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Finding God in Times of Crisis

BY CHIP INGRAM

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Although I haven't struggled nearly as much as others, I've had a number of crises in my life. One of the most difficult crises I've ever gone through was the prelude to the biggest decision of my life.

I was twenty-three years old and ready to be married. I had met a beautiful, godly woman who had been through a lot of difficulty. She knew God like few women I'd ever known and had a passion to serve and follow Christ. In many ways, we seemed to be designed for each other. But there were complications.

When I first met Theresa, she was working at a college in West Virginia. I had gone there to look for a job. I was already leading a ministry on the campus, and I thought having a job at the school would help to make ends meet and provide a greater platform for ministry. We soon discovered we were both Christians, and she later attended a large Bible study I was leading. Within a couple of weeks, she came to the Bible study with two small twin boys. They were as cute as they could be, not much over two years old. I still remember the blue pajamas with the zippers up the front—you know, the kind little kids wear that have the feet in them. I also thought it was a shade inappropriate to bring these two small children that she was babysitting to a group made up primarily of college and early-career students. But she was young in the faith and it was understandable.

Only later did I learn Theresa wasn't babysitting. The twins were hers. She brought them on purpose, so I would know she had two children. When I found that out, my heart sank. I had no idea that she was already a mother. Although I longed to build a deeper relationship with her, this put a stop sign right there at the fork in the road. I shifted emotionally and began to resist any romantic thoughts. I determined to become her friend and nothing more. I knew I wanted to be married some day soon, but I was far from being ready to be a father.

The Plot Thickens

Theresa and I became very good friends over the next year. I struggled to keep my defenses up. She secretly prayed and believed that I might well be her future husband and father to her children. You have to remember that this was in the mid-1970s and the church was having a difficult time dealing with the rapid changes in the culture. The church's response to sin tended to emphasize legalism and judgment rather than mercy and forgiveness. I soon learned more about Theresa's background. She had gone through a devastating divorce prior to becoming a Christian. Her husband had abandoned her shortly after the twins were born. She eventually discovered her husband had been involved with another woman for well over a year prior to the birth of the boys. The marriage ended and her life was shattered. In her desperation and pain, she sought answers but could find none. At her lowest point, when she thought there was no hope or reason for living, she had a

conversation with her boss at the college. God moved him to communicate what it meant to have a relationship with Christ. Theresa learned that God loved her and had a plan for her and her boys. Just when she had run out of places to look for answers, God met her in a tiny church outside Fairmont, West Virginia. She trusted in Christ and began a journey with a group of women who were focused on intercessory prayer and learning to hear God's voice.

For the first two years of her new faith, Theresa didn't know much, except that God loved her and that when she talked with him, he listened. She saw miracle after miracle as he provided for her and her two young children. She then began to pray that God would bring a man into her life. Because she wanted to say thanks to God by giving her life in full-time service to him, she prayed that he would be a pastor. At the time I had no real desire to be a pastor. In fact, it never entered my mind. But after doing college ministry for several years, I did believe God wanted me to be a missionary. After some graduate work and further ministry on college campuses, I determined that my life direction was going to be missions.

Unexpected Turn

Meanwhile, our friendship grew. I thought I had avoided any possible romantic dangers. In fact, I vividly remember praying that God would bring a godly man into Theresa's life to be her husband. I had no idea I might be that man. Then in a most amazing way, while three thousand miles away from Theresa, I suddenly fell in love with her.

I was traveling as part of an evangelistic basketball team in Caracas, Venezuela. During a time of prayer, God unexpectedly brought Theresa to my mind. I realized for the first time that I might well be the answer to her prayer, and she might be the answer to mine. After I returned home, we began dating. Very cautiously, I got to know the boys more personally. Theresa and I made sure that we did nothing more than hold hands, as I was very fearful about the implications of our relationship on me, on her, and on the future of these young boys.

By this point, I knew that God wanted me in full-time ministry, but I was getting conflicting relationship advice from those I respected most. Many told me that God would never use my life if I married a divorced woman. Others said the Bible was very clear that when a person has a divorce prior to their conversion or has been abandoned by an unbelieving mate, God not only forgives but also restores and allows that person to remarry. I had been a Christian for only about five years and was no biblical expert. Conflicting voices and shifting emotions made my life miserable. More and more I realized that I was drawn to Theresa and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. But voices I trusted were cautioning that might not be the will of God. And yet, we could not simply stay in limbo.

