This study is a walk with the Shepherd through the beloved Psalm that has been too long relegated to funeral services when it is so full of guidance for living with confidence, compassion and courage. I have chosen 10 themes out of the text as jumping points for discussion. Phillip Keller’s book, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Zondervan Publishers) continues to be a definitive voice in understanding how a shepherd’s life gives insight into the deeper meanings behind the images foreign to this city girl. I pray that this Psalm speaks into your life as it has mine in preparation.

Lesson 1: The Lord is my Shepherd (looking at the image of God as shepherd and Lord)
Lesson 2: I shall want for nothing (the concept of contentment – why are we so restless)
Lesson 3: He makes me to lie down in green pasture (rest and Sabbath)
Lesson 4: He restores my soul (soul-care for self and one another)
Lesson 5: Yeah though I walk through the death-shades (facing difficult times)
Lesson 6: I will fear no evil (discussion on the reality of evil)
Lesson 7: Your rod and staff comfort me (the role of discipline in our spiritual journey)
Lesson 8: Prepare a table before me in the presence of my foes (Who are my enemies)
Lesson 9: My cup overflows (Living a life of Joy)
Lesson 10: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me (worship as a life style)

The Lord is My Counselor!

The Lord is my Counselor,
I shall not try to solve things on my own.
He encourages me to trust Him.
He teaches me to listen in quietness & stillness to His voice,
He calms my anxious heart.
He guides me down the paths that are best for me,
Even when I think I know better.
When I walk through the valley of frustration, worry,
Fear and overwhelmingness,
He reminds me that He never sleeps or takes holidays off.
I need not fear being alone, for He is always with me.
His wisdom and advice, they comfort me.
He knows everything that is going on in my life, but
It remains confidential with Him.
Blessings overflow through my sessions with Him.
Surely my future is secure as I dwell in the house of
The Lord, leaving my problems at His feet,
and follow His advice that is free of charge,
all the days of my life!

Paraphrase of Psalm 23: copyright 2000 by Susan Secrest Waters
Lesson One – Shepherd and Lord

1. Read the Psalm: The image of Shepherd is a common and comfortable picture found in the Scripture. What does that image mean to you?

2. Read the following verses and share what they reveal to you about how God cares for us as a shepherd
   a. Isaiah 40:11
   b. Jeremiah 31: 10,11
   c. Matthew 9: 36
   d. I Peter 5: 1 - 4

3. Contrast the care of a good shepherd with Ezekiel 34: 1 – 16
   a. How does a shepherd care for his sheep as described in this passage?
   b. What are the ways that God does this for us? Give modern examples.

4. The image of Shepherd is one of sacrifice. How does the Shepherd sacrifice for the sake of the sheep? Referring back to I Peter 5, what are we to sacrifice for the sake of others that are in our care? (I do not believe that only paid pastors are shepherds to flocks of people, but that we are each called to offer care to other – those already in the “sheepfold” and those not yet.

5. What do you know about sheep and why are we so often compared to sheep? Is it a flattering image?

6. “Domestic sheep depend on humans for protection. They are very timid. A sheet of paper blown by the wind will frighten them. A thunderstorm may throw them into a panic. They may drown without a struggle if they are scared while crossing a stream. Fire in a building where sheep are kept may destroy a whole flock, because they are too frightened to flee.” (Compton’s Encyclopedia) How might this image apply to our spiritual lives? What fears keeps us from God’s peace?

7. Read John 10: 1 - 18. It was a common image for shepherds to all gather by the same watering hole, their sheep mingling with one another, as there were few spots for water in that arid land. When it was time for a shepherd to move on, all he had to do was call his sheep, and the sheep would recognize the voice of their shepherd and come. How do you recognize God’s voice among all the other “voices” that you are surrounded with each day?

8. The Psalmist begins by addressing God as “Lord”. How do you put together the image of Shepherd and Lord? Is their a difference in your understanding of the two terms or do they represent the same image?
Lesson 2: “I Shall not Want”

Are you satisfied? Satisfaction seems to be a rare commodity these days. In fact, the marketing gurus capitalize on our dissatisfaction by focusing our attention on things that make us discontent or by trying to make us think we need more of something or something better or bigger. How many times have you replaced or upgraded your computer or installed updates for its programs in the last five years? Two years? Year? Month? Week? Have you ever obtained a new sofa or remodeled a room because you were not satisfied with the one you had?

