

The Good Shepherd

A Workbook for Memorizing

Psalm 23

by

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Introduction

You are about to start a wonderful adventure! Memorizing Scripture is an awesome privilege. As you memorize and meditate on the words of our Lord, you'll find them penetrating the very essence of your being. They'll feed your soul and bathe your spirit as nothing else. You'll experience parched areas of your life being satisfied as never before. You'll find yourself experiencing the all loving, all powerful Author in new and intimate ways. And as you begin memorizing this psalm always remember that the Bible is unlike any other book — it is the *all-powerful, never failing Word of God*. It is God speaking to you.

When David lived, about 3000 years ago, the life of a shepherd was very prominent and well understood in the culture of that day. Most people lived out in the country, out in the hills and fields and either farmed or raised animals for a living. It's difficult for those of us who struggle to accommodate the bustling, city life of our 21st century to comprehend the serene, pastoral existence inherent in this psalm. But our Lord masterfully applies His all-powerful Word to every situation. It's exciting to discover how He uses the life of an eastern shepherd of bygone days to illustrate His involvement in our lives as Christians in this Nuclear Age.

It is interesting to note that sheep are quite a unique species. They are the only domestic animal that cannot live without man. Horses, cats, dogs and even cattle, if left to themselves in the wild, can survive from generation to generation, but sheep will die if they have no one to care for them. Their very existence depends solely on a shepherd's care. In David's day, the reverse was also frequently true because the flock sometimes represented the shepherd's entire wealth. His entire life was thus spent caring for and protecting his flock and his diligence and ability to do so determined his own survival. So whereas the life of the sheep was utterly dependent on the shepherd's care, in some cases, the shepherd's livelihood also depended on the care he gave his sheep.

As a young boy David spent many hours and even days out in the fields tending his father's sheep, leading them on safe paths, making sure they had adequate food and water, protecting them from thieves and predators. Most of us don't know too many shepherds, and our only contact with sheep might be limited to the petting zoo. But David will skillfully use the sheep/shepherd bond of 3000 years ago to develop profound truths revealing the intimate relationship that exists between the Great Shepherd and us, the sheep of *His* fold.

As you begin this powerful chapter, remember that Scripture should not be memorized under pressure, but leisurely, as you give the Holy Spirit opportunity to impress it on your mind and spirit. Remember that it is not getting to know the words that is important, joy lies in getting to know the Author, the Shepherd Himself. Be sure you can say each verse without mistakes, then quote it to someone who will check it for you to make sure you are saying it word perfect before going on to the next verse. Say the Scripture you have learned often, to yourself and out loud, while you're working around the house, riding in the car, lying in bed, or whenever your mind is not active in other areas. The more often you say it, the easier it will be to remember. Writing it out will also help to impress it on your memory.

Some people find it helpful to note word and letter associations—such as acronyms, alphabetic sequence or counter sequence and/or the repetition of words. Such associations often help jog the memory when a catalyst is needed. (You will find our book, *The Sword! Scripture Memorization: A Must For Today* an invaluable resource to challenge and help you in your journey of Scripture Memorization. It can be downloaded free of charge or purchased at this web-site.)

(Dr. Robert L. Moyer's book, *The Psalm of Psalms* has been a helpful resource in preparing this workbook.

Psalm 23:1a

The Lord is my Shepherd....

The first five words in this psalm are the key that begins to open up the depth of its meaning. David doesn't say, "The Lord is *a* shepherd," he says, "The Lord is *my* Shepherd". It was not an on/off relationship, intact one day, detached and uncertain the next. This is David's firm assertion concerning the vital relationship existing between himself and his Lord. It is a present tense, consistent affirmation that is unshaken by circumstances. The sheep\shepherd bond was very familiar to the people of that day.

As we mentioned in the *Introduction*, sheep do not exist apart from a shepherd. They are the only domestic animal that can't live without man. Whereas other domestic animals, left to themselves in the wild, can survive from generation to generation, sheep will die if they have no one to care for them. Thus they are purchased or born into a flock and constantly require a shepherd's care.

So it was that as David watched over his flock, day after day, he was continually reminded of how his sheep were completely dependent on his care and protection. He must also have seen the entire human race as a great flock of needy people wandering in sin, heartache, and despair, in need of a Shepherd who would gather them in His love and tend to their needs. David knew that God had promised to send a Messiah who would one day fulfill this role and many of his psalms contain explicit promises of this coming Redeemer. It's even possible that David wrote this psalm while watching his father's flock on the very same Shepherd's Fields where, 1000 years later, the angel choir would herald the Messiah's birth.

David must have seen a shepherd's purchase of a helpless sheep needing his care and protection as an illustration of the Messiah who would be the Great Shepherd of mankind offering loving care and eternal protection to all who would accept it. Thus the first five words ring with connotations of a price paid, ownership, and a permanent, protected bond between a helpless sheep and a good shepherd as also between David and the Great Shepherd of his soul.

This psalm will reveal the loving attention and tender care that the Good Shepherd lavishes on His sheep. But all shepherds are not *good* shepherds. Ezekiel 34 describes false shepherds whose treatment of their sheep was *harsh and brutal*. Helpless sheep are completely at the mercy of such shepherds and have no ability to resist. This is the plight of mankind. We are all born into the devil's flock. He delights in exploiting our weaknesses and building on our inability to resist. Look around and you will see the heartache and grief, broken lives and gaping wounds of those who bow to his evil manipulation.

Sheep, in every sense of the word, are "dumb" animals. They thoughtlessly wander off, away from the shepherd's protection, even though they have no ability to take care of themselves. They have no defense against predators, no sharp teeth or claws as other animals, and often do not even have the sense to run away from danger. Does that remind you of anyone you know?