The crisis was real. I faced both a great opportunity and a possible tragedy. It was the most difficult decision I ever had to make, and I didn't make it quickly. Months and months dragged on as our relationship continued to develop. Theresa and the boys were a wonderful part of my life. But I wasn't sure they were meant to be in my future. I felt my emotions and thoughts go up and down like a yo-yo. We sought God

together and asked him to show us his will. I fasted for two, three, four days at a time. I got counsel from everyone I knew. I read every book on divorce and remarriage I could find and studied every Bible passage. For months, I agonized on the sharp edge of indecision.

The usual people I loved the most had given me conflicting counsel. They all cared about me, but they all had very different ideas about what was best for my life and disagreed on what the Bible taught. I was uncertain about the most important decision of my life.

What I needed most of all was a shepherd. I needed someone to lead me and guide me and help me understand what God wanted for my life in a way I could understand. I needed to encounter God in this time of crisis. I needed to have him lead me through to the green pastures and still waters that would satisfy my deepest needs.

You may find yourself in a crisis or a transition similar to mine, or far different, but we all need a shepherd to lead us through such uncertain times. As I sought to follow God while deciding whether or not to marry Theresa, I learned some lifelong lessons that transformed my relationship with God. I discovered that all the voices in the world could never replace the voice of the Good Shepherd. I learned that God would indeed lead and guide me in paths of righteousness. I learned that he is good and that if I would learn to listen to his voice, he would clearly lead me—not around the crisis, but right through it.

PSALM 23:

The shepherd's psalm is perhaps one of the better-known passages of literature in the world. Its comforting words are read at most funerals. The familiar phrases are memorized by Sunday school children. Even people who are unfamiliar with the Bible seem to know about the "valley of the shadow of death," and they can finish the phrase, "The Lord is my _____." It's the Twenty-third Psalm.

In order to understand this psalm, we need to consider it in the historical context in which it was written. This psalm is more than a beautiful poem. When God inspired David, by the Holy Spirit, to write Psalm 23, he used words and pictures that made great sense to his contemporary Hebrews. Once we understand those ideas, they can instruct us the same way today. I will also give you a little background on sheep and shepherds, so that as you read this passage, you can grasp the full impact of what it means for Christ to be your shepherd in your time of crisis.

Psalm 23 reads:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Notice the first line. It says, "The LORD is my shepherd." The Bible includes many names for God. This title, "LORD," means Yahweh or Jehovah, God's great covenant name. This is the name by which he revealed himself to Abraham. Literally it means "I am that I am." It refers to God's transcendence, his eternal otherness. The word expresses the most comprehensive picture of God that can fill our minds. When we say "Lord" in the sense of "Yahweh," we are echoing back what only God can truly say: "I am before all else. I am self-existent. I am self-sufficient. I am holy. I am above. I am unlimited in power and resources. I am outside of time. I am eternal. Yahweh, the great I AM!" Then in a voice that calls out to our deepest longings, the Lord whispers, "I am your shepherd."

This entire psalm expresses a metaphor—sheep and a shepherd. This metaphor casts us as sheep. In fact, the Bible refers to believers as sheep over two hundred times. Unfortunately for most of us, our last close and personal encounter with sheep was likely at a petting zoo. Translation? We don't know much about sheep.

By contrast, when Hebrews heard this psalm for the first time three thousand years ago, the words connected and pictures came to mind. They grasped a new understanding about God. They learned about the intimacy God desires to have with his people. And they were introduced to a concept that would later be fully revealed by a man who said, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). We can't grasp this same understanding unless we get a clearer picture of sheep and shepherds.

A Closer Look at Sheep

Don't take this too personally, but sheep are among the densest animals God made. Sheep are slow and easily frightened. They are defenseless by nature. When sheep are in danger, they don't growl or fight back. Their wilderness skills don't add up to much. In fact, the equation apart from a good shepherd looks something like this: danger + sheep = death.

Sheep cannot find food or water without help. Every deer knows where to find food; even rabbits can locate water. Animals for the most part have keen survival skills—not sheep. Left alone, sheep will stay in one place, eat the grass down to the roots, and ruin the land. Unless someone leads them to green pastures, they'll stay there on the barren land and bleat until they die.

Sheep are so easily frightened that if a cool stream bubbles and splashes too much, they will not approach to get life-giving water because they're afraid of the sound. That's why a good shepherd will often dam up a stream and create a pool or a quiet place where the flock will not be afraid to get a drink.

