

The LORD, Our Keeper

Lesson Text—Psalm 23; 121

Background Text—Psalms 23; 80; 121

A Verse to Remember—Psalm 121:1-2

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 23 is one of the most familiar declarations of faith from the Judeo-Christian Scripture. People in all walks of life, regardless of their participation in the religious life, have availed themselves of the powerful comfort in the uniquely moving words of this psalm. Known commonly as “The Shepherd Psalm,” it is often called upon to offer healing and hope to the bereaved. That, however, is not the limit to which this beautiful text may be appropriately applied. We can study Psalm 23 to learn about life and living, about wholehearted commitment to God, and about fostering healthy human relationships.

This lesson will also consider another familiar chapter from the Psalter, Psalm 121. The second selection from Israel’s hymns for worship deals with matters of trust and concern for security from the perspective of one’s faith-based relationship with the LORD.

THE WORD—THE LORD, OUR SHEPHERD

Psalm 23:1-4

(1) The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. (2) He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, (3) he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. (4) 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.

Psalm 23 celebrates God’s redemptive and caring kingship in the spirit of other Hebrew Scripture verses, such as Isaiah 40:11, 49:9f., 63:14, and Ezekiel 34:11-16. Many in our own day have heard Psalm 23 since their youth and can recite it from memory. Its particularly appealing declaration of faith and timeless perspective of hope have long been sources of strength and consolation to countless people, believers and non-believers alike. The psalm has been the bedrock of sure comfort to those in need for millennia.



Before the Lesson

1. Ensure that an adequate supply of Bibles and the *Uniform Study Guide* are available for distribution.
2. Enrich your lesson preparation with the outstanding resources for Bible study developed in the *Uniform Commentary* by Brian Harbour.
3. Display the following lesson outline:
 - The LORD, Our Keeper—Psalms 23; 121
 - The LORD, Our Shepherd (23:1-4)
 - The LORD, Our Host (23:5-6)
 - The LORD, Our Protector (121:1-8)
4. Prepare copies of Resource Kit item, “The Lord Is...” (KIT p. 7).

BEGINNING THE LESSON



Read or summarize: The Twenty-Third Psalm is likely the most familiar of Israel’s hymns and poetry for worship. Psalm 121 may be “a close second.” These two psalms also underscore the assuring reality of God’s comforting presence during times of uncertainty and suffering.

Invite members to share briefly about times when they most especially experienced God’s protective presence and provision.

STUDYING THE SCRIPTURE

Psalm 23:1-4



Introduce Psalm 23 and 121 by reviewing the information found in “Locating the Scripture Text.” Continue by sharing the information related to Psalm 23 in this lesson’s “Introduction.”



LOCATING THE SCRIPTURE TEXT

Written as hymns of trust, Psalms 23 and 121 offer praise to God through the language and attitude of worshipful thanksgiving. Marginal annotations at the beginning of Psalm 23 in the ancient Hebrew texts ascribe the authorship of this song to David. Psalm 121 is, by similar annotation, located among the Songs of Ascents—those psalms associated with preparation for the journey to worship in Jerusalem. Both psalms portray God as Israel’s keeper. Although the Maker of heaven and earth is concerned with the destinies of entire nations, the LORD is also an intimate friend to and protector of individuals.

Invite the class to read verses 1-4 in unison.

Discuss the context of the phrase, “I shall not be in want” (v. 1). Is this a declaration about material prosperity or an abundance of another sort? (Hint: Righteousness is the nature of the path along which the Shepherd leads the sheep in v. 3b.)

The Shepherd is Lord—Review John 10:11-16

Good Shepherd’s Resume

- Provides
- Protects
- Restores

Help the class explore the character of the shepherd’s leadership by completing the following phrases from their own experience:

- “Green pasture” reminds me of...
- “Still waters” are like...
- “Restores my soul” means...

The Lord’s sheep are called to a unique responsibility. They are called to be shepherds to each other and to the world. How can we provide shepherding care to:

- each other in this class?
- members of our church?
- people in our community?

Reason for Our Righteousness: “His name’s sake.”

