



A Closer Walk
With
The SHEPHERD
of Psalm 23

There are a couple key reasons for study of the Bible: 1] to learn what God says about Himself 2] to learn what God says about us.

As we examine **Psalm 23**, may we each understand the characteristics of a sheep, the shepherd's care, similarities between us and sheep, and how the *Shepherd* of **Psalm 23** cares about us.

Sheep are the only herd animals that require full-time supervision. When a man decides to raise sheep he must commit his life to them. They must be watched during the day and secured at night. Moses was in the field caring for his father-in-law's sheep when God called him to go and tell the Egyptian pharaoh to 'let His people go'. Moses would then be called to transfer his shepherding skills to lead 2 million murmuring people through a desert for 40 years. [**John 10:11**]

Sheep are not trainable. Their problem is that they never learn from mistakes. They do the same stupid things over and over, again and again. Sheep do not remember anything. They go astray and are always getting in trouble. Pain and punishment have no effect on future behavior.

I. Psalm 23 – The Lord is my Shepherd

"Come to Me, [God invites] – all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." **Matthew 11:28**

If we let Him - - God will lighten our loads . . . the question is '*How do we let Him?*' Perhaps, the study of **Psalm 23** can afford some answers. We can find these words scrolled on hospital halls, scratched on prison walls, quoted by the young, whispered to the dying, and shared at funerals.

Why did David write **Psalm 23**?

- To build our trust in God and remind us of who He is.
- God is *Yahweh* – an unchanging God & an ungoverned God!

David is writing out of a knowledge that he belongs to his Shepherd. We need to read & study in the same way. Shepherds choose and purchase their sheep. They own them. The sheep are the possession of the shepherd. [**Ephesians 2:12-13**]

The shepherd who became king wrote this psalm about the King who was his Shepherd. David grew up a shepherd & became a giant-slaying, singer, songwriter. [He was called a 'man after God's own heart' – **1st Samuel 13:14**] Around 1005 BC, David became king of Judah. Most scholars feel he wrote **Psalm 23** near the end of his life. It was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and encouragement of the Scriptures – we might have hope.

We need stability in our lives! Don't you deal with enough change in your life? You may have heard it said: *Change is inevitable - - but growth is optional.* Relationships change. Health changes. The weather changes. Our God – who ruled the earth last night is the same God who rules it today. He never changes [You can no more alter God than a pebble can alter the rhythm of the oceans]. No one gave birth to Him. No one caused Him. No act brought Him forth. Though He creates . . . God was never created. Though He causes . . . He was never caused. *“Before the mountains were born or You brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God.” Psalm 90:2*

Think about it – The LORD – The Creator of the galaxies, the One who commands the armies of heaven is the One who sustains all things by His word, the One who knows the name of every star and the location of every grain of sand, the One who has Infinite Power, the One who is Sovereign over history and every detail of our lives, the one who gives life to every creature from kings to single-cell amoebas – the LORD – is MY shepherd.

God [*our Shepherd*] – doesn't check the weather; He makes it. He doesn't defy gravity; He created it. He isn't affected by health; He has no body. In **John 4:24** it is recorded that Jesus said, *“God is spirit”*. Since He has no body; He has no limitations. He is everywhere at the same time. David mentions in **Psalm 139:7-8**: *“Where can I run from You? If I go up to the heavens, You are there. If I lie down in the grave, You are there.”*

Our God does not fear earthquakes, hurricanes, or tornados. Cancer does not trouble Him and cemeteries do not disturb Him. He was here before they showed up. He'll be here long after they are gone.

Sheep are defenseless – they have no defense mechanism to protect themselves from assailants [they can't bark, spew venom, or use teeth or sharp claws]. There have been incidents of ravens or crows flying down on a sheep's head and plucking out the sheep's eyes. They need a shepherd!

My friends, we seek comfort in the storms of life - - but we need a God who can actually *still* the storms. We need a God who has conquered the grave. We need a God who can place 100 billion stars in our galaxy and 100 billion galaxies in the universe. We need a God who can shape two fists of flesh into 75 to 100 billion nerve cells [each with as many as 10,000 connections to other nerve cells throughout the body] place it in a skull and call it a brain.

We need a God who is so mind-numbingly mighty and awesome - - that He may also lift you in His arms and hold you with great tenderness. **We have one. He is our Shepherd!**

In David's day and culture, it was all about *community*. Individualism was not a thing like it is here in this day & age. Sheep were never in the pasture alone. They were always in a flock. So for David to write [in his day & culture] as a singular individual when comparing himself to a sheep – spoke to the shepherd's great value. [It speaks to our great need, as well!]

In this crowded world where you're pulled back and forth, caught in the hustle & bustle, hearing competing voices - - your Shepherd has you. He has your back. He holds you. He guides you. He will not let you go! He is with you!

Notice that in verse 4, the pronoun shifts from *He* to *You*. There is a corresponding shift from language about sheep to language about humans. The imagery after this verse also centers on human things. The language shift is subtle and hardly noticeable; however this change mirrors the change that takes place as we embrace God as our Shepherd.

Examine: **Psalm 16:5; 18:2; 27:1; 28:7** *The Lord is my _____*. [notice 'my' – not 'our']
The Lord is mine!" - I love that! Who He is, is personal to you!! He belongs to you & you belong to Him! [Do these qualities of God's character show up in your life?]

- Is God personal to you?
- Why is it so difficult to turn over the reins of our lives to our Shepherd [manager, owner]?
- David proudly exclaims: "The Lord – *HE* is my Shepherd." – discuss in light of **Colossians 1:15-20**.
- Analyze what our author says about the *character & ability* of our Shepherd.
- Why do we need a Shepherd?
- What does it mean to wear the 'mark' of the Master?

To be honest, when I really lean on Him as my Shepherd, I feel the freedom to be as needy and dependent as a sheep. Be needy. Be vulnerable. Be carried. Be loved. Be led. Be you.
#HewillbeyourShepherd

II. Psalm 23 – I Shall Not Want

Jesus will meet every genuine need his sheep have. He will provide for us; He won't leave us wanting. And because He is the LORD, he has the power to fulfill our every genuine need. No other "shepherd" could do that. If Bill Gates were my shepherd, as rich as he is, he couldn't give me deep, lasting joy. He can't give me power to overcome sin and temptation. No human can cause everything in my life to work together for my good.

I shall not want. It is not only a fact, but I often think of it as a personal decision. If I know that Jesus Christ the Lord is caring for and leading me, then I will not grumble or complain. I will make every effort to continually offer thanks. I know my Shepherd has my best interests at heart, and will give me everything I genuinely need, so I will be content in him.

You are so very great – God! Your character is holy. Your truth is absolute. Your strength is unending. Your discipline is fair. Your provisions are abundant for our needs. Your light is adequate for our paths. Your grace is sufficient for our sins. You are never early, never late. You

sent Your Son in the fullness of time. Your plan is perfect. Bewildering. Puzzling. Even troubling – but perfect!

Remember: ***What you have in your Shepherd – is greater than what you don't have in life!***

Think for a moment: about the things you 'own' – your house, the car you drive, money you've saved, jewelry you've inherited, stocks you've traded, clothes you've purchased, all your stuff.

