

In the Care of the Good Shepherd

Reflections on Psalm 23

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Foreword

Welcome to this life-enriching seminar for men and women who already know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and others who may be seeking Him.

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In the Care of the Good Shepherd

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In the Care of the Good Shepherd

Reflections on Psalm 23

Lesson 1

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most beloved Psalm and one of the most treasured pieces of literature in the world is Psalm 23. In this beautiful writing, David, who had been a shepherd before becoming a king in ancient Israel, describes the deep fulfillment of being a "sheep" in the LORD's pasture.

What makes Psalm 23 so explosive with meaning and at the same time so comforting to the soul is the beautiful imagery of a sheep under the care of a good shepherd. David uses this word picture with amazing brevity to declare the peace, nurture, guidance, protection and hope found in allowing the LORD to direct our lives.

Therefore, to understand Psalm 23 it helps to have some understanding about the relationship between a sheep and its shepherd. First of all, sheep are not smart animals; they are dirty and smelly and completely vulnerable to predators, pests, and starvation. Their only defense is to run, and they can't run very fast. Sheep also have an impulsive "herd mentality" and will follow the herd even if it is over a cliff.

In spite of their shortcomings and great needs, the good shepherd patiently and painstakingly devotes himself to his sheep, knowing and caring for them individually. He guides, protects, and provides for the totally dependent sheep so that they thrive and feel completely secure in his care.

God is making some wonderful statements about His own heart toward us through this word picture. The first is that He wants to personally lead and watch over our lives. The Creator and sustainer of the universe in all His

majesty wants to guide, protect and provide for you and me as completely as a good shepherd cares for his sheep. He is saying that we can trust Him with the details of our lives rather than trust the unstable sources of help in our ever-changing world.

Secondly, the LORD wants to care for us even with our imperfections and constant needs. The fact that we are compared with sheep that are anything but perfect and "together" means that He knows we will never be, either. His love and care are unconditional when we choose Him as the shepherd of our lives. He is never inconvenienced by our continual needs.

The comparison with sheep also depicts us as completely vulnerable to many destructive forces, with death being the final and inescapable enemy. But the LORD, who is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise and present everywhere, promises to oversee our lives in such a way that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will "dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

A final aspect of Psalm 23's imagery, with the sheep grazing in green pastures, is peace. Even when the sheep face dreadful, even life-threatening situations, they are secure that the shepherd is in control and will not leave them. This is also God's promise: He will never leave us. We can have an inner peace knowing the LORD will remain by our side and give us His strength whatever may come.

Perhaps Psalm 23 is still so loved today because we are all wounded and needy people. Everyone is challenged by issues of failure, insecurity, injustice, emotional wounds and the struggles of life. In the study of this beautiful passage of God's Word, we will see a sure path to peace, security and joy despite the difficulties of our human experience. We will discover that all our needs can be met in the care of the Good Shepherd.

TRUSTING THE GOOD SHEPHERD

"The LORD is my Shepherd..."

These opening words of Psalm 23 have been compared to a sheep bragging to another sheep across the fence, "The LORD is my shepherd." As a child might speak with joy and pride about a good father, the author is speaking with pride and joy that he belongs to and is personally cared for by the LORD.

As we move forward in time to the words of Jesus in John 10:1-8, we discover that Christ is the Good Shepherd whom David knew and loved. The Son of God took on human form, lived among men and died on a cross to show the world the loving, trustworthy, and holy nature of God. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus promises "life to the full" now and eternally to those who follow Him (John 10:10b, 27-28).

So we see that Psalm 23 is in fact a loving invitation from the LORD Jesus Christ to trust Him completely as the Good Shepherd of our individual lives. But to yield our lives to the LORD in this way, we have to first believe that He is trustworthy.

In this first lesson, we will look at the character of the Good Shepherd, especially His unconditional love that motivates us to trust Him.

1. What does this imagery of Psalm 23 reveal about the relationship the LORD wants to have with us?

2a. To thus care for His "sheep," the LORD must have overall control over their lives. Who (or what) do people allow to control their lives instead of the LORD?

b. What are some results of these choices in people's lives?

3a. What do the following verses tell us about the LORD that would motivate us to let him shepherd our lives?

Psalm 100:3, 5

Psalm 34:18

Jeremiah 29:11

b. What promises does He make to you when you trust Him with your life?

Psalm 121:3

Isaiah 46:4

4. To trust the LORD as the Shepherd of our lives, we have to know He loves us and will always do what is in our best interest.

a. How do the following passages describe the LORD's love?

Psalm 36:5, 7

Psalm 86:5

b. The Bible states, "God is love" (1 John 4:16). How does

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a describe God's love?

5a. Jesus told a parable about a prodigal son who left home and squandered his inheritance on loose living. Destitute, he decided to return to his father, confess his wrong, and ask to be his father's servant. What was the father's response?

Luke 15:21-24

b. What was Jesus showing us about God's love for those who stray from Him and return with a humble, repentant heart?

6. What do the following verses reveal about God's readiness to forgive and help us when we are truly sorry for our sin?

Isaiah 1:18

Psalm 32:5

7. The reason God can justly forgive our sin when we are genuinely repentant is that in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ, God Himself took the penalty for our sin when Jesus died on the cross. What do these verses tell us about the extent of the LORD's love for us?

John 3:16

Romans 5:8

8. The Scriptures tell us that God was in Christ, seeking to reconcile the world to Himself (Hebrews 1:3; John 14:9-10). What do you observe about God's love as reflected in the life of His Son?

John 10:11

Galatians 2:20c

Romans 8:34

Romans 8:38-39

9. How does Psalm 23:6 sum up the rewards of a lifestyle of trust and dependence on the LORD?

SUMMARY

10. What have you observed in this lesson about the relationship the LORD wants to have with you?

11. What does the LORD promise you as you allow Him to be the Good Shepherd of your life? What truths or promises stand out to you from this lesson?

