

SESSION 1

THE SHELTER OF GOD'S PRESENCE

The Point

No matter what you are going through, God is with you.

The Bible Meets Life

When life seems to turn against us, we need someone to stand with us. We need to know we are not alone when we experience loss. God, who never disappoints or hurts us, walks with us. He provides what we need and strengthens us with His presence. Our desire should be to look back at the storm and say that we are nearer to God and now look more like Him because of His presence.

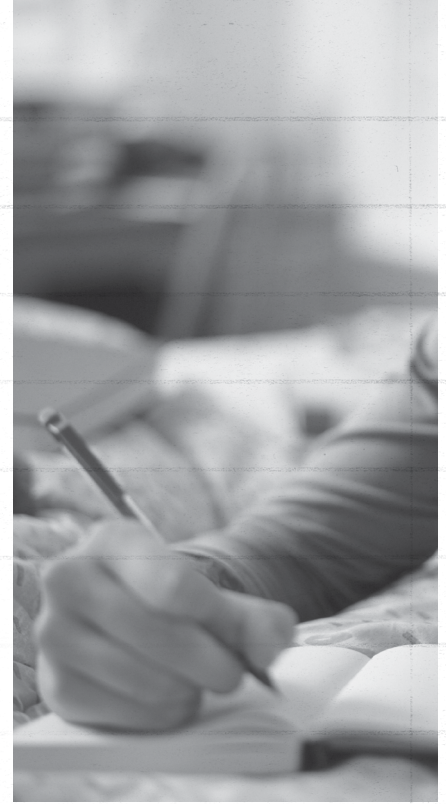
The Passage

Psalm 23:1-6

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Psalm 23:1-6

- ¹The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.
- ²He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.
- ³He renews my life; He leads me along the right paths for His name's sake.
- ⁴Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.
- ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
- ⁶Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.



THE SETTING

David apparently composed this psalm in the midst of or reflecting back on a time when his enemies were close at hand, and the outcome of the conflict was far from certain. The situation was severe enough that David could have feared for his life; instead, God's presence and goodness gave him the courage to not fear impending danger (v. 4). This former shepherd could plainly see how the Great Shepherd guided, cared for, and provided for him.

ENGAGE

(15 MINUTES)



GET INTO THE STUDY

ENGAGE: Begin the session with one or more of the **Engage Options** on the next page. (This is optional. If you'd rather skip the **Engage Options**, just begin with the first discussion question.)

SAY: Sometimes life is hard, but we are never alone. God walks with us, providing the strength we need in His presence. When we go through these storms, He is our shelter.

DISCUSS: Encourage students to discuss the question, "Have you ever been through a storm that scared you?"

GUIDE: Call attention to **The Point**. Explain that this is the key idea to keep in mind throughout the session.

ITEM
1

Leader Pack: Direct students to the *Storm Shelter* unit poster. Ask your students what they think of when they hear the word "shelter." Use the poster to promote the six-week series.

ITEM
2

Use the *Psalms 23:1-6* poster to help in the discussion of this session's Scripture passage.

THE POINT

No matter what you are going through, God is with you.

READ: Read and summarize **The Bible Meets Life** for your group.

I knew what I wanted to say, but my mouth simply would not cooperate. I thought, "Why am I so tongue-tied? I must just be tired." But then after trying again to answer my wife's question, I found I was physically speechless. After a few frantic moments, the paramedics were called. It was all a blur from there. Sirens. Wheeling through the emergency room. Getting a CAT scan of my brain. The diagnosis was a transient ischemic attack (TIA), often called a "mini-stroke." There is nothing quite like being 41 years old and hearing a vascular neurologist say, "You really dodged a bullet. You should have died." I thought I had the world by the tail. Wonderful wife and kids. Great job. Awesome church family. It's a wonderful life, right? And then the unexpected happened. Out of the blue—disaster, disappointment, and loss. We've all experienced the pain of those moments. When it happens, we scramble for shelter. We need something to cover us in the midst of the storms. For me, I had to come to my senses and remember that God had not abandoned me. It was a time to once again learn about God's strong presence in my life. No matter what you are facing, God is present. He does not just offer a shelter during your storms. He is the shelter. His presence with us is the only thing that can make sense of this life.