Isaiah said we're all like that: *We all like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way....* (Isaiah 53:) This "wander lust" or sinful nature is inherent in us all. Just like lost sheep, we in our natural state, are *lost* in sin and under the control of a cruel and ruthless shepherd. As a good shepherd seeks and rescues sheep in need, Jesus came to seek and rescue us. The horrible, painful death He suffered on the cross was the price He paid to free us from sin and to purchase us for His own flock in His eternal kingdom. But here, the analogy ends.

When sheep are bought by a shepherd, they have no say in the transaction, they are forced to go with the shepherd who pays the price. Even though you were purchased by a Good Shepherd who paid dearly for your redemption, you are not *compelled* to follow Him. God made us all with a free will and we alone decide for ourselves which shepherd we want to follow. So, unlike sheep, we do not have to remain under the control of an abusive taskmaster, nor are we forced to accept the care and forgiveness of a loving shepherd who will

bind our wounds, comfort our hearts and protect us from harm. We must all decide for ourselves. You must choose for yourself. Do you wish to receive the forgiveness for sin that Jesus offers and do you want the protection of His love and care—or—is your choice to continue to live under the mandate of sin and the one whose evil and cruelty knows no bounds.

In order for the beautiful promises of this psalm to apply to the life of an individual, he must, like David, humbly realize that he is a lost sheep, under the control of a ruthless master and he must choose to become the property of the Good Shepherd who sought him and bought him. He must consent to the ownership of the Great Shepherd who paid the price for his sin. He must assume the position of bondsman to One who will bear the responsibility for his care and protection throughout time and eternity. If you have accepted this Great Shepherd as your Lord and Savior, you can rest confidently in that relationship and continue on in this psalm to learn about the blessings of being a member of His flock.

But if, per chance, you have never committed your heart and life to the Lord Jesus, you have never asked Jesus to be your Savior and Shepherd, perhaps you would like to do this right now. Just bow your head and tell Him in your heart that you know you are a sinner and are incapable of saving yourself. Thank Him for the great price He paid to purchase your salvation. Tell Him that you want Him to come into your heart and life; that you want to submit to His ownership and you want to be a child of His care, a sheep of *His* pasture.

Now if you prayed that prayer, in reality, you are no longer a lost sheep in the care of an unscrupulous master. You are one of God's very own flock. The Lord no longer sees your sin. You are washed clean and He sees you as spotless and perfect. This is not because you are perfect, but because you have Jesus in your heart and He is perfect. You're like a little sheep that was under the authority of a ruthless shepherd, but the Good Shepherd bought you back, and brought you back. So now you're in His fold where you belong. You can say, "*The Lord is my shepherd*". And you are ready to apply the wonderful truths of this psalm to your own, personal life.

(This has been a long introduction and you probably already know these first five words, but one of the great blessings of memorizing Scripture is to meditate and delight in its truths as you think about them in review. David alludes to this in his very first psalm. So I would encourage you to go ahead and complete the blanks, if for no other reason than to give you opportunity to relish the profound truth in just these five words. There are normally four steps in filling in the blanks, but because some portions in this psalm are so short we have sometimes only included three or in some cases even just two.)

Beginning:

Vs. 1a - *The _____ is _____ shepherd* *(It will always be important to cover up the steps as you complete them, otherwise it's tempting to look back at prior answers.)*

Arriving:

Vs. 1a - _____

Psalm 23:1

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

The Lord is my Shepherd! Just these five words are like a many faceted diamond. You can emphasize any one of the five and be blessed with a different aspect of meaning. Children may enjoy an exercise that emphasizes the intimacy and closeness of a personal relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd. It's a visible reminder of the Lord's constant love and watch care over them (and us). ***The Lord - is - my - shepherd.*** There is one word for each finger on one hand. Have them use the index finger of their right hand and start by pointing it at the little finger on their left hand. As they move toward their thumb, have them allow one word for each finger. The little finger is "*The*", the next finger is "*Lord*". The third finger is the longest one and that one is "*is*". Now you come to the fourth finger, the one next to your thumb. That's the important one—"*my*". Have them wrap their right hand around it and hold it tight. As they hold it, have them say to themselves, "*The Lord is my shepherd.*" Then

whenever they're afraid or have a special need to be reminded of the Lord, their loving Shepherd, being close and watching over them, suggest that they just hold that fourth finger and think of this verse. This will always be kind of a tangible reminder that Jesus is always near wherever they are and no matter what happens.

Once the sheep/shepherd relationship is established between ourself and our Lord, there are awesome promises to be claimed. We do not get through the first verse without the first amazing assurance springing forth with impetus. If the Lord is *my* Shepherd, ***I shall not be in want.*** The word *want* here is the Hebrew word *chacer*, which means "to lack". We live in a very materialistic society and it's easy for us to interpret the word, ***want***, as "desire", like it's going to be Christmas every day. The Lord doesn't promise to supply us with everything we *want* but He does promise to see that we don't *lack* for anything we need. We have a Shepherd who loves us too much to satisfy our every desire like a doting parent accommodating every whim of a spoiled child.

Only God can see the many facets of our life and what is needed for our spiritual and personal development. Only He knows the qualities to be cultivated in our lives that will help us grow to be more like Him so that we might have the ability to face whatever may confront us in the future. What will your lifetime hold? God sees your life as if it's already lived. Only He can put the pieces of the puzzle together and work every circumstance, every situation together for your benefit as He promises in Romans 8:28 and again in verse 32: *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will He not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* What we need to joyfully exist as His sheep in the pasture of this world, He has promised to supply.

What do you need today? Do you need wisdom? Do you need strength? Do you need patience? Your Great Shepherd is carefully watching over you to see that you are supplied with your ***every need.*** He has promised that you will not ***lack*** for any necessity in your life. Our problem is that we often forget that we have One whose commitment and responsibility is to take care of us. So often we struggle to take care of things ourselves, to manage them in our own strength and finite wisdom. We all need to learn the lesson of looking to Him, our Good Shepherd, for the answers to life's dilemmas and the strength to cope with the many things we encounter on a daily basis. We should not forget that we were bought, we are the property, the sheep, of our Lord and our very existence, our needs and our care are His responsibility.