23:1 The image of the shepherd was a powerful symbol in the largely agrarian society of ancient Israel and in the Western world during the centuries prior to the industrial and technical revolutions. Even in our own era, the figure of the shepherd remains as a beloved symbol of care, protection, and security. Ancient Israel constantly affirmed, “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock” (Ps 81). This image conveys the notion that God is in charge. The Hebrews used this metaphor to illustrate the powerful theological message that God is in control. Just as the shepherd has total charge over the flock, the psalmist testifies to the truth of God’s care and protection over his “flock”—his people. The phrase, “I shall not be in want,” affirms that God provides what is necessary for life. Just as the sheep do not worry about the source of their provisions, the psalmist knows that God’s people can trust in the LORD for the provision of their needs. Those in the Shepherd’s care will lack nothing that is necessary to righteous living.

23:2-3 In verses 2-4, the psalmist specifies how God’s shepherding care is delivered, how the LORD carries out his charge over the “flock.” Verses 2 and 3 in particular celebrate God’s personal concern for and care over the people. The pastoral scene of sheep grazing and resting without fear in verdant fields, at peace next to fresh and quietly flowing waters, has inspired innumerable works of art, poetic refrains, literary allusions, and sheets of music—classical and popular. Some may fight their way through life, attempting to scratch meaning from the arid fields of purely human endeavors. God’s people, however, are at rest within the shepherd’s full provision. This rest is not passivity but purposeful confidence and trust. The flock’s relationship to the divine shepherd is redemptive, restorative. Each day is a new day in which to embrace God’s will and be made anew in God’s image.

As they move from pasture to pasture, from one of life's moments to the next, God's people willingly follow his leadership. There is no large sense of mystery regarding God's will: It is always that his people are to reflect the righteousness of God's own character.

Consequently, God's leadership is along paths in life that lead to conclusions of right, to ends that are holy. Love for the shepherd means that the sheep—again, in this case not a passive flock of unthinking creatures—seek to honor the LORD's name by keeping to the paths of righteousness along which they are being led by the shepherd who walks with them.

23:4 If one were inclined to scoff at the psalmist's views of life and faith as naive and not dealing seriously with the challenges life presents each person, this verse sets those objections aside. The psalmist is not ignoring the difficulties of living, the sorrow and suffering that visit every person. It is, declares the psalmist, within the deepest sorrows and among life's greatest hazards that the shepherd's provision is most apparent. Those who are the LORD's may "boldly go" where others dare not, certain that God will not abandon his people to the wiles of evil. The shepherd's nurture and presence is here portrayed as strength to oppose those who would harm the sheep. The shepherd's rod and staff are instruments of correction for the sheep, but weapons of devastation against those who would ravage the flock. For that reason, even being disciplined by God can be an experience of security and comfort to the sheep.

THE WORD—THE LORD, OUR HOST

Psalm 23:5-6

(5) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. (6) Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

23:5 The psalm introduces a second metaphor to express deep faith and trust in God. The shepherding God is also like a glorious host who provides a feast for those who are in his care. The reality of God's sovereignty is underscored in the provision of the celebratory banquet as well as in its timing and

Ask: What comes to mind with the phrase, "the valley of the shadow of death"? How did the psalmist respond to being in that place? Do Christians have reason to be confident even when challenged by difficult circumstances?

Rod and Staff: Comfort to Believers, Catastrophe to Evildoers

God's Presence: The Believer's Source of Life and Security

Psalm 23:5-6



Invite the class to read verses 5-6 in unison.

Say: Psalm 23 uses a second image to portray God's care for the believer, that of host.

Discussion: Meals as an important part of recognizing significant events.

Review the list of banquet participants in verse 5:

- God—host, sovereign, provider, protector
- Psalmist—honored guest, freed from adversaries
- Enemies—oppose God, impotent before God

Challenge: Read Matthew 5:43-48. How are Christians to respond to Jesus' teachings about our enemies?

Anointed and Overflowing—God's People

- Called to be God's
- Affirmed and Protected by God
- Abundance from God

Lead the class to discuss "goodness" and "love" in context of v. 6.

Challenge: Christian discipleship is for “all the days of my life.”

House of the Lord—Then, Now, To Come

- Temple in ancient Jerusalem
- God’s people, the Body of Christ
- Eternity with the Lord in heaven

Psalm 121:1-8



Divide class into small groups. Direct each to read Psalm 121 and discuss the following:

- God’s direct intervention in our circumstances
- God’s intervention in our circumstance through others

Reconvene class. Invite each group to share some of their discussion.

God, Our Helper

- Maker of heaven and earth (2)
- Supportive strength (3a)
- Uninterrupted presence and care (3b-4)

Say: Christians long have taken great comfort from verses 5-8. They are a reminder that God is actively involved with and concerned for his people in all of life’s circumstances.