PRAY: Transition into the session by praying that students would trust God during difficult times in their lives.

Engage Options

► *Lead with Action*

Call a student in front of the group. Ask the student to fall back as you catch him or her. Next, blindfold him/her, and then ask the student to fall back again for you to catch him/her. Again ask the student to fall back with the blindfold back on. Then, walk in front of the student. Direct a pre-enlisted adult to stand behind the student and catch him/her. Make sure the other students do not tell the student that an adult is behind the student. As you stand in front of the student, tell him/her to fall back, allowing the other adult to catch the student like you previously did. Say, **“God is always there, whether it makes sense to you or not. He will not leave nor let you fall. He promises to remain by your side for eternity.”**

OPTION: Invest some time and decorate your room to reflect the six-week series on shelter.

► *Lead with Atmosphere*

Without informing students that it will happen, play a loud siren. Make sure it is loud enough to initially scare the students. Say, **“The storms of life will come. Sometimes there is a warning siren and some times there isn’t. Regardless of the kind of story, God will never leave you or forsake you. While others may want to always be there for you, they are human and can keep no such promises. God is also the only One with the power and control over your life circumstances.”**

► *Lead with Media*

Search the Internet for a video titled “Hurricane Katrina: Extreme Video.” If there is not enough time to show the entire clip, make sure to include the section where you see the power of the storm surge and where the anchor asks the guys if they ever doubted their decision. Say, **“These guys went into the storm knowing what was coming. They were prepared. However, they admit that they questioned their decision, every minute and every second. Why? As prepared as they were, they could not save each other. They were at the mercy of the storm. God never leaves you in those moments when life is raging. He will be by your side the entire way, and He already has it all under control.”**

OPTION: You may rather show clips about the 2004 Tsunami, 2013 Moore, Oklahoma tornado, or other significant storms.

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: No matter what you are going through, God is with you.

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.* ² *He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.* ³ *He renews my life; He leads me along the right paths for His name's sake.*

—PSALM 23:1-3

PSALM 23:1-3

GUIDE: Lead students to understand the three things God does for us as our Shepherd.

1. He guides us. Sheep are not terribly smart. They often wander aimlessly, getting themselves into one problem 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.

Life is filled with distractions and dangers. God desires to help you navigate through the toughness of life. The Shepherd is not just interested in our rescue but also our restoration.

2. 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. In the midst of life's needs, sorrows, and grief, God provides perfectly for us.

3. He renews us. The psalm refers to green pastures (a place of rest) and still waters (a source of refreshment). It is only by God's presence in our lives that we can get to these places of refreshment.

DISCUSS: Lead students to discuss the question, **"Which of the Shepherd's three actions is most meaningful to you right now?"**

READ: Ask a volunteer to read the following:

We normally get ourselves deeper into trouble. When we struggle through some difficulty in life in our own strength, we usually only tighten the grip pain has on us. God's presence brings about freedom, joy, and release from our struggle. When we decide to stop struggling and start trusting, we experience the relief and renewal we need.

Commentary

PSALM 23:1-3

David grew up tending the flocks of his father, Jesse (1 Sam. 16:10-13). Psalm 23, a favorite of many Christians, uses this shepherd imagery to proclaim profound truth about God's loving presence and care for His people no matter what challenges they face.

David's opening affirmation, "The LORD is my Shepherd" sets the foundation for the psalm. First, David described the personal aspect of his relationship with God by using the word *my*. The Lord was David's shepherd, and thus took responsibility for caring for and guiding David. Second, David affirmed he was not in charge of his life. God was. Sheep follow shepherds, not the other way around.