12a. How do the Scriptures describe God's love for you?

b. What does the cross of Christ prove about God's love?

13. Scripture tells us that we must individually invite Christ into our lives in order to be right with God and have Him as the Shepherd of our lives.

John 1:12 says: *"Yet to all who received Him [Jesus Christ], to those who believed in his name, He gave the right to become children of God...."*

Revelation 3:20 (Jesus speaking): *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with Me."*

If you have never opened the door of your life to Jesus Christ, or if you want to reaffirm your desire to have Him lead your life, the following is a suggested prayer.

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of my life and make me the kind of person You want me to be.

If you prayed this prayer, what is Christ's promise to you in Revelation 3:20 above?

What assurance can you have from John 10:27 below?

Hebrews 13:5b below?

John 10:27 (Jesus speaking) *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."*

Hebrews 13:5b *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*

14. The better we know the LORD, the more we will trust Him. The following study can help you know God better.

Optional study on the attributes of God.

His Majesty: 1 Chronicles 29:12

Faithfulness: Psalm 36:5

Goodness: Nahum 1:7

Grace: Romans 3:23-24 (Titus 3:7)

God's Graciousness and Patience: Psalm 103:8

Greatness: Psalm 145:3

Holiness: (purity; separate from sin) Psalm 99:5 (Isaiah 5:16)

His Immutability (He does not change): Psalm 102:27 (Heb. 13:8)

Impartiality: Job 34:19 (Acts 10:34-35)

Justice: Psalm 33:5

Love: John 3:16

Mercy: Psalm 103:10-12 (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Omnipotence (all-powerful): Luke 1:37 (Job 42:2)

Omnipresence (everywhere present): Psalm 139:7-10

Omniscience (all-knowing): Hebrews 4:13 (Job 31:4)

Providence (care):

 Providing: Philippians 4:19

 Protecting: Psalm 91:4

 Guiding: Proverbs 2:8

Righteousness: Deuteronomy 32:4

Sovereignty: Daniel 2:20-22

His Ways and Laws: Psalm 18:30; Psalm 19:7-8, 11

Understanding: Psalm 147:5 (1 Chronicles 28:9b)

Wisdom: Isaiah 28:29 (James 1:5)

For further study: The Knowledge of the Holy by A. W. Tozer; Knowing God by J. I. Packer; and Your God Is Too Small by J. B. Phillips

LESSON 1 NOTES

1. LORD, or YHWH, pronounced "Yahweh" is the Hebrew word used in Psalm 23. It is the very personal name of God He gave to His people in Exodus 3:15 when He met Moses through the burning bush. It means, "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." It is the name that expressed His character as the dependable and faithful God who desires the full trust of his people (see Exodus 3:12, where "I will be" is completed by "with you"; see also Exodus 34:5-7). YHWH is the third person form of the same verb, to be, and means He is or He will be which is the form of the verb used when we speak of God. (i.e. God says, "I AM," and we say, "He is.") It is translated LORD in the NIV translation.
2. Shepherd (Psalm 23:1) was "a widely used metaphor for kings in the ancient Near East, and also in Israel. Here David the king acknowledges that the LORD is his Shepherd-King. For Jesus as the shepherd of His people see John 10:11, 14; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 5:4; Rev 7:17."
3. "Why did Christ have to die in my place?" This is one of the most important yet least understood questions of the Christian faith. The following explanations of two biblical terms answer this question:
 - a. Redemption is a biblical word meaning "to buy out" or "to set free by the payment of a price (ransom)" and refers to a slave being purchased out of slavery. Romans 3:24 says we are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." As born sinners, we are in the slave market of sin, so to speak. But Christ, the only free man who ever lived (because He was sinless), paid the ransom price of His own blood to purchase sinners out of the slave market of sin and set them free to become sons of God. Only by the price of death can one be set free (Romans 6:23), and only one who is free (sinless as Christ was; cf. Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21) can buy a slave's freedom. By paying the ransom price of His shed blood, Jesus purchased the person who puts faith in Him out of the slave market of sin and sets him free to become a son of God (Gal. 3:13; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Gal 4:4-5).

b. Justification refers to God declaring us "not guilty" and righteous in his sight, even though we are guilty of sin. God is able to do this because of the life and death of Jesus Christ acting as man's substitute. When God declares a person righteous in His sight, He does so on the basis of the life and death of the One who was acting on his behalf. "Jesus our LORD...was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:24-25). When we put faith in Jesus Christ to save us from sin, God declares us justified, or not guilty, and righteous. We are justified by the death of Christ, who paid the penalty for our sin, and we are justified by the life of Christ whose life of righteousness is also credited to us. This justification, which is all by God's grace and received by faith, brings us into fellowship with God as a child in His family.

Lesson 2

PROVISION FOR ALL OUR NEEDS

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing."

With this confident statement of trust, the writer spends the rest of the psalm explaining the ways the LORD meets his deepest needs—for refreshment and restoration, protection and guidance, significance and security. We will look at these provisions as we continue this study. But in this lesson, we will look at the relationship with God that allows us to find our daily needs—spiritual, emotional and physical—met by Him.

Psalm 23 describes a life that acknowledges Christ as LORD and trusts Him with daily needs. When we do this, He promises we "shall lack nothing." How do we establish and maintain this kind of relationship? Primarily, by openly and honestly communicating with God through prayer and prayerful reading of His Word.

Over and over in Scripture, God invites us to talk to Him about everything. *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God"* (Philippians 4:6). *"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28). *"...pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge"* (Psalm 62:8). *"Cast your cares on the LORD, because He cares for you"* (1 Peter 5:7). Nothing is more wonderful for the Christian than God's open invitation to come to Him with all that is on our hearts. We see this in the framework for prayer Jesus gave us called the LORD's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). He first teaches us to come to God as our loving heavenly Father and to seek His will and kingdom above all. This puts us in the right frame of mind to openly discuss needs and concerns and lay our requests before Him. Jesus teaches us that God welcomes our prayers and is always available to listen to us.

"Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11) is the sample phrase Jesus used to not only refer to physical sustenance, but also to all our basic

needs—physical, emotional and spiritual. God wants us to look to Him as only source of supply for all we need to sustain the “full” life Jesus came to give us (John 10:10b). While He may use a friend to help us, a doctor to heal us, or a job to provide for us, “*every good and perfect gift*” ultimately comes from God (James 1:17). When we come to Him with childlike faith, He promises to carry us through each challenge of life, orchestrating our circumstances to give us the “bread” we need one day at a time.

More importantly, this dependence on God and open communication about our needs meets our deep spiritual need for fellowship with our Creator. The fifth century theologian, Augustine, wrote, “*Thou has made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.*” As we learn to talk to God about everything, by God’s design, we will find rest in our relationship with Him.

Jesus said, “*I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty*” (John 6:35). Through His death on the cross, Jesus made a way for us to be reconciled to God and be close to Him as a loving heavenly Father. As we meet with the LORD daily for prayer and meditation on His Word, He feeds our souls, quenches our spiritual thirst and sustains our spiritual life. Not only this, but His Spirit within us uses our time with Christ to transform us into His likeness and strengthen us to reach others with God’s love and grace.

To confidently say, “*The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall lack nothing,*” is to have open communication with the One we trust as the Good Shepherd of our lives and to find, as Philippians 4:19 promises, “*.... my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*”

1. The writer declares: “*The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall lack nothing.*” What does this suggest about our relationship with God that allows Him to meet our needs?

2a. What do people tend to do with their needs and concerns if they do not take them to the LORD?

b. Summarize what Matthew 6:25-32 tells us not to do with our needs and why?

c. What are we instructed to do instead, and what results?

Matthew 6:33

Philippians 4:6-7

3a. How do these verses describe the extent of God's care for us?

Psalms 121:3, 8

3Luke 12:7a

b. What does God want us to do with our needs and concerns?

Psalm 62:8

Luke 18:1 (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Verses in parenthesis () are optional.

4. What points did Moses make in his warning to Israel that are important for us to heed today? What is important to do when God meets our needs?

Deuteronomy 8:10-14, 17-18a

5. For 40 years, God supernaturally provided food for millions of Israelites in the wilderness.

Read Exodus 16:14-21, 31, 35.

a. How often did manna come (21)?

b. When did they collect it (21)?

c. How long did it last (19-20)?

d. What did they learn from God's way of providing for them?

6. The manna was a foreshadowing of Jesus to come. How did Jesus describe Himself in John 6:35?

7a. Jesus not only gives us spiritual life when we put our faith in Him, but He also wants to continually feed us spiritually as we spend daily time with Him in prayer and meditation on His Word. How is this “daily bread” like the manna the Israelites fed upon in the wilderness? (Review Question 5 a-d.) What parallels do you see?

b. What did Jesus say about our need to continually stay connected to Him in John 15:5?

c. How are we changed by being with the LORD?

2 Corinthians 3:18

8. How does Matthew 7:7-8 reflect God's desire for us to come to Him with every need, concern and question?

9. What is His promise?

Philippians 4:19

SUMMARY

10a. What physical, emotional or spiritual needs are in your life today?
What concerns are on your heart for others?

b. What does Jesus tell you not to do in the face of these needs and concerns?

c. What are you encouraged to do instead?

11. Ephesians 6:18 tells us to pray "on all occasions" and at any time, but it is also helpful to have a regular quiet time when we are nurtured by God. Do you have a place, a time and a plan to meet regularly with the LORD to pray and meditate on His Word? If not, perhaps you would like to establish this now. Discuss with Him the obstacles you've faced and your need for help to make this time a priority.

12a. How can we experience Jesus as the Good Shepherd, under whose care we "shall lack nothing"?

b. Why is daily time with Him important in your life?

Suggested Devotional Books

Thirty-one Days of Praise by Ruth Myers

Joy and Strength by Mary Wilder Tileston

Lesson 3

THE REST AND RESTORATION WE NEED

"The LORD is my shepherd...He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, He restores my soul."

Sheep require more care than any other form of livestock. Because of their utterly dependent nature, the quality of care given the sheep by their shepherd determines whether they experience peace or misery. Sheep under the care of a good shepherd rest securely while those under the care of a negligent shepherd can suffer terribly. Psalm 23 reveals that it's not because of an absence of danger that the sheep rest securely. Rather, they find peace because they trust in the shepherd's care & protection as they walk through danger with him at their side.

We are not unlike sheep. Although we may try to feel in control of our lives, we are all needy people. We need the LORD's care, protection, and guidance in order to know peace amid the challenges of daily life. Psalm 23 speaks of the supernatural rest and restoration the LORD gives to those who choose Him to be the Master of their lives.

1. Sheep are unable to rest when they are hungry, fearful, irritated by pests, or upset by friction within the flock. How are we similar to sheep? What types of things make us anxious people?

2a. Sheep have a "herd" mentality and can blindly follow the frantic herd off a cliff. How can we be like this in coping with tensions?

b. What can result?

3. How did David, whose life held many difficulties, portray the Good Shepherd's care in Psalm 23:2-3a?

4. David found rest from the weariness of life in the presence of the Good Shepherd. What did this rest involve, according to the following psalms?

Psalm 3:3, 5-6; 4:8

Psalm 94:18-19

5a. Because David trusted the LORD, he found rest for his soul. What did Jesus bid us to do in order to experience this supernatural rest amid the wearisome challenges of life?

Matthew 11:28-29

John 14:27

b. Whom did Jesus promise would give us His supernatural joy and peace?

John 14:16-17

Galatians 5:22a

6. Of what does the Holy Spirit remind us when we seek the LORD:

a. When facing fear, anxiety, or worry?

Isaiah 41:10

Philippians 4:6-7

b. When overwhelmed, lonely, or confused?

