Studies in Psalms: Songs of Faith

Lesson Three

Trusting in a Caring God

Focal Text
Psalms 23; 27:1-6

Background
Psalms 23; 27

Main Idea
We can trust in God’s care even when the worst that can happen happens.

Question to Explore
Can we trust God to care for us in the worst of times?

Quick Read
God is present, even (and especially) when we cannot see him.

Commentary
When I became a Christian, I was pretty well ignorant about the Bible. I grew up believing in the Bible, but I just didn’t read it much. I even had a copy of it that the Gideons gave us in the fifth grade, and I carried it for a time in my hip pocket. But it didn’t travel from my hip to my head very well. I didn’t know Job from job, or John from Jonah, or the epistles from the apostles.

I was so ignorant, in fact, that I was sure the statement “God helps those who help themselves” was in Scripture. Unfortunately, I wasn’t alone. Many Americans think that is true. We don’t know that Benjamin Franklin coined the expression for his Farmer’s Almanac, and that it is nowhere in the word of God.

But it fits our American culture, our self-reliant, self-sufficient values. Don’t we admire those Horatio Algers who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, who don’t need anybody’s help? “I did it my way” is our theme song. We think God wants us to be self-
reliant, self-sufficient, and call on him only if we must. But that’s the gospel according to American culture and Ben Franklin, not Jesus Christ.

David said, “The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1, italics added for emphasis). The Lord can be my shepherd only when I admit that I’m a sheep and need a shepherd.

So, are we sheep? Do we need a shepherd? Why does the question matter so much to your soul and your class?

Psalm 23 is the best-known example of a “psalm of trust.” Psalm 27 also fits the category and provides a commentary on the most famous psalm in Scripture, Psalm 23. As we study them both, we are invited to make the faith they celebrate our own.

Are we sheep?
The Bible says that we are sheep. God’s word calls us “sheep” many times. In fact, did you know that “sheep” is the most common metaphor for human beings in all of Scripture?

This is not a compliment. Sheep are beautiful animals to view from a distance, but they are among the dumbest animals on earth. When I was pastor of First Baptist Church in Midland, Texas, our education minister owned some sheep for a time. He was always complaining about their stupidity. He could line them up in a row and get the first sheep or two to jump over a stick. Then he would throw away the stick, and the rest would jump over thin air.

Have you ever seen a sheep in a circus? Can they be trained for anything?

Sheep are totally defenseless against every predator. They must be guarded and led every day. The shepherd must live with them and watch them constantly, or they’ll wander into trouble. God is not trying to increase our self-esteem when he calls us sheep.

Surely this isn’t true of us all. Surely some of us are smarter and more self-sufficient than that. But read Isaiah 53:6: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (italics added for emphasis). God thinks we’re all sheep, every one of us.

We don’t like to admit that fact, do we? But we can never have a shepherd until we admit that we need one, that we are sheep. Ben Franklin says that we must help ourselves. The Bible says we’re sheep, and we cannot.

Do we need God’s leadership?
David was a shepherd himself (1 Samuel 17:28), and he knew sheep well. He understood three facts about them.
One: sheep need to be led. They need the shepherd to go before them to lead them beside the quiet waters, to guide them in paths of righteousness. Sheep have very poor eyesight. They cannot see ten or fifteen yards ahead of themselves. Too, they are dumb enough to follow the sheep in front of them off a cliff or into a crevasse.

Sheep need a shepherd to lead them to food in the “green pastures” (Ps. 23:2a). In the fields of the Middle East grow poisonous plants that are fatal to sheep, and other plants with sharp thorns that will stab their soft noses. The shepherd must lead them to pastures where good grass grows.

They need leadership to “quiet waters” (23:2b). A sheep is a very poor swimmer because of its heavy wool coat. Its body weight multiplies five times when wet. A sheep trying to swim would be like a man trying to swim while wearing five heavy wool overcoats. Sheep instinctively know they cannot swim in swift currents, and so they will not drink from a moving stream. They must be led to quiet waters or they will die of thirst.

Too, they need to be led “in paths of righteousness” (23:3b). There are paths in Palestine that lead off cliffs, and the sheep will walk down them to their deaths. The good paths are called “the paths of righteousness,” and the shepherd leads his sheep down them.

In every way, the shepherd goes before his sheep—to food, drink, and safety. That’s what a shepherd does.

Do you need to be led? Do you know the future? Do you always know the best job? the right decision for your family’s security? for your marriage? for raising your children? Do you always know the future, or do you need a shepherd to lead you?

Do you know the future of your job? your health? your family? this economy and stock market? the world in this age of terrorism? Is Ben Franklin right, or are we sheep? Whatever future you’re facing, if you’ll admit that you’re a sheep, you’ll find a Shepherd who goes before you. That’s what a shepherd does.

**Do we need God’s protection?**

There are times when sheep need their shepherd *before* them, to lead them. Then there are times when they need their shepherd *beside* them, to protect them. Do we need protection?

David said, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (23:4). There is an actual valley in Palestine called “the valley of deepest shadows.” It leads from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and is a very narrow and dangerous pathway through the mountain range. The path is rough, with cliffs and crevasses. Thieves and predators can hide in the shadows. The sheep can fall into the cracks and die. Too, the sheep are totally defenseless here. They have no physical attributes they can use to defend themselves—no claws or sharp teeth or horns. They are too slow to run away and too dumb to hide.
Yet they “fear no evil” (23:4). Why? The shepherd’s rod and staff “comfort” them. The rod was a club two to three feet long, used to beat off predators. The staff was about eight feet long, with a crooked end, used to catch the sheep before they fell off cliffs. The shepherd became an expert at both.

