

## SESSION 5

# Overcoming Worry



### QUESTION 1:

*How would you describe a worry-free life?*

## THE POINT

God's presence provides a way out of worry.

## THE PASSAGE

Psalm 23:1-6

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The world offers us a lot to worry about: terrorism, global tensions, a fluctuating economy, and crime. Will the national situation be better or worse next year at this time? We also face many worries closer to home. We worry about our family, our health, our retirement, and the list goes on.

Of course we know we're not supposed to worry, but let me give you a reason you shouldn't worry: it's not good for you. According to National Institutes of Health (NIH), chronic stress and worrying leads to a weak immune system, making you more likely to have colds or other infections. Worry also can cause high blood pressure, ulcers, acid reflux, cardiovascular problems, irritable bowel, backaches, headaches, respiratory problems, and even skin conditions.<sup>1</sup> *Great. Now I have something else to worry about: worry!*

Even for those who think they are "natural-born worriers," an antidote is available: trust in God. Psalm 23 paints a beautiful picture of what it means to let go of our worries and rest in God, the loving Shepherd who takes care of us in all situations.

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## Psalm 23:1-3

**1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

**2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.**

**3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

God's presence is the most comforting thing we can have when worries arise. Psalm 23 is a beautiful picture of God's loving presence, which helps to explain why the twenty-third Psalm is so widely known and loved. It reminds us that, when we encounter life in all of its brutality, God is present to guide and comfort us.

David wrote this psalm, but we don't know when he did so. It could have been when he was a young boy working as a shepherd, when he was being chased and challenged by King Saul before becoming king of Israel, or when he was an old man looking back on his life of ruling under God's power. No matter when he wrote it, his song—sung by the Hebrew people and used by many in the face of worrisome situations—reminds us that God is our Shepherd.

David reminds us of three things God does for us as our Shepherd.

1. **He provides for us.** A shepherd does more than just keep the sheep out of trouble; he also provides for their needs. God does the same for us. The psalmist wrote, "I shall not want." God is such a good Shepherd we have all we need in Him. It is an absolutely amazing statement. In the midst of life's needs, sorrows, and grief, God provides perfectly for us in Christ.

The apostle Paul understood what it meant to be in need. At one point in his ministry, while he was imprisoned, he wrote a letter to the church in the city of Philippi. The theme of the letter was joy. Writing from his prison cell, he reminded

them at the end, “But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

2. **He guides us.** By nature, sheep are not terribly smart. They often wander aimlessly, getting themselves into one predicament after another. The shepherd’s staff has a hook on one end for this very reason: so that he can haul sheep out of holes and ravines when they fall in. A pretty good metaphor for our lives.

God desires to help us navigate through the toughness of life. Often, when we feel like we’re just trying to put one foot in front of the other, He is present, guiding us so that we will stay on course. But what about when we fail? When we are tempted to get off course—or even when we do wander off course—His presence will guide us back onto “the paths of righteousness.”

At times, we face the sorrows and struggles of life, and all we want is relief. But the Lord wants more than that for us. He does not just want to get us back into a neutral position where the things that cause us worry are merely absent. Rather, He wants to get us on “the paths of righteousness” that will lead to the joy of His presence and His mission. Our Shepherd is not just interested in rescuing us; He also wants to restore us.

3. **He renews us.** With God, we get provision and guidance, but we also get renewal. The psalmist described “green pastures”—a place of rest and provision—and “still waters”—a source of refreshment. Again, it is only by God’s presence in our lives that we experience renewal.

#### QUESTION 2:

*What areas of life do people tend to worry about?*

Worry normally gets us deeper into trouble. It is like that silly toy children play with: the Chinese finger trap. You make one by weaving a few pieces of material into a tube. When you put your

fingers in either end, any attempt to pull them out only causes it to tighten its grip. When we struggle through some difficulty in life in our own strength, we usually only tighten the grip worry has on us. On the other hand, God's presence brings about freedom, joy, and release from our struggle. He knows what we need, and when we decide to stop struggling and start trusting, we experience the relief we need. Only His presence will lead us to places of renewal.

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## Psalm 23:4-5

**4** Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

**5** Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

**KEY WORD: Anointest** (v. 5)—Prophets, priests, and kings were anointed or smeared with oil in biblical times to set them apart for the Lord's service. Anointing symbolized God's power.

The things we tend to worry about can sometimes become reality:

- ▶ A decline in the stock market that leads to financial loss
- ▶ A cancer diagnosis from the doctor
- ▶ A broken relationship

In the end, it does not matter if our problem is self-inflicted or brought on by others. It does not matter if it is public or private. *What matters is that we are not alone.* God's presence makes all the difference no matter what circumstance we face.

**As our Shepherd, God protects us.** Sometimes we do walk "through the valley of the shadow of death." We imagine ourselves as a defenseless sheep wandering alone at the midnight hour. We cannot see them, but we know predators are lurking in the shadows. They are waiting for us to turn the wrong way or lose our

focus for just a moment, and they will pounce on us. We can feel helpless and hopeless.