James 1:5

Psalms 73:23-26

7. David declared that the LORD "*restores my soul*" (23:3a). This means to "mend, correct, doctor, improve." What do the following verses suggest about how Christ, the Good Shepherd, restores our souls:

a. When we place our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior?

2 Corinthians 5:17

Ezekiel 36:26-27

b. When sinful choices pull us down and we come to God with a penitent heart?

1 John 1:9

Hosea 14:4 (Jeremiah 30:17a)

c. When situations of life leave us weary and exhausted?

Isaiah 40:30-31

Isaiah 40:11

8. What four choices found in the following verses allow us to receive the restoration of soul Jesus offers?

Proverbs 3:5-6

1 Peter 5:7

SUMMARY

9a. Is there anything in your life that is causing tension and restlessness?

b. Have you been seeking relief and rest in someone or something apart from the LORD?

c. What choices can you make to find the rest and restoration you need in Christ?

10a. How can the Good Shepherd meet your needs for rest and restoration as no one or nothing else can?

b. What does He want to give you as He restores your soul?

Romans 15:13

LESSON 3 NOTES

1 The Holy Spirit. God has made Himself known in the Bible as a Trinity; three divine persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), all with the same essence of deity. The Holy Spirit, known as the third person of the Trinity, indwells every person who personally receives Christ (John 1:12; 14:16-17; Romans 8:9). The Scriptures reveal the Holy Spirit not as an it, but rather as a He, a distinct personality. In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit brings about regeneration or spiritual birth in the believer. While the Holy Spirit cannot be seen, we can see the evidence of His work (3:8). When we ask God (Luke 11:13) to “fill” us with His Spirit (Ephesians 5:18b), He responds by supernaturally instructing and empowering us to live the Christian life (Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 3:16-20; Ezekiel 36:26-27). Sometimes the Bible refers to this as “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27b).

Lesson 4

THE GUIDANCE WE NEED

"The LORD is my Shepherd...He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

Sheep need more guidance and care than any other livestock. In his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Phillip Keller states that when left to graze pasture without direction, the sheep will eat the same ground until it is barren and infested with parasites. As a result, the land is ruined, the sheep are thin and sickly, and the shepherd gets a bad reputation. To avoid all this, the good shepherd keeps his flock on the move, regularly guiding them into fresh pasture as he follows a carefully planned grazing strategy.

Having also been a shepherd, David knew these facts about sheep when he wrote, "The LORD is my Shepherd...He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." David saw our similarity to sheep in that our stubborn natural habits can leave us unhealthy and wreak havoc in the world around us. We need the guidance of the Good Shepherd, not just intermittently, but for direction every day of our lives. The LORD alone sees the whole picture and can be trusted to have our best interests at heart. As He guides us in good paths, others will see His care and be drawn to Him.

Sooner or later, most of us come to a place where we see that we are not wise enough to run our own lives. We realize we are lost in our quest to find fulfillment and desperately need trustworthy guidance to help us make wise choices. Here we discover that the LORD's promise to direct us is truly a great relief! As the Good Shepherd, He alone can lead us in the ways that are best for us. In this lesson, we will make some observations about the promised and trustworthy guidance of the LORD.

1. How are we similar to sheep in our need for direction? Why do we need to continually seek the LORD's guidance?

2a. Where do people turn for guidance apart from godly counsel?

b. Why are these sources often untrustworthy? What have you learned from your experience?

3. In contrast, how do these verses describe the LORD and His path for us?

Psalm 23:3b

Psalm 25:9-10

Note: keep the demands of His covenant means to revere the LORD and follow His ways (cf. Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

4a. As the prophet Ezekiel described selfish religious leaders of Israel, he painted a vivid picture of what happens to us if we let the world "shepherd" our lives. What stands out to you about the care the world gives us?

Ezekiel 34:2-6

Note: The world here means the secular world which is godless and promotes lust, pride and self-sufficiency.

b. In contrast, how does Ezekiel 34:14-16 describe the LORD's care?

Note: sleek and strong refers to bullying sheep in the flock, in this case the selfish religious leaders.

5. In John 10, Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd.

a. How does Jesus summarize the contrast between the world's leadership and His in John 10:10?

b. What promises does Jesus make those who follow Him?

John 10:3b-4

John 10:11

John 10:27-28

6 a. In his book, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller states: "Just as sheep will blindly, habitually, stupidly follow one another along the same little trails until they become ruts that erode into gigantic gullies, so we humans cling to the same habits that we have seen ruin other lives." Summarize what the following Psalms suggest can hinder us from experiencing the LORD's plan for our lives.

Psalm 78:8, 11, 18, 22

b. What warnings about directing our lives apart from the LORD do the following verses imply?

Psalm 127:1

Isaiah 30:15

7a. Psalm 23:3 promises that the LORD will lead us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. As we trust in Him, whom did Jesus promise would personally guide us in God's best way?

John 16:13 (14:16-17)

b. What does righteous living look like according to the following? List the characteristics of the lifestyle, which the Holy Spirit will produce and nurture in us.

Galatians 5:22-23

Colossians 3:12-14, 17

8a. What choices let us continually experience the LORD's guidance?

Romans 12:2 (Psalm 1:1-2)

Psalm 5:3

Proverbs 3:5-6

b. What must be our continual heart attitude and prayer?

Psalm 139:23-24

9. What do these scriptures promise will result when we allow the Good Shepherd to guide our lives?

Psalm 32:8

Psalm 23:6

SUMMARY

10a. What sheep-like tendencies do you see in your own life? Why do you continually need the guidance of the LORD?

b. Why must worldly counsel be evaluated prayerfully and in light of biblical principles and godly counsel?

11a. In what areas in your life do you need the LORD's direction today?

b. What promises or principles in this lesson on the LORD's guidance have especially spoken to you?