Related to this idea of satisfaction is the “law of diminishing returns”: The more you receive, the more you need. You may never have a car fast enough or a house big enough. You may never have a computer with enough memory or a kitchen with enough cupboards. Drug addicts, those enslaved to pornography and other addictions experience this problem. They constantly seek increasing quantities and increasingly extreme experiences to satisfy their cravings.

Now, it is true that we should be discontent in some areas, even in our Christian lives. We should never think we have arrived. We always have room for improvement in our relationships with our husbands/wives, our children, and our friends. We can do better in our witness to unbelievers and sharing the Good News. But more than any of these things is one area where we should constantly be seeking satisfaction. We should not be satisfied until we are satisfied in our relationship with God. He is the only One who can truly satisfy us. (Written by Doug Smith) Cornerstone Chapel Reformed Baptist Church (Bristol, TN)

1. What are some areas in your life that you really never worry about because you know that God is caring for you?

2. What are some areas that you struggle to relinquish into God’s hands?

3. What makes it difficult for us in North America to be a truly content people?

4. Read Philippians 4: 10 – 13. What is Paul’s secret for being content? Now read earlier in the chapter, verses 4 – 9. Is there any other insight into finding contentment in these verses?

5. Read I Timothy 6: 6 – 10. What does Paul want Timothy to understand about contentment? What are some temptations that make one discontent?

6. Read Hebrews 13: 4 – 6. Does the theme of contentment apply to relationships as well as to material goods? How does society promote discontentment in relationships?

7. Are you content with your body size? Your physical appearance? How can our walk with the Shepherd help us to accept ourselves more fully than we presently do?

8. We are invited in this Psalm to be satisfied with God as our shepherd. How are you satisfied with a) his Person, b) with his Provision, and c) his Promises? Are you ready to say, “I shall want for nothing?”
Lesson 3: He makes me to lie down in green pasture; He leads me beside quiet waters.

1. Read Genesis 2: 1-3. Why did God rest? Did he need rest? What was God communicating to his Creation? What does that tell us about our own needs, physically, emotionally, spiritually?

2. The Hebrew word for rest and its derivatives are as follows:
   - Shabath: To repose, desist, cease, let be, put away.
   - Sha-an: To lean upon – rest upon
   - Shamat: To fling down, let alone
   - Shaqat: To settle, rest, be still
   - Shakan: To lodge, reside, abide

   What do these words offer us as a gift that we need to receive? What is the invitation?

3. Read: Exodus 16: 21 – 30: The first thing God did for his children when he brought them out of slavery was to give them a day off. How was God using this observance to set the Israelites apart (make holy means to set apart)? What was trying to teach them?

4. Read Exodus 20: 8 – 11. Keeping the Sabbath “holy” means that the day is set apart – it becomes “something other” than any other day of the week. The number seven seems very significance in terms of rest. Every seventh day, we are to rest, every seventh year, the land was to rest, every 7th cycle of 7 years, the economic structure was to rest – the year of jubilee. Even our bodies seem to lag at the 7th hour – if you wake up at 7:00 a.m., how many of you feel tired and lacking energy around 2 p.m. in the afternoon. Wouldn’t it be nice if every 7 weeks we could take a break and do something other than we always do? I believe we would be much less stressed and dragged and much more productive. Is it just a number or has God programmed his creation to a cycle of 7?

5. Read: Mark 2: 23 – 28 In light of what you have already discussed, what was Jesus telling us about God’s intention and desire in modeling the Sabbath? Considering the culture that we live in, the life style that is valued and expected, what gift can we offer the world as a counter – culture or community?