David affirmed God's presence and provision. With God as his Shepherd, David lacked nothing he really needed; he could follow God content with what God provided. God's presence also meant God's protection. In ancient Israel, people who cared for the animals of others were responsible to the owners for those animals (Ex. 22:10-13). God would protect David just as shepherds protected sheep.

The expression of the psalmist lying down stresses the Shepherd's leadership. The sheep only lie down where the shepherd directs. Their safety and well-being are always his concern, and he knows what is best for them. Green pastures literally means "pastures of vegetation," perhaps an area of relative plenty in the wilderness. In the wilderness during much of the year, vegetation is scarce. Good shepherds, however, know where to find food and water for their sheep. Quiet waters again stresses the shepherd's care. Rushing waters would prove dangerous to sheep that are fairly clumsy by nature. The shepherd would either lead them to gently flowing waters or dam up a faster stream with stones to provide a pool for the sheep to drink from without fear.

David's testimony that the Lord renews his life affirmed God's refreshing of David along his life journey. God always knew what was coming next for David and provided for him accordingly. Seeing God's faithfulness again and again refreshed David like food and water refreshed sheep in the wilderness. Just as a shepherd led his sheep along the proper paths, so the Lord knew where David needed to travel to fulfill the purpose He had prepared for him.

The shepherd's reputation was at stake in the care and safety of the sheep under his charge. As David reflected on his relationship with the Lord, he knew God put His reputation at stake as He cared for David. The Lord had promised to care for His people, and He would make good on His word.

TIP: *Make sure students understand that God's guidance is needed to keep us focused on His plan. When we focus on what we think we should do, we tend to get ourselves in trouble.*

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: No matter what you are going through, God is with you.

⁴Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

—PSALM 23:4-5

PSALM 23:4-5

DISCUSS: Lead students to discuss the question, “**What keeps us from recognizing God’s presence in our lives?**”

GUIDE: Explain how God’s presence protects and comforts us and brings us courage.

As our Shepherd, God protects us. We can feel helpless and hopeless. But it is in these circumstances God is protecting us.

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

God’s presence brings about courage. Consider the dark valleys of life you must pass through. In many of them, there is really nothing you can do.

- ▶ **When school is overwhelming, all you can do is work hard—and pray.**
- ▶ **When the diagnosis comes, all you can do is take the medicine—and pray.**
- ▶ **When a relationship is on the verge of collapse, all you can do is love deeply—and pray.**

It is in prayer—connecting with the presence of God in our lives—we gain our courage. The Shepherd never leaves your side but walks with you in every dark corner of life.

SAY: And when He walks with you, victory is yours. The imagery 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 be glad because God is with us. We are the honored guests at the festivities, and God has set us apart unto Himself.

DO: Direct students to complete the **Action Point**, “Refuge.”

Refuge

When do you find yourself needing the protection of God the most? Discuss your answers with a partner and be ready to share your answer if asked.

Commentary

PSALM 23:4-5

David realized that life isn't easy. The dark valley that David walks through denotes a tight, narrow ravine of the kind that are common in Judah's wilderness. The wilderness is quite dark at night, and thus ravines are extremely dangerous for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, David affirmed that he feared no danger as he went through life. His Shepherd was guiding him, and nothing would take God by surprise. God would be with David, and nothing lay beyond His sovereign supervision.

The Hebrew word translated *rod* can refer to a club, an instrument of protection. Wild animals saw sheep as easy prey, and shepherds had to fend them off with some kind of weapon. A shepherd's staff typically was made of wood and provided him something to lean on for support and to guide his sheep as he led them through the wilderness. The staff also often had a hook—a bend in one end—to enable the shepherd to lift a sheep out of a crevice or pit. Just as a shepherd's protection and care would comfort sheep, so God's loving care and protection comforted David.