All that stuff isn't yours! Read: **Ecclesiastes 5:15** *"Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands."*

All that stuff is not you! Read: **Luke 12:15** [Message] *Speaking to the people, he went on, "Take care! Protect yourself against the least bit of greed. Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot."* Read: **1st Samuel 16:7** *But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."*

- What do you want God to see – when He thinks of you?
- Discuss contentment, discontentment, and gratitude.
- Analyze the meaning of: *'not being in want'*.
- List the effects of serving an *'indifferent master/owner'*.
- Discuss the attributes of a *'good shepherd'*.
- Talk about the problems of what our author describes as a *'fence crawler'*.

Your Shepherd carries you when you can't carry on. He stands up for you when enemies stand against you. He protects you when you are unsure or feel unsafe. He leads you when you don't know which way to go. He saves you from your sin and from yourself. He keeps you close to Him, and He is faithful forever.

The Message paraphrases *"I shall not want"* into *"I don't need a thing."* I love that! We 'lack' nothing. [**Deuteronomy 2:7; Psalm 34:9-10; Proverbs 11:14, 15:22**]

This Psalm lists the following needs that sheep will not lack: food, drink, tranquility, rescue, guidance, freedom from fear, protection, and the shepherd's presence all the days of their lives. Notice – the things like 'stuff' and status didn't make the list. We may experience lack in this life, but we will only lack what we do not need. We will never lack what we do need.

Check **Mark 10:17-22** – when Jesus said, "one thing you lack". [Have we become too – *self-reliant*? Self-reliance can keep us from being honest & vulnerable. It can cause a lack of humility and even build a wall of isolation.] You get treasure in heaven by making heaven your treasure. Are you content? Why or why not?

III. Psalm 23 – He Make Me Lie Down In Green Pastures

Green pastures is a picture of abundance, rest and refreshing. A sheep lying down in a green pasture wouldn't have a care in the world – that sheep is surrounded by rich food. That sheep won't worry about whether there will be enough to eat. His good shepherd richly provides. The richest green pasture our Shepherd Jesus *makes* us "lie down" by His word. His word is full of comforting promises and rich wisdom. His word feeds, strengthens, satisfies and protects us.

For sheep to sleep – everything must be just right. They must feel safe [No predators. No tension in the flock. No bugs in the air. No hunger in the belly.] Unfortunately, sheep need help. They need a shepherd to 'lead them'. For without a shepherd, they can't rest. Neither can we!

Have you ever tried to sleep while someone else in your family is driving?

Note the pronoun preceding the verb. *HE makes* me . . . Who is the active one? Who is in charge? The shepherd selects the trail and prepares the pasture. The sheep's job [our job] – is to keep our eyes on the Shepherd. "*You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You.*" **Isaiah 26:3**

To remain healthy – you must slow down and rest. Green pastures were NOT the natural terrain of Judea. [The hills around Bethlehem where David kept his flock were NOT lush & green.] Any green pasture required work on the part of the shepherd. He had to clear the rough, rocky land. Stumps had to be torn out, brush burned, irrigation, and cultivation.

Knowing that God will shelter me when I am in trouble, knowing that there are songs of deliverance being sung over me [even when I can't hear them], knowing that when it's dark there is a greater shadow of God wings sheltering me, and knowing that when I feel the most helpless my Shepherd is my Defender - - these truths give me rest & assurance when I feel vulnerable.

Fear will always tell you that you aren't safe & you can't trust your Shepherd. Insecurity will tell you that you will never find peace – so you must keep your guard up. Fear is a liar. Insecurity is not your friend.

Sheep have one responsibility, and it's not to find the green pasture & still water. The one and only responsibility is to *obey & follow* their shepherd. Do you spend more time looking for green pastures than you do looking to your Shepherd? Following is freeing. Surrender brings serenity. Read: **Matthew 11:28-29** The yoke of Jesus is one of grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness. [His grace saves us a seat on the back of His bike. Ever been on a tandem bike? He picks the path. He determines the pace. He carries the weight of the journey, He is doing the bulk of the work. Our job is to trust Him, follow Him, and cooperate with Him.]

Read **Hebrews 3:7-19** Examine why the people of Israel [who came out of Egypt] couldn't enter into their rest. Note that we are protected from becoming hardened by deceitfulness of sin – by sticking with the flock & encouraging one another. We are followers. We become vulnerable.

We need to stay close to the Shepherd and in the flock. [**Psalm 95:7**] Your Shepherd wants to lead you to green pastures not just to bless & minister to you - - but so He can bless others & minister to others thru you.

My Shepherd makes me lie down *in His finished work*. Jesus created a pasture for my soul . . . He planted seeds of grace and dug ponds of mercy. He invites us to rest there. His pasture is a gift to us. This is NOT a pasture that we have made. Nor is it a pasture that we deserve. It is a gift of God!

Of all the people on the face of the earth, we who know Jesus have His word. Dwell in His word. Let Jesus help you “lie down” in it, meditate on it. He will speak to you, and give you faith, encourage, and satisfy you.

- What images come to mind when you think about resting? [Physical, emotional, mental, spiritual] Discuss situations where you can't easily rest.
- How does fear keep us from flourishing?
- Discuss how *rivalry & competition* hamper the effectiveness of individuals. [**Ezekiel 34:15-22**]
- Analyze Paul's secret to contentment. [**Philippians 4:10-13**]
- Look at the impact of the shepherd who keeps his flock from '*being bugged*'.
- Discuss the impact of *green pastures* to the success of sheep.

IV. Psalm 23 - He Leads Me Beside Quiet Waters

God leads us. God will do the right thing at the right time.

Sheep are afraid to drink from running/moving water. Still water may be stagnant and harmful. Sheep are not even aware of their need for water. They can often be found grazing beside the water exhibiting the early signs of dehydration. Aware that sheep must be led to safe water – the shepherd must watch each animal to make sure it drinks. Often he resorts to using the crook of his staff to aid them in drinking.

Check the antonyms & synonyms for 'still'. [Antonyms: broken, changeable, variable, moving, rapid, agitated, stirred, unfixed. Synonyms: fixed, calm, hushed, sealed, smooth, stable, at rest, peaceful, tranquil.] This is a big deal - - sheep won't drink from water that is turbulent or swift.

Our Shepherd is God over our problems & God over our pain. He is bigger than any mountain we face and stronger than any power we possess.

Still waters describe *peace*. This same Lord who spoke to and calmed the wind and the waves on the Sea of Galilee, leads His sheep into peace with God. Because Jesus bore the wrath of

God we deserved, we are reconciled to God. Jesus removed our offenses before the Holy One. Now reconciled, God adopted us as His very own children. This is the ultimate peace.

Our Shepherd also leads us into peace in this life. He tells us not to worry about what we shall eat or drink, because our Father who provides for the sparrows will surely provide for His sons and daughters. Jesus leads us into peace, and helps us trust Him in the midst of trials. He leads us into peace with our brothers and sisters. He helps us trust Him, knowing that He is in control of all things. [Isaiah 43:1-3]

He leads us – God isn't *behind* me, yelling, "Go!" He is *ahead* of me, bidding, "Come!" He is in front, clearing the path, cutting the brush, and showing the way. He is at the curve, saying, "Turn here." Constantly warning, "Watch your step."