But it is in these circumstances—when danger or even death seems near, when we are in the darkest valley imaginable—God is protecting us. He escorts us through the darkest places where death and fear seem to prevail. We can count on His power as He walks with us through the darkness and fear of the valley.

**In times of danger and fear, God’s presence gives comfort.** The shepherd’s rod could be used for protection as well as for an offensive weapon against attacks. The staff also was used to protect from harm. Knowing our Shepherd protects us when fear and danger arise is a great comfort.

Remember, we are His sheep; that means we belong to Him, so He is for us. As it says in Romans 8:31, “What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” We gain comfort in knowing that God Himself uses His power on our behalf when we face darkness and the predatory nature of this world.

**God’s presence also brings about courage.** Some of us may appear courageous or try to put on a good face, but in the reality of life, we only have limited ability to stand up and fight or resist.

David wrote, “I will fear no evil” when he spoke of “the valley of the shadow of death.” Consider the dark valleys of life we must pass through. In many of them, we really can do nothing.

- ▶ When the cancer diagnosis comes, all we can do is take the treatments and medicine ... and pray.
- ▶ When the economy is headed toward a financial downturn, all we can do is trust in the Lord ... and pray.
- ▶ When our relationship is on the verge of collapse, all we can do is love deeply ... and pray.

No matter what, we can pray. It is in prayer—connecting with the presence of God in our lives—that we gain the courage to face our worries. Knowing the Lord is present makes all the difference in the world. The Shepherd never leaves our side but walks with us in every dark corner of life.

**We have victory when He walks with us.** The imagery David used in verse 5 is one of a celebration. The enemy is forced to watch as we celebrate. A huge banquet table is set before us. It is a time to feast and laugh and be glad because God is with us. Beyond being satisfied, we are anointed with oil. The idea of having oil poured over my head does not sound appealing, but it was an act of great significance and honor. It was a symbolic act of being anointed and set apart. In Psalm 23, the significance is that we are the honored guests at the festivities, and God has set us apart unto Himself. You and I do not just barely slip in past the guards and sit at the “kids’ table” during dinner. Instead, we are brought to the main table and are the personal guests of the King. And when we dine with the King, our cup is never empty. Indeed, it will overflow with more of God’s abundance than we can ever consume.

**QUESTION 3:**

*How have you been assured of God’s presence during difficult times?*

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**Psalm 23:6**

**6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.**

Psalm 23 is comforting because of what it tells us about God and what He will do on our behalf. For many people, their real question is not “What will God do for me?” but “Will God love me?” Some worry that their past sin is a barrier to experiencing God’s love.

The Book of Psalms was essentially the songbook the Israelites used during worship. Every psalm was used as a part of worship to the Lord and as a teaching tool for the people to remind them of

what God had done on their behalf. In light of that, David taught us in Psalm 23 to sing that God’s “goodness and mercy” will come after us ... and they will be there for the rest of our lives. Don’t miss it. David says God’s “goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

- ▶ When we feel like temptation is stalking us, God is more determined to win our hearts.
- ▶ When sorrows seem to be around every corner, the Lord is present to wipe our tears and win our hearts.
- ▶ When life is just plain hard and we don’t know if we can overcome the pain, the Shepherd is present to guide us toward His love.

One of my favorite names for Jesus is “Emmanuel.” In the story of the birth of Jesus, an angel told Joseph in a dream to take Mary as his wife. Using the Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah 7:14, the angel told Joseph that Jesus will be called Emmanuel, a title that means: “God with us” (Matt. 1:20-23). This has to be the most comforting thought in all of life: God pursued us from the throne room of heaven, lived a life in the dirt with us, and He will not hesitate in His pursuit for us. He promises to be with us.

God also desires that we will live with Him. That is why He pursues us. God desires to become our Shepherd and protect us in the deep, dark valleys of life. It is by His presence that we gain a sense of hope and courage. His never-letting-go, always-coming-after-us love becomes an ever-present help in our lives. And by His goodness, we dine at the King’s table. Forever.

#### **QUESTION 4:**

***What does dwelling in the house of the Lord look like in a believer’s life?***



**QUESTION 5:**

*What are some ways our group can help one another overcome worry?*

**ENGAGE**

*We can worry or we can worship, but we can't do both. Identify some worries that people typically face. Consider how your worries can be turned to thanks and praise with a promise from Psalm 23.*

Typical worries:

Promises from Psalm 23:

*Write a sentence prayer that expresses your trust in the Good Shepherd as you worship Him:*

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## LIVE IT OUT

How will you live out your trust in God?

- ▶ **Identify.** Identify the things about which you're most prone to worry (e.g., health, finances, physical health, memory issues). Turn that list into a prayer list, trusting Him to work in each situation.
- ▶ **Memorize.** As a safeguard against worry, memorize Philippians 4:6-7: "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."
- ▶ **Encourage.** For someone who tends to worry, pray with them. Help them to trust God in whatever situation they are facing by being a model of complete trust in the loving care of God.