12. What practices allow you to follow the LORD's leadership in your daily life?

13. Joy is a feeling you get from Psalm 23. Why is the guidance of the LORD a reason to rejoice?

Lesson 5

COMFORT AND SECURITY IN THE VALLEYS

"Even 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."

This must be one of the most profoundly comforting verses in the Bible. Millions have recited it in the midst of the lonely, fearful valleys of life. In it is the promise that the LORD, the Good Shepherd of our lives, will not leave our side as we go through the tough and fearful times. Instead, He will be there to give consolation and strength in times of suffering, fear, pain or death.

The valley of the shadow of death for the sheep is when the shepherd leads the flock through the ravine between sharp cliffs in order to get them to fresh mountain pasture. Not only were these valleys dark and shadowy, but also predators could jump down on the flock. The situation would produce terror if the sheep did not trust the shepherd to be with them and see them to safe pasture. The picture of the faithful shepherd here is the epitome of tender care and continuing watchfulness. The sheep instinctively trust the shepherd to provide and protect through the fear of danger.

As he wrote Psalm 23, David used this word picture to convey a joyful confidence in the LORD who had accompanied him through many "valley of the shadow of death" experiences as a shepherd, fugitive, and now king.

No matter what our station in life is, we all walk through valleys. The deep emotional stress that can accompany these times can be overwhelming unless we find security in the presence of the LORD. Not only will He walk with us, but He gives supernatural strength, comfort, protection, and assurance of final victory. Through it all, He deepens our relationship with Him, produces His character in us, and takes us to new and greener pastures in our walk of faith. As we continue our study of Psalm 23, we will look at the security and victory the Good Shepherd can give us through the valleys of life.

1a. What are some examples of "valleys" people go through in life?

b. What overwhelming emotions can accompany these situations?

2a. Why does the sheep of Psalm 23 fear no evil?

Psalm 23:4

Note: The rod and staff of the shepherd are used to fight off predators and rescue sheep when they fall or head in the wrong direction.

b. What does God's Word promise if we've placed our lives in His hands?

Psalm 34:18

Isaiah 42:16

Romans 8:38-39

Hebrews 13:5b

3a. A comforter is someone who stands by us in a time of need to give us strength to carry on and tangible support to lead us through difficult circumstances. Psalm 23:4 is a picture of the LORD's comfort as we trust Him with hard times. How is God described in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4?

b. How is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, our "comforter," described in these verses?

John 16:7 Note: Counselor (NIV) is also translated Comforter (NASV)

Romans 8:26

Romans 15:13b

c. What will the LORD also use to bring comfort?

Romans 15:4

Proverbs 17:17

4. Of what can we be sure as we walk through valleys with the LORD?

Romans 8:28

1 Corinthians 10:13

1 Peter 5:6, 10

5. What can we know in the face of our vulnerability and weakness?

2 Corinthians 12:9

6. As the Holy Spirit comforts us through difficult times, what results in our lives? Romans 5:3-5

7a. How did Jesus command us to respond in the valleys and why?

John 14:1-3

John 16:33

b. What is His enduring promise in Jeremiah 29:11?

8. What will we be able to say on the other side of the valley?

Psalm 116:7-8

Psalm 62:1-2

SUMMARY

9. What valleys of life have you experienced with the LORD in the past?
What did you find in these times?

10. Who is the Holy Spirit, and how does He help us?

11a. What valleys are you walking through at this time in your life?

b. What perspectives do Psalm 23 and this lesson encourage you to have in this valley?

Footprints in the Sand

by Margaret Powers

One night I had a dream--
I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the LORD and
Across the sky flashed scenes from my life.
For each scene I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,
One belonged to me and the other to the LORD.
When the last scene of my life flashed before us,
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.
I noticed, that many times along the path of my life,
There was only one set of footprints.
I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest
times in my life.
This really bothered me and I questioned the LORD about it.
" LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you,
You would walk with me all the way,
But I have noticed that during the most
troublesome times in my life
There is only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why in times when I
needed you most, you should leave me."
The LORD replied, "My precious, precious child, I love you
and I would never, never leave you during your times of
trial and suffering.
When you saw only one set of footprints,
It was then that I carried you."

Lesson 6

FREEDOM FROM FEAR IN THE VALLEYS

"Even 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."

Fear is an emotion that David knew well as he penned Psalm 23. His life had held many fearful circumstances, perhaps the greatest of which was his flight from King Saul. Because Saul, the first king of Israel, had been unfaithful, God sent the prophet Samuel to inform Saul that He'd replace him as king with "a man after His own heart." Unbeknownst to Saul, that man was a young shepherd boy named David, whom Samuel was instructed to anoint secretly as Israel's next king (I Samuel 16-17). Ironically, David's love for the LORD and abilities as a musician and poet led Saul to call him periodically to the palace to soothe his depression with singing.

About that time, a nine-foot Philistine giant named Goliath challenged Israel in a representative duel. David, still in his teens, was the only one in Israel with the courage to face the enormous foe. Through faith in God, David killed the giant with a sling shot. This was only the beginning of David's God-given success as a war hero. As David led Israel in one unbelievable victory after another, Saul began to realize David was probably God's anointed king. Crazy with jealousy, Saul began a rumor that David was conspiring to overtake the throne and issued a death warrant on the young man's life. David became a fugitive, seeking to escape Saul for at least ten years.

After Saul's death, David was anointed king of Judah and later of all Israel. But this was not the end of David's experiences with fear. His mistakes, especially committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband killed, had terrible ripple effects in his family. One of his sons, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar, and her brother, Absalom, killed Amnon for his action. After this, Absalom, heir apparent to his father's throne, set up a conspiracy to kill David and take his place as king. David was forced to flee Jerusalem and waited in anguish as civil war raged

between Absalom's men and those loyal to David. During the battle, David's greatest fear came to pass: Absalom was killed. David was stricken with grief again.