Ask: What conclusive answers do verses 5-8 provide to the question first posed and addressed in verses 1-2? What perspective does the psalmist adopt when describing the effectiveness of God’s care? When will God cease to care for believers?

Ponder: How do the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ help the Christian to embrace the assurances of Psalm 121?

location. There is a sense of victory in the mood of the feast. The precious oils of anointing are poured upon the head of the psalmist—representing God’s faithful people—without reserve.

The banquet’s sweet wine, drawn from God’s own vineyards, is so plentiful and lavished upon the psalmist in such generous portions that the liquid brims and spills over the cup of blessing. Such is the reality and ready generosity of God’s blessings for those who are his people in faith. The call of God, the confirmation of covenant with God, and the providence and protection of God are all matters of abundance rather than lack.

The victory celebrated in this feast is confidently declared in the midst of the psalmist’s adversities (v. 4a) and in spite of the proximity of adversaries (v. 5a). This is a celebration for what is and what is yet to be—God is present; God’s people will be redeemed and their faithfulness vindicated. The psalmist is not only secure but is filled with the very presence of the divine.

23:6 The final verse of this psalm speaks of the believer’s confidence in God. A wholehearted faith in the living God causes hope to swell and overflow into the psalmist’s declaration of praise to the LORD. It emphasizes that God’s care over his people, person by person, is far more than a temporary boon. God’s caring reflects the nature of the LORD’s own character and love: it is forever.

The first word of verse 6 is translated “surely” by the *New International Version* (NIV) of the Bible. The *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) suggests in a margin note that the translation might alternatively be rendered “only.” By that line of reasoning the English “surely” proposes a probability, even if an excellent probability. The RSV’s use of the English word “only,” however, articulates the hope of the psalmist—and so of all who follow God—as an absolute certainty. The joyful future the psalmist envisions is to attain the highest aspiration of any who love the LORD. “To dwell in the house of the LORD” is to remain in God’s presence. In the present life it is to worship God continually among the congregation of his people. In the life that is to come, it is to share eternity with the LORD and his redeemed.

THE WORD—THE LORD, OUR PROTECTOR

Psalm 121:1-8

(1) I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? (2) My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. (3) He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; (4) indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. (5) The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; (6) the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. (7) The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; (8) the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

121:1 Psalm 121 begins by asking a question common to a variety of life experiences: How will I be helped? The inquiry is initially posed in the context of danger that is perceived to be near. If one looked to the hills beyond ancient Jerusalem, one saw enemy territory. Some have treated verse 1 as a declarative statement, suggesting the looking upward that often characterizes the posture of prayer. The weight of the textual evidence, however, more readily lends itself to the interrogative, a question: How can I deal with the danger in my present situation? The psalmist voiced the people's concern for security in the midst of uncertain times and perilous surroundings.

121:2-4 Help that is truly help comes directly from God, the Maker and Redeemer of heaven and earth—of all that is. The idea behind the verb “watches over” (v. 7, “will keep you”) is used five times (vv. 3-5, 7, 8) to convey the reality of God's presence and protection. God is the powerful keeper of the nation and intimate companion to the individual. Not so much as one small stumble, one slip of the foot, is of too little consequence to escape the vigilant notice of “he who watches over Israel.” There were some deities in the near-eastern religious pantheon who were thought to slumber during various seasons of the year. The God of Israel was no such sleeper but awake and watchful over his people throughout each day.

121:5-6 The right side was the traditional Semitic side of favor or preference. To cast God standing at one's right side indicated that such a person enjoyed

✂ Righteous ✂ Shepherd and King

Shepherd is a universal figure, associated with both the care of sheep and the function of kings. The shepherd is also the guide-protector who directs the sheep to a secure camp near water (the emphasis is not on the stillness of the water but on the security and comfort of the site) and protects those whom he leads with rod and staff—symbols of kingship—even when they pass through “the valley of death.” [Psalm 23:4] is sometimes read as “the valley of deep darkness” or as *through the darkest valley*, carrying the idea of great danger and the nearness of death. Thus the speaker can declare that there is no “lack” in Yahweh's providing for his people (v. 1), and no fear as he guides them through the times of terrible distress (v. 4). (Tate, 454-55).

