they give us the right witness. As we become the right people, we give glory to the Lord. They are “right” or “righteous” paths whether the going is easy or hard.

It is important to realize that when God leads us, it is not simply a question of His delivering a parcel to the destination. It is much more than guidance and protection. Like the many examples all through the Bible in which God is leading His people (whether it is leading Abraham by His promises or leading Israel by the pillar of fire and cloud), when God is guiding, it is always about Him training His people in righteousness.

How conscious are you that righteousness is the Shepherd’s priority for your life? How can trials change your life so that you better reflect the character of Christ?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

In this quarter's lessons we are trying to find positive solutions to negative problems. There are often no easy solutions, because the issues arise as integral parts of a world system that disconnects itself from the Source of the solutions—God. Psalm 23, our introductory study, includes statements that seem both contradictory and complementary.

- 1 Why, if we tread the “paths of righteousness,” do we also find ourselves in the “valley of the shadow”?
- 2 Why spread a table in the “presence of my enemies” when it would be a lot more pleasant to have it spread in the presence of my friends?
- 3 How is it that I am pursued by “goodness and mercy” when life really is showering me with injustice and anything but mercy? Who is doing the pursuing, and will they ever catch up?
- 4 Why is it that I am told that I will have “seasons of terrible perplexity and trial”? Who needs it?

The answers greatly will accelerate your growth in grace and enhance your appreciation for God's way of handling a complex world messed up by the sin problem.

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question, *What do I need to know from God's Word?*

Bible Commentary

The lessons for this quarter focus on how to cope with the bad things that happen to good people. Human beings tend to blame God when bad things

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Unexpected Detour 1: The 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” (Ps. 23:4, NKJV).

It would be nice if the paths of righteousness wound their way only along the grass-covered banks of cool streams. But that is not the way David paints it. Also along these paths is the valley of the shadow of death—not a place that we are too eager to visit! At certain times of the year, the wadis and ravines found in Israel are prone to flash floods that could come unexpectedly and prove overwhelming. These places are also characteristically narrow, with steep sides that block out the light. Hence, “the shadow of death” is an image for a “very deep shadow” or “deep darkness.”

Think about the times you have been in your own “valley of the shadow of death.” What has it been like? Did you have fear, even though you knew that the Shepherd was there? Which Bible texts were most precious to you at that time and why?

How do you think the sheep ended up in the valley? Do you think the sheep went there on their own, or did the Shepherd lead the sheep that way Himself? Justify your answer.

Elisabeth Elliot writes, “A lamb who found himself in the Valley of the Shadow of Death might conclude that he had been falsely led. It was needful for him to traverse that darkness in order to learn not to fear. The Shepherd is still with him.”—*Quest for Love* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming H. Revell, 1996), p. 218.

Have you ever felt that you have been “falsely led” into the valley? How did you respond to God during this time? Why do you think the Shepherd might be willing to risk being misunderstood by permitting us to enter a dark valley?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

happen. Even insurance companies identify unexplainable events as *acts of God*. Some Sabbath School students will inevitably ask why these bad things happen in the first place. The following information will be helpful when the question arises.

I. Is God to Blame?

The introduction to this quarter's lessons mentions the word *theodicy*, a combination of the Greek words for *God* and *justice*. Theodicy is a philosophical discipline that searches for an answer to the problem of evil. Its fundamental question is "If God is good, why is there evil?" In other words, why do bad things happen to good people?

A philosopher named Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) first used the term with the idea of defending God against charges of injustice and accusations of involvement in moral and natural evil. Others used the word to explain why God permits evil (on the assumption that He doesn't).

Most non-Christian religions have no problem with theodicy because their *gods* just are reflections of the human beings who serve them. No one expects these gods to do much good. These religions tend to focus on appeasing the gods, with the hope of keeping their bad tempers and violent natures in check.

II. Biblical Perspectives

The biblical perspective is entirely different. It presents a God whose unchanging nature is love. He needs no appeasement. Moral evil exists not by divine design but only by divine permission. He tolerates it only because His nature of love is determined to win His wayward children back to Himself.

The sacrifice He asks for is "a broken and a contrite heart" (*Ps. 51:17*), driven by a "new spirit" that changes a "stony heart" into a "heart of flesh" (*Ezek. 11:19*).

In the biblical perspective, humanity caused its own downfall, and God has taken upon Himself the task of rescuing it.

Point of Emphasis

It would be worthwhile to spend some time during the class period considering Ellen White's statement from *Messages to Young People* in Friday's lesson. This statement is a beautiful explanation of how

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Unexpected Detour 2: The Surrounded Table

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over” (*Pss. 23:5, NKJV*).

Throughout our lives we will inevitably have enemies. How do you deal with them? Have you ever lain awake at night, dreaming up ways to take revenge on those who are trying to hurt you or destroy your work? It can be hard for Christians to deal with enemies.

What type of enemies have you had? How have you responded to those who have tried to hurt you? How well did you follow Christ’s words in Matthew 5:44 or Paul’s words in Romans 12:18–21?

In Psalm 23:5, David shows us a way of dealing with enemies. He obscures their presence by looking instead at what God is doing in his behalf. And God is there preparing a banquet for him.

In David’s culture, when an honored guest came for a feast, the host would anoint his head with oil as the guest was about to enter the banquet hall. The oil was a mixture of olive oil and perfume. Then the guest would be seated in front of far more food than he or she could ever eat.

How could the three items (table, oil, cup) in Psalm 23:5 help to remind us about how God provides, even when we are in the valley?

As Paul reminds us, “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (*Eph. 6:12, NRSV*). Our enemies include those we see and those we don’t. Yet, when we are with the Shepherd, not one enemy, visible or invisible, can steal what He has provided for us.