6. Leisure vs. Rest. There is only one reference to leisure in the Scripture in the KJV. It is defined as ease and convenience, relaxation. The North American Culture is driven by the goal of leisure. “Freedom 55” The lottery commercials – the desire to be totally free from work. Rest sees value in work – Rest is a key or tool to enable one to work more effectively and wisely. How do you see the difference between rest and leisure?
7. I believe that society is addicted to adrenalin which is one of the reasons that we are an angry culture because anger generates adrenalin. It is our addiction to extreme sports. We are sleep-deprived, driven, over-scheduled. What evidence do you see that this is true – that we are addicted to adrenalin and overextending ourselves?

Sabbath can be understood as a sense of completion. “God saw all that he had done and it was very good”, denoting a sense of accomplishment and completion. It is finished, Jesus said from the cross. His work was completed and he was prepared to “shamat – to fling down” to “shabat – to let it all alone” and to enter “shakan – his eternal rest”. Rest can only truly come in basking in the joy of a job well done – a checking off of the list. A heavy sigh that says, finally I can put that aside – I can fling it down – I can let it alone and I can abide here in this place of completion now. It is good to establish an evening discipline of reviewing your day and saying, I was able to accomplish this and this, and it is good. Tomorrow is another day and I will not think on what needs to be done in it – for now I am at rest. It is finished.

8. Read Matthew 11: 28 – 30. Worry makes us weary. How do we “shamat’ it – fling it down and leave it to God? We know we are supposed to, but how do we practically, actually get our minds and stomachs to shut down? How do we “sha-am” rest upon – lean upon – take his yoke upon us? The Greek word for rest is “anaprio” – to take ease, to refresh, repose. What are ways that you release your concerns of the day?

9. The invitation out of Psalm 23 is to lie down in green pastures. Sheep will only lie down if they are totally at peace and that peace only comes from the presence of the shepherd. If they are nervous or frightened, they will not be able to rest. Also, sheep cannot drink from moving waters, it must be still. What is the invitation to you today and how will you receive it?
Lesson 4: He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

1. What are some ways that you restore the health of your body? How do you restore the health of your mind or emotions? And how do you restore the health of your soul? Do you feel you give equal balance to all aspects of your person?

2. What are some of the events of life that make the soul grow weary?

3. Read Psalm 42: 5 – 11 When are the times that you might relate to the psalmist’s sentiment as recorded here?

A word about sheep: To say that a sheep has been “cast” or “cast down” is to say that it has rolled over onto its back and can’t get up. Sheep are made in such a way that once they are in that position, they can’t get up by themselves. It may sound funny, but in fact it is very dangerous because, once on their backs, their circulation is cut off so that blood can’t reach the extremities of their bodies. Then gasses begin to build up and if the shepherd is unable to find and help that sheep, it will die in a matter of hours or days depending on the weather. That’s why the shepherd in Matthew 18 will leave the ninety-nine sheep in search of the one that is missing. If one sheep is missing, fear grips the shepherd, because that sheep could be “cast down.” (Even the strongest and fastest of the flock can be “cast down!”) If a sheep is missing, he will run in hopes of finding it before it is too late. As he approaches it, he is filled with joy and fear. Is he in time? If he is, he will pick up the sheep and help it on its feet. He will then massage its outer limbs to help the blood circulation. He may even talk to the sheep while he does this. Finally, that sheep will rejoin the others, free from fear and able to live a little while longer. The shepherd restores the sheep not only to its feet, but to its flock and its shepherd as well.

4. A sheep can become cast down by:
   a. Looking for a comfortable spot to rest. How might this apply to our spiritual lives?
   b. Becoming weighed down if it’s too fat or if it has too much wool. The wool becomes matted down with mud and manure and the sheep becomes weighed down by its own wool. How might this apply to our spiritual lives?
   c. One of the major causes of overturned sheep is the sheep would stand for a long time on a soft patch of ground, its weight settling into the grass, and when it shifted its body to move, it would tumble. In our spiritual lives, how do we end up “standing in one place too long?”
5. Because we sheep don’t like change, we’re vulnerable to entrenching ourselves in a certain way of thinking or living that can easily become destructive, or at least contrary to who God has called us to be. Phillip Keller writes that the greatest single safeguard a shepherd has in keeping his flock safe is to keep them on the move, helping them find green pastures, leading them to fresh water, keeping them from settling too long in one place. Sheep are notorious creatures of habit, and if they are left to their own devices, they will literally idle themselves to death. In what ways does God keep the church on the move in order to keep it fresh and alive?