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LESSON-TO-LIFE

Say: Christianity teaches that we need to trust God for the resolution of our present difficulties. The Lord, who gave his Son for our redemption and gives his Spirit as our Counselor, is deeply concerned with all aspects of his people's well-being.

Invite the class to revisit Psalms 23 and 121, finding and describing in each statements that refer to eternal qualities of our relationship with God (23:6; 121:8). Lead the discussion to consider how a perspective that embraces eternity strengthens faith and hope in the midst of a difficult present.

Distribute Resource Kit item, “The Lord Is ...”(KIT p. 7). Invite the class to use the sheet as an additional resource during their weekday prayers and Bible study.

CLOSING PRAYER

Almighty God, keeper, host, and protector, we thank you for the privilege that is ours to come before you. We recognize and give thanks for your redeeming presence in all the circumstances of our lives. We affirm your goodness and care. We celebrate your love in the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

References

J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

_____. *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

Marvin E. Tate, “Psalms,” *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills, et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1995).

the blessing of God’s immediate presence and divine favor. As a consequence, the psalmist offers the assurance that all threats to the believer’s well-being ultimately come to naught under God’s providential care. No element of creation, such as the sun or moon (associated in some traditional contexts with punishment and curse) can harm the psalmist. The LORD, able to protect Israel from imposing celestial forces, will certainly stand as a bulwark against the onslaught of adversarial circumstances or the harassment of the people by their foes.

121:7-8 These last verses of Psalm 121 serve as summary to the compelling faith first indicated in verse 2. The question, “Where does my help come from?” has been answered. It is the LORD who responds to the believer’s concern for well-being and security. It is the LORD who deserves the believer’s trust, who calls upon the believer to have faith. The Maker of heaven and earth also watches over life. His watching and caring do not end; they are forever.

The faith of the psalmist is based upon a deep connection with God. The depth of this faith is found in the confidence that God brings us through dangers seen and unseen. I remember as a child the words of my parents in their fervent prayers. They prayed, “God, we thank you for bringing us through dangers seen and unseen.” They knew, like the psalmist and believers throughout the ages, that God is Protector.

A CONCLUDING WORD

Psalms 23 and 121 are among the most beloved of the Christian church. Over and again, on occasions of deep sorrow and in times of desperate searching, these ancient hymns of Israel have brought comfort, assurance, and courage to the disciples of Jesus Christ. The message from the psalmist is that God’s people can trust the LORD to be present with them during their times of rejoicing and in their experiences of rejection. The Sovereign God is at work to lead his people through times of turmoil so they may stand with him anew, redeemed in Christ and forever free.

TEACHING OPTION**LORD and Shepherd—Psalm 23:1-4**

- A After welcoming Bible study participants and sharing a brief time of prayer
 B together, lead the class in a unison reading of Psalm 23:1-4 (NIV).
 C

Encourage Sharing: Are there any special and comforting memories that come to mind when you hear Psalm 23?

Three Strong Comforting Terms (v. 1)

- LORD—Sovereign God
- Shepherd—Caring God
- “I shall not be in want”—Assurance in God

God’s Nurturing Provision (vv. 2-3a)

- Green pasture—Nurture and sufficiency
- Still waters—Nurture and confidence
- Restored soul—Nurture and life

Discuss: Righteousness and the believer as the LORD’s representative.

Double Duty

- Comfort from the LORD’s rod and staff
- Confrontation from the LORD’s rod and staff

LORD and Host—Psalm 23:5-6

After a volunteer reads verses 5-6 aloud, ask: Why do we ascribe great importance to social customs of hospitality in connection with special events such as weddings?

Memorable Banquet

- Prepared and served by God
- Celebration despite adversarial notice
- Confirmation of blessings

Believer’s Certainty: Goodness and love from God today, tomorrow, and forever.

Ponder: Jesus Christ as the completion of Psalm 23’s vibrant faith.

Ever-Watchful Lord—Psalm 121:1-8

Invite several volunteers to read Psalm 121 aloud.

Lead the class to discuss the “source” of the help for which the psalmist awaits: Is it “from the hills” or “from heaven”?

Direct the class to scan the psalm and ask: How does Psalm 121 portray the character of God? (Answers may include: Sovereign LORD, creator, ever-present, powerful, nurturing, protective, eternal.)

Application: Given God’s character, how should believers’ characters be shaped?

Challenge: Read and discuss 1 Peter 1:13-16, 22-25 in light of Psalm 121 and the immediately preceding application.