(Before you fill in the blanks below, say this verse to someone who will check it for you to make sure you are saying it without any mistakes.)

Beginning:

Vs. 1 - The _____ is my _____, I shall _____ be in want. *(Don't forget to cover up each step as you complete it.)*

Progressing:

Vs. 1 - _____ Lord _____ shepherd, _____ shall _____ in _____.

Arriving:

Vs. 1 - The _____

Psalm 23:2a

He makes me lie down in green pastures. . .

In David's day, sheep were kept in what was called a "sheepfold". This was a place out on the range that was surrounded by a wall with thorn branches around the top to keep wild beasts and robbers from crawling over. It had no gate or door but when the sheep were brought in at night the shepherd would sit or lie in the doorway. He was the "gate" of the sheepfold to see that the sheep didn't get out and wander off and also to make sure that no predator got in to harm them or thief to steal them.

That's what Jesus meant when He said, "*I am the gate for the sheep . . .*" (John 10:7). He was talking about being our Shepherd and protecting us in His sheepfold. There are many things today that hover around us to threaten our joy, our peace and our confidence in Him. No matter what they might be, we need to remember that we are in the sheepfold of our Lord, that He is sitting in the doorway and will *never* let *anything* past that will be detrimental to our walk with Him or our spiritual growth. So we can know that whatever happens and whatever others may intend as harm God will work it out for our good because He is the One who *owns* us and watches over us if we commit our life to Him.

Often several shepherds brought their sheep into the same fold at night so there were sometimes hundreds of sheep in one fold at the same time. We might think it would be an enormous task to sort out everyone's sheep come morning, but even though they are not very smart, the sheep all knew one thing. Each sheep knew his own shepherd's voice and would not respond to a stranger. Each shepherd had his own special shepherd's call. When a sheep heard the call of his shepherd, he responded to that familiar voice and obediently followed.

This is what Jesus was describing in John 10:4-5 where He said, "*when (the shepherd) brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him for they do not know the voice of strangers.*" (NKJV) It was very important for the sheep to know their shepherd's voice and to follow him, just as it's important for us to know the voice of our Good Shepherd and follow Him. Jesus said "*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.*" (John 10:27). There are many seductive voices that call to us from the world today, voices of predators and robbers seeking to lure us away from the security we have with our faithful Shepherd. They beckon, incessantly, from every side, inviting us to follow as they play on our emotions and desires: the voice of temptation, the voice of peer pressure, the voice of selfishness; the voice of materialism, of anger, worry, pride, fear, doubt These are thieves and predators that will lead us into dark valleys. We need to recognize the voice of our Good Shepherd and follow close behind his leading, quickly fleeing from the voice of a stranger.

Sheep were never fed in the fold, they were always taken out to pasture to graze on lush, green grass, so it was important for the shepherd to have a good place picked out for them. The sheep in this psalm were *lying down in green pastures*. Not only are the *green* pastures significant, but sheep won't lie down when they're hungry or if they're afraid, only when they feel safe and satisfied. So the fact they are lying down indicates that they are well fed and confidently secure in the shepherd's care. Having grazed all day in luscious green pastures, now safe and satisfied, they are lying down, contentedly "chewing their cud". (Like cows, sheep eat fast and swallow, then "chew their cud" or "ruminates" at their leisure.)

The spiritual application is obvious, isn't it? Just as sheep must have green pastures on which to feed in order to survive, it's important for us to feed on God's Word in order to function spiritually. Jesus said, "*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every Word that comes from the mouth of God.*"

As you are now taking the words of this psalm into your heart and mind, as you are memorizing and meditating on the very Words that God has given us, you are feeding your hungry soul as Jesus taught and becoming more familiar with His gentle voice. Memorizing is different from just reading or studying Scripture. When you memorize it *in context*, as you are doing, you can think about it when you're working around the house, or in the yard; children, when you're doing your chores or riding your bike; and perhaps everyone when you're lying in bed at the end of the day. Just as satisfied sheep lie down in green pastures to ruminate, you are, in effect, "ruminating" when you review and meditate on the Scriptures you have memorized.

*(As we mentioned, most of the Scripture portions we are learning in this workbook are so short it seems unnecessary to follow through on each step. But in order to establish a pattern to apply in memorizing other portions, we are for the greater part pursuing the procedure we suggest when memorizing **in context**. It is especially important for children to write out the Scripture, but it is good for all of us. This helps to establish it in our minds. So, it is best if you can write out the first verse to be sure you know it, then say verses 1 and 2a together to the one who is checking for you. And as you review this short Psalm, always start back with verse 1.)*

Beginning:

Vs. 2a - He _____ me lie _____ in green _____ . . . (You won't forget to cover up as you go along, will you?)

Progressing:

Vs. 2a - _____ makes _____ lie _____ green _____ . . .

Arriving:

Vs. 2a - He _____

Psalm 23:2b

He leads me beside quiet waters. . .

Today, in western countries, shepherds and ranchers "drive" their sheep. But as we mentioned with the last verse, eastern shepherds *led* their sheep (and still do to this day). As Jesus described it in John 10, the custom is still for the shepherd to go ahead and for the sheep to follow close behind so the shepherd can watch over and protect them. When sheep, like people, decide to wander off on their own, they leave the protection and watchful eye of the shepherd and could become victims of multiple misfortunes. As the shepherd leads his sheep, Jesus, the Good Shepherd goes ahead of us to show us the way, and if we are to remain under His tender care, we must also follow close behind. With people, as it is with sheep, running ahead, lagging behind, or wandering off with our own ideas and inclinations often lead to misfortune and heartache. Only as we follow close behind Him can our Lord and Shepherd guide us into safe paths and pleasant valleys.