6. Sheep cannot be herded like cows, they must be led. The shepherd must go before them to assure them that the way is safe before they will feel safe. Read John 14: 1 – 4. Consider this verse in light of daily living, rather than your eternal destiny. In what way does Jesus prepare the way for us before we get there? What are some of the “rooms” that he prepares for us to enter in life?

7. I like to define righteousness as “right ways” – we are called to live the right way of Jesus. What are some of those ways we are called to live – what are the paths of right living that Jesus would have us walk as he goes before us?
Lesson 5: Though I walk through the Death Shades . . .

1. We will look specifically at three words: The first word **though** is different than the word “if”. *What does that say to you?*

   The word "though" carries with it the expectation and the assumption that the valley we call suffering and grief is a normal part of life. It certainly was for sheep in the Middle East. In the process of getting from one grazing pasture to another, they would often have to travel under the guidance of their shepherds through narrow ravines called wadies. These ravines would be fraught with danger including predators and precarious spots where the journey could be rough and the possibility of falling off a cliff were high. These wadies also provided cover for thieves out to steal sheep. It was a normal part of a lamb’s life to have to journey through these dangerous and sometimes painful places in the process of getting from grazing pasture to pasture. The valley was a part of their everyday life.

   Suffering and grief is a part of life. There is no way around it. There is no way to avoid it. The journey of life includes it. **Though** I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. There is no other way, no alternative, the journey of life includes along with joy and celebration, suffering, trials and grief. This is a biblical truth that we in the advantaged part of the world love to deny.

2. *Do you think that people in other cultures have a better sense of the place of suffering as part of life than we in North America do? If so, why?*

3. *What are the causes of suffering in our lives? Of the different kinds that you list, what are the most difficult for you personally to face?*

4. *What is/has been most helpful for you when you go through the valleys?*

5. Look up the following references and discuss what perspectives do they give on suffering:
   a. 2 Tim 1: 8 – 10
   b. Romans 8: 16 – 18 ( you may want to read vs. 19 – 25 also)
   c. 2 Cor. 1: 5
   d. James 5: 10 – 11, Matthew 5: 10 - 11

6. *What gives a sheep its assurance that it will make it through the wadie? How does that apply to us as we face difficult journeys?*
7. The second very important word of our text is the word walk. The word walk has to do with pacing ourselves. The valley of the shadow of death is not a place for running or stopping, it is a place of careful walking. For sheep that have to journey the steep walls of a wadie, their steps had to be careful and planned. Running would be self destructive. Grief takes time, careful steps and a lot of effort. And different people walk at different paces, some are slower and more careful than others, some takes steps with hesitation, some takes steps boldly. But the truth is, this valley of the shadow of death is no place to rush, nor is it a place to ignore the difficult steps that have to be taken. It is a place of walking. What are the implications of this for you?

Grief, as I read somewhere once, is a lazy Susan. One day it is heavy and underwater, and the next day it spins and stops at loud and rageful, and the next day at wounded keening, and the next day numbness, silence. I was hoarse for the first six weeks after Pammy died, from shouting in the car and crying, and I had blisters on the palm of one hand from hitting the bed with my tennis racket, bellowing in pain and anger. But on the first morning in Mexico, the lazy Susan stopped at feelings of homesickness, like when my parents sold the house where I grew up. {Taken from Traveling Mercies by Ann Lamont, 1999. Pg 70}

8. The valley is also not a place to set up camp and stay. We are meant to walk – to continue to move forward. What are ways that we get stuck and mired down in the struggles of life?

9. The third word that we will focus on is through. The journey of sheep through a wadie is a journey from pasture to pasture. The journey through the valley of the shadow of death is a journey that we must get through. It is a passageway to a better field. It is a life changing transition that brings us to a new place, sometimes even a better place. Do you believe this? What does that mean for you?