Hebrews 4:16 NLT affirms, "*We will find grace to help us when we need it.*" God assists us in doing the right thing at just the right time - - what a difference that makes. We are encouraged to leave tomorrow's problems until tomorrow.

He promises a lamp unto our feet [to light the path], not a crystal ball into the future [**Psalm 119:105**]. Remember – God is still in control. We need to hear that it is not over until He says so.

"Even when I have things to do, Lord help me 'still' and just be. May I be still in You, and know that You are God. You are in charge. So, I can just be, and You will do all the doing that needs to be done in and through me. Thank You, Lord!"

"When the train goes through a tunnel and the world gets dark, do you jump out? Of course not. You sit still and trust the engineer to get you through." – Corrie ten Boom Next time you find yourself disappointed, don't panic. Don't give up. Just be patient & let God remind you – He's in control. *'It ain't over till it's over!'*

- Your soul has needs too. Rest. Nourishment. Peace. Companionship. Refreshment. Are you in position to receive what your soul needs most?
- Describe the *capacity* and need for the water of the eternal God [**Matthew 5:6; John 4:10-14; John 7:37-38**]
- Discuss the acquisition of water by way of the dew.
- What substitutes do people seek after?
- Analyze how drinking deeply from 'the wells of the world' leaves the soul unsatisfied & unquenched. [**Jeremiah 2:13**]
- Why are so many *sheep* stubborn & resistant from drinking pure, crystal clear water? [**Galatians 5:13-26**]

Because Jesus has redeemed us, called us by name, and made us His own, He will always be with us, no matter what we go through. And because He is the Lord our God and our Savior, He will allow nothing to overwhelm us in an ultimate sense. He will give us *peace*.

V. He Restores My Soul

Our Shepherd rescued our souls from sin. He restores our souls when we stray [He brings us back from our ignorance, errors, and wanderings]. Jesus restores our hope by giving us Himself.

When sheep fall and roll to their backs – they do not possess the musculature to get up. All their kicking, flailing, and bleating doesn't help. They certainly cannot follow the shepherd, even though they may hear his voice. The sheep becomes isolated from the flock and becomes easy prey for their enemies. They cannot help each other get back to their feet – only the shepherd can help. There is an absolute dependence on the shepherd to remain on their feet. It is important to stay within 'hearing range' of the shepherd.

Afflictions, hardships, and challenges of everyday life can drain and exhaust us. But Jesus restores us day by day. Every morning we have fresh hope, new outpourings of grace. He restores us again and again. He restores our faith and gives us fresh grace.

It is really hard to see things grow old [Neighborhoods, towns, schools, buildings, and even people]. It would be nice to be able to go back and see things 'new' again. God doesn't reform; He restores. He doesn't camouflage the old; He restores the new. Our God will restore the vigor. He will restore the energy. He will restore the soul.

Sheep are not physically able to carry heavy loads. You will never see one hitched to a wagon carrying a heavy load. They seem to follow behind the shepherd without a care. They don't even know where they are going.

What predators are causing you an undue amount of stress? Failing health, broken hearts, lack of employment, empty wallets, demands of bosses, creditors, family dissention, etc. For many – hope is in short supply. What would it take to restore your hope?

Our Shepherd majors in restoring hope to our souls. Whether you find yourself on a rough and treacherous ledge, or up to your hips in the mire - - everything changes when your *rescuer* appears.

Your loneliness diminishes, because you have fellowship. Your despair decreases, because you have vision. Your confusion lifts, because you have direction. The problems still remain - - the thorns still cut the skin, circumstances still lurk . . . but you have changed because you have hope. [You have hope because you have someone who can lead you out of the 'deep weeds' you find yourself in. Your Shepherd knows that you were not made for this place. He is aware that you are not equipped for this journey. So He has come to guide you out. He has come to restore your soul.

Jesus doesn't give us hope by changing the 'deep weeds'; He restores our hope by giving us Himself. He has promised to stay until the final whistle. "*I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" **Matthew 28:20**

Read about: *restoration*. **Deuteronomy 30:1-3; Psalm 80:3; Jeremiah 30:17, 33:7; Galatians 6:1**. No one wastes the energy or work to restore something that has no potential. [Check **Psalm 119:176; Matthew 18:12-13**]

We are sheep. It's OK to be a sheep. We must honor and love our Shepherd by receiving His compassion and pressing into His restoration. He doesn't just bring us back from our wanderings - - He gives us back what our wanderings have taken from us.

- Discuss what it means for a person to be 'downcast'. [**Psalm 42:11**]
- Analyze why the shepherd must keep a sharp eye on his flock. [**2nd Chronicles 16:9**]
- Describe the importance of 'standing firm'. [**Psalm 56:13; 1st Corinthians 10:12-13**]
- Why is it so easy to become 'self-indulgent'?
- Discuss **Hebrews 12:4-14** in light of our standing with the Good Shepherd.

Our Shepherd doesn't want some of your worries – He seeks *all* of them. He is not sometimes thinking about you – but *always*. He is not watching over some of the things that concern you – but *everything*.

VI. He Guide Me In Paths of Righteousness

The path of righteousness is a narrow, winding trail up a steep hill. At the top of the hill is a cross.

Sheep have a natural tendency to follow a leader. [Attempts to drive them – causes them to scatter.] The flock recognizes the voice of the shepherd – and responds to his calling. They depend more on their ears than their eyes. [It is important that the sheep spend time with the shepherd to become familiar with his voice. Familiarity builds confidence in the shepherd.]

The Shepherd knows His sheep by name and lays down His life for them. He protects, provides, and possesses His sheep. [**Psalm 79:13; 100:3; Luke 15:4; Matthew 9:36; Luke 12:32; Matthew 26:31; 1st Peter 2:25; Hebrews 13:20**] The vast majority of Jesus' listeners made their living off of the land. Many were shepherds.

No flock ever grazed without a shepherd - - and no shepherd was ever off-duty. When sheep wandered – the shepherd went to find them. When they fell – he carried them. When they hurt – he healed them.

Sheep are NOT smart. They have the tendency to wander even into running creeks searching for water - - their wool grows heavy & they drown. Sheep have no natural defense – no claws, no

horns, no fangs. They are helpless! They need protection. Sheep have no sense of direction and need someone to guide them [on paths of righteousness].

There are always some sheep who wander away. Some become distracted and lose their way. Some sheep are 'head strong' and want to go their own way. The shepherd knows this and looks out for them and guides them back on the path.

God does not expect us to travel alone through life. Our Shepherd goes before us, beside us, and follows along behind us - - constantly 'drawing' us to Himself.

We as sheep – tend to be swept away by 'waters we should have avoided'. We have no defense from the 'evil lion' who prowls seeking someone to devour. We get let 'lost'. [Isaiah 53:6] We need a shepherd - - NOT a cowboy to herd us. And we have one. The One who knows us by name!