At this point in the psalm, the metaphor moves away from sheep and Shepherd to a picture of even greater intimacy—one of close fellowship as David and God enjoyed a meal together. The Lord hosted the meal and would prepare a table so He and David could enjoy their company. Such an arrangement presupposed a good level of security, though being in the presence of my enemies may not appear to suggest it. God, who was with David at every turn and who guided David's life, would protect him in every circumstance. Even David's greatest adversaries dared not approach as he dined with the King of kings.

Summer temperatures in the Judean wilderness exceed 100 degrees. The humidity is quite low and one's skin can easily become dry. Even today, a host might anoint a guest's skin with oil. Combined with a gentle breeze, this would cool David's head and refresh him. Moreover, anointing David with perfumed oil would signify God was treating David as His special guest (Luke 7:46).

"My cup overflows" indicates David had plenty to eat and drink. God treated David to a wonderful banquet that more than satisfied his appetite. It suggests the abundance of God's blessing beyond the basics. In the Lord, David had all he would ever need, including complete security. God was with him all the time, no matter what David faced.

TIP: Ask for prayer requests on the day you meet. Then, contact your students everyday for the next 7 days, reminding them how God is there for them.

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: No matter what you are going through, God is with you.

⁶ *Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.*

—PSALM 23:6

PSALM 23:6

READ: Ask a volunteer to read the following:

Psalm 23 is comforting because of what it tells us about God and what He will do on our behalf. For many people, though, their real question is not “What will God do for me?” but “Will God love me?” Most of us are looking for love and acceptance.

GUIDE: Help students understand God’s goodness and faithful love come after us—and they will be there for the rest of our lives.

- ▶ **When we feel like temptation is pursuing 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.**

As long as you have breath in your lungs and a beating heart, you have the opportunity to embrace the love that longs to embrace you.

SAY: **God has a great desire for you: that you will live with Him. That is why He pursues you. God desires to become your Shepherd and protect you in the deep, dark valleys of life. It is by His presence that you gain a sense of hope and courage. And by His goodness, you dine at the King’s table. Forever.**

DISCUSS: Ask students to answer the question, “**What does it mean that God’s goodness and love pursue you?**”



Commentary

PSALM 23:6

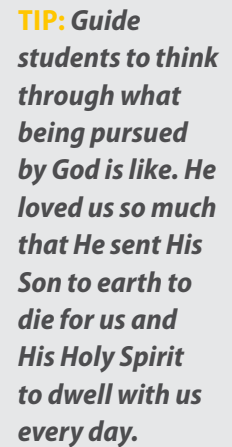
As David concluded the psalm, he continued to express confidence in his relationship with God. David's words sound certain and extra affirming. Again, David wasn't implying that he would never see hardship during his life. However, he knew he would always have the comfort of God's sustaining presence. David counted on God's goodness at life's every turn.

The Hebrew word translated *faithful love*, also translated *mercy, faithfulness, covenant love, loyalty, or grace*, is a rich theological term. It describes all the blessings that come to us because we are God's children. Goodness and faithful love are wonderful gifts of God. They would actively pursue David, just as they pursue believers today.

The phrase "all the days of my life" reflects David's confidence—he could count on God's presence and protection as long as he lived. He had begun a relationship with the Lord early in his life; he believed God would never abandon him or cease to provide for Him. The goodness and faithful love that pursued David all his days came from God and denoted God's active presence in David's life.

David's commitment to dwell in the house of the Lord was a vivid picture of a deep relationship between close friends. The phrase "house of the LORD" does not describe the temple; David's son Solomon built that after David's death (1 Kings 6–7). However, David had arranged for the ark of the Lord, the symbol of God's presence, to dwell in Jerusalem; he worshiped God there (2 Sam. 6:1–19). It's likely that David didn't intend a specific place; rather, he used the term metaphorically to mean he would enjoy God's presence forever. In Psalm 27:4, David affirmed that close fellowship with the Lord was the one thing he desired more than anything else. Indeed, God's presence is what makes heaven heaven (Rev. 21:3–4).

