

# The Shepherd's (Jesus') Crucible<sup>1</sup>



## SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 29

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Psalm 23; Romans 12:18–21.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “He gives me new strength. He guides me in the right paths for the honor of his name” (Psalm 23:3, NIV).

**SOPHIE STOOD AGAINST HER BEDROOM DOOR** and slid to the floor. Tears were building up fast. Soon afterward, she was crying. “How could he? How could he!” Sophie had just received news that was breaking her heart. Her trusted friend was spreading negative gossip about her. Sophie thought that the gossip would ruin her reputation<sup>2</sup> and the work she had been doing. Sophie took her Bible off the bed and suddenly found herself looking at some well-known words: “He gives me new strength. He guides me in the right paths for the honor of his name. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid. You are with me. Your shepherd's rod and staff comfort me” (Psalm 23:3, 4, NIV).

“Surely this is too good to be true!” Sophie said to herself. But the truth was right there. The Shepherd (Jesus) in the psalm was leading His sheep in the right paths. But these very paths also seemed to lead the way to the valley of the shadow of death. Sophie thought, *Can it be possible that God is using my friend (this dark valley) to teach me to take the right path?*

**THIS WEEK'S LESSON UP CLOSE:** At which times have you grown closer to God—through the easy times or the harder ones?

1. crucible—a boiling pot for purifying metals. It also represents a testing time, or time of suffering, that strengthens character, or who we are.

2. reputation—what other people think of you.

**SUNDAY—SEPTEMBER 30****A GUIDE (LEADER) FOR THE JOURNEY: THE SHEPHERD  
(Psalm 23:1)**

Several children were drawing a picture of God. Each child drew a picture with a heart somewhere in it. When asked why, the children answered that God is love. It was as simple as that.



It is easy to have a good opinion about God and His plan for our lives when everything is going well. But as we grow older, life becomes harder. Then our opinion of God often changes. The truth is that God does not change (Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17), but we do.

Psalm 23 uses the example of a shepherd to describe how God cares for us. The symbol (word picture) of a shepherd is used for God—in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is a wonderful picture that never changes. Before we look at Psalm 23, let us study how different Bible writers understand the work

and character (who a person is) of the Shepherd throughout the Bible.

**What do you learn about the Shepherd from Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 23:3, 4; Ezekiel 34:12; John 10:14–16; and 1 Peter 2:25?**

**Now turn to Psalm 23. What does the Shepherd do to care for His sheep in verses 2–6?**

**What does it mean to you to know that there is Someone (God) who is caring for you? How could you use this picture to help someone who has a picture of God that has been unclear because of his or her problems?**

**MONDAY—OCTOBER 1****PLACES ALONG THE JOURNEY  
(Psalm 23:3)**

Imagine the “right paths” (Psalm 23:3, NIV) stretching far away from you. You cannot see the end. But you know that at the end of the journey is home, God’s house. As you focus closer to you, do you see where the paths lead? You can see some places clearly. But other parts are fully blocked by large or dangerous barriers (roadblocks). Sometimes the path disappears over a hill. Some parts of the path are easy to walk along. Others are difficult. Israel experienced hardship again when they traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land. And this hardship is described the same way in this psalm.



God leads us in right paths.

**In Psalm 23 the sheep pass through certain places on the paths of righteousness (the right paths) on their way to the house of the Lord. What are these places?**

But why are these paths called “paths of righteousness” (NIV) or “right paths” (NIRV)? Here are four important reasons. First, these paths are the right paths because they lead to the right place—the Shepherd’s home. Second, they are the right paths because they keep us very close to the right Person—the Shepherd Himself. Third, they are the right paths because they teach us to be the right people, the same as the Shepherd. Fourth, they are the right paths because they help us become the right people giving the right witness.<sup>3</sup> In this way we give glory to the Lord. They are “right” or “righteous” paths. It does not matter if the journey is easy or hard.

3. witness—the act of telling other people about Jesus through your words and the loving deeds you do for them.

We need to understand that when God leads us, this does not just mean that God is bringing us like packages to some place. His leading is much more than guiding us and keeping us safe. Many examples throughout the Bible show that God is leading His people. (For example, He is leading Abraham by His promises or leading Israel by the pillar of fire and cloud.) But when God is guiding, He is always training His people in righteousness, or in right ways.

**How well do you know that God is making righteousness (right living) His important work in your life? How can trials (troubles, tests) change your life so that you can better show who Christ is?**

## TUESDAY—OCTOBER 2

### UNEXPECTED (SURPRISING) DETOUR (ROADBLOCK) 1: THE VALLEY (Psalm 23:4)

It would be nice if the paths of righteousness, or right paths, would lead only to the grass-covered banks of cool streams. But that is not the picture David paints. Also along these paths is the valley of the shadow of death. (This is not a place that we want to visit very much!) At certain times of the year, the wadis (streams that are dry) and ravines (canyons) in Israel have flash floods that could come without warning and powerfully. These places are also narrow, with

steep sides that block out the light. So, “the shadow of death” is an example for “very deep shadow” or “deep darkness.”