Notice where and how He guides us. [Psalm 5:8; Psalm 25:4-5,9; Psalm 31:3; Psalm 86:11; Proverbs 11:14] We need guidance. Without it we can stray or stumble. Thankfully, God is willing to teach us the way & instruct us where we should go.

Who or what I follow is who or what I trust the most. It's not what I *say*, it's what I *do* that proves who or what I trust.

Read: **Psalm 119:1-8** [The Message]

When we belong to our Shepherd, we are connected to Him. He has drawn us with 'ropes of love' [Hosea 11:4], and He lovingly stays one step ahead of us - - to keep us on the correct path. He causes us to be led by Him. *We don't have to know the path - - we just need to know the Shepherd!* [Psalm 32:8]

In the Holy Land – shepherds most often guide with their voices. Frequently a shepherd will sing, and his sheep know his voice. It's not uncommon for several shepherds & their flocks to be at the same water source all at the same time. Often, flocks may mingle. They will drink and be made to lie down and rest while the shepherds chat. When the shepherd is ready to go, he calls his sheep or begins to sing. They will quickly stand, leave the snoozing flock, and begin to walk to their shepherd [because they recognize his voice]. [John 10:27] When you hear the Shepherd's voice – don't become hard-hearted and dig your heels in [we must have the right attitude]. We don't control the path. All we control is our attitude and actions on our right paths. [Proverbs 4:18]

Lord, please be our guide. We want to trust You more than our experiences, feelings, habits, or anyone & anything else in our lives. It is You, Your Word, and Your Spirit that we seek to follow. Amen.

- What does it mean to guide? Where has He guided you in the past? [Discuss the situation in which you needed God's guidance.]

- Analyze how the Good Shepherd combats the bad habits of His flock. [**Proverbs 14:12; 16:25**]
- Describe the seven essential attitudes that must be acquired to progressively follow our Shepherd.
- In **Psalm 25** the writer comes back to his need for forgiveness and God's forgiving love several times [**vv. 6-9; 11,18**]. Discuss your thoughts regarding the relationship between this theme and the theme of seeking God's guidance.

If you want to touch God's heart - - use the name He loves to hear: call Him Father!

VI. For His name's sake

The wool that protects the sheep in winter has to be removed in the summer. Too much wool prevents the body heat from dissipating. This causes the sheep to suffer and can lead to heat prostration. Dirt, grass, and water can accumulate deep in the wool next to the skin. Should this mud-like substance freeze – it can be fatal. Sheep cannot shear each other. They depend upon the shepherd to do the shearing. When the wool is sheared, the sheep are providing for others. [The wool is an very unique product – imitations often fail.]

Sheep can only see a short distance in front of them – unless the wool is trimmed from their face. During the shearing – it requires two people to hold the kicking, bleating sheep. It sounds as if the sheep is being killed. The shepherd takes his time, knowing that this procedure is necessary for the animal's health. The reaction of the sheep does not hinder the performance of the shepherd. After this first shearing – the sheep are quiet -knowing the shepherd cares for them. They trust him to do what is necessary for their protection.

Remember, God is the One who heals! He may use an extension of the medical world or a part of the hospital, but He is the One who removes the 'poison' from your system. He is *Jehovah-raah*, your caring shepherd – whom you can consult when you are confused about your future. When anxious about provision, talk to *Jehovah-jireh*, the Lord who provides. If your challenges are too great, seek *Jehovah-shalom*, the Lord is peace. If you are physically sick or your emotions weak, look to *Jehovah-rophe*, the Lord who heals. When you feel like you are stranded behind enemy lines, take refuge in *Jehovah-nissi* – the Lord is my banner.

It is always important to recall the various names of God - - for it reminds us of His character. Our God is the shepherd who guides, the Lord who provides, the voice who brings peace to the storms, the physician who can heal, and the banner that guides the warrior.

The path that our Shepherd guides us on is full of promise and potential. It has a purpose, but the path isn't chosen for our sakes - - it's for His name's sake. [Read: **Exodus 20:3-5; Isaiah 42:8; Malachi 1:11; Philippians 2:9**] God's name represents His character [and He always acts according to His character] and for His name's sake.

Human shepherds lead their flocks for 'their name's sake'. They choose paths for their sheep in order to protect their own reputations. The paths chosen represent their character, management style, integrity, compassion, and ability. The condition of the sheep is a direct reflection of the shepherd.

God's honor is at stake in the way He is leading your life. God forgives us, delays wrath, and leads us for His name's sake. We all tend to live our life stories as if we were the main characters - - but God is! What brings Him glory – brings us good.

I love this promise. Our good Shepherd promises to lead us in paths of righteousness, to deliver us from sin and protect us from falling. A favorite promise is **Psalm 32:8**: "*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*" God Himself promises to personally instruct, teach and counsel us with His eye upon us. He doesn't send an angel to tell us where we should go or what we should do, He Himself does. And as **Psalm 23:3** says He leads us "*for His name's sake,*" not only for our good but for His glory – "*for His name's sake.*" Our good Shepherd leads and counsels us to walk in His ways to bring glory to the Father. The Father's glory has always been Jesus' top priority, and it is His top priority for our lives.

- Consider that the Shepherd's purpose has nothing to do with our preferences or our pleasures. How does that make you feel?
- What does it mean that God guides us along the journey – not for our sake, but for His sake?
- Check out: **Psalm 25:11; Jeremiah 14:7; Ezekiel 20:9, 36:22**

VII. Even Though I Walk Thru The Valley

As we linger in the valley – remember: your Shepherd is by your side. [*He gathers the lambs and carries them close to His heart*'] **Isaiah 40:11**]

As springtime grazing leaves the pasture bare, the shepherd is forced to seek out new fields. This is the day that the shepherd takes the sheep to the high country, leading the flock to the mountains. With no other companion [other than the sheep] and no desire other than the flock's welfare, he leads them to the deep grass of the hillsides. The shepherd and his flock are gone for weeks, perhaps months. They will stay well into autumn, until the grass is gone and the chill becomes unbearable.

Not all shepherds make the journey up the hillsides. The trek is long. The path is dangerous. Poisonous plants can infect the flock. Wild animals can attack. There will certainly be narrow paths and dark valleys. Many shepherds choose the security of the barren pastures below. David knew from a shepherd's perspective, how timid the sheep would be when the valley was dark. He was familiar with the role of protector. [**1st Samuel 17:34-35**] He also knew what it felt like to be a sheep, walking through the dark valleys of his own life. He knew how much he needed his Shepherd to lead him, comfort him, and assist him in getting through.

David understood this annual pilgrimage. Before he led Israel - - he led sheep. His time as a shepherd was probably the inspiration behind this verse of the psalm. What the caring shepherds do for their flock – our Shepherd will do for us. He will lead us to the ‘high country’. When the pasture is bare down here – He will lead us up there. He will guide us thru the gate, out of the flatlands, and up the path of the mountains. He knew the shepherd’s perspective, he knew how timid the sheep would be when the valley was dark.

