

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?

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?

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?

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” (Ps. 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?

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”?

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?

Stubborn Believer

by ISAAC ROBLES

I first learned about Adventists when I was ten years old. My older brother, Felipe, had become an Adventist and shared with me what he was learning. But my father did not like Felipe's new religion and told him to stop teaching me and taking me to church. My father thought Adventists were a strange cult that had brainwashed my brother. Although my brother could no longer take me to church, I had learned enough to know that the Sabbath was special. So I tried to spend Sabbaths in my room. I read the Bible and some Ellen White books my brother gave me.

I continued to keep the Sabbath in my room, but my father forced me to attend church with him on Sunday and take part in certain rituals. I didn't want to, but I was just a kid.

My brother had moved to New York, and when I was 12 I went to visit him there. At last I could go to church, finish Bible studies, and be baptized. I felt great that I could follow God. I thought that when my father knew I had been baptized, he would let me worship according to my faith, but that didn't happen. He still made me go to church with him and forbade me to go to church on Sabbath.

For four years I tried to keep the Sabbath, all while my father, aunts, and uncles tried to talk me out of it. Some of my cousins called me "Bible man," but still I did not give up.

One day my cousin found a tract in the trash. He read it and asked me about it. I told him Adventists printed it, and he read it with interest. But I could not teach him or take him to church.

When I was 17 my brother's father-in-law visited and invited me to go to church. At last my father allowed me to start attending church. I told the church pastor about my cousin and the tract he had found. The pastor and I visited my cousin and his wife, and we gave them Bible studies. He and his wife have decided to be baptized as well.

My father even allowed me to study at the Adventist university in Puerto Rico. I praise God for providing a sponsor and a job to help me pay my fees. My father and I have a better relationship now. I hope that one day he will accept my faith.

I thank God for my brother who shared what he learned with me. Your mission offerings make it possible for thousands to hear God's Word every day.

ISAAC ROBLES *has completed his education and is teaching high school in Puerto Rico.*