Just as the shepherd finds pastures for his sheep, he must also find them quiet places where they can drink, undisturbed. Sheep won't drink from noisy, turbulent streams. They are afraid of rushing water because if they get into a fast moving stream their wool buoys them up and they can easily be carried off down stream. Even just the sound of a bubbling stream will frighten them. This is why they must have "quiet" waters to drink from. There are many springs in the land of Israel where shepherds took their sheep to enjoy calm, cool waters. Or they drew water from one of the many wells that were dug for this purpose. But if neither of these options were available, they would dam up a stream so their thirsty sheep could quietly drink their fill.

When you've had a good workout exercising or working hard at a difficult job on a warm day, what is it you crave? How about a nice glass of cold water? Why do you want something to drink? Why not something to eat? You're probably thinking, "Don't be ridiculous, when you're thirsty, you need water." That's right, when you're thirsty, you need something wet and preferably cold to drink. Only liquid quenches thirst. Your craving is not for food, it is for water.

Physical thirst is a craving for one thing, something to drink, but the term "thirst" also describes a "craving" that is focused on *any* one, specific thing. There are many things in this world that we "earthlings" often thirst for. Some people thirst for money. Others thirst for power or prestige. Some thirst for popularity or good looks. But God wants us to thirst for *spiritual water*. The Psalmist said, "*As the deer pants (or thirsts) for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*" (Psalm 42:1)

The spiritual application of water in this psalm is God's Holy Spirit. In John 7:37-9, Jesus said, "*If you are thirsty, come to me! If you believe in me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within.*" (When He said "living water", He was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in Him.) (NLT) And Paul said " . . . (we) have all been made to drink into one Spirit." (I Corinthians 12:13) When Jesus was about to return to heaven He promised to send His Holy Spirit who would take His place here on this earth while He was gone. We, as His children have been given this precious Spirit to quench our thirst of knowing Him better and serving Him only. He is the One who is here to help us, guide us and teach us.

As an eastern shepherd leads his sheep, God's Holy Spirit *leads* us in His ways. He will never "drive" us or try to *force* us to follow. We must follow Him because this is the desire and longing of our heart. He is the One who gives us the strength to stand against evil. It is the Holy Spirit who produces the *fruit of righteousness* in our lives (James 3:18). It is the Holy Spirit who gives us *spiritual gifts* and teaches us how to use them. (I Corinthians 14.) And it is the Holy Spirit who gives us a deep joy in our heart that bubbles up into praise and worship to our great Shepherd and Lord.

The Holy Spirit is God's gift of *living water* to us, His thirsty sheep. *Quiet waters* is literally translated "waters of stillness" or "waters of quietness". This gentle Spirit doesn't operate in a swirl of activity. He says: *Be still, and know that I am God* (Psalm 46:10). As a sheep drinks from quiet waters, it is in quietness and confidence that we drink in His strength and He takes joy in satisfying the longing of our weary, thirsty souls. (Isaiah 30:15, KJV).

The ultimate fulfillment of this verse is found in Revelation 7:17. When God's world-weary sheep finally reach their heavenly home we're told . . . *the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water.* (Revelation 7:17)

As we have mentioned, writing out the Scripture helps to impress it on your mind and children especially often enjoy this exercise. So it would be good if you would write out the first verse and the first half of verse 2 before quoting both verses in full to the one who is checking them for you.

Beginning

Vs 2b - He _____ me _____ quiet _____ . . .

Progressing:

Vs. 2b - _____ leads _____ beside _____ . . .

Arriving

Vs. 2b - He _____

Psalm 23:3a

He restores my soul.

To *restore* means "to bring back to a former condition". We're familiar with the process of "restoring" furniture. This is when we take something that is old and worn and try to "bring it back" to what it was when it was new. And in Hebrew writings, *soul*, as used in this verse, has the meaning of "life" or "one's own self". There are several ways the shepherd of Psalm 23 "restored" his sheep.

Krikorian, who was himself a shepherd, depicts the intimate relationship existing between the shepherd and his sheep in his book, *The Spirit of the Shepherd*. He said that once during the day each sheep broke away from the line and approached him with an expectant eye and a mild "Baa". He knew what this meant. By holding out his hand, he encouraged the sheep to come over to him. He would then rub its nose and ears, scratch its shoulder, stroke its back with a few gentle taps, and whisper loving words in its ear. "How do you like your shepherd? Did you enjoy your food today? Any briars or thorns or snake bites?" The sheep in the meantime, rubbed against the shepherd's leg, telling him with all its strength that it loved him, or if he was sitting down, it nibbled at his ear, and rubbed its cheek against his face. After a few moments of such communion and exchange of love and friendship with his master, the sheep returned to its place in the feeding line, refreshed and made content by the personal contact with its shepherd.

This was a special time for both shepherd and sheep. Our Good Shepherd longs to have times like this with us. Quiet times when we come to him and tell him how much we love Him. Times when we meditate on His Word and think about how much He loves us and the many ways He shows this special love. Times when we share with Him our joys and our sorrows. It is this personal contact with our Good Shepherd that refreshes us and "*restores our souls*" as we walk with Him in a world of evil and growing chaos.

Another way the shepherd "restored" his sheep has to do with the way sheep so often wander off into dangerous situations. Dogs, cats, horses and even cows can find their way home, but sheep always have to be *brought back*. In David's land there were many paths, traveled by shepherds for many generations. Some of them ran by steep, precipitous cliffs, with dangerous predators lurking in the shadows. Although a shepherd was careful to lead his sheep on safe paths, sheep often strayed off into precarious predicaments, powerless to protect themselves and completely incapable of finding their way back. Without a shepherd to rescue them they would surely perish. The shepherd often had to risk his life in order to save a lost sheep that had wandered off on its own.