A Closer Look at Hebrew Shepherds

Now before you become offended that the Bible refers to us as sheep, bear in mind how God cast himself in this metaphor. The shepherd was the lowliest job on the Hebrew social scale. Growing up in my family, the lowest job was taking out the garbage. That's the job that always got bumped down to the youngest kid. When you were in a Hebrew family, the lowest job was watching the sheep. You had to stay with them, provide for their needs, protect them, and lead them. David, the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, who became king of Israel and wrote Psalm 23, knew firsthand about shepherding.

The Shepherd's Equipment

Every shepherd's equipment included a rod and staff. The rod was a long, strong stick with a knob on the end. It was carried in the belt and was used to kill wild animals that would come around seeking a sheep to devour. A good shepherd could throw that rod with such precise aim and deadly force that he could protect the sheep from the predators.

The shepherd's other piece of equipment was a staff. You know, the tall pole with a crook at the top. You've seen it in Christmas card pictures and classic paintings of the Good Shepherd. Even Little Bo Peep carries a staff in nursery-rhyme illustrations. The shepherd's staff had many uses, but most of them involved keeping the sheep on the right path and out of trouble. The sheep, being clueless, regularly wandered off and got into thorn bushes. The crook of the staff was used to pull them out. When they strayed too close to the edge and fell into ravines, the shepherd used the crook of the staff to lift them up and pull them out. When the shepherd saw a sheep beginning to stray into dangerous territory, now and then he'd use the staff to give

them a little rap on their rear end as if to say, “Hey, we’re not doing that.” So the rod served as an instrument of protection from predators, while the staff kept the sheep on the right paths or rescued them when they got off into dangerous territory. A good shepherd knew how to use both the rod and the staff.

An Intimate Relationship Between Sheep and Shepherd

Notice that the psalm does not say, “The LORD is the shepherd.” It says, “The LORD is my shepherd.” As more than one writer has pointed out, this may be the most intimate, personal term ever given to God in the Old Testament. The Hebrew mind had been trained to resist casual references to God. They didn’t even write out God’s name because they wanted to show respect. So the opening words of this psalm may have shocked them before it comforted them.

These people understood the kind of relationship a good shepherd has with each of his sheep. He stays with them night and day, often sleeping at the doorway to the sheepfold, putting his own body between the sheep and any predator. He provides for, protects, cares for, understands, nourishes, and loves his sheep. He knows each ewe and ram by name. Each sheep must depend completely on its shepherd for life, but the shepherd also loves his sheep and is willing to risk his life to preserve theirs. This psalm took a familiar setting and applied it unexpectedly to a divine relationship. You might want to circle all the first-person pronouns in this psalm: my, I, and me. David wasn’t writing about a distant God. David knew a God who intimately cares about all his sheep.

David’s Secrets to Confidence in Times of Crisis

This psalm includes three statements in the future tense. Everything else is in the present tense. Consider them.

“I shall not be in want.”

“I will fear no evil.”

“I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

(verses 1, 4, 6)

David had been through enough to understand who God is. He had been in danger as a shepherd boy, a young soldier, and a fugitive. He had been through dangerous transitions when there was no telling how things would turn out. He knew all about crises. Somewhere along the line, the Spirit of God revealed to David the secret of having unshakable confidence, even while living with uncertain circumstances. The more David’s life and the survival of his fellows hung in the balance, the closer he walked with God. This is the kind of confidence that can help when someone has cancer and has to decide whether to take the chemotherapy or go another way. How else can someone in that situation say, “I will fear no evil”? It’s the kind of confidence that comes when you have to decide from a position of godly stewardship whether to take your money out of the market or let it ride. When your finances are uncertain and you have to decide what to do, can you say, “I shall not be in want”? When you stare into eternity at the end of your life, can you say, “I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever”? This psalm can give us that kind of confidence in God no matter what uncertainties we face or what life-or-death decisions we must make.

God Has You Covered: *Physically, Emotionally, and Spiritually*

Three key areas of personal need underlie David's words: physical, emotional, and spiritual. He reminds us that the Almighty God of the universe is committed to meeting our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. When David wrote, "He makes me lie down in green pastures," he knew that sheep don't look for the best grass on their own. The shepherd makes them go to fields where their physical needs can be met. Likewise, God will take you to places where you will be physically nourished. When David says, "He leads me beside quiet waters," he speaks of taking care of the sheep's physical needs. Sheep will not lie down in grass, graze freely, or drink from the still waters if there is friction within the flock, danger lurking outside of the flock, or parasites within their bodies. In other words, their physical needs have to be met before they can lie down.