10. What is your theology of suffering in the sense of what part does God play in its cause, its duration or its outcome?
Lesson 6: I Will Fear No Evil

1. What are some areas that cause fear in your life? What are ways that you calm your fears?

2. The definition of the word rendered “evil” is also distress, misery, injury, or calamity. In this context, it is not a personified evil but rather the discomfort that comes from evil. When you have read this verse previously, how did you interpret the word in your thoughts? Does this definition change any thoughts?

3. In the Lord’s Prayer, in Matt 6:13: (deliver us from evil) the presence of the article indicates not evil in general, but the evil one himself (deliver us from the evil one). In the context of Matthew’s Gospel, such deliverance from Satan seems to be linked to Jesus’ temptation in 4: 1-10. So how do you consider the difference between evil as difficulties that we face in life and evil that is brought about through temptation? Which of the evils do you feel you face more of in life and what may you fear more?

4. Assign one of the following verses to each person to read quickly out loud. What is your general sense of the use of the word evil from these verses?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job 1:1</th>
<th>Matthew 7:11</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psalm 34:14</td>
<td>Matthew 12: 35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psalm 97:10</td>
<td>John 17: 15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psalm 101:4</td>
<td>Romans 2:9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proverbs 11:27</td>
<td>Romans 12:9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proverbs 24: 19-20</td>
<td>I Corinthians 14: 20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isaiah 5: 20</td>
<td>I Thessalonians 5: 22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Habbakuk 1: 13</td>
<td>I Peter 3: 9</td>
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5. Do you ever consider yourself evil? Where do evil behaviors come from?

6. What is there to fear about evil? Where do our fears come from?

7. The word for Satan means “accuser”. Read Zechariah 3: 1 – 4. What is the struggle that Joshua is facing as a high priest? What is Satan’s role and how does God deal with him? How is Joshua set free from this evil?

8. Read Mark 4: 15 and substitute Satan with the word “deceiver” or “accuser”. Does it give any different insight into how we are led astray from our path?

Lesson 7: Your rod and staff, they comfort me.

1. Read all of verse four of Psalm 23 once again and put the thoughts together. Consider the following translation of the themes that we have discussed. “When my time comes to walk through the most difficult of times, I will not fear misery, injury or calamity, because I know you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” I have heard people say that they do not fear death, but they fear the process of dying. How does this reading of Psalm 23 speak into that situation?

Quote from Sue Hille, “The Rod of Comfort”

The Hebrew word for rod used in both the Psalms and Proverbs passages is "shabat." A shabat is specifically the rod used by a shepherd in caring for sheep. The shabat has five common practical uses: 1) it is the symbol of the shepherd's guardianship of the sheep; 2) it can be thrown with great accuracy just beyond the wandering sheep to send the animal scurrying back to the flock; 3) the shabat can be used to ward off an intruder and protect the sheep from any animals which may attack; 4) the sheep are counted as they "pass under the rod;" 5) it is used to part the wool in order to examine the sheep for disease, wounds or defects which may be treated. (Remember from our study on rest that the verb form of shabat means “to fling down” – a symbol of letting go)

How do these five uses for the rod relate to how God cares and offers comfort to us?

2. Read Proverbs 13:24: How do the same five principles relate to parenting?

3. Have you ever considered the rod a tool of discipline for spanking a child? Does this explanation of the rod change any of your understandings? Does God discipline his children and if he does, would the “rod” be a tool of discipline?

4. Read Hebrews 12: 1 – 12. How do you understand the discipline of God? What are some examples of ways that you may have been disciplined by God? Discipline is a concept we talk about but do not always relate it to personal experience. Sometimes it is easier to point at another’s situation and label it as God’s discipline or punishment. How does God as a perfect parent discipline?

5. Consider these ideas as ways in which God disciplines us: Sue Hille offers these thoughts: 1) Security--the child knows he/she is loved, cared for, accepted; 2)
Psalm 23 – Everything that we need
Written by Faye Reynolds

Guidance—the loving parent will teach the child and keep him/her from going astray; 3) Protection—the parent will not let outsiders hurt the child; 4) Evaluation—the child will be "counted" and progress will be monitored; 5) Diagnosis—the parent will look for signs of anxiety or pain in the child and seek out treatment and healing. Discipline is not always a punitive action, but rather offers boundaries for safety and direction.