**Think about the times you were in your own “darkest valley.” How did you feel about them? Did you have fear, even though you knew that the Shepherd was there? Which Bible verses were very special 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 by themselves? Or did the Shepherd lead the sheep that way Himself? Defend your answer.**

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

**Have you ever felt that God has been “leading you in the false path” into the valley? How did you follow God during this time? Why do you think the Shepherd might be willing to let us misunderstand Him by allowing us to enter a dark valley?**



The Shepherd (Jesus) is still with us, even in life's dark valleys.

**WEDNESDAY—OCTOBER 3**

### **UNEXPECTED DETOUR 2: THE TABLE (Psalm 23:5)**

Throughout our lives we will have some enemies. How do you deal with them? Have you ever spent a sleepless night, trying to find ways to take revenge on those who are trying to hurt you or destroy your work? It can be hard for Christians to know how to handle enemies.

**What type of enemies have you had in your life? How have you dealt with those who have tried to hurt you or those you care for? How well did you follow Christ's words to us in Matthew 5:44, or Paul's words in Romans 12:18–21?**

In Psalm 23:5, King David shows us an interesting way of dealing with

enemies. He “overlooks” them by looking at what God is doing for him. And God is there preparing a banquet (special dinner) for him.

In the time in which David lived, when an honored guest came for a feast, the host would anoint, or pour oil on, his head. The host did so when the guest was ready 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.



“You [God] prepare a feast [table] before me right in front of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5).

**How could the three items (table, oil, cup) in Psalm 23:5 remind us of how God cares for us, even when we are in the valley?**

Paul reminds us that “Our fight is not against human beings. It is against the rulers, the authorities and the powers of this dark world. It is against the spiritual forces of evil in

the heavenly world” (Ephesians 6:12, NIV). Our enemies include those we see and those we do not. They are around us even if we do not want them to be near us. But when we are with the Shepherd, not one enemy can steal what He has given to us.

Think about how the Shepherd has treated you when your enemies are around you. What can you see during these times that can help you to give thanks to God even during these difficult moments?

#### THURSDAY—OCTOBER 4

#### A CERTAIN PROMISE FOR THE JOURNEY (Psalm 23:6)

When we are in the valley or when enemies are around us, we sometimes feel tempted to believe that God has left us alone. We might feel that God has not been doing much. We might think that if God had helped us, we would not be in this situation to begin with. But David clearly does not feel that way.

**David has had his share of troubles. But in Psalm 23:6 David says that he is sure of what two things? Read also Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 11:13–15; 2 Peter 1:10.**

Some translations of the Bible say that goodness and unfailing love (God’s faithfulness to His promises) will “follow” me all the days of my life. But the original verb is much stronger. The verse should read that God’s

goodness and unfailing love will “pursue” (chase) me all the days of my life. (In fact, it is the same verb used in such verses as Genesis 14:14; Joshua 10:19; and 1 Samuel 25:29, where the idea of “pursuit” [chase] is very clear.)

**What picture do you get in your mind if you imagine goodness and unfailing love “pursuing” you? What do you think David means to tell us about God when he describes His care for us this way?**

The valley may be deep, or the enemies may be all around us. But God's sure goodness and unfailing love and His sure guidance to the very end of our journey, are without any doubt. If these thoughts could support Jesus through His death on the cross, we should be very encouraged, too.

There are times when many things puzzle us. The best way to deal with these doubts is not to try to explain from the Bible what God can do for us. Instead, as David shows us in verse 6, we need to just show our strong faith in the truth about our God.

**How does your own knowledge of God prove to you that God's goodness and love are sure to pursue (chase) us? What proof could you add from Bible verses? How could you share this proof with those who may be questioning the**

**sureness of God's care? How is the Cross the greatest example of this “pursuit” (chase)?**

### FRIDAY—OCTOBER 5

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

“Those who finally have victory in Christ will have times of terrible doubt and trouble in their religious life. But they must not throw away their faith, because this is a part of their discipline [training] in the school of Christ. And it is very important that all sins may be purified [made clean] from them. The servant of God must continue with strong faith in refusing to accept attacks of the enemy. And he must overcome the barriers [roadblocks] which Satan will put in his way. . . .

“Keep looking up, not down at your difficulties. Then you will not weaken in the way. You will soon see Jesus reaching His hand to help you. You will only have to give Him your hand in simple faith, and let Him lead you. As you become trustful, you will become full of hope. . . .

“You will find help in Christ to form a strong and beautiful character.<sup>4</sup> Satan cannot stop the light shining forth from such a character. . . . God has given us His best gift through His Son to put His

4. character—who you are; all the things that a person does, feels, and thinks are what a person is made of; your character is the sum of the choices you make, such as a choice to be honest or to cheat.

own perfection of character on us to prepare us for a home in His kingdom.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, pp. 63, 64.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ How much do you realize that your “terrible trial” is really God’s way of training you in the school of Christ?
- ❷ How might our help, comfort, and encouragement to those in the darkest valley be part of the Shepherd’s way of getting people through their troubles? How can you as a church

member work with the Lord to help those in need?

- ❸ In class, go around and have each person talk about how goodness and mercy “pursued” him or her. What can you learn from each one?
- ❹ Think about the last hours of Christ’s life as He entered into the crucible or boiling pot. What does the Bible or Ellen G. White (*The Desire of Ages*) say is the reason that Jesus, as a man, could remain strong in His faith? What can we take from His example for ourselves in whatever crucible (trial) we face, too?