When sheep in Palestine are on their journey to the high meadows they certainly pass through deep canyons, which are dark and filled with danger. While in these dark, foreboding valleys the shepherd is especially close, always making his presence known. David describes his experience of facing dangers and threats of every kind, of being afflicted and even broken-hearted. In spite of these afflictions – this psalm expresses the good news that God responds to our calls for help and rescue.

One day our Shepherd will take us to the ‘mountain’ by way of the valley. He will guide us to His house – thru the valley of the shadow of death. Every passing year we grow older [it’s called aging]. We can joke about it, we can groan about it – but we can’t stop it. With these aches, pains, and wrinkles come some serious thoughts/questions about what happens when this journey on earth is over. Is death when we go to sleep? Or – is it when we finally wake up?

We all want to hear what God has to say about death. To His disciples - Jesus shared His own eulogy [they did not comprehend that it was His farewell address]. He knew when He would witness His last sunset. He knew when His death would come in the morning. *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”* **John 14:1-4**

Our Shepherd says: trust Me with your death. When you face the grave, don’t be troubled – trust Me! To God the grave is a no-brainer. I can take care of it, don’t worry, it’s no big deal. He knows what lies ahead.

The valley of the shadow of death can mean when we are literally dying or it can mean times of affliction and suffering. Yet Jesus promises He will be with us no matter what we go through. We may not sense His nearness, but He promises He will never leave us nor forsake us. [When my mother was first diagnosed with Alzheimer’s she said, “I hope I never forget Jesus, and I never forget you kids.” And I said, “Mom, even if you forget Jesus, He will never forget you. And we will never forget you either.” As God promises in **Romans 8:38-39** - *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*]

The Hebrew translation for ‘the shadow of death’ is ‘darkest of valleys’. There is the valley of depression, of grief, of rejection, of divorce, of illness, of stress, of joblessness, infertility, of

longing - - just to name a few. Valleys foster fear and uncertainty. These are usually not the places we seek to tread alone. When they get long and treacherous, we need comfort.

Valleys are part of our journey. Take note: we are to *'walk through'* – denoting movement and progress. We are not to stop, buy a house, and live there forever. Valleys are the *conduits*. They have an entrance and an exit. Valleys have a beginning and an end. They are *passages* that take you from where you are to where you are going. Even when they last a long time – they are still temporary! Read: **2nd Corinthians 4:16-18**

Staying isolated while in the valley can feel confining, heavy, and certainly dark. Our adversary wants us to believe that they have no ending [hoping to bring a feeling of claustrophobia]. In the darkness – we tend to stumble. We can't always alter the valley we are in, but we can change our attitudes, actions, and choices. When we walk thru the valley with our Shepherd, He will use the *valley moments* to change us, grow us, and point us to a new and better place.

In those valley moments it may awaken fear. The 'what-ifs' start to whisper. This is a natural reaction to our valleys. Anger, Isolating yourself, being overly controlling, anxiety and worry, are often signs of fear in disguise. [**Joshua 1:9; Psalm 56:3-4; Isaiah 43:1; 2nd Timothy 1:7**]

Fear focuses on the darkness and shadows. *Faith* focuses on the Shepherd. [Faith and fear certainly do NOT share the same perspective.] [Check the 'fear statement' of the father in **Mark 9: 20-24**] *Nothing you fear is more powerful than your God!* God gets personal – when the valley becomes dark. Note: **Psalm 46:10** – stillness increases our awareness of our Shepherd's presence. Often our reaction to valleys is to run frantically, worry incessantly, and seek out the nearest off-ramp. It is at times like this that we need to quiet our hearts, be still, and focus. Rather than turning to the other sheep - - David turned to the Shepherd. Rather than staring at the problems, he stared at the rod and the staff. Because he knew where to look and took a few deep breaths. [**Hebrews 12:1-2**] Do not measure the size of your mountain; talk to the One who can move it!

You are with me! The One who rules the universe and sits upon the stars walks along side of me. The Creator, Yahweh is with me. Look at what He tells Jacob in **Genesis 28:15**. You are NOT alone!

- As you read **Psalm 34**, make a list of all the things that the psalmist says God has done for you and continues to do.
- **Psalm 34** was written especially to encourage us when we are in distress / walking thru a dark valley. Reflect on the afflictions/dark valleys that you have experienced during your journey. What emotions arise in you as you walk through your valleys?
- Examine the meaning of *'climbing to higher ground with God'*.
- If you could live your life over again - - what would you have done differently?
- Discuss how we can best encourage and inspire others.

VIII. Your Rod & Your Staff Comfort Me

We receive ultimate comfort through the presence of our Shepherd.

The good shepherd forges onward. He knows the path. He has walked this winding trail many times. He is prepared – staff in hand and rod attached to his belt to lead them up the mountain. *Staff* to nudge the flock, the *rod* to protect and lead the flock.

When shepherds lead their sheep in darkness, if a sheep begins to stray, the shepherd “hooks” the sheep and bring him back with the crook of his staff. The shepherd strikes attacking wolves with his rod. Shepherds also use their rods to gently tap sheep on the side when they began to drift from the flock. Jesus continually protects us and helps us not to stray.

When I look at a flock of sheep: I see a bunch of wool, a herd of hooves, all alike, none different. Not so with the shepherd. To him every sheep is different. Every single face is special. Every face has a story. Every sheep has a name.

If we look to a crowd – we see exactly that, a crowd. Bodies filling a huge stadium. We see people. Not persons, but people. A herd of humans. A flock of faces. Think about that, the creator of all – knows your name and your story. [Isaiah 49:16] Your name is on God’s hand. Your name is on His lips. He knows you – and – cares about you. You are His child. [1st John 3:1] Realize that you are important to Him.

Safe. Secure. Relaxed. Peaceful. Those are a few of the words that often come to mind when thinking of ‘comfort’. Two words that may never come to mind are: *rod* and *staff*. [Numbers 17; Job 21:9; Proverbs 29:15]

When a man held a rod – it represented authority. It was a tool of discipline and demonstrated that he had the ability and the readiness to defend. The rod [*shebet*] is a weapon of defense. It is designed to defend against predators. The shepherd’s ability to use the rod to protect the sheep from falling prey to their enemies is the only hope for survival in times of attack. This rod can be seen as a symbol of God’s power in caring for us.

The staff [*mishenah*] was used to pull sheep out of gullies, ditches, and to guide them along the path. The shepherd also uses his staff to gently connect with his sheep, allowing the staff to rest on the sheep’s side as it walks along [as if to say “I am here with you, at your side”.] The staff can be seen as a symbol of God’s kindness in caring for us. The staff carries the thought of something to lean on, trust, and support.

God’s gentle guidance and discipline make us feel safe in our valleys. God’s willingness/ability to defend and protect offers the confidence to continue walking. [1st Samuel 17:34-35 – note how a rod/staff toting shepherd could turn into a one-man, rod-swinging wrecking crew.] There is no greater comfort than the knowledge that our Shepherd will protect you, fight for you, and rescue you – and even offer His life for you.

