

The Lord is My Shepherd

(Psalm 23:1a)

Pre-Session Warm Up

[Teacher, bring a box filled with the following items: food items, jug of water, first aid kit, directional compass, binoculars, shield, receipt, hat with a label reading “manager,” and a blanket. On the box write, “*Property of the shepherd,*” but cover the words “*the shepherd*” with a piece of paper so those words cannot be seen.]

Many people use different tools in their jobs. For example, what types of tools do teachers at school use? (Pencils, pens, erases, books, and so forth.) I have several things in this box that someone would use on a certain type of job. As I pull out each one, I'll give you a clue and you try to guess who would use these things in their job.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Clue</i>
Food items	This person makes sure food is always provided. Any guesses?
Bottle of water	This person makes sure there is always water to drink. Any guesses?
First aid kit	This person makes sure care is provided.
Compass or map	This person leads and guides those in their care.
Binoculars	This person watches over those in their care.
Shield	This person protects those in their care.
Receipt	This person owns those in their care.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Clue</i>
Hat	This person manages those in their care.
Blanket	This person comforts those in their care.

[If a child guesses correctly during this, then ask them *how* a shepherd would use each of the remaining items.]

Can anyone guess what type of person provides food, water, care, guidance, protection and watching over, ownership, management, and comfort to those in their care? [Pull the cover off “*the shepherd*” on the box.] It is the job of a shepherd to do all of these things for the sheep in their care. Wow! That’s a lot of hard work. But you know, shepherds do their jobs because they love their sheep.

The Bible tells us that “*The LORD is my shepherd.*” What do you think that means? Today we begin a new series of lessons on the 23rd Psalm and we’re going to find out what our Shepherd, Jesus, has to say about this.

Opening Prayer

Father, teach us today what it means that You are the shepherd of our souls. We want to know you better and love you more. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Memory Verse

What are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them? (Psalm 8:4 NLT)

Lesson

[Teacher, before you start the lesson, gather these materials:

- Action figure
- Cards with these verses printed on them: 1 Peter 5:7, 1 Peter 5:8, and Hebrews 13:5
- Bible
- Fake ear
- Recording of various student's parent's voices
- Receipt
- Paper with many names written out (use names of children in your class for some)
- Bowl of grapes or marbles
- Box with contents from Pre-Session Warm Up

The Pharisees were the leaders of the Jewish religion. They spent their lives studying the scriptures and were full of pride. It made them angry when Jesus taught people about the Kingdom of God. They figured that they were the experts about the things of God. And, who was Jesus, anyway? He hadn't even been to school! So, they tried to trick Jesus by asking him lots of questions. They thought they could catch him in saying something that was wrong. [Teacher, see note about the passage in Ezekiel 34 at the end of this lesson.]

One day Jesus performed a mighty miracle – He gave a blind man the ability to see! As usual, this miracle caused a big stir with the Pharisees. They began to ask Jesus some questions but instead of answering their questions directly, Jesus started talking about shepherds and sheep.

John 10:1-5

"I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber!

*(2) But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. (3) The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and **the sheep recognize his voice** and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (4) After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and **they follow him** because they know his voice. (5) They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice."*

When Jesus lived on earth, many people took care of sheep. His listeners knew exactly what he was talking about. They all knew that some shepherds took very good care of their sheep. Their animals ate well and slept in safety. And, they also knew that some shepherds, especially those that were hired to watch someone else's sheep, were often careless. When danger came, shepherds who did not own the sheep, would often run away and leave the sheep unprotected.

A good shepherd, on the other hand, was willing to do anything to save his sheep — even if he had to give up his own life.

Sheep know if their shepherd is a good shepherd or not. Jesus described how sheep listen for the shepherd's voice and know it from anyone else's voice. [Pull out the fake ear and talk about listening for the voice.]

Jesus said that the sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd. And if they have a good shepherd, they will hear their shepherd's voice and trust it. In that way the shepherd can lead the sheep out by name because they will follow his voice. Jesus said that sheep will never follow a stranger; they will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice.

I want to play a recording for you all and I want you to tell me if you recognize the voice. [Play the recording you made.] Do you know that voice? Just as you could easily recognize that the voice, so it is with sheep. They recognize their own shepherd's voice! And, they know when it's not the shepherd!

But the Pharisees didn't understand what Jesus was talking about. So, Jesus tries to explain it to them.

John 10:6-10

*Those who heard Jesus use this illustration didn't understand what he meant, (7) so he explained it to them: "I tell you the truth, **I am the gate** for the sheep. (8) All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. (9) Yes, **I am the gate**. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. (10) The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.*

Jesus compared Himself to the gateway into a sheep pen. Jesus was speaking in figurative language—in *word pictures*. *Word Pictures* paint ideas in your mind that help you to understand things more clearly. This made a lot of sense to Jesus' listeners.

A sheepfold is an area to keep the sheep. [Hold up the bowl with the grapes. Pour the grapes out and scatter them across the table.] This won't work. All of our grapes are scattered all over the table. I'd better put them together in one place. [Pick up the grapes, putting them in the bowl.] Like this bowl with the grapes, the sheepfold is used to keep the sheep from wandering off.