From Phillip Keller’s book, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23: The staff is essentially a symbol of the concern, the compassion that a shepherd has for his charges. No other single word can better describe its function on behalf of the flock than that it is for their "comfort." There are three areas of sheep management in which the staff plays a most significant role. 1) The first of these lies in drawing sheep together into an intimate relationship. The shepherd will use his staff to gently lift a newborn lamb and bring it to its mother if they become parted. He does this because he does not wish to have the ewe reject her offspring if it bears the odor of his hands upon it.

2)...the staff is used by the shepherd to reach out and catch individual sheep, young or old, and draw them close to himself for intimate examination. The staff is very useful this way for the shy and timid sheep normally tend to keep at a distance from the shepherd.

3) The staff is also used for guiding sheep. Again and again I have seen a shepherd use his staff to guide his sheep gently into a new path or through some gate or along dangerous, difficult routes. He does not use it actually to beat the beast. Rather, the tip of the long slender stick is laid gently against the animal's side and the pressure applied guides the sheep in the way the owner wants it to go. Thus the sheep is reassured of its proper path.

4) A fourth use is that the hook is helpful for rescuing sheep from precarious situations like a cliff ledge or if they have fallen into brambles. In what ways to these images give you a picture of how God might care for you, especially in the context of going through “the valley of the shadow”?

6. Karen Armstrong is an Oxford Theologian who said that Scripture can only be interpreted through the lens of compassion. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Nevertheless, compassion is definitely a defining characteristic of God. What are ways that we as the people of God can be a more compassionate people to our world?
Lesson 8: You prepare a table before me

1. Read Psalm 3 as an example: I have difficulty reading many of the Psalms because I do not like to think that I have any enemies. I want to be liked by everyone.

To quote Adam J. Copeland from his blog site, A Wee Blether [www.adamjcopeland.com](http://www.adamjcopeland.com) “Surely we don’t have enemies anymore? With our sophisticated understandings of human relations, we must not have enemies but “non-allies” or “under-developed relationships or “potential new friends.”

Who are my enemies? Who are your enemies? What comes to mind when you try to name your enemies?

2. What image or ideas comes to mind in light of Psalm 23 where you feel nourished in safety and peace before your enemies?

3. What are your initial thoughts about the mood behind this verse? Is there any sense of vengeance in this phrase – of wishing ill to the enemy; that we get to eat when they don’t?

4. If you move away from a literal interpretation of this verse, how else might you understand this image? What is the table that is spread before you?

5. Consider this thought by Alan J. Meehan from Hollywood Presbyterian Church: “God’s blessing is so sure that even though your enemies may gather around and watch, there is nothing they can do to stop the blessing of God from reaching the one that He loves and wants to bless”. How might that interpretation resonate with you?

6. In Eastern Culture, there is the practice of hospitality. If you came upon a shepherd in a field, he would be obliged to share a meal with you and offer you protection while under his care. God, as our shepherd takes us in and feeds us through difficult times. In what way does God nourish you during hard times? In this sense, the enemy is the difficulties that we face and God cares and meets our needs in the midst of them.

7. Have you ever considered that perhaps the enemy might be invited to dine with you? Is there any sense of that in this verse? What might that mean for us as a community of faith? Read Proverbs 25: 21, 22
8. Read Matthew 5: 43 – 48. *What are some tangible examples of ways that we can love our enemies?* To love someone is not to feel “warm and fuzzy” toward them, but to commit yourself to work toward their better welfare. In this way, we become peace makers, rather than peace keepers.

Consider this quote from by Laura Mariko Cheifetz  
*June 21, 2005 from the Presbyterian Peace Making Program*

We are invited to eat, each one of us, at the table God has set for us. But here’s the catch. You see, this table in Psalm 23 is not a table we set. It is not a group of people we choose. It is not the table we sit at every evening. God is in charge this time. . . . God sets the table. We don’t get to request what we’re served. We don’t get to express our preference for sushi, steak, greens, or a vegan menu. Nope. God’s in charge of that part, too. And, deep breath, we have no idea who is invited. . . . It is up to us, knowing that this God is God of everyone, to accept the invitation to this table that we didn’t set, that we didn’t choose, to the table where we won’t always like the other guests, the table set by the God who loves those we consider our enemies.