Reflect on how the Shepherd has treated you when you have been surrounded by enemies. What can you see during these difficulties that can enable you to give thanks?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Christians should relate to trials and tribulations in circumstances all too often dominated by the forces of evil.

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Look at the titles of the lessons for this week:

- A Guide for the Journey
- Locations on the Journey
- Unexpected Detour 1: The Valley
- Unexpected Detour 2: The Surrounded Table
- A Certain Promise for the Journey


Application Questions:

Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1** Do I pay attention to the Guide, or am I determined to call the shots myself?
- 2** Is the location I am in right now the end of the journey, or do I have some hope for the future?
- 3** What unexpected valley has overtaken me? Is my personal valley of the shadow a box canyon with no way out or just a narrow spot in the road where the sun temporarily does not reach?
- 4** Am I surrounded by the wrong people at the table? How can I get an invitation to a better table in a better environment?
- 5** If there is, as Thursday’s lesson says, a “certain promise,” on what map do I find it, and where will it lead me?

Write out for your own edification a statement showing the following:

- 1** That you understand the nature of the “valley of the shadow” you find yourself in.
- 2** That you know at least some of the things that have to be done to help get you past the shadows onto a more brightly lighted path.

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A Certain Promise for the Journey

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (*Ps. 23:6, NKJV*).

In the valley or surrounded by enemies, it is sometimes tempting to believe we are alone. It does not always feel as though God has been doing much. But David obviously does not see it like this.

In spite of his trials, what two things does David say in verse 6 that he is certain of? See also *Eph. 1:4, 2 Pet. 1:10, Heb. 11:13–15*.

Some translations say that goodness and unfailing love will “follow” me all the days of my life. But the original verb is stronger, and the text should read that goodness and unfailing love will “pursue” me all the days of my life. (In fact, it’s the same verb form used in Genesis 14:14, Joshua 10:19, and 1 Samuel 25:29 where the idea of “pursuit” is very clear.)

How do you picture goodness and unfailing love “pursuing” you? What do you think David meant by describing God’s care for us this way?

No matter how deep the valley or persistent the enemies, the certainty of God’s goodness, unfailing love, and guidance is unquestionable. If these thoughts could sustain Jesus through Calvary, we should take heart.

There are times, however, when those we care for are full of questions. Like David, the best way to address these concerns is often not with a theological description of what God can do. Rather, as David shows us in verse 6, it is through an affirmation, the sharing of a personal conviction, of the truth about our God.

What evidence is there from your own knowledge of God that illustrates the certainty of His goodness and unfailing love? What evidences could you add from the Bible? How could you share this with those who may be questioning God’s care? How is the Cross the greatest example of this “pursuit”?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Witnessing**

Someone you know may be going through a tough time. Even if you personally do not have all the answers to the questions raised in this lesson (who does?), you may be able to help your friend just by going over Psalm 23.

It is surprising that just looking at the problem from a biblical perspective often brings peace of mind. The Bible, because it is the Word of God, brings an added dimension of comfort to the soul.

► STEP 4—Apply!

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question, With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?

Something to Think About

Albert Shirkey, in his book *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, writes, “What joy comes to life when we stop to consider that God never changes! His attitude of love no one can ever alter. His offer of mercy and pardon will be mine now and to the end of time. . . . The hills will change, people will change, customs will change, everything in the world or universe will change; but God is the same from everlasting to everlasting.”—(Nashville, Tenn.: The Upper Room, 1963), p. 14.

Personal Application

Shirkey also states, “As I have the right to my Lord, it follows that He has the right to me. He has the right to knock upon my heart and ask me to give it to Him. He has the right to ask me to put my life in His keeping. He has the right to ask me to think as He thinks, to see as He sees, to act as He acts, and to love as He loves.”—Pages 15, 16.

So, somewhere in the shadows there’s an undiscovered opening onto a path leading to everlasting light, a path that may never be found unless you face the shadows first. If God never changes, then even though I can’t see it, there is something in the shadowy valley that will eventually cause the sun to shine.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Missionaries in the Home,” p. 143, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4; “The Divine Shepherd,” pp. 476–484, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Those who are finally victorious will have seasons of terrible perplexity and trial in their religious life; but they must not cast away their confidence, for this is a part of their discipline in the school of Christ, and it is essential in order that all dross may be purged away. The servant of God must endure with fortitude the attacks of the enemy, his grievous taunts, and must overcome the obstacles which Satan will place in his way. . . .

“But if you keep looking up, not down at your difficulties, you will not faint in the way, you will soon see Jesus reaching His hand to help you, and you will only have to give Him your hand in simple confidence, and let Him lead you. As you become trustful, you will become hopeful. . . .

“You will find help in Christ to form a strong, symmetrical, beautiful character. Satan cannot make of none effect the light shining forth from such a character. . . . God has given us His best gift, even His only-begotten Son, to uplift, ennoble, and fit us, by putting on us His own perfection of character, for a home in His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, pp. 63, 64.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 To what extent have you been aware that the “terrible perplexity and trial” that comes into your life may actually be part of your “discipline in the school of Christ”?
- 2 How might our help, comfort, and encouragement to those in the valley be part of the Shepherd’s way of getting people through their crises? What things can you as a church do to be better used by the Lord to help those in need?
- 3 In class, go around and have each person talk about how goodness and mercy “pursued” them. What can you learn from one another’s experiences?
- 4 Think about the last hours of Christ’s life, as He entered into the crucible. From what you can tell, either from the Bible or Ellen White (*The Desire of Ages* is a great source), how was Jesus, in His humanity, able to endure? What can we take from His example for ourselves in whatever crucibles we face, as well?