Jesus' listeners knew that a sheepfold had only one opening. There was no gate across that entrance. The shepherd himself would lie in the opening — he became the gate. Then no one could go in or out of the pen unless they went by him. The sheep were safe as long as the shepherd was at the opening.

Jesus wanted His listeners to understand the spiritual meaning of what He was saying. Jesus was using a word picture to tell people that He is the only One who can grant us entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Once you are in His kingdom, you can rest safely, knowing that Jesus is your protector.

Jesus then made a very bold declaration.

John 10:11-13

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. (12) A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. (13) The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.

When Jesus said, "*I am the Good Shepherd*," He wasn't talking about being a shepherd of sheep! Jesus was saying that just as a shepherd cares for sheep, He cares for us! [Teacher, hold up each item from the box from the Pre-Session Warm Up.]

Food items	He makes sure that we, as His "sheep," have spiritual food to help us grow in godliness.
Bottle of water	have spiritual water so that we aren't thirsty for righteousness.
First aid kit	are cared for both physically and spiritually.
Compass or map	are guided correctly and led in our lives to be more like Jesus.
Binoculars & Shield	are watched over and protected both physically and spiritually.
Receipt	are owned by Him.
Hat	when we ask Him into our hearts, He manages us and maintains us so that we are living our lives for Him and not selfishly for ourselves.
Blanket	are comforted when we are in need of comfort.

As our Good Shepherd, Jesus makes sure that we are well cared for. Sheep can't take care of themselves. Did you know that if a sheep falls down on its back, it can't get upright again without help? They need a shepherd to set them right. Isn't it wonderful to have such a Good Shepherd!

John 10:14-16

*"I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, (15) just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I **sacrifice my life for the sheep.** (16) I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.*

Jesus also goes on to say that the Good Shepherd risks and lays down His life for His sheep. [Hold up the Action Figure.] Jesus tells us that someone who has been hired to watch over sheep, but doesn't love them or own them, won't care to stick around and fight off the wolves that come to kill and eat the sheep. But, as the Good Shepherd, Jesus does love us and owns us [hold up the receipt] so He was willing to risk His life for us. In fact, the wolves of sin were eating the flock so much, that Jesus gave His life to save us, stopping the wolves! Now that's some caring! [Throw the Action Figure and receipt in the box.]

In fact, our job as a "sheep" in His flock is very simple: [Take out verse card for 1 Peter 5:7 and have one of the children read it.]

1 Peter 5:7

Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you.

Our job is to let go of all our cares and concerns and give them to the Good Shepherd, Jesus. He will take care of you! [Throw the verse card back into the box.]

The Lord loves His "sheep." As our Good Shepherd, Jesus makes a promise that He will provide us with everything we need. As a

shepherd protects his sheep from lions and bears, Jesus protects us from our enemy, the Devil, who is seeking to devour us.

[Take out verse card for 1 Peter 5:8 and have one of the children read it.]

1 Peter 5:8

Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

Since Jesus, your Good Shepherd, gave His life on the cross to pay for your sin, you can surely trust Him to stay with you throughout your life, supplying all your needs. [Throw the verse card back into the box.]

[Take out verse card for Hebrews 13:5 and have one of the children read it.]

Hebrews 13:5b

For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you."

Wow! As big and awesome a God as He is, He knows you by name and cares for you as if you were His only one. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, knows us all personally, by name. [Hold up the page with names written on it.] What a neat thing this is. He knows us each so well—better than we know ourselves!

Jesus also says that as His sheep, we can know and recognize His voice as our Shepherd. How is that possible? [Hold up the Bible.] We become familiar with His voice as we read His Word. And as we become familiar with it, we'll follow Him as a sheep follows its shepherd!

Finally, Jesus tells us that all His sheep will be brought together as one flock (John 10:16). The Pharisees, who were listening to Jesus, thought that the Jews were the only ones in the whole world that were going to go to heaven. But Jesus came to die for the sins of the world

(John 3:16). God had chosen the Jewish people to be His messengers of the Good News. But they had missed the point. Jesus wants everyone be to a sheep in His sheepfold.

Sheep in a shepherd's flock receive a mark or a tag on their ear, identifying them as members of that flock. Jesus doesn't want to put a mark or a tag in your ear, but He does want to put His mark on your heart. All the wonderful benefits of the shepherd, the Good Shepherd, can only be yours if you become a part of His flock.

Once you become one of Jesus' sheep, you can truly say, "*The Lord is MY shepherd!*"

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for being our Good Shepherd and for laying Your life down for us. We can rest safely, knowing that You are protecting us from anything that could harm us or lead us away from You. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Learning Activities

Craft Corner

Psalm 23 Keepsake Wall Hanging

Provide various craft materials so that your students can make a decorative plaque of the 23rd Psalm. This will help them to keep this famous poem in their hearts forever. Encourage them to memorize the whole psalm over the course of this lesson series. Perhaps, award them with a special gift to commemorate their achievement.