9. *Perhaps this interpretation is less comforting to you than the previous thoughts we have discussed, but what is the message of hope and also challenge contained within her thoughts?*
Lesson 9: You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows . . .

1. *What were reasons that one’s head was anointed with oil?* Look up I Samuel 10:1; I Samuel 16: 11 – 13; James 5:14; Isaiah 61: 1 – 3; Hebrews 1:9

2. David experienced his head being anointed with oil when he was proclaimed to be the next king by Samuel. *In what ways do you feel “chosen and special” – singled out in some way?*

3. *How have you perhaps been anointed by God for some kind of ministry or leadership position?* This isn’t necessarily a literal anointing, but a way in which you have felt appointed by God for ministry.

By Philip Keller

“YOU ANOINT MY HEAD WITH OIL” PSALM 23:5 (NIV)

In Bible times, shepherds anointed their sheep with oil for two purposes:

(1) To repel insects. If insects are allowed to deposit their eggs in the soft membrane of the sheep’s nose, the eggs become wormlike larvae, driving the sheep insane. The ewes stop milking and the lambs stop growing. So the shepherd anoints the sheep’s head with an oil-like repellant that keeps the enemy at bay and the flock at peace.

(2) To heal wounds. Most wounds result from living with the flock. Thorns prick, rocks cut, or a sheep rubs its head too hard against a tree. The shepherd regularly inspects them because he doesn’t want today’s wound to become tomorrow’s infection. So he pours on the healing oil.

4. *What are some of the irritants in our lives and how might God anoint and protect us from them?*

5. Explore anointing in the context of healing. *Again, thinking beyond the literal anointing for illness, how have you experienced the healing oil of God in your life? What is required of the sheep to receive healing oil? What is required of us?*

Quote by Steven Purcell from *Even Among These Rocks*: “Joy is fundamentally a word about relationship. It has little to do with what we possess and everything to do with being loved. Joy knows nothing of fixing ourselves up or making ourselves impressive. It simply means the homecoming of our hearts into the open presence of God. As with the lost son, it is the experience of being welcomed home in spite of ourselves. . . . God’s ecology of grace dictates that joy will often sprout from dubious soil. From experiences of loss, frustration of desire and shattered dignity emerge new and intimate encounters of his graceful presence. In these encounters he speaks to us: “Do not fear, little flock . . . do not worry about your life.”
6. The oil of gladness – imagine how soothing it would be for the sheep to experience the oil on their wounds and sores – it would definitely bring a feeling of gladness and joy. *What brings you joy?*

   Read Psalm 4: 7 – 8, Psalm 21: 6

7. *What is some of the evidence or the signs that a Christian’s life is overflowing with the cup of joy? Have we as a Christian community expressed that joy as well as we perhaps ought to have? What are ways that you express joy?*

8. A continual theme throughout Psalm 23 has been this image of abundance in the midst of adversity. Last week, we saw a feast spread before us in the midst of our enemies – that we are fed and cared for in spite of adverse surroundings. God’s rod and staff have guided us and protected us, even in the midst of evil. Through the most difficult valleys, God’s overwhelming presence guides us through. And now our cup is overflowing, though we have known pestilence, discomfort and illness. Psalm 23 is beyond any doubt, a psalm of hope – we truly will lack for nothing. This is the source of a joy that never ceases – a well of contentment that can never run dry.

9. Celebrate this truth by reading the following verses:

   a. 1 Chronicles 16: 23 – 29
   b. Nehemiah 8: 10
   c. Psalm 4: 7 – 8
   d. Psalm 96: 11 – 13
   e. John 15: 9 – 14
   f. 2 Corinthians 8: 1 – 7
   g. 1 Thess. 2: - 17 – 19
   h. 1 Peter 1: 3 – 12
Lesson 10: Surely Goodness and Mercy . . .

A mom was concerned about her kindergarten son walking to school. He didn't want his mother to walk with him. She wanted to give him the feeling that he had some independence but yet know that he was safe. So she asked a neighbor if she would please follow him to school in the mornings, staying at a distance, so he probably wouldn't notice her. The neighbor said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed.