One word of caution is in order here. God wants to fulfill the desires he has given you in his way and his time, but he doesn't necessarily follow your agenda. The promises of provision and protection stand as long as we follow and trust. When we are going through times of decision and major life transitions, we certainly should ask God to give us the desires of our hearts, understanding that he will lead us to that which is best. Sometimes that may be just what we were hoping for, as when I sought God about whether or not I should marry Theresa. Sometimes God will answer in miraculous ways. Sometimes, however, God will take us through situations we never would choose for ourselves and allow us to deal with dangerous times of following him through "the valley of the shadow of death." Whatever the circumstances, we can experience God's provision, protection, and guidance. He promises to lead us to a place where there are green pastures and quiet waters.

As we follow God through such times of transition, we can trust that he will provide not only sustenance for our physical bodies but also restoration for our souls. In verse three, the word restore literally means "to repent" or "to be converted." There will be times when God will allow a crisis in order to get us to turn around and follow his agenda. When the ancient Hebrews used the term soul, they were referring to the whole person or the self. So the idea here is that God restores us to wholeness. He takes our deepest needs and our deepest hurts, puts us on the right path, and restores us. He puts us back together. And while he's giving us his grace, turning us around and pulling us out of trouble, he's ministering to our whole being.

But that's not all. The psalm goes on to indicate what God seeks to do through us. God's purpose is not only to make us whole but also to lead us into a life that speaks to others for him. We can have confidence, like David, that God will guide us, give us direction, and show us how to walk "in paths of righteousness" or literally "the right path."

When you and I have to move forward and make important, life-changing decisions, how do we know what to choose? What's right? What's wrong? What's true? Whom should we marry? What job should we take? Should we get involved in this or not? That's when you and I need to claim God's promise that he will lead and direct us as clearly as he did David. Notice that he leads us in the right path for "his name's sake." God is more committed to revealing his will to us than we are to following it. I assure

you that if you will come to the place where you are honestly willing to do whatever God directs you to do, he will show you what to do 100 percent of the time (Ps. 32:8).

In ways we can't fathom, God orchestrates people and circumstances all around us to meet our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. David, speaking from the sheep's point of view, is confident that God will meet all his needs. And we can be confident that he'll meet all our needs too. The Valley of the Shadow of Death The little phrase "the valley of the shadow of death" describes a frequent event in the physical life of the sheep. During part of the year, the shepherd keeps his flock in the lowlands, where the grazing is good. When the weather changes and all the lush grass is up in the mountains, the shepherd leads his sheep through ravines and valleys to get to green pastures. So, in the course of changing seasons, the flock must journey through the mountains, in and out of darkness in the "valleys of shadows."

Those shadowy valleys are where the predators lie in wait to capture their prey. As sheep go through the darkness, they can't see the predators. A lion or wolf could come out, snatch a sheep, and kill it before a lax shepherd would know anything about it. When the sheep go through those valleys, they sense the danger. They know fear.

That's the scene David describes. Literally, "the valley of the shadow of death" refers to the flock's travels through unfamiliar and dangerous territory; figuratively, it relates to those dark times when you cannot make sense of what is going on around you. The promise here isn't simply that God will take us through the shadow of the fear of death but that he will take us through whatever crisis we face, no matter how fearful or dangerous. David assures us that we don't have to be afraid because God is with us, even when we go through such valleys.

When David writes, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," he is making a radical statement. He is declaring that he knows how dangerous this fallen world can be, but he refuses to give in to fear. How can he express such confidence? David simply and boldly trusts God as his shepherd to guard him against all natural disaster, all enemies, and all predators.

Note that he even cites three reasons that can give us the same kind of confidence when we go through such dangerous valleys: (1) "for you are with me," (2) "your rod," (3) "and your staff, they comfort me." Let's look at each of these.

God's Presence Equals Provision and Protection

The first reason we don't have to be afraid in the midst of crisis is because God will go through it with us. Whatever your crisis may be, whenever the darkness of your valley obscures your view of the future, whatever predators or enemies may be lying in wait, God promises, "I will be with you." Hebrews 13:5 and 6 confirms this promise, "For He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,' so that we confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?'" (NASB). God is saying, "I will always be with you and never ever leave you or forsake you." He could hardly say it any stronger. I don't understand how it works.