Game Center

Who's That?

Select one child to stand in the middle of the room. Put a blindfold on the child so he/she cannot see. Direct the other children to quietly walk to another place in the room. One by one, have the children say the name of the child in the middle of the room. After each child says the name, the child in the middle of the room must guess who said his/her name. The goal is for the child in the middle of the room to guess each person solely by hearing his/her voice. Allow each child to have a turn in the middle of the room as time permits.

When finished say, "*Just like you knew each person by only hearing their voice, sheep know the shepherd's voice and will not follow another person's voice. We, as Jesus' sheep, must know His voice, and only listen to and follow Him.*"

Like Sheep Among Wolves

Place a row of food items in the middle of the room. Separate the children into two groups. One group is the *sheep*. The other group is the *wolves*. Have the *sheep* stand against one wall and the *wolves* against the other wall. Each respective wall is "safe." Select one child to be the *shepherd* and give him/her a nerf ball. Say: In order to live, the *sheep* must get the food items from the middle of the room and return them to their home base. *Wolves*, you want to catch the *sheep*, but the *shepherd* is guarding them. *Shepherd*, you are to protect your *sheep* from the *wolves* by throwing the ball at them. If the *shepherd* hits a *wolf* with the ball, that *wolf* is out of the game and must sit down. *Sheep*, if you are tapped by a *wolf*, you are out of the game and must sit down. Both the *wolves* and the *sheep* are safe when touching their home base wall. Once you leave the wall, however, you may be caught.

Play the game as time permits. Select different children to be the *shepherd*, *sheep*, and *wolves*.

Just like the shepherd protected the sheep, so Jesus cares for, protects, and saves us from anything that would harm us and lead us away from Him.

Or, use the following review questions in a time of discussion or a game of your choice:

1. What types of jobs does a shepherd do for the sheep? (Provides food, water, care, guidance, protection and watching over, ownership, management, and comfort to those in their care.)
2. How is Jesus like a Good Shepherd? (He was willing to even lay down His life for us so that we could be found spiritually.)
3. When Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd" what does that tell you about God? (He protects us from our enemy — the Devil, watches over us, and provides for our spiritual needs.)
4. How did Jesus prove that He was a good shepherd? (He gave His life on the cross to pay for our sin.)
5. Why did Jesus compare Himself to the door of a sheep pen? How is He like a gate? (He is the only One who can grant us entrance into the kingdom of heaven.)

Note to teacher: read Ezekiel 34 regarding God's Woe to the bad Shepherd. When Jesus was telling this story, He was hoping that the Pharisees, who would have been quite familiar with the following passage from Ezekiel, would understand that God wanted them to be good shepherds over their flocks of people:

Ezekiel 34

Then this message came to me from the LORD:

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So My sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them.

"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, you abandoned My flock and left them to be attacked by every wild animal. And though you were My shepherds, you didn't search for My sheep when they were lost. You took care of yourselves and left the sheep to starve. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I now consider these shepherds My enemies, and I will hold them responsible for what has happened to My flock. I will take away their right to feed the flock, and I will stop them from feeding themselves. I will rescue My flock from their mouths; the sheep will no longer be their prey.

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I Myself will search and find My sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find My sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live. Yes, I will give them good pastureland on the high hills of Israel. There they will lie down in pleasant places and feed in the lush pastures of the hills. I Myself will tend My sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign LORD. I will search for My lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!

"And as for you, My flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says to His people: I will judge between one animal of the flock and another, separating the sheep from the goats. Isn't it enough for you to keep the best of the pastures for yourselves? Must you also trample down the rest? Isn't it enough for you to drink clear water for yourselves? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Why must My flock eat what you have trampled down and drink water you have fouled?"

"Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will surely judge between the fat sheep and the scrawny sheep. For you fat sheep pushed and butted and crowded My sick and hungry flock until you scattered them to distant lands. So I will rescue My flock, and they will no longer be abused. I will judge between one animal of the flock and another. And I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David. He will feed them and be a shepherd to them. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be a prince among My people. I, the LORD, have spoken!"

"I will make a covenant of peace with My people and drive away the dangerous animals from the land. Then they will be able to camp safely in the wildest places and sleep in the woods without fear. I will bless My people and their homes around My holy hill. And in the proper season I will send the showers they need. There will be showers of blessing. The orchards and fields of My people will yield bumper crops, and everyone will live in safety. When I have broken their chains of slavery and rescued them from those who enslaved them, then they will know that I am the LORD. They will no longer be prey for other nations, and wild animals will no longer devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will frighten them.

"And I will make their land famous for its crops, so My people will never again suffer from famines or the insults of foreign nations. In this way, they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them. And they will know that they, the people of Israel, are My people, says the Sovereign LORD. You are My flock, the sheep of My pasture. You are My people, and I am your God. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!"

Psalm 23

A Psalm of David

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul;

He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I 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 have anointed my head with oil;

My cup overflows.

*Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of
my life,*

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

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