### END NOTES

1. Marlo Sollitto, "The Effects of Caregiver Stress on Health," *Aging Care*, [www.agingcare.com/articles/health-problems-caused-by-stress-143376.htm](http://www.agingcare.com/articles/health-problems-caused-by-stress-143376.htm).



## SHEPHERDS: A BIBLICAL IMAGE OF GOD & HIS CHOSEN LEADERS

By Thomas H. Goodman

How did one of the lowliest jobs of men become one of the dearest images of God and His chosen leaders? Many consider shepherding to be the lowest rung of migrant labor in America, and it was no different 2,000 years ago. An angel announced Christ's birth to shepherds (Luke 2:8-18), men in a despised occupation. Shepherds could not be witnesses in court. Buying "wool, milk, or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property."

Young shepherd tending sheep at Hormah. This region served as the southern border of Canaan during the time of the conquest.

Yet the image of the shepherd was a favorite biblical metaphor to describe God and those He chose as leaders of His people. The image first appeared in the earliest days of Israel's history, when the economy was based on a nomadic life and on moving flocks of sheep and goats in order to find sufficient pasture in the rainless summers. The patriarchs lived as herders, as did Moses, David, and Amos. Against the backdrop of these early experiences, people began to compare divine and human leadership to the work of shepherding.

The Old Testament contains several references to God as "Shepherd" (Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Ps. 23:1; 80:1; Eccl. 12:11), plus many other references that compare His work to that of a shepherd. When the biblical writers said God "tends his flock like a shepherd" (e.g., Isa. 40:11) they had the idea of God feeding, leading, protecting, and restoring His people. While most references are to God's care of the flock as a whole, in Psalm 23 David applies this imagery to his personal

experience with God: "The Lord is *my* shepherd."

The Bible often refers to God calling on leaders to shepherd His people. He reminded Nathan that all who ruled His people in the past were those "whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel" (2 Sam. 7:7). These rulers included Moses and Aaron (Ps. 77:20), and David, whom God chose "from tending the sheep ... to be the shepherd of his people" (78:71). Second Samuel makes clear that shepherding God's people and serving as their ruler meant the same thing: "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler" (5:2). To be without an earthly ruler was to be "like sheep without a shepherd," a condition Moses did not want for his people (Num. 27:17).

A leader's failure left the people vulnerable. Speaking through prophets, God complained against shepherd-leaders who imperiled His flock. Through Jeremiah, God said that His people had become "lost sheep" because "their shepherds have led them astray" and "have not

bestowed care on them” (50:6; 23:1-2). God also commanded Ezekiel to “prophesy against the shepherds of Israel”:

*Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ... You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. ... I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock (Ezek. 34:2,4,10).*

Through the prophets, God castigated the shepherds for letting wild animals get to the sheep, for leading the flock in the wrong direction, and for leaving them altogether (Zech. 11:17). He also declared, “My anger burns against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders” (10:3). The Lord echoed this thought when He promised that incompetent leaders would be punished and removed. “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them,” He said, adding, “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, ... he will tend

them and be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34:11,23; see also vv. 12-22; Jer. 23:3-5).

A messianic figure is what God promised through Micah, who would come from Bethlehem, and shepherd God’s people:

*Out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. ... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace (Mic. 5:2,4-5).*

Matthew said this prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus (2:6). Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10) who came to do what others were unwilling to do. He had compassion on the crowds, whom He saw as “sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). His mission was to reach “the lost sheep of Israel” (15:24). This lostness was due to the

carelessness of their earthly leaders, but Jesus said He knew His sheep by name and would lead them (John 10:3).

Of course, Jesus prophesied that the Good Shepherd would lay down his life for the sheep (vv. 11,15,17-18). “Strike the shepherd,” Zechariah had prophesied, “and the sheep will be scattered” (Zech. 13:7). Matthew cited this prophecy as being fulfilled upon Christ’s arrest (26:31).

The Shepherd laid down His life, sacrificing Himself like a Lamb (John 1:29; Rev. 7:10-17). Yet He was raised to life by the Father who “brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20). In heaven “the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd” (Rev. 7:17).

As did the Father in the Old Testament, the Son also commissioned under-shepherds through whom He guides His flock. Before His departure, Jesus commanded Simon Peter to “take care of my sheep” (John 21:15-17). Later in life, Peter

himself wrote that elders who serve well as “shepherds of God’s flock” will be rewarded “when the Chief Shepherd appears” (1 Peter 5:1-4). This was consistent with Paul’s command to the Ephesian elders to “be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” because the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers” for “the flock” (Acts 20:28). Church leaders are called “pastors” in Ephesians 4:11, using the word *poimen*, the Greek work most often translated “shepherd.”

Peter cautioned church leaders against “lording it over” others or seeking financial gain in their position of authority (1 Peter 5:1-4). Just as the prophets warned of derelict shepherds in the Old Testament, Jude warned the church of “shepherds who feed only themselves” (v. 12). Through earthly shepherds, and in spite of incompetent ones, Christ still leads His people as “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). 🍷

**Thomas H. Goodman** is pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church, Austin, Texas.