All I know is that in the worst and most difficult times, when we come to the end of ourselves, God's presence invisibly travels those dark valleys with us.

As a pastor, I've been with people during some of the darkest times they will ever face. I've sat next to believers in the intensive care unit after an accident has claimed their child or cancer has consumed their mate. I've stood by a brother in the smoke and dust after his business literally went up in flames. As hard as some of these moments have been, they have given me a priceless front-row seat as I watch in amazement as God's gracious, empowering presence has surrounded and supported those who have lost so much. I have seen God carry these people along in a transparent, protective bubble through the harshest and most painful early days. His presence cannot be denied. When all else fails, and we find ourselves in life's darkest moments, David reminds us that we do not have to be consumed by fear—God will be with us.

His Rod Equals Power

Earlier I noted that the shepherd's rod was a powerful weapon used to protect sheep. If you were a shepherd, you learned who the enemy was. You knew the silhouettes of wolves and the sounds of lions on the prowl. You were fully trained in the use of the rod to kill any predator. When you were taking your flock through dark and uncertain places, you'd stand ready to protect them. It made sense that the sheep would draw comfort from such powerful protections. Likewise, at times in your life when you are in dangerous territory, remind yourself that your Shepherd is with you, he has a rod—and he knows how to use it!

You and I, as God's sheep, have a deadly predator that 1 Peter 5:8 warns us about: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." This is a real danger, and when we are going through tough times, we may be more inclined to stray, which makes us even more vulnerable to the enemy of our souls. We need to remain alert and let our Shepherd lead us on the "paths of righteousness." Most importantly, we need to stay close to our Shepherd because he has the power to fend off the enemy's attacks against us. But you might ask, "How does that work? How can I stay close to the Shepherd when in my fear and insecurities I'm prone to stray?" The answer is in God's staff.

His Staff Equals God's Word

The shepherd's staff corresponds to the way God's Word functions in our lives. When a sheep strays, the shepherd taps the sheep with his staff to get him back on the safe path, thus correcting him. The shepherd uses the crook of the staff to lift a sheep out of a ditch. As the shepherd walks along, the sheep can see the staff standing tall beside him and follow it. The Bible says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). So God's Word serves the same functions as the shepherd's staff.

Following God's Word is crucial to making it through the dark valleys. I don't know about you, but when things get dark or I have to go through something that I'd

rather avoid, the enemy starts to throw lies at me, giving me ideas about shortcuts like these:

- “Hey, does your marriage seem a little stale? Turn it in and try another one.”
- “Feel bored? Depressed? Down? Go shopping!”
- “You’re tired of so and so? Ignore them.”
- “You got financial needs? Just charge it!”
- “Take life in your own hands—make yourself happy for a change.”

But those suggestions take us far from the paths of righteousness. When the valley is dark, you need to make sure you stay on the right path. When the enemy comes in and tempts you to go your own way, don’t fall for it! Follow the staff of your shepherd; follow God’s Word. I can’t tell you how many times the simple, habitual practice of getting into God’s Word every morning (regardless of how I feel) has restored my soul and kept me from disaster.

Prepare for a Banquet

God took David through the dark valleys, staying with him all the way, providing, protecting, and keeping all his promises. But life is more than difficulties and darkness. On the other side of the valley, a banquet is waiting. David’s psalm ends with a tribute to some of the highlights of a godly life.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalm 23:5–6)

In these closing verses, the psalmist does something interesting. He takes the sheep-and-shepherd metaphor and gently lays it on the shelf. Then he comes over and reaches for another metaphor common to his culture. He’s not going to end this psalm on a negative note. He’s going to celebrate the fullness of God’s character and what he has in store for those who follow him even in the midst of crisis. So the metaphor changes to a banquet. In sharp contrast to the darkness of the valley and the dangers of the journey, David writes of a feast, a celebration filled with food, music, joy, and happy relationships. God serves as the gracious host.