When the enemy attacks, sheep are unable to defend themselves. They are not swift runners. Their bite is harmless. Most have no horns. This leaves them as easy prey. The shepherd uses his rod to firmly guide and protect his flock, and he uses the staff to draw the sheep to himself and keep them close. Both of these actions brought the sheep comfort - - they felt secure, safe and seen by their shepherd.

Sheep will come to the shepherd daily and rub against his legs or wait for a pat on the head. Once they have a bit of personal attention – they are satisfied for the day. Satisfied sheep eat, drink, grow fat, and grow wool. [Fulfilling the purpose for which they were created.] A good shepherd will make himself readily available to the flock. He know that he must reach out to them and offer the ‘touch of the shepherd’.

At times we may seek comfort in all the wrong places. Food, drink, activity, status, escape from the valley - - none of these things give us ultimate comfort or strength. The never provide the *companionship* our souls crave. We must fight and not settle for these temporary solutions. When we are comforted sheep, we can comfort other sheep. We can be the ones God uses to strengthen other valley-walking folks.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus called Himself ‘the door’? At the close of the day a shepherd may lead his flock into a rock enclosure. Notice the shepherd’s concern for the sheep. He sleeps in the doorway. He becomes the door. None of the sheep come out except with his permission and no wolves can enter unless they pass by him. What security this provides us!

- Analyze the various uses of the shepherd’s rod.
- Read: **Ezekiel 20:37** What does it mean to ‘pass under the rod’? [**Psalm 139:23-24**]
- Consider the shepherd’s staff – discuss the functions.
- Examine how the shepherd stays; ‘in touch’ with his sheep by using the staff.
- How can the shepherd’s discipline be comforting? [**Hebrews 12:5-11**]

IX. You Prepare a Table Before Me

The Shepherd provides a voice that brings peace in the storm.

Think of how your Shepherd cares for you – as a shepherd cares for his flock. He deals with your enemy [the devil] and provides for you a safe place of nourishment. In times of our failures – He invites us to a meal. He has called us to Himself and invited us to take a permanent place at His table! When we take our place next to other sinners-made-saints . . . we share in God’s glory.

Check out a partial list of what awaits us at His table: [**Romans 8:1; 7:6; 5:1; Ephesians 2:13; 2:18; Colossians 1:13-14; Hebrews 13:5**]. Even in the valleys we must recognize and receive the blessings, gifts, and signs of our Shepherd’s ultimate plan for us. These ‘table times’ are happy, meaningful, special, deep, connected, safe, and honest times of His presence. [Read: **2nd Samuel 9:1-7; 1st Kings 2:7; Isaiah 25:6-9; Matthew 22:1-4; Luke 14:15**]

Tables have always been ‘gathering places’, the launching pads for so many of life’s precious times. Happiness, celebration, pondering, honor, and blessing are just a sampling of the experiences that are found during ‘table times’.

David wrote this psalm about his Shepherd as if he [David] was a sheep. In this verse [v. 5] David shifts his image from God as a Shepherd – to God as a generous host/king throwing a banquet celebration. Our Host prepares a table, and in Him we have a continual feast. Jesus anoints us with His Spirit and our cup overflows – in Christ we have more than we need – joy, peace, strength, and every good thing.

In ancient Hebrew banquet tradition – a king, or wealthy host would invite the important and favored people to his table. Often the grand feast would be held outside so all the people could see who was at the party [and who was not]. The king’s favor was obvious to everyone who looked on – even any enemies. *The table was a place of blessing, favor, and communion.*

God offers us an invitation to partake of the good things of God. It’s an opportunity to accept God’s provision, experience His protection, and enjoy His pleasure. God the Host serves His guests. God the Shepherd serves His sheep. God the Father serves His children. God the King serves His subjects. Man, it should be exactly the opposite! We are loved by such a gracious and humble God.

Are you going to RSVP to your table Host? [This indicates your desire to receive your Shepherd King’s blessing, favor, and communion.] The Shepherd is saving a seat at His table - - we must be ready to receive what He has prepared for us. There are times when we seek to invite the company of an intruder – an addiction, a problem, sinful adversary. We must be ready to say: “Satan has been at my table for a while knowingly and unknowingly! NOT anymore!!!” ‘The King sits at my table & no one else!’ The enemy is going to try to sit with us but we must recognize when it happens and CALL UPON GOD immediately. Don’t give the adversary a seat! We must say, ‘devil, get outta’ my house and away from my table!!’

David faced quite a few enemies in his life – wild animals, a jealous king, a giant, a former friend, and many more. He was very aware of what it felt like to be threatened, hated, mocked, and treated with hostility. The Hebrew word for enemies in this verse suggests *to show hostility*. Your enemy is a crafty accuser, a filthy liar. He’s a scheming stumbling block who seeks to devour your joy, kill your confidence, steal your hope, and tempt you to believe that his way of living & thinking is better than your Shepherd’s.

We must stop and evaluate – have we given an extra seat at the table to our enemy? Are you experiencing the favor, blessing, and companionship God has prepared for you? Is the adversary spoiling the banquet? There may be times when the enemy doesn’t even need the extra seat to disrupt our feasting because we have already given up our own seat. There will be ‘valley times’ when we truly grieve and life is hard. But even in these times of stress and despair

– it doesn't mean God can't or won't prepare a table right there. [Read Psalm 78:19] He loves you and wants to bless you and celebrate you.

- What is your response to the thought of God wanting to provide you with nurture?
- In what ways does the Shepherd prepare the table-land?
- The psalm states that God will feed us in the presence of our enemies. What enemies are you aware of? [Luke 22:31; 1st Corinthians 10:13]
- After reading Isaiah 55, What can we learn from verse 5? What can we learn about God?
- What spiritual food is God offering you?

X. You Anoint My Head With Oil

We approach our Shepherd with high hopes and a humble heart.

In ancient Israel – shepherds used oil to repel insects, prevent conflicts, and also to heal wounds. Bugs may bug people, but they can kill sheep. Flies, mosquitoes, and gnats can turn the summer into a time of torture for the flock. Nose flies can deposit their eggs into the soft membrane of the sheep's nose, the eggs become worm-like larvae, which drive the sheep insane. Lice could attach themselves into the sheep's wool. If those gross little critters got near the sheep's head it was not only super annoying to the sheep, but could be very dangerous. [If the pests burrowed into the sheep's ears – it could kill them] For relief from the agonizing annoyance of these pests – sheep can deliberately beat their heads against trees, rocks, posts, or even brush. In extreme cases of intense infestation a sheep may even kill itself in a frenzied attempt to gain respite from this aggravation.

When a swarm of flies appears, sheep panic. They run. They hide. They toss their heads up & down for hours. They forget about eating. They are not able to sleep. The entire herd is disrupted and even destroyed by the presence of a few flies. The shepherd anoints his sheep and covers their heads with an oil-like repellent. The fragrance keeps the insects at bay and offers the flock peace.