Similarly, you and I are prone to wander away from the safe path our loving Shepherd has planned for us. When we stray into disobedience and sin, we should always remember our Shepherd gave His life to rescue us from these situations. He is always there with His hand out ready to forgive and "*restore*". When we sin and wander off His chosen path, we should be quick to confess our sins to Him and ask Him to forgive us so our walk with Him can again be restored. He has assured us that "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" (I John 1:9)

(Before saying this verse to the one who is helping you, write out the first two verses to be sure you know them and then say them together with this first part of verse 3.)

Beginning:

Vs. 3a - _____ restores _____ soul.

Arriving:

Vs 3a - He _____

Psalm 23:3b

He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

A *guide* is one who leads or shows the way. When travelling in unknown or uncharted territory, people often hire a guide who is familiar with the terrain so they won't get lost or fall prey to some unanticipated peril. Our Lord and Shepherd wants to *guide* us into paths that are relatively unknown to us mortals. *Paths of righteousness* are not the course we naturally pursue. As you are now memorizing from the "guide book", you are learning some of the principles involved. One of the first lessons to heed is that *paths of righteousness* are not something that we accomplish in our own strength. We must have a Shepherd to guide us.

One of David's other psalms gives us insight into his thinking about our complete reliance on the Lord to accomplish His will in us as He guides us into righteous paths. In Psalm 138:8, he confidently asserts, "*The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me.*" And then, as if realizing the frailty of the individual with whom the Lord has to work and not wanting Him to become discouraged with the task, he adds, "*Your love, O Lord, endures forever—do not abandon the works of your hands.*"

Again we are reminded that sheep are utterly dependent on the shepherd for their every need because they are completely incapable of *thinking* for themselves. (They are so "mindless" they have even been known to eat their way right off the edge of a cliff.) Such is the picture of *our* utter dependence on the Good Shepherd. We need His mind and His thinking if we are to walk the *righteous path*. Paul says in *Romans 12:2*,

... let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect His will really is.
(NLT)

That's not the mind of the natural man. Like sheep, we need a capable Guide not only to show us the way, and do our thinking for us but to actually transform our whole thought process as well as purify our motives. The Good Shepherd has promised that if we will commit our life into His capable hands, even as sheep helplessly rely on their shepherd, *He will fulfill His purpose for us and guide us in paths of righteousness.*

We talked a little in the last verse about shepherds in David's day who led their sheep rather than driving them as they do in western civilizations. The shepherd led his sheep to green pastures and cool, quiet waters, but as we said, there were always sheep who wandered off into strange and treacherous territory.

The story is told of a shepherd who had a sheep that ate from his hand and followed him everywhere he went, more like a dog than a sheep. One day someone asked him why this sheep seemed to love him so much and follow him so closely. The shepherd said that in the first year of its life, this sheep was very rebellious. It often went wandering off into perilous situations and the shepherd spent many long hours searching for it. Finally, in desperation, the shepherd deliberately broke its leg. Then he carefully bound it up and carried the sheep with him. He tenderly cared for it, feeding it by hand and taking it water. When the sheep was fully recovered, it never wandered away again but always followed close by the shepherd's side.

This sheep had to learn a very painful lesson to keep it from wandering off into areas where it might be injured or fall prey to wild animals. Our Shepherd wants to guide us *in paths of righteousness* where we will be safe and where He can watch over us. But if we stray off on our own into enemy territory and if we persist in disobedience, it could be that our Great Shepherd, in His love, may also have to take severe steps to teach us a better way.

When a sheep was lost, a shepherd *always* went out to look for it. His *good name* depended on the way he treated his sheep. If a shepherd let a stray lamb perish without going after it, it would have been a terrible blight on his reputation. As shepherds gathered around to talk over the happenings at the close of the day, this disgrace would be a reproach on his name that would be discussed for days, months or even years afterwards.

As shepherds keep their good names by carefully watching over their sheep, how much more does this apply to the Shepherd of our souls. He could *never* forsake a lost sheep. He will always watch over His flock and search for any who wander off. Nor does He do this for "man's sake", because we deserve it, or have earned it. He does it *for His name's sake*. Isaiah said, *His name shall be called wonderful*. And wonderful it is, far above any other name we could utter. He would never fail to care for us because He is the **Good Shepherd** far above all other shepherds.

(We also need to remember that we bear the responsibility of being called by His name, *Christian*, "Christ's ones". We are His representatives in this world. People watch how we act and judge the name of Jesus by our actions and reactions.)

The Bible tells us that there is "*no other name under heaven, given to men by which we must be saved.*" (Acts 4:12) It is through the name of **Jesus** that we receive forgiveness of sin. His name is the key to heaven. Paul tells us that:

*. . . God raised Him up to the heights of heaven and gave Him the name that is above every other name, (and one day) at the **name of Jesus** every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, NLT)*

One day everyone who ever lived will bow down to that name and proclaim Him as Lord and King whether they want to or not. This is the name we call on to save us, to keep us, to guide us, to help us. **Jesus!** We need to say it often and never hesitate to proclaim it boldly. This is the *name* that is at stake if He fails to keep His promises. Solomon proclaimed: "**There has not failed one word of all His good promise . . .** (1 Kings 8:56, NKJV) What a privilege it is for us weak sheep, to carry such a banner!

(Be sure to write out verses 1 through 3a, then say them with all of verse 3 to the one who is helping you.)

Beginning:

Vs 3b - _____ *guides* _____ *in* _____ *of righteousness for* _____ *name's* _____.

Progressing:

Vs. 3b - *He* _____ *me* _____ *paths of* _____ *for His* _____.

Advancing:

Vs. 3b - _____ *me in* _____ *of* _____ *for* _____.