A Table Is Prepared

As the door of the banquet hall swings open, David sees a wonderful sight. He says in wonder, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” This is a great picture. In the ancient Near Eastern culture, eating a meal meant far more than going to a fast-food restaurant. It was a fellowship, especially a banquet. To “prepare a table” gives the idea of a big celebration. After a great military victory, the general who won would literally ride in on a white horse (such imagery can also be found in Psalm 68:4, 14, 17–18, 33 and Ephesians 4:8). He would enter the gates with his troops, bringing in the plunder and then all the captives. While the defeated foe watched, the people would hold a great celebration, giving credit to their gods for the great victory. This would lead to a grand feast. Such banquets were held to publicly declare that the victor’s god was greater than the gods of the vanquished.

This idea of fellowship at a banquet table, and the closeness of such fellowship, can be seen many places in Scripture, especially in passages that foretell our final victory feast in heaven. David may have started this psalm with the truth that we are like sheep, following our shepherd through difficult and dangerous transitions, but he ended it with thoughts of eternity. The way we find the courage to keep following God is to look forward to the victory he assures us is ours in the future. God is calling us to enter in. He's assuring us that even though we go through crises in this life, he is leading us on to certain victory over our enemies.

Abundant Joy, Overflowing

Notice the phrase "you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows." In biblical days, the host of a huge victory banquet anointed the guests as they arrived. The host would take olive oil, mix it with perfume and spices, and pour it on the guests as an honor. This was also an official welcome to a celebration. The act announced, "You are special!"

Once the guests were seated, the servants kept the cups overflowing to underscore the welcome and joy. God is not giving out goodness in eyedroppers. The overflowing cup is a symbol of abundance and joy. It's not, "Watch how much you eat. No second helpings!" Instead, these details convey the idea: "There's the table. It is filled. It is all for you. It is lavish, and there's plenty more where that came from." It's a picture of God's goodness. He wants to do good things for us—spiritually and in every other way.

Look at What's Following You

"Surely goodness and love will follow me." The word follow here actually means "pursue." That's right, God is actually pursuing you with his love and goodness. While it is true that we live in a fallen world, David assures us that our lives are watched over by a good God who makes sure that goodness and love (mercy) will follow us all the days of our lives. The word goodness literally means "lavish love." Mercy is a word that refers to God's steadfast, loyal, and covenant commitment to you that never stops. God's mercy doesn't just lag along behind you—it's pursuing you. How long? All the days of your life.

Look What Your Future Holds

Psalm 23 ends with this assurance, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." That is David's third and final confident affirmation. He sees God as his Shepherd, who promises an abundant life now and forever. Remember what Jesus said in John 10:10? "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (NASB). The word abundantly literally means "spilling over, overflowing." It doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to drive fancy cars, have a great house, and never have a problem. It means you're going to overflow from the inside out, having more than enough to get you through whatever you have to go through because God is with you and will take you all the way through all life's transitions, until you arrive in his house

and rejoice there forever! It can be rich, it can be deep, it can be powerful, it can be wonderful, and it can be that regardless of what dark valleys you have to go through along the way. That's what it means to have an abundant life—here and hereafter. And to punctuate his purpose, immediately after promising us abundant life, Jesus reveals his identity: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11 NASB).

God will demonstrate his abundance in surprising ways to those who trust him. We can experience his presence as our Good Shepherd every day.

The Rest of the Story

My journey was a difficult one as I struggled to follow God and make the right decision about getting married. In ways that were unmistakable and even supernatural, God showed Theresa and me it was in fact his will and his best for us to marry. God brought us (me in particular) through the shadows of the valley of indecision. I experienced his patient shepherding in my life.

That was over twenty-five years ago. I'm now the proud father of those young twin boys. In the providence of God, I had the opportunity to adopt them. Our relationship is beyond my wildest dreams in terms of intimacy and love for one another. The father-son connection didn't happen overnight. In fact, it took years for the bond to grow. Eric is now a physical therapist. I marvel as I watch God use him to bring life and healing to others. Jason is a Christian songwriter and worship leader who is in full-time ministry, using the talents given him by God. They are not only my sons but two of my closest friends. I can't imagine life without them.

As a special bonus, God granted us two other children. Our third son, Ryan, is a youth pastor. He, like his older brother, takes after his mom. He is musically gifted, a great teacher, and loves to share Christ. Our youngest is a girl who came along a little bit later in our life. Annie is now a vibrant college student. She grew up in a home with three older brothers, who are all quite protective and have helped her become a beautiful, godly woman. She has a heart to serve others, is gifted musically, and is mature beyond her years.

