BIG IDEA

When we find ourselves in the midst of some of our darkest days, Psalm 23 gives us a tremendous sense of confidence.

INTRODUCTION

Songs we love often help us process emotions in times of darkness and confusion. What is an example of a song that you would listen to during such a time?

How do these songs continue to speak to you when you hear them outside of one of those seasons of life?

Songs have a way of expressing those feelings that are too deep and true for plain words. Lyrics lay bear and make clear our longings when prose fails. The Psalms are a window into the soul of Israel, and they resonate with all of humanity. In them we find every kind of emotion, from uncontainable joy to impenetrable sorrow. Psalm 23 is one of those Scriptures that we lean on when things go bad. Its stanzas are well known even by those outside of the faith. While it is common to hear this psalm in funerals and desperate prayers, its promises are true for all seasons of life.

UNDERSTANDING

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PSALM 23:1-3.

What are a few things we learn about God by seeing Him as a shepherd?

What are a few things we learn about mankind by seeing ourselves as sheep?

Of the sheepish traits Ross listed on Sunday (listed in the paragraph below), which most often describe you?

How do these qualities drive you back to the need for a shepherd?

David pulled upon his personal experience under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and wrote that God is a shepherd. He is the One who leads and cares for His flock. When we observe sheep, it becomes clear that they need constant attention. Sheep are fearful, stubborn, defenseless, and easily aggravated. They have a mob instinct, while also being prone to wander. Sheep require meticulous care, which we receive from God. Thus, we have no reason to want.
When a sheep is turned over or “cast,” it cannot right itself. The shepherd must come to these sheep, right them, then help the blood circulate back to their legs so that they can walk again. How is God doing this for us as He restores our souls?

How does God helping and guiding us make His name great (v. 3)?

Why is this psalm really about God and not about us? Why do we seek to make it all about us?

We have a tendency to view Scripture as a story about us even though, in the truest sense, it is a story about God. He is the main character, and this is important for us to remember. Seeing Psalm 23 this way allows us to uncover a depth of meaning that is missing when we see it as primarily our story. God finds us when we are astray and wayward, rights us, and puts on the right path. His sovereign and providential guidance is what allows us to flourish. Yet, He does all of this for the glory of His name. Our souls are restored so that we can demonstrate to the world the amazing depth of grace that is available to all in Jesus Christ.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PSALM 23:4.

What are the rod and the staff? What do these two things bring to us?

Read Isaiah 41:10 and 2 Corinthians 12:9. How is our weakness and vulnerability actually a strength?

The rod is a defensive weapon to drive away predators. The staff is for comfort, direction, and discipline. God provides both to us when we are weak and in need of strength. Instead of being a liability, our weakness—under God’s hand—becomes a great source of strength to us.

How can we be a source of protection and comfort to one another when life hits us hard?

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PSALM 23:5-6.

How does Psalm 23:6 help us live with the end in mind? Why is it important to remember that suffering is not ultimate?

Read Isaiah 53:6 and John 10:11. How is the fullness of Psalm 23 found in the life and death of Jesus Christ? How does Jesus understand God’s perspective as well as ours in this psalm?

Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd. We are His sheep and one day, He will usher us into a world where there is no pain, suffering, or death. His goodness and mercy will follow us all of the days of this life and lead us into the fullness of that goodness and mercy in the life to come. Because Jesus is our shepherd, we should not want for anything.
APPLICATION

How does being in the hands of the good shepherd provide us the strength and the comfort to walk through darkness with grace and hope? What are some ways this grace is applied to our lives?

Ross gave some tips on Sunday about how to help a grieving person. When you are struggling or grieving, how do you like to be comforted? When have you received comfort from another brother or sister in Christ?

Psalm 23 is one of the most well-known passages of Scripture, even for those outside of the faith. How could you use this passage to explain the gospel to someone?

PRAY

Make Psalm 23 your prayer today.

MEMORIZE

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. – Psalm 23:1

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COMMENTARY

PSALM 23:1-6

23:1. The Lord is often referred to as the shepherd of His people, Israel (74:1; 80:1; Isa 40:11; Ezek 34:11-16). In the ancient Near East, kings were commonly known as the shepherds of their people. Since Yahweh is the true King, the title shepherd is most appropriate.

23:2-3. Let me lie down is a Hebrew form implying causality, showing that God is the cause of the refreshment. Right paths might have a twofold idea. In keeping with the shepherd and sheep image, it can mean safe paths that are free from danger. In the larger context of Wisdom literature it refers to paths of righteousness, though usually that would contrast one path of life with another leading to death. The former idea is probably the primary meaning here.

23:4. Some argue that the Hebrew term tsalmaweth is related to an Akkadian word that means “deep darkness.” Others say it comes from two Hebrew words, tsal and moth, and means “shadow of death.” It occurs approximately 20 times in the OT. It is clear that it implies intense darkness that represents extreme danger (Job 10:21; 28:3; Jer 2:6). “Darkest” fits this specific context, since it is in the darkest valley where the greatest danger (such as a predator) lurks for sheep.

23:5. The image shifts from shepherd to friend. The identification of Yahweh with a shepherd emphasizes His care and protection, but He is much more than that for a person who is in close fellowship with Him. While protection from enemies is still implied, it is intensified with the image of a banquet (table) that is served while the enemies look on. In Jewish society oil was a symbol for rejoicing (104:15) and was also used in the welcoming of guests (45:7; 92:10; Lk 7:46).

23:6. The verb pursue is commonly used for attackers, but here Yahweh’s goodness and faithful love are personified as the ones who chased the psalmist throughout his life. As long as I live represents the Hebrew “for the length of days.” This is equivalent to the parallel all the days of my life. Though some translate this as “ forever,” it is nowhere else used that way but always refers to one’s earthly life (91:16; Pr 3:2,16). Dwell is similar to the word for “return” (Hb shuv). In this verbal form, it differs only in the vowels. It is possible that the request is to return to the sanctuary of Yahweh throughout one’s life, although the preposition in argues for the idea of “dwell.”