David's experiences echo the fact that regardless of age or status, we all face fearful things in life. This deep emotion can paralyze us if we do not know how to find safety in the presence of the LORD. Amid the heartaches, David proclaimed, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me"* (Psalm 23:4). David's intimate relationship with the LORD turned his experiences toward spiritual growth and his fears into deeper love and trust in God.

We have seen that in the New Testament, Jesus revealed Himself as the LORD and Good Shepherd whom David knew and loved. He instructed us regarding fear when He said, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me"* (John 14:1). *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). Scripture promises that we can rest in God because He is in control and will be with us and protect us as we walk through fearful circumstances. Even in the face of enemies, David found peace as he trusted in the faithful Shepherd of his soul. As we continue our study of Psalm 23, we will probe more deeply into the sure protection which surrounds the "sheep of His pasture."

1a. What can produce fear in our lives?

b. What negative effects can fear produce?

2a. What imagery of safety in the face of threat does Psalm 23:4 give?

Note: The rod and staff of the shepherd are used to fight off predators and rescue sheep when they fall or head in the wrong direction.

b. What key to overcoming fear do you see in Psalm 23:4?

3a. What did David declare in the face of fearful circumstances in Psalm 27:1 (2-3)?

Psalm 27:5 (optional)

b. How did David respond in fearful circumstances?

Psalm 27:7-8

Psalm 27:11

Psalm 27:14

Note: To wait on the LORD is to trust Him and expect Him to work.

4. What phrases in the following describe choices that enable us to receive the LORD's protection?

Psalm 91:1-2

Psalm 91:9-12 (34:7)

5. The shepherd's rod, used to fight off predators, gave the sheep security in the face of fearful circumstances (Psalm 23:4). What is the promise of God in the following?

Deuteronomy 3:22

Isaiah 41:10

2 Thessalonians 3:3

6a. The shepherd's staff also comforted the sheep (Psalm 23:4). The shepherd used the hook at the end of the staff to pull the sheep back when they fell or headed in the wrong direction. What words or phrases describing the actions of ancient Israel describe choices that can take us away from the LORD and His protection?

Psalm 106:7, 13

Psalm 106:35-36

Psalm 106:43

b. What does the LORD do when we stray from Him?

Ezekiel 34:16a

Matthew 18:12-14

c. What is the LORD's response when we repent (turn from going in the wrong direction) and commit ourselves to following His will?

Psalm 107:19-20

Psalm 107:29-30 (Optional)

7a. What can we know God will do as we trust Him in the fearful "valleys" of life?

Psalm 25:15-18, 20

b. What does the LORD command us to do and promise in return when we place our fears in His hands?

Psalm 55:22

Psalm 68:19

8. What did the psalmist declare as a result of trusting in the LORD's protection?

Psalm 23:4a, 6

SUMMARY

9a. In what area(s) of your life are you struggling with fear?

b. What verses from this lesson been especially helpful to you?

c. What can you do with this fear in order to experience the peace Christ promises?

10. What do you need to maintain in your life in order to experience the LORD's protection?

11. Why is the LORD's protection a reason to rejoice?

LESSON 6 NOTES

1 Angels (Psalm 91:11-12). According to the Bible, angels surround us continually. They are created immortal beings who serve God and believers. An angel is physically powerful; for example, one angel effortlessly moved the huge stone from the tomb of Jesus, a stone three men would struggle to displace. An angel closed the mouth of the lion in Daniel 6:22. Angels are usually invisible to our eyes, but they can become visible (Genesis 16:7; Numbers 22:23; Luke 1:28). When angels do appear, they are usually glorious and stunningly beautiful causing amazement in those who witness their presence (Luke 1:11; Matthew 28:2-3; Daniel 10:6; Revelation 10:1). 2 Corinthians 11:14 states that Satan can make himself appear as an angel of God. "Whether visible or invisible, however, God causes his angels to go before us, to be with us, and to follow after us. All of this can be fully understood only by believers who know that angelic presences are in control of the battlefield about us, so that we may stand (Isaiah 26:3) with complete confidence in the midst of the fight." Billy Graham, Angels, God's Secret Agents, p. 45.

Lesson 7

GOD, OUR GRACIOUS HOST

"You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You welcome me as a guest, anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings." New Living Translation

The word picture in the original language now changes from the Shepherd-King to God being a gracious host who prepares a rich banquet at His beautiful home and welcomes you as His special guest. Enemies are held outside, but there's no enemy in His house; only a feast in your honor with the richest of fare.

Psalm 23:5 speaks of the great privilege of being welcomed into the LORD's presence and experiencing His love and protection. David is talking about the spiritual fulfillment that comes from an ongoing personal relationship with the LORD and the freedom to go to Him at any time.

This word picture also shows how loved and valuable you and I are to God that He honors and serves us individually. As God's children, He has saved us from judgment or our sin through the death of His own dear Son, Jesus, clothed us with Christ's righteousness, and changed our hearts by His Spirit. Sin no longer reigns over us, and we are always welcomed in God's presence as His much loved children. In His presence, our most basic needs are met--to love and be loved, feel secure, and feel significant. There are enemies of our faith to be sure, but as we walk with the LORD, these enemies are no match for Him. In the presence of these enemies, He sets a feast before us and welcomes us as His special guest.

1a. Most people struggle with inferiority feelings. How does the word picture in Psalm 23:5 show our great value to God?

b. How does Isaiah 43:4a reflect God's love for His people?

c. What is the supreme demonstration of God's love for you and me?

Romans 5:8 (8:32a)

2. Only God's children in relationship with Him can experience the fullness of God's love. What must we do to become His child?

John 1:12 (Him refers to Jesus Christ)

Revelation 3:20 (Jesus speaking)

Note: If you have never invited Christ into your heart, the prayer on page 13 may be helpful to you now.

3a. David used the word picture of Psalm 23:5 to describe the privilege and blessing of being in God's presence. According to the following, what did David find in the presence of God?