Best of all, their shepherd is “with” them (23:4). He is beside them when they are afraid. He goes where they go, when they go. For us, the Shepherd is Immanuel, “God with us.” God walked our planet, breathed our air, ate our food, felt our pain. He faced our temptations. He died in our place. After he—Jesus, Immanuel—rose from the dead, he promised that he is with us always, to the very end of the age.

Do you need such protection? Does any of us know when the “valley of the shadow of death” will come for us?

When I was a pastor in Atlanta, I heard the taped testimony of a man dying of brain cancer. He told his audience about his faith and encouraged them to receive Christ before they died. He said that even though he would be dead in just a few days or weeks and they would outlive him, he wanted to see them again in heaven.

The next week, one of the men in that audience was driving on the freeway around Atlanta when a spare tire flew off the truck in front of him, crashed into his windshield, and killed him. The man with the brain tumor attended his funeral.

Is Ben Franklin right, or do you need God’s protection? Whatever valley you’re experiencing, if you’ll admit you’re a sheep, there’s a Shepherd who walks with you. That’s what a shepherd does.

**Do we need God’s presence?**

So there is a Shepherd who wants to walk *before* us, to lead us into the future. To walk *beside* us, to protect us when the valleys come and the shadows fall. And to walk *behind* us, to surround us with his presence: “Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life” (23:6a). God wants to follow us with his presence, wherever we go.

Any soldier will tell you that the rear of the line is always a dangerous place. The enemy will attack from the rear and pick off the last soldier. Similarly, the wolf will sneak up behind the flock and attack the last sheep. So there are times when the shepherd must follow his sheep to surround them with his presence. This is our Shepherd’s promise to us.

Even when we cannot see our Shepherd, he’s there. When my boys were very young, we’d go to the playground together and they’d want to climb up the slide. I’d climb behind them just a step, all the way, my hands just behind them in case they fell. They’d reach the top and announce proudly, “I did it.” They had no idea that I was just behind them, where they couldn’t see me, all the time.
So with this shepherd. The sheep cannot see the wolf attacking from the rear. They cannot see the shepherd surrounding them with his presence. But our Shepherd is there for all time, until we “dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (23:6). In life and in life eternal, the Lord wants to be our Shepherd. Wherever we go, we can find our Shepherd waiting for us.

Is Ben Franklin right, or would we admit that we are helpless sheep? that we need a Shepherd? Then our Shepherd will surround us with his presence, for that’s what a shepherd does.

**Do we need God’s salvation?**

Psalm 27 is a remarkable companion to David’s best-loved hymn of praise. Here he adds to the metaphor of a shepherd with his sheep:

> The Lord is my light and my salvation—
> whom shall I fear?
> The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
> of whom shall I be afraid? (27:1)

The answers to his questions are obvious. God is his “stronghold,” a term describing a military installation or place of protection. In the battles to come, David would find his security in the Lord. Why was he so confident of God’s salvation and strength? For these reasons:

**One:** God would defeat his foes when they advanced against him (27:2-3). This king never lost a war. The Shepherd protected his sheep.

**Two:** God would keep him safe in his presence in the midst of his enemies (27:4-6). This king was able to worship and exalt the Lord to the end of his days. He would worship God in God’s heavenly temple (27:4) and in God’s earthly tabernacle (27:5). The tabernacle was the tent of meeting that preceded the temple in Jerusalem. The Shepherd was present always with his sheep.

**Three:** God would receive his prayer even when others rejected him (27:7-10). This king stayed in communion and relationship with God even through the worst failures and tragedies of life. The Shepherd partnered with his sheep through the valley of deepest shadows.

**Four:** God would guide his steps even when his enemies oppressed him (27:11-12). The Lord led David through Absalom’s rebellion and the subterfuge of enemies on every hand, and gave him peace at the end. The Shepherd followed his sheep until the sheep was safely home.

So David could sing:
I am still confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord (27:13-14).

To “wait” for the Lord is to rest in him, to trust in his provision, presence, protection, and grace. For what do you need to “wait” on God today?

**Conclusion**
There is a Shepherd who is before us, beside us, and behind us. He’s where we’re going, where we are, and where we’ve been. He will lead us, protect us, and surround us. That’s what a shepherd does.

Do you need this Shepherd right now? Are you facing a decision, an issue, a problem for which you need his leading? Are you walking through a valley for which you need his protection? Do you need him to surround you with his presence until he takes you home? How can you help your class members trust such grace this week?

Jesus is your Good Shepherd who lays his life down for his sheep (John 10:11). He wants to do all this for us. But we must admit that Ben Franklin is wrong and God is right. That we need this Shepherd—that we need to know him and trust him and walk with him. That we need him today.

So we close with the key to Psalm 23—the little word “my.” David said, “The Lord is my shepherd” (italics for emphasis). Not the shepherd, which he is; or our shepherd, which is true; but “my” shepherd. Can you say that?

There is an old story of an elderly man and a young man, each enlisted to speak in the same worship service. As part of the program, each of these speakers was to recite Psalm 23 from memory. The young man, trained in the best speech technique and drama, gave the words of the psalm. When he had finished, the congregation applauded loudly, amazed by his resonant voice and remarkable talent.

Then the elderly gentleman, leaning on his cane, stepped to the pulpit. In a weak, shaking voice, he repeated the same words. But when he finished, no sound came from the congregation. People seemed to be deep in prayer and worship.

In the silence the young speaker stood and said, “Friends, I wish to say something. You clapped when I quoted the psalm, but you remained silent and moved when my friend was done. The difference is simple. I know the psalm, but he knows the Shepherd.”

You know the psalm. Do you know the Shepherd?