Arriving:

Vs. 3b - *He* _____

Psalm 23:4a

***Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for You are with me;***

Well, that sounds like a pretty scary valley, doesn't it? It's easy to visualize a deep, dark, ominous canyon, as many pictures depict, with danger of the unknown lurking in every shadow. We've learned about green pastures, quiet waters and such, now we see another aspect of life. . . . *the valley of the shadow of death.*

This is a valley that we must all face with no help from our earthly family or friends. It is that *Lonesome Road* spoken of in the song. But notice, this verse says, *Even though I walk **through** the valley of the shadow of death . . .* Death is only a valley we will walk **through**, not a place where we will linger. The Great Shepherd gave His life to break the strangle hold that death held on His sheep. He paid the full price for sin, making it possible for all in its grasp to be released. Now we who are in His fold can no longer be held hostage in its grip. Paul triumphantly proclaimed, "*Where, O death, is your sting? Where, O death is your victory?*" "*Death has been swallowed up in victory.*" (I Corinthians 15:55, 54) For one of God's sheep, death is merely the door to life—life eternal! According to this verse it is merely a shadow. A *shadow* has no ability. A shadow can pose no threat of harm.

It was common for shepherds to assign their own names to valleys they frequented. One eastern shepherd recalled a valley named, *The Valley of Robbers*, another named *The Ravine of the Raven*. So giving a name to a valley, as *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* was a custom true to the tradition of the eastern shepherd.

In leading their sheep from one pasture to another, it was sometimes necessary for shepherds in the land of Israel to pass through dark ravines and narrow valleys that were so deep the sun reached them only for a brief time at noon. Jagged rocks, and sharp thorns could bruise or tear the sheep's tender skin. Wild beasts and poisonous snakes lurked in dark dens and robbers hid in the thickets. Danger and death lurked in every crevice and around every corner, but the sheep were not afraid because the shepherd was there to guide and protect. They trusted completely in his ability to cope with any situation that might arise.

William Knight in his *Song Of Our Syrian Guest* says that when a wolf came into a flock, the sheep would frantically run and leap, in a state of panic. This made it impossible for the shepherd to reach the life threatening intruder but he knew what to do. Rushing to a high rock or knoll he would shout his familiar shepherd's call. When the sheep heard his voice, they remembered their shepherd. Even in a state of terror, these that had been so timid and helpless, instantly rushed into a mass around the shepherd with all their strength. In this way the wolf was overcome, and often crushed to death with the force of the mass.

The enemy of our souls waits for us in the dark crevices of this life. His sole aim is to *steal, kill, and destroy* (John 10:10). He constantly schemes to lure us away from God's "*paths of righteousness*" and ensnare us in his sin-traps. It was another psalmist who said, *I have hidden* (God's) *Word in my heart **that I might not sin against*** (Him). As you are now following his example, as you are memorizing God's own Word, hiding it in *your* heart, you are gaining ready access to its protection. Now, when the enemy springs from the shadows you can draw from the strength of that all-powerful Word in your heart. You can rush to the Word of God for assurance and protection, in complete confidence, just as the sheep, scared and timid though they were, rushed confidently to the voice of the shepherd when the wolf's breath of death permeated their flock.

Whenever those evil thoughts and lurking temptations inject themselves into our thinking, and we are tempted to wander off the righteous path, we need to immediately sense the danger. A strange shepherd is trying to steal us away, a predator is ready to devour. The Bible says *the wages of sin is death*. Even though our loving Shepherd has paid the price for the eternal salvation of His sheep, sin still has hurtful and dire consequences for us in this life. This is another of the devil's subtle ways of trying to lure simple-minded sheep into the *Valley of the Shadow of Death*.

What a comfort it is to know that our Good Shepherd has not left us unprotected. This doesn't mean we'll never be tempted. It doesn't mean we'll never sin against His love. (If we do, He has given us the remedy in I John 1:9. We must be quick to confess our sin to Him. He will forgive and restore us back to the safe path of righteousness.) It doesn't mean that we'll never be hurt. It doesn't even mean that at some point we might not have to face death for Him. It does mean that we can hold that fourth finger and know that our good Shepherd is always with us. When trouble comes, we can know that He will either rescue us from it, or He'll hold our hand very tightly and walk us right through the middle. Either way, we *never* have to be afraid. Our good Shepherd has told us "*I will never leave you; I will never forsake you.*" (Hebrews 13:5, NLT)

Did you notice the shift of pronouns in this verse. Up until now, David has been talking *about* the Good Shepherd, now he is talking *to* Him. It has been, *He* leads me, *He* guides me, *He* restores me, but *in the valley of the shadow of death*, it is no longer "He", the Shepherd is now at his side "*You are with me*", says David. Thus, as we move from green pastures and quiet waters to dark and dangerous terrain, the pronoun suddenly shifts from *third person* to *second person*. What a comfort to know that in *the valley of the shadow of death* the Good Shepherd does not leave us to negotiate it alone. He does not offer comfort from a distance. He is right there to walk through it with us. *I will fear no evil, for You are with me.*

The story is told about an allied soldier in World War II who found the body of a German soldier killed in battle. As he looked at the lifeless form, he noticed that the dead man was tightly holding his "*my*" finger. That sheep had walked right *through the valley of the shadow of death* and was safely in heaven with the Good Shepherd.

Before you quote verses 1 through the first part of verse 4 to the one helping you, write out the first three verses to help fix them in your mind.

Beginning:

Vs. 4a - Even though _____ walk through _____ valley of the _____ of death, _____ will _____ no evil, for _____ are with _____:

Progressing:

Vs. 4a - _____ though I walk _____ the _____ of the _____ of _____, I will _____ no _____, for _____ are _____ me:

Advancing:

Vs. 4a - _____ though I _____ the _____ of _____ of _____, I _____ no _____, for _____ are _____;

Arriving:

Vs. 4a - Even _____

Psalm 23:4b

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

A shepherd's staff was about 6½ or 7 feet long with a crook or hook at one end. In pictures a shepherd is traditionally depicted holding his staff. His rod has not been so obviously displayed. It was about 2½ - 3 feet long and was thicker at one end. The thick end was studded with spikes or flint stones to make it a weapon to be used against thieves and predators. The rod was carried suspended by a thong from a waistband; the staff was usually carried over the shoulder. These two items served the shepherd well. From Dr. Moyer's exegesis: a rod spoke of authority, a staff of aid; a rod was for defense, a staff for direction; a rod was used to govern, a staff to guide; a rod was used to rule, a staff to restore; a rod was used against the enemies of the sheep, a staff on their behalf.