Psalm 16:11

Psalm 36:9

Psalm 56:13

Psalm 86:15

b. What makes God's presence real to us when we receive Christ and follow Him? What did Jesus promise?

John 14:23

4. How do the following verses describe the qualities supernaturally produced in our lives when we walk with the LORD and allow His Spirit to control our lives?

2 Timothy 1:7

Galatians 5:22-23

5. Psalm 23:5 speaks about having safety from enemies when we are with the LORD. What strong enemies of our faith are mentioned in the following parable of Jesus that God's Spirit enables us to overcome?

Mark 4:15

Mark 4:16-17

Mark 4:19

7. The Scriptures also tell us about an internal enemy of our faith--our old sin nature. Although we have a "new nature" in Christ, the Bible tells us that we can expect a continual battle in our lives between the Holy Spirit and our old sin nature.

a. How can we allow the Holy Spirit to win these battles according to Galatians 5:16-17, 25 (cf. Romans 8:4-5)?

Note: To walk in the Spirit is to ask the Holy Spirit to control our lives and give us power to live the Christian life.

b. Instead of the selfishness and resistance to God's way characteristic of our old nature, what wisdom does the Spirit produce in us when we ask Him to control our lives?

James 3:17

8a. The picture in Psalm 23:5 of God as a gracious host shows how God always welcomes us into His presence. How is this also stated in Hebrews 4:16?

b. How does Jesus reflect the Father's graciousness in the invitation of Matthew 11:28-29?

9. What is the natural response to the graciousness of God shown us in Psalm 23:5?

Psalm 100:4-5

SUMMARY

10. Most people struggle to some degree with feelings of inadequacy or failure. How does the idea of God preparing a feast to honor you affect your sense of self-worth?

11. How can walking with the LORD and experiencing His presence meet your basic needs to love and be loved, feel secure and feel significant?

12a. What part does the Holy Spirit play in making God's presence real to you as God's child?

b. What enemies of your faith can the Spirit defeat in your life as you choose to walk with the LORD and desire to live in His presence?

13. How would you describe the ever-present "table" God as a gracious host has prepared for you? (See also Question 3.)

IMPORTANT NOTE: The following is a sample prayer that may be helpful to you as you daily ask the Spirit to supernaturally enable you to live the Christian life.

LORD Jesus, I acknowledge that I have tried and failed to live the Christian life in my own strength. Thank you that you have forgiven my sins through your death on the cross for me. I now invite you to take control of my life. Fill me with the Holy Spirit as you have commanded me to be filled (Ephesians 5:18) and as you promise to do if I ask (1 John 5:14-15). Live your life through me, LORD, in the power of your Spirit. I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

What is the promise of Ephesians 3:20?

LESSON 7 NOTES

1 Works of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit is the source of power in the Christian's life, it is important to know who He is. Throughout Scripture, the Holy Spirit is revealed along with the Father and the Son as a full and distinct person of the Godhead. As a divine Person, the Holy Spirit is eternal, everywhere present, almighty, perfectly wise, perfectly just and perfectly good (Hebrews 9:14, Psalm 139:7-10, 1 Corinthians 2:10-11).

The Holy Spirit's distinct role is the Sanctifier who frees us to lead new lives in Christ (2 Corinthians 3:17). It is the Holy Spirit who leads us to spiritual rebirth, brings Christ's presence to us, keeps us in touch with God, makes us realize God's love, gives us power to witness and to live the Christian life, and gives us spiritual gifts with which to serve the body of Christ (Titus 3:5, John 14:16-18, Romans 8:26, Romans 5:5, Acts 1:8, Romans 8:5-9, 1 Corinthians 2:4-12). He teaches, encourages, comforts, pleads for us and leads us into all truth (John 16:13, Acts 9:31, John 14:16, Romans 8:27). Romans 8 tells us that allowing our minds to be controlled by the Holy Spirit is the key to 'life and peace' (8:6) and experiencing victory over the sin that seeks to control us.

Lesson 8

SECURITY FOR THE FUTURE

"The LORD is my Shepherd.... Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

David concludes that if God, the Good Shepherd, has so loved and cared for him thus far in his life, regardless of David's mistakes and faults, but wholly by His grace, surely the LORD will continue to be good to him throughout his days and always. Furthermore, David had found the greatest joy in life to be the continual "feast" of knowing God and being under His care and grace and mercy.

This is just as true for us as believers today. While the world may hold temporary joys, nothing compares with being God's child and having Him carry us through the difficulties, share the joys with us, be with us in the sleepless nights, carry our burdens, talk to us through His Word, love and encourage us through His people, and use us in the body of Christ to present His love and hope to the world.

But the best is still yet to come. When the world wearies us and gets us down, not only is the LORD our refuge, but eternal life with Him is our certain hope for the future. There, we will be completely and forever fulfilled, and we will truly be in His presence, knowing God face to face.

In the New Testament, Jesus, the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1f) and the Good Shepherd (John 10) revealed truth about the unseen world to us. He confirmed that God reigns over all things from a place called heaven, where God's children will be perfect in body and soul in God's presence forever.

The descriptions of this place, envisioned by men like Isaiah and the Apostle John, sound like something we would see on a modern movie screen... almost unimaginable. These writers of Scripture had difficulty using human language to depict what they saw.

But in common terms, Jesus promised that those who believe in Him will be there and that He has gone to prepare a place in heaven for each one. Because Christ's resurrection is a fact of history, we can know Jesus was God's Son, and His promises regarding heaven and our eternal future there will certainly be fulfilled.

As our study comes to a close, we will look at some truths about the heavenly home where we will "*dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*"

1a. What are some common preconceived ideas about heaven and our Father in heaven?

b. What does 1 Corinthians 13:12 say about our understanding of the unseen world?

2a. What do these Old Testament passages reveal about heaven?

Psalm 103:19

Psalm 93:2

b. What will always cause those around the throne of God to worship Him?