David said he wanted to dwell in the house of the Lord forever or as long as he lived. He wasn't specifically referring to eternity, but God's covenant and commitment to us has no end. Some interpreters, therefore, suggest the last phrase of the psalm speaks of God's love and grace beyond this life into eternity itself. Indeed, the Bible teaches that eternal life begins when we come to know the Lord (John 17:3; Eph. 1:13), so such an interpretation makes sense. For David, and for believers of all ages, dwelling in God's loving presence can be a constant in our lives even now—and in eternity our relationship with God will surpass anything we have ever known in this life (Rev. 21:1–4).



TIP: Guide students to think through what being pursued by God is like. He loved us so much that He sent His Son to earth to die for us and His Holy Spirit to dwell with us every day.

IMPACT

(10 MINUTES)

TIP: Encourage your students to complete one or both of the Live It Out activities. Send them an email, text, call, or social media message to encourage them to apply what they've learned.

APPLY IT

READ: Ask for a volunteer to read aloud a few ways students can take what they have learned and **Apply It**.

- ▶ **Identify.** Identify the circumstances in your life where you need God's presence. Take time to pray that you will be more sensitive to what God is doing in your life.
- ▶ **Review.** Discuss with your group the areas in your life where you have seen God bring victory out of troubles.
- ▶ **Share.** Share your story of how God's presence in your life has changed you.

GUIDE: Lead students to consider which of the three suggested responses to the Bible study most closely applies to them and their current circumstances.

ASK: Which of these responses do you personally need to focus on most as you live this session out? Allow time for responses.

WRAP UP

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking that God makes His presence real to your students, especially as they navigate life's difficulties. Ask the Lord that he remind your students that He is always with them.

ASK: Ask students about last week's **Live It Out** options. Discuss any responses and encourage students as they choose to apply the Bible to their lives.

GUIDE: Encourage students to complete one or both of the **Live It Out** activities for the week. Let them know you will discuss them next time you meet.



For **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/BibleStudiesForLife

LEADER LIVE IT OUT

Before the session, challenge yourself to grow with your students through this Live It Out.

Refuge | Psalm 46:1

Sometimes we can be overwhelmed by life's challenges. The Lord never promised us that our lives would be easy, but what He does promise is that He will be with us and He will help us. Write out the three biggest challenges in your life right now. Then, write out a prayer to God for each. Ask Him to help you, to reveal Himself to you, and to give you strength through these challenges.

Challenge 1:

Prayer:

Challenge 2:

Prayer:

Challenge 3:

Prayer:

Notes:

Scripture: Psalm 23:1-6

ONE CONVERSATION™

Use these discussion starters to help foster a spiritual conversation with your family.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE: When life seems to turn against us, we need someone to stand with us. We need to know we are not alone when we experience loss. God, who never disappoints or hurts us, walks with us. He provides what we need and strengthens us with His presence. Our desire should be to look back at the storm and say that we are nearer to God and now look more like Him because of His presence.

STUDENTS

THE POINT: No matter what you are going through, God is with you.

- Tell your student about a difficult season in your life when you knew God was with you.
- How did God reveal Himself to you during this time?

Discuss the following quote: "Without a shepherd, sheep are not a flock."¹ —Russian Proverb

1. "Shepherd," ThinkExist.com, [cited 2 May 2014]. Available from the Internet: <http://thinkexist.com>.

LIVE IT OUT: Your student has been encouraged to do one or both Live It Out activities in the Personal Study Guide. Here are

some suggested ways to help your student:

*If your student chooses to do **Refuge**:*

- Talk with your student about the challenges he/she chose. Spend some time praying with your student about these challenges.
- Memorize Psalm 46:1 with your student. Post it around your home as a reminder that God is always with you.

*If your student chooses to do **Encouragement Box**:*

- Help your student find materials for his/her box.
- Give your student notes of encouragement or Scripture that he/she could add to the box.