Shepherds have the added responsibility of preparing the pasture land. With new lands the shepherd must be careful [the ideal grazing area would be a flat mesa or tableland]. It is important to search out poisonous plants and check for an ample supply of water. He must also be on the look-out for wolves, coyotes, and bears. A special concern to the shepherd is the adder, a small brown snake that lives underground. Adders are known to pop out of their holes and nip the sheep on the nose. [The bite often gets infected and can even kill.] As a defense against the snakes, the shepherd pours a circle of oil at the top of each hole, He also applies oil to the noses of the sheep. [The oil at the snakes hole lubricates the exit – preventing the snake from climbing out.] The smell of oil on the sheep's nose drives the 'serpent' away.

Most of the wounds the shepherd treats are simply the result of living in the pasture. Thorns prick or rocks cut or a sheep rubs its head too hard against a tree. Sheep get hurt. As a result, the shepherd regularly [often daily] inspects the sheep, searching for cuts or abrasions. He doesn't want the cut to worsen. He doesn't want the wound to become tomorrow's infection. Many of our wounds – are wounds of the heart that come from repeated disappointment. If we're not careful, these wounds lead to bitterness. So, just like sheep, we need to be treated/anointed. [**Psalm 100:3**] We need preventative care and a healing touch. We can get irritated with each other, butt heads, and then get wounded. Many of our disappointments in life begin as irritations. A huge percentage of our problems are not lion-sized attacks, but rather the day-to-day swarm of frustrations, miscues, and heartaches.

Just like sheep – there are times we don't sleep well, or eat well. We may even be tempted to hit our head against a tree or wall. Or we may hit our head against a person. It is amazing how hardheaded we can become with each other. Some of our deepest hurts come from butting heads with people.

The bulk of our wounds come from just living in the 'pasture'. We have to face aging, loss, and illness. Some may face betrayal and injustice. If you live long enough on this journey – most will face deep, deep hurts of some kind or another. Remember, when we get wounded – we have a Shepherd [we belong to Him & He tends to us]. Note *who* does the anointing. No one does the work of God, for only He can heal. [**Psalm 147:3**]

Check reasons and purposes for anointing with oil. **Leviticus 8:12; 1st Samuel 16:13; Isaiah 61:1; Luke 7:46; Acts 10:38; James 5:14; 1st John 2:20,27**. This oil was used to consecrate or set apart someone for special service [like kings or prophets]. It was also used in prayers for healing and was a gesture of hospitality and honor for a guest. Often the words *anointed* & *chosen* are used interchangeably in Scripture.

Oil itself is mentioned over 200 times in the Bible. [most frequently regarding its use in anointing] It can actually be applied as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit's presence and action in a person's life. [as in **1st Samuel 16:13**] The anointing of oil in Psalm 23 is a picture of this presence and action [of the Holy Spirit] in our lives.

It was custom to honor guests to your table by anointing them with oil [olive oil mixed with sweet, fragrant spices]. When guests visited your home, it was hospitable to wash their feet and place oil on their heads. The longer the dinner lasted, the more oil would trickle down over their hair, cheeks, and neck – cooling the guests and releasing a pleasant fragrance.

Think about how your Shepherd set you apart/consecrated you. Consider how the Shepherd King's presence or touch has brought healing [physically, emotionally, relationally, or financially]. When your Shepherd anoints your head with oil, He is honoring you with the bounty of His blessing. He is overflowing your life with the fullness of His Holy Spirit. He is reminding you once again that He chose you! He calls you to be His own. He protects you for you belong to the Shepherd King.

We receive the Holy Spirit when we receive Christ. He doesn't ever leave us! He seals us. Since we approach the table every day – we can also receive a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit. [That does not mean you re-receive the Holy Spirit] It means that you get a renewed awareness of His presence and power to lead you, to strengthen you to obey & accomplish God's will.

[Lamentations 3:22-23]

We may have earthly enemies, but our greatest enemy is Satan, who desires to rob us of our joy in Christ. But though he prowls about us - - Jesus has abundance for us. Our Shepherd will take care of our physical needs, as well as, our spiritual needs. The sheep doesn't understand why the oil works or how it heals - - only that there is something good happening in the presence of the shepherd.

- Compare our reaction to that of the sheep's during a 'season of attack'.
- Read: **Isaiah 61:1-3** Think of all the things this text suggests God's anointed One will do.
- Have you taken your wounds to the Shepherd? [**James 5:13; 1st Peter 5:6-7; Psalm 15:1-2**]
- Analyze the mass mindset that occurs when we 'get our heads together'.
- **Psalm 23:5** uses an image of joy following the image of anointing [*'My cup overflows'*]. How does this compare with the 'after' images in **Isaiah 61:3**?
- Read: **Luke 22:24-30** What happens when sheep don't 'see eye-to-eye'?

XI. My Cup Overflows

My provision from God is abundant – my Shepherd will provide *more* than the bare necessities.

The shepherd is willing to take the flock to better grazing land and water sources even if it requires cost and danger. **John 10:15** relates that Jesus was willing to go to the cross and die for His sheep. If He is ready to give His life - - He is obviously willing to give us all that we need [**Matthew 6:25-34**].

There may be 'half-full days' when the constant stress of life is dogging you, when you are extremely tired/weary, when there is conflict under your roof, when you are easily aggravated. When you are jostled, when you get knocked down, when you start to shake - - what brims over from your cup?

When a glass or goblet reaches the rim and tumbles over the edge – it is not large enough to contain the quantity. David mentions that our hearts are not large enough to contain all the blessings that God wants to give. He pours and pours until they literally flow over the edge and down onto the table. The 'overflowing cup' was a powerful symbol in the days of David. Hosts in the ancient world used it to send a message to their guests. As long as the cup was kept full – the guest knew he was welcome. When the cup sat empty – the host was hinting that the hour was late.

Consider terms like – *brim over, bubble over, run over, spill over*. Did you notice all the ‘overs’? To overflow means you have plenty - - more than you can contain. Life is abundant. And that was your Shepherd’s intention for you, whether you find yourself in green pastures, beside still waters, or trudging through a dark valley.

The Hebrew word for *overflow* in **v. 5** means *saturated*. This word denotes wealth or satisfaction. So when we are saturated with the good things of God, we will be rich with His Spirit and truth, and be fully, deeply satisfied. We will be sheep who lack nothing.

Have you ever wondered why God gives so much? We certainly could exist on far less. He could have left the world flat and gray; we wouldn’t have known the difference - - but He didn’t! We give gifts to show our love – think about how much more our Shepherd offers. Even with all of our obsessions and greed – we love to offer gifts. It is absolutely amazing how our God enjoys to give gifts to us!

The next time a sunrise or sunset steals your breath, or the expanse of the rolling waves leaves you speechless – remain that way. Say nothing and just listen as heaven whispers in your ear, “Do you like it? I did it just for you!” Think on this: if you were the only one on earth, it would look exactly the same. The mountains would still have their drama, and the beaches still exhibit their charm. The sun would still sink in the west with a fantastic spray of light and rise in the morning with a jubilant return. God would not diminish the earth’s beauty one degree.

Our Shepherd King did it all for you and He is waiting for you to discover His gift. He is waiting for your eyes to pop and your heart to stop. He is anticipating that moment between your jaw dropping and the leaping of your heart. It is in that silence that our Master leans forward and whispers in your ear: “I did this just for you!” God’s thoughts are higher than ours, and His ways are far greater than ours. There are times – out of His great wisdom, our Father offers us a small piece of heaven just to show that He cares.