Psalm 89:14

3. What do the following verses tell us about Jesus Christ and heaven?

Hebrews 1:2-3

Hebrews 1:8 (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Philippians 2:9-11

Revelation 11:15

4a. What does Jesus promise the believer?

John 11:25-26

John 14:1-3

b. What does Philippians 3:20-21 add to this promise?

5. The Bible tells us that God will make heaven and earth new (2 Peter 3:10, 13; Revelation 21:1), and the whole created world will be redeemed and set free from decay and struggle. How do the following verses describe this redemption?

Romans 8:19-21

6. Jesus' resurrection body gives us a picture of what our eternal bodies might be like, bodies not subject to decay or sickness, but made to live eternally. What do you observe about Jesus' resurrection body in the following passages?

Luke 24:15-16, 30-31, 36-43, 51

Acts 1:9-11

7a. Revelation 21-22:6 gives some specifics about the new heaven and earth where God's people will live forever. What do the following selected verses reveal?

Revelation 21:1, 3-5

Revelation 21:10-11, 16

Note: In vs. 16, 12,000 Greek stadia is about 1,400 miles, or 2,220 kilometers.

Revelation 21:22-27

Note: Lamb is a term used for Jesus (Ex. 12; 1 Cor. 5:7; John 1:29; Is. 53:7).

b. Optional Question: What do you observe about heaven from Note 1, Reflections on heaven, page 58?

8. As we reflect on dwelling in the house of the LORD forever, for what can we praise God?

1 Peter 1:3-4

Note: Hope, biblically speaking, means certainty, not just wishful optimism.

SUMMARY

9. Although our understanding is limited, what are some clear revelations about heaven in Scripture:

...about God?

...about our physical bodies?

...about physical aspects of heaven?

...about the peace and fulfillment of heaven?

10. Of what does the phrase, “And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” remind you?

Study Review

11. Take a moment to look at Psalm 23. What have you observed:

...about the character of God?

...about God's love for you?

12. How would you evaluate the worth of this Psalm for your life?

13. Perhaps you would like to end your study of Psalm 23 with a prayer of thanks to Him.

LESSON 8 NOTES

1 Reflections on heaven. Heaven is mentioned over 400 times throughout the 66 books of the Bible. Sometimes it refers to the earth's atmosphere. "*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven...*" (Isaiah 55:10). Sometimes heaven is used to speak of outer space. "The heavens declare the glory of God..." (Psalm 19:1). Certainly God is in these places because He is spirit and omnipresent. "Do I not fill heaven and the earth?" is the declaration of the LORD recorded in Jeremiah 23:24.

But the heaven Jesus refers to in His teachings is the third use of the word heaven in the Scriptures. It is the place where God dwells and from which He reigns eternally. In the New Testament, it is sometimes described as a heavenly country, a New Jerusalem, a home prepared especially for God's children. Being a realm we cannot see, it is hard to imagine, and many questions surround the concept.

In his book, *A Layman Looks at the Lord's Prayer*, pp. 33-42, Phillip Keller lists the following freedoms and benefits in heaven.

Fourteen things we will be freed of in heaven:

1. Freedom from assaults of Satan--subtle insinuations and dark deceptions, temptations and deceitful tactics. No more doubt or temptation.
2. Freedom from the strain of separation from loved ones. We will have quiet contentment, no more restless spirits; at home with God.
3. Free from tears of anguish, despair, frustration, no more painful anguishing moments.
4. No more death because of what Christ accomplished on the cross--His death was the doorway to His home. Free from foreboding thoughts about when and how we will die.

5. Freedom from regrets and remorse over errors, wrong attitudes, unkind words, selfish motives, wrong actions. Fully forgiven, free from folly, sorrow, regret over misdeeds. Instead, deep delight.
6. No more search for truth, having come home to find our Father there waiting to welcome us.
7. Deliverance from pain--physically and emotionally and spiritually. No more watching others endure agony.
8. When God's new heaven, new earth and New Jerusalem are unveiled, there will be no church buildings or doctrinal divisions, only warmth and love and understanding produced among God's people by God's presence.
9. No sun or moon -- time will be no more. We will not be limited by the time/space conditions of life on earth. No more meeting deadlines, schedules, organizing our lives around the clock and calendar. No more sense that time is running out on our lives. No urgency--instead peace, quiet, unhurried life free from the fret and strain of earth's on-rushing pace.
10. No night there. Our new spiritual bodies will not need sleep and restoration as our physical bodies have.
11. No more misunderstanding between ourselves and others or God. Total and complete enlightenment--we will know as we are known--no more fears, doubts, misjudgments, animosities, despair from misunderstanding.
12. Nothing there to contaminate our thoughts or moral life. Nothing there will draw us away from devotion to God. No more dominated by struggle to earn a living--deliverance from the strain and stresses of our unpredictable earthly sojourn. The world can't pull us down.

13. No more tension of looking good for others; no more masks or false fronts to cover flaws. No more deceit, lying, dishonesty, duplicity. We will just be ourselves before God and others.
14. Free from sin and the pull of evil, freely walking in paths of righteousness. No longer burdened with sin--exult with lighthearted abandon.

Seven Benefits of heaven God's Presence will make possible:

1. Satisfaction and tranquility, contentment and repose, complete satisfaction continually.
2. Abundant quality of life--absolute love, honesty, good will and righteousness.
3. Absolute justice and fairness.
4. Service to God. All our work will have significance and deep meaning for it will be divine--a series of delightful enterprises in which men and God are active co-workers.
5. Exquisite fellowship--see our heavenly Father face to face. Tremendous joy in knowing Him will bind everyone together in a loving family.
6. Complete revelation of God and every aspect of life--all bright and right. No fear or foreboding.
7. Victory, rest at last as we reign forever and ever with Christ.

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Psalm 23

A psalm of David

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads
me beside quiet waters,

He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of
righteousness for his name's sake.

Even 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.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of
my enemies. You anoint my head
with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the
days of my life, and I will dwell in the
house of the LORD for ever.