The next school day, the neighbor and her little girl set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbor boy he knew. She did this for the whole week. As the boys walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, Timmy's little friend noticed the same lady was following them as she seemed to do every day all week. Finally he said to Timmy, "Have you noticed that lady following us to school all week? Do you know her?"

Timmy nonchalantly replied, "Yeah, that's just Shirley Goodnest and her daughter, Marcy. Every night my Mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers and it says, 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life, so I guess I'll just have to get used to it!"

1. First of all, how do you define “goodness”? We don’t expect that life will be easy and we have already discussed the inevitability of difficult valleys, illness and sorrow. So what is the “goodness” that will follow you all of your life?

   a. Consider Genesis 50:20 and the story of Joseph along with Romans 8:28. How is good realized in this situation?
   b. Also consider Psalm 34: 4 – 10: What is the source of goodness in this Psalm? Psalm 84: 10 – 12? Psalm 103: 1 – 5?
   c. How does Micah 6:8 define “good”. Is there any requirement on our part to know goodness in our life?
   d. Consider these thoughts from Barbara Mutch when she spoke at the Alberta Women’s Retreat in 2007:

   God has a will for Goodness. That is why he can be trusted. Not a “plan” because plans always get messed up – plans are over-rated. But God “wills” goodness – all of his energies go toward goodness. A plan never knows what to do with tragedy. The will shows the direction, the hope, but not the path. We hope in God because of his Love and his forgiveness toward us and his ultimate will is for our good.

   What insight does this give you regarding God’s will for goodness to follow us all the days of our lives?

2. Now define mercy. Why are we in such need for mercy and how does it help us to realize goodness through our life?

   a. Read Exodus 33: 12 – 20, and focus particularly on verses 19 and 20. Does God’s goodness and mercy follow everyone?
b. Read I Peter 1: 3 – 9: *In what ways do these verses echo the teachings of Psalm 23?*

Think about the word, “Follow”. Martin B. Copenhaver of the Wellesley Congregational Church, Massachusetts writes:

The psalm makes it clear that God is not waiting to be found. No, it is God who seeks us out. The psalmist writes, “Surely, goodness and mercy shall *follow me* all the days of my life.” That statement, as powerful as it may be, does not even carry the full impact of what is in the original Hebrew. To say that God’s goodness, God’s mercy—that is, God’s steadfast love—will follow me, is to affirm something powerful. But, to me at least, the word “follow” conjures an image of something that trails along after. A puppy dog may follow me. My shadow may follow me. And there may be some comfort in picturing God’s goodness and steadfast love following that close. But, in Hebrew, the word implies something more active and persistent and determined than that. The word often translated as “follow,” is more accurately translated, “pursue,” or “chase down.” And that sounds quite different, doesn’t it? “Surely God’s goodness will pursue me, God’s mercy will chase me down.”

3. Does God pursue us or do we seek God or do both have to happen at the same time? For fun, read part of “The Runaway Bunny”. *What might be the theological wisdom to this story?*

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, “I am running away.”

“If you run away,” said his mother, “I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.”

If you run after me,” said the little bunny, “I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you.”

“If you become a fish in a trout stream,” said his mother, “I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.”

“If you become a fisherman,” said the little bunny, “I will become a rock on the mountain high above you.”

“If you become a rock on the mountain high above me,” said his mother, “I will be a mountain.

The little bunny said, “I will join the circus and fly away on a flying trapeze.”

“If you go flying on a flying trapeze,” said his mother, “I will be a tightrope walker, and I will walk across the air to you.”

“If you become a tightrope walker and walk across the air,” said the bunny, “I will become a little boy and run into a house.”

“If you become a little boy and run into a house,” said the mother bunny, “I will become your mother and catch you in my arms and hug you.”

4. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. *What is your definition or description of heaven or life beyond death? What does this verse mean to you?*

5. Read Psalm 23 from start to finish once more. Note that the first two words are “The Lord” and that last words of the Psalm are “the Lord”. *What does that speak to you regarding the themes that we have studied these last ten weeks?*