Don’t settle for less than all that God wants to give you. Don’t bring a tiny ‘dixie’ cup to the table - - bring a venti size, a giant ‘big gulp’ cup. May we drink richly of His goodness.

That is the picture God is drawing for us. It’s as if He is saying: *What I want to give you is far bigger than you can contain. What I seek to offer you is more than you have capacity to hold. I want to fill you with grace, peace, joy, and My Word - - so that you will overflow with hope, love, and rejoicing. When I saturate your life with My goodness, you will be satisfied.*

- Think about the days when you perceive that your cup is half-empty in life.
- How does your life overflow with hope? [**Romans 15:13; 2nd Corinthians 4:15**]
- Consider how God’s grace causes thanksgiving to overflow in your life.
- Read **2nd Corinthians 7:4** How does comfort and encouragement cause your life to overflow with joy?

- Read and ponder – **Philippians 1:25-26; 1st Thessalonians 3:12; Psalm 119:171; Genesis 27:28-29; 2nd Samuel 22:3-4; Psalm 36:8, 138:7; Isaiah 41:10; John 1:16; Philippians 4:19; James 1:17.**

XII. Surely Goodness & Mercy Will Follow Me

Goodness to supply every want. Mercy to forgive every sin. Goodness to provide. Mercy to pardon.

God's Word tells us that believers will suffer afflictions of many kinds and we shouldn't be surprised when that happens. Because our good Shepherd is sovereign, infinitely wise and loving, He causes all things to work together for our good. No matter what happens to us, He pours out His mercy upon us every single day of our lives. *"But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness". Lamentations 3.21-23*

Please check out this phrase [*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*] in several other translations. In the face of our doubts – goodness and mercy sweep in on all our insecurities, like a squad of Navy Seals on a mission.

Notice the word *'surely'*. In Hebrew – this part of speech denotes a very strong, positive assertion of truth. It is translated: certainly, completely, or only [those are hefty, emphatic words]. They do not leave much doubt that what follows is unbending, unalterable, or non-negotiable truth. David did not say, *maybe*, or *I have a hunch*. He believed in a sovereign, sure God – who makes confident promises and provides a sure foundation. Our moods may shift, but God's doesn't. Our minds may change, but God's doesn't. Our devotions may falter, but God never does. He is a sure God. He is worthy of all confidence.

'Goodness' and *'Mercy'* . . . not goodness alone - for we are sinners in need of mercy, not mercy alone – for we are fragile and in need of goodness. We need them both. *Goodness* means: that which is pleasing, valuable, useful, a good thing. *Mercy* means: compassion, showing great kindness, act of forgiving. Goodness and mercy will follow the child of God each and every day. No matter what lies ahead on your journey, He will take your hand every day – not some, not most, not nearly all – but ALL the days of your life. You can look at your life thru the lens of *only* goodness and mercy. The Shepherd is saying: *"It's all good!"*

Perhaps, my favorite word in this section – *'follow'* . . . He will *'follow'* you. This is such a surprising way to describe God. We are so accustomed to a God that remains in one place. A God who sits enthroned in the heavens and rules & ordains. David, however, declares a mobile and active God. A God who pursues us, follows us, chases us, tracks us down, and wins us over.

God is the God who follows. Have you sensed Him following you? We are often unaware when He is near – but He IS there. Release your doubts and set them down. You are not a victim of insecurity or a client of timidity. You can trust God. He gives us Himself. Never forcing us. Never

leaving us. But, patiently persistent and faithfully present. God is forever with you and for you. He chases you with His loving-kindness and goodness.

- Read: **Psalm 40:1-3** Describe your thoughts and feelings as you read these descriptions of God.
- Discuss the ways in which God's power is important to you when you need comfort.
- In **Isaiah 40:11** Jesus comes as a Shepherd. Describe what sort of sheep you feel like – Cradled? Content? Wandering? Caught? Why?
- **2nd Samuel 11:1 – 12:23** We see that David could easily have had a long train of guilt/shame following after him. Note that David confessed, repented, and asked for God's cleansing/restoration [**Psalm 51; 1st John 1:9**] – mistakes & guilt replaced.
- Read – **2nd Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 3:13-14**
- The author mentions the 'legacy' sheep leave behind - - discuss what legacy you can/are leaving behind.

XIII. I Will Dwell in the House of the Lord Forever

This is our Father's house.

Sheep, after spending the summer in the high pastures, are taken back to the shepherd's property in the fall and winter.

If His house is your 'forever house', what does that make this earthly house? [Temporary, short-term housing] [**Philippians 3:20**] This may explain any homesickness that we feel. The many twists and turns of life have a way of reminding us – we aren't home yet. We are what Peter mentions 'elect exiles' [**1st Peter 1:1**]. This is not our homeland. We certainly are not fluent in the languages of disease and death. This culture confuses our hearts, the world's noise disrupts our sleep, and we feel far from home.

Your eternal address is fixed in your mind and in your heart [**Ecclesiastes 3:11**]. We must be careful not to live like we are home now. For many of our sojourners – this trek has been stormy, difficulties have popped up along the way, and burdens that are shouldered – seem unbearable. There have been farewells to family and friends. You may have been robbed of life-long dreams. Challenges may far outweigh the strength to keep moving. You are tired.

Remember this: God has never said that the journey would be easy, but He did say that the arrival would be worthwhile. He may not do what you want, but He will do what is right - - and best. He is the Shepherd King of forward motion. We must trust Him! He will get us home. And the trials of the trip will be lost in the joys of the 'feast'.

When we believe in Jesus, He gives us eternal, everlasting life in His presence. Someday we will gaze upon His unimaginable, breathtaking beauty forever. He will wipe away every tear and all we will ever know for eternity will be overflowing joy at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

- Read **Psalm 16** Discuss what the psalmist says God does and will do for him.
- Describe how it feels to be 'at home with The Shepherd'.
- Have you ever longed to be home?
- Analyze: 'bragging rights' we enjoy because of our Shepherd.
- Discuss: Satan as a 'heartless owner'. **John 10:9**
- Check: **Isaiah 25:8-12; Jeremiah 50:5; John 14:2-4; Colossians 3:2; Revelation 22:1-5.**

The mark of the sheep is its' ability to hear the Shepherd's voice. [The mark of a disciple is to hear the Master's voice.] The world promises temporary, flashy pleasures; the Shepherd promises a permanent, quiet dinner. There is never a time during which Jesus is not speaking. There is never a place in which Jesus is not present. *"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*

There is a day coming when everyone will hear His voice. A day is coming when all other voices will be silenced. Only His voice will be heard. Some will hear His voice for the very first time. It is not that He never spoke, it's just that they never listened. For these, our Shepherd's voice will be the voice of a stranger. They will hear it only once – and never again. They will spend eternity fending off the voices they followed on earth. Others will be called from their graves by a very familiar voice. For they are sheep who know their Shepherd. #followthevoice of the Shepherd

We are always moved by, moving toward, and moving with our Shepherd!