This may sound a little bit like a fairy tale, but it's not. I'm sharing the wonderful results. The process has been hard. Many decisions along the way were tough, and the original crisis was real. But God does promise a banquet table, and my family has turned out better than my wildest dreams. We don't have it all together, and every day is not a big party, but our relationships are rich and deep. Our love for each other is solid. God has granted me the deepest desires of my heart. The Good Shepherd took me through the shadow of the valley of death, and his goodness and his mercy have pursued me ever since.

I know some reading these words are in the midst of intense pain and crisis. You long for the dark valley to end and the banquet table to appear. You want to honor God, but it's difficult and you may not know how. I'd like to close this chapter by giving you four practical life lessons from Psalm 23 to help you experience God as your shepherd in your time of crisis.

LIFE LESSON 1: Make the Lord Your Shepherd

Allow Christ to be Lord of your life; make him your shepherd. Stop right now and submit your will, your agenda, your future, and your fears to him. If you do, then all these promises in Psalm 23 apply to you.

The other option is to say, “You know something? I’m a pretty big sheep. I’ll go graze where I think I’ll be fulfilled. I’ll follow the other sheep and go where I think it’ll be fun.” What happens when a real sheep does that? It soon has big problems. The same holds true for people. You see, the biggest problem in our lives is not that God is mean or that he doesn’t really care about us; the biggest problem comes from the fact that down deep in our hearts we are proud and self-sufficient. Most people want to be both the sheep and the shepherd. I know that’s how I was before I began following Jesus, and I continue to struggle with that to some degree every day. So the first step is to admit that you are a sheep in need of a shepherd, and then ask the Lord to be your shepherd. He wants to help you!

LIFE LESSON 2: Follow the Lord as Your Shepherd

Knowing what is right to do and doing it are two different things. God cares about you far more than you can imagine. He knows the dangers, the pain, the hurt, and the fear that you feel. He wants what’s best for you and wants to lead you and direct you even more than you want to be led. Choose to do what you know is right according to Scripture even when every fiber in your being wants to bail out. If you will follow, he will lead you in paths of righteousness. You will, in the midst of your crisis, endure short-term pain. But if you will follow by faith, you will experience long-term gain. Trust him.

LIFE LESSON 3: Refuse to Let Fear Dominate Your Life

Do this especially during times of transition, when things are uncertain and you have to make decisions that have momentous consequences. We learn this from David’s declaration, “I will fear no evil.” Fearless living is a choice. God is willing to see us through, but we have to be strong and courageous to continue following him through those valleys. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is trusting God and his Word even when circumstances seem impossible. Memorize Isaiah 40:31, and say it often when you feel fear’s grip upon your soul:

But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

LIFE LESSON 4: Get in the Scripture Daily

God told another ancient, wise sheep, Joshua, “Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left” (Josh. 1:7 NASB). Why? So that you may have success wherever you go. The word careful literally means “to observe”;

it means to look into for the purposes of putting into practice. God was telling Joshua, "I want you to follow my instructions down to the detail, doing everything that I commanded Moses." God showed David the same truth. The more we know of God's Word and the more we make it a part of us, the more power it has to comfort, convict, direct, and empower us.

Why Follow the Lord as Your Shepherd?

Why does God want us to let him be our shepherd and follow the life lessons above? For the same reasons David understands when he says, "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." When the Lord is our Shepherd, good results will follow. God gave Joshua the same reason, "That you may be successful wherever you go" (Josh. 1:7). The word successful literally means "to be prudent." It has the idea of seeking after God and following him in such a way that you will actually live your life according to his plan. Success here didn't guarantee that Joshua would get a new chariot or you a new BMW. The success you'll have if you will follow the Lord and his Word, not turning to the right or the left, is that you can be guided in the same way that Moses, Joshua, and David were guided by God.

The success promised here is that you will be able to discern what to do in every situation, trusting that God can lead you and make your way prosperous. The Hebrew word here for prosperous literally means "you will make your way with power and ability to fulfill the will of God." Be strong and courageous; don't tremble; don't be dismayed. Why? For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Keep following the Lord as your shepherd.

Trust in his provision, his presence, and his power to protect you. Keep following his Word. Then he will fulfill his promise to take you to the green pastures and still waters you long for. He will lead you on to celebrate victory in this life and in the one to come.

Note: This is an excerpt from *Finding God When You Need Him Most*. To find more resources to help you grow closer to God, visit **LivingontheEdge.org**.

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