The shepherd used his staff to direct the sheep, or to pull them out of thickets, bogs or crevices in the rocks. Sometimes if a sheep was prone to wander away, the shepherd would hook the crook around its leg to bring it back. His rod was used to count the sheep at night and to protect them against predators. The rod was also sometimes used to discipline a sheep that was persistent in going astray. It's comforting for us to think of the "rod and staff" of our Good Shepherd as being our help and protection, but we should also be comforted to know that our Good Shepherd loves us enough to correct and discipline us when we need it.

Let me say to children. . . When I was growing up, people often said "Spare the rod and spoil the child." The "rod" then was a spanking. It meant that children needed to be directed and disciplined. And if parents didn't discipline a child when he needed it, they could spoil him for life. I'll tell you a secret, children: adults need to be disciplined, too. We are told in Scripture, ". . .the Lord disciplines those He loves." (Hebrews 12:6) And you can also know that when your parents discipline you, it's only because they love you. If they didn't love you, they wouldn't bother trying to teach you how to avoid mistakes that could be harmful to you or to others.

But the lesson is the same whether we're children under the care and protection of our loving parents, or adults under the care and protection of our loving Lord. There will always be times when we need to be corrected and disciplined as long as we're here on this earth. And we need to remember that the guidance, protection and discipline of our Great Shepherd are all expressions of His compelling (sometimes *tough*) love.

The word *comfort* is from the Latin word *fortis* from which we get the words "forte" and "fortitude". It means more than simple consolation. It means "to strengthen in the use of all one's energies". This must mean that when our Lord *comforts* us, He doesn't intend for us to just sit back and enjoy it, but being refreshed and encouraged, we should be strengthened and out there ready for the next round of battle.

Now, I think you know to write out verses 1 through 4a and to quote verses 1 through 4 to the one checking for you. From here on, I'm sure you have the pattern and can do it on your own so I'll not continue to remind you.

Beginning:

Vs. 4b - _____ rod and _____ staff, _____ comfort _____.

Progressing:

Vs. 4b - Your _____ Your _____, _____ me.

Arriving:

Vs. 4b - Your _____

Psalm 23:5a

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

According to Dr. Moyer and other scholars, the Hebrew word translated *table* means "spread out". A pasture is something "spread out" and it was always important for it to be prepared by the shepherd before the sheep came to graze.

There are many poisonous plants in Israel which endanger the lives of sheep. The shepherd had to survey the pasture very carefully and use his staff to dig out any poisonous plants because just a nibble could in some cases mean death. There were snakes hiding in holes with just their heads sticking out ready to bite the noses of the sheep. Death could result in just half an hour. Lions, bears and jackals lurked in dens and caves. So you can see why it was important for the shepherd to go ahead and prepare the pasture before bringing in his sheep.

Just as new pastures were overrun with enemies of the sheep, our path in this life is rampant with enemies ready to discourage, deter and threaten to destroy our joy, our testimony and our walk with the Lord. Although there will always be people who will be quick to ridicule and humiliate Christians, our worst enemies are not those that assault from without, but those that rage from within: that quick temper, the strong impulse to be noticed and accepted by the crowd, that ravenous appetite for "more" of this world's goods, no matter how much we already have, or what enemy lurks in your thinking trying to entice you into its path of disobedience? And from without there is the constant bombardment from the world of glitz and glitter: the appeal of pleasure and gratification of the flesh; sin, sex, and blasphemy packaged in pictures, politics and punk rock. Of course behind it all, lurking in the shadows, is the great unseen army of demonic forces doing their best to kill, steal and destroy God's people.

Remember, though, *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin.* (Hebrews 4:15) Our Shepherd has walked the same path that we walk and He has prepared for us a table of grace and mercy as we come to him with our weaknesses and failures.

As we partake of communion we should always be reminded of the great price that was paid for the table of forgiveness and love that our Shepherd has prepared for us.

Beginning:

Vs 5a - _____ prepare _____ table before _____ in the _____ of _____ enemies.

Progressing:

Vs. 5a - You _____ a table _____ me _____ the _____ of my _____ .

Advancing:

Vs. 5a - _____ a _____ before _____ in the _____ of my _____ .

Arriving:

Vs. 5a - You _____

Psalm 23:5b

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

When the shepherd led his sheep back from green pastures to the safe fold in the evening, they weren't just rushed in, helter-skelter. The shepherd stood or sat in the opening of the sheepfold and with his rod in hand held the sheep back, letting them in only one at a time. They were carefully counted to make sure that none was missing or that no strange sheep had joined the flock. And as they passed by the shepherd, each one was carefully examined for briars, snags, thorn wounds in the side, bruises on the knees, inflamed eyes, weariness and sickness. After his inspection the shepherd lifted the rod and the sheep passed under it. (This was called "rodding the sheep".)

When the shepherd (a good doctor) found cuts or bruises, he anointed the sheep with cedar tar. If a sheep came along that was neither torn nor bruised, but the shepherd could see that it was dragging with exhaustion, he was prepared with help and comfort, there too. Close at hand he kept a horn filled with olive oil and water kept cool by evaporation. He bathed the head and face of the weary animal with refreshing olive oil and then taking a pail, or great cup with two handles that he had handy for that purpose, he filled it full to brimming with water and let the sheep drink from its refreshing contents.

"Anointing with oil" (or smearing with oil) was a common practice in eastern countries, done to keep the skin soft and to slow down evaporation which is a problem in hot climates. Jesus rebuked Simon for not extending this courtesy to Him. (Luke 7:46)

The anointed head and the overflowing cup in this verse, speak of the Holy Spirit's *anointing*. To *anoint* means to "set apart". The Good Shepherd has chosen you and *anointed* you, set you apart, to live for Him. *You have an anointing from the Holy One . . .* (I John 2:20)

The overflowing cup is the abounding joy our Good Shepherd lavishes on His obedient sheep. *You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.* (Psalm 45:7) We struggle and strive in this world of temptation and evil. Then weary and worn, we stagger to the feet of our Good Shepherd where His gracious Holy Spirit refreshes us by anointing us with the oil of His presence and by instilling His deep, assuring joy in our hearts.

Beginning:

Vs. 5b - _____ anoint _____ head _____ oil; _____ cup _____.

Progressing:

Vs. 5b - You _____ my _____; my _____.

Arriving:

Vs. 5b - You _____

Psalm 23:6a

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,

The word "love" here is translated "mercy" in the King James Version and tends to reveal a focused aspect of God's love that is inherent in this psalm. The shepherd leads, the sheep follow, and hot on the heels of the sheep are the Shepherd's *goodness and love* or *goodness and mercy*. The Shepherd is ahead, His goodness and mercy follow close behind. It reminds me of Psalm 139:5 "*You hem me in—behind and before.*" Goodness meets all our needs; mercy and love forgive all our faults.

Did you know that you are being pursued? "*Goodness and love*" are hunting you down in order to lavish God's blessings on you. Dr. Moyer says, "Goodness and mercy are two bright faced angels that follow every child of God. What a difference this is from wicked men who are pursued by judgment and hunted by calamity."

Someone has said "goodness and mercy are our *rear guard*". In war some of the most vicious attacks are against the rear guard. And it often causes us painful anguish to look back and see the devastating path of sin we have trodden, the people we have hurt, the damage we have done. How reassuring it is to know that Jesus took the punishment for it all; and that God's rear guard "*goodness and love*" separate and shield us from the guilt and regrets that often doggedly hound our heels.

Notice the implicit confidence expressed in the word *surely*. It's not "perhaps". It's not "probably". It's not "possibly" or "maybe". It is ***surely!*** *Surely goodness and mercy will follow me . . .* This means that whatever happens, no matter what the emergency might be, God can handle it. It's a good thing that His faithfulness to us is not dependent on our faithfulness to Him, isn't it? (After marrying a woman named *Shirley*, a pastor humorously declared, "*Shirley, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life . . .*")

The word "surely" can also be translated *only*. Thus, ***only*** *goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life*. If we know Jesus as our Savior and Lord, no matter what comes into our lives, we can know that our faithful Shepherd is working it for our good. It is encouraging for us to always remember—*goodness and love* (*goodness and mercy*) are bringing up the rear erasing the guilt and regret of our past mistakes as we confess them and commit them to the cross of Christ for forgiveness.

Beginning:

Vs. 6a - Surely _____ and love will _____ me all the _____ of my _____,

Progressing:

Vs. 6a - _____ goodness and _____ will follow _____ all _____ days _____ life,

Advancing:

Vs. 6a - Surely _____ and _____ will _____ all the _____ of my _____.

Arriving:

Vs. 6a - Surely _____

Psalm 23:6b

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Did you pick up that word *dwell*? That's not talking about a transitional situation, is it? It is the Hebrew word *yawshab* which means to "remain" or to "sit down". It speaks of God's sheep arriving at their final pasture. After all the frustrations, failures and disappointments, battles and victories of this world, bruised and battered, God's sheep will one day arrive at a day of "happy everaftering" with their Great Shepherd.

Isn't it incredible to think that He, our great and wonderful Shepherd, is our constant Provider, Protector and Guide throughout our pilgrimage in this world? But then it gets even better. Ahead—in His presence—there is *fullness of joy*; at His right hand there are *pleasures for evermore*. (Ps 16:11, KJV) We are told that "*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.*" (I Corinthians 2:9, NKJV)

Jesus prayed, "*Father, I want those you have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory.*" And to us He said, "*I go to prepare a place for you (again preparing the way for us). And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.*" (John 14:2, NKJV) Whereas the earthly shepherd at some point would of necessity be separated from his beloved sheep, our Lord assures us that we will never be separated from Him or His love, not in this life, not throughout all eternity. He has said, "*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.*" (Hebrews 13:5) David told Him, "*As for me. . . I shall be satisfied, when I awake in your likeness.*" (Psalm 17:15, NKJV)

Surely the profound intimacy of our relationship with the Great Shepherd, the assurance of His care as set forth in Psalm 23, and the promise of a glorious eternity with Him will inspire us to a deeper communion and a more committed walk with Him, realizing that *this world is not our home; we are looking forward to our city in heaven, which is yet to come*. (Hebrews 13:14, NLT)

When we at last arrive on that awesome day; when we greet the Great Shepherd in the place He has prepared for us, we're told: "*Then the King will say to those on his right, (His slaves, His bondservants, His obedient sheep that He purchased with His own blood) 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'*"

. . . and His servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign (with Him) for ever and ever. (Revelation. 22:3-5).

Beginning:

Vs 6b - *and* _____ *will* _____ *in the* _____ *of the Lord* _____ .

Progressing:

Vs 6b: - _____ *I* _____ *in the* _____ *of the* _____ .

Arriving:

Vs. 6b - *and* _____

Congratulations!! You have now completed Psalm 23. It will always be a blessing to you. Be sure to go over it thoroughly to be sure you can say it with no hesitation and review it often. It will also be a blessing to others as you share it with your Bible Study group, Sunday School Class and even in Church. Others are often encouraged to start memorizing Scripture --- in context --- when they hear Scripture quoted in this way. The blessings of this precious psalm will be yours now and forever!

Psalm 23

- 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.*
- 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.*