

# You Prepare a Table Before Me

(Psalm 23:5a)

## Pre-Session Warm Up

We've been learning the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. So far we've looked at the first four verses: *"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."*

We've learned that because the Lord is our shepherd, we have all that we need.

- He gives us peace and joy in our lives so that we might rest in the knowledge of His love and care for us.
- He quenches our inner thirst as we spend quiet time with Him reading His Word, praying, and worshipping Him.
- When our relationship with our Good Shepherd is broken, He tenderly and lovingly picks us up and restores us to a right relationship with Him.
- He guides us along the right paths in life so that our lives will bring honor to His name.
- When we walk through the dark valleys in our lives, we don't need to be afraid because our Good Shepherd is close by. He never stops leading and protecting us!
- He has given us the tools we need for life. Our "rod" is the Word of God which teaches us how to live a God-honoring life. And, our "staff" is the Holy Spirit, Who is our comforter and the One who leads us into all truth and gives us the power we need to live a sanctified life—set apart for God's use.

Today we will learn about one of the most important jobs a shepherd has—a good shepherd goes before his flock to prepare a place for them.

## Opening Prayer

Father, show us Your love and Your care in new ways today as we consider that no matter what we're going through in our lives, You have gone there first and have checked it all out for us. You are going ahead of us and preparing the way for us. What a comfort! In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. (Matthew 25:34)*

## Lesson

If you were expecting 100 people over to your house for a dinner, what would you need to do to get ready? [Teacher, entertain ideas.]

Well, first you would have to figure out who you wanted to invite. Then you would need to figure out what you were going to feed them and then you would have to make a list. Then, of course, you would have to clean your house. Then you would need to decide how you were going to decorate the table and when to start the cooking. Wow, there would be tons to do to prepare for your guests, wouldn't there.

We learned a couple of weeks ago how every spring, shepherds lead their flocks up through the valleys to the high mountaintops where it is cool. These summer grazing ranges in the high mountains are known as "tablelands". In Spanish, the word for such a place is "mesa," which means "table."

These mesas, or mountaintop meadows, are great for grazing because that is where the best grass is found.

Get the picture? Sheep grazing in a luxurious pasture on a high mountain plain—sounds like a picture post card, doesn't it? But, wait! There could be some things that aren't good for sheep, such as poisonous plants, roots, and berries, as well as, dangerous predators such as coyote, cougar, wolf, or even snakes.

So, one of the most important jobs the shepherd has is to prepare these choice mountain meadow lands *before* the sheep get there. Before the sheep arrive, there is a lot of work to do to get the place ready for the flock. Just like if you were planning to feed 100 people.

The shepherd needs to get rid of the poisonous things so the sheep won't eat them. Next, he needs to drive away as many of the predators as he can that are lurking around, like rattle snakes. And, he also needs to clean out the watering holes so the sheep will be able to drink.

All of this preparation takes place long before the sheep get there. It's a lot of hard work and it can take a lot of time. But because the shepherd loves his sheep and wants to see them enjoy the tablelands, the shepherd is willing to sacrifice himself so that his sheep will have a "mountaintop" experience.

In the same way that a shepherd prepares the meadows for the sheep in the presence of the sheep's enemies (the poisonous plants, poor grass, predators, and the lack of water), Jesus, our Good Shepherd, has prepared a place for us in the presence of our enemy, the devil.

Jesus, Who is God, stepped out of Heaven and became a man. He came to rip out the poisonous roots of sin, to destroy the work of our deadly predator, Satan, and dig holes for His living water so that we could enjoy the abundant life.

John 10:10b

*My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.*

As a shepherd goes before his sheep to prepare the meadow, Jesus has prepared the way for us to have an abundant life!

How has He eliminated our most dangerous predator, Satan? By dying on the cross for us and offering us forgiveness and everlasting life.

Though life with Jesus has "valley" times when we are fearful and struggle with sin, we also enjoy the abundant "mountaintop" times, too. Jesus is the same Good Shepherd through it all. We may still be stung by the poison of sin or be surprised by predators on the mountaintop—but, we can trust that our Shepherd will keep us safe.

### **Bible Lesson**

As the time for Jesus to die on the cross was drawing near, He spoke some very important words to His disciples while eating their last supper together.

Luke 22:29-30

*And just as My Father has granted Me a Kingdom, I now grant you the right (30) to eat and drink at My **table** in My Kingdom. And you will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

Jesus was telling His disciples about the "table" He was preparing for them to eat from in the heavenly kingdom and the thrones they would sit on when they got there.

Wow! Jesus told His disciples that He was going on ahead of them to prepare a place for them! And these promises are for us, too.

John 14:1-3 [still at the Last Supper]

*"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. (2) There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? (3) When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.*

He left His disciples here on earth so they could tell others about Him and what He had come to earth to do—to die on the cross to take the punishment we all deserve for all the naughty things we do.

But He didn't leave us all by ourselves, He sent the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us and to give us strength and power to live a God-honoring life while we wait for our turn to go to heaven.

John 14:25-26

*I am telling you these things now while I am still with you. (26) But when the Father sends the Advocate as My representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—He will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.*

Jesus told His disciples these things right before He went back up to Heaven. He didn't want them to feel abandoned after He left. He wanted to assure them that they would not be left alone. The Holy Spirit is with us at all times. He is invisible, but He is very real. He is the one that teaches us everything and reminds us of everything that we have learned about Jesus. The Holy Spirit also convicts us of our sins.

John 16:5-8

*“But now I am going away to the one who sent me, and not one of you is asking where I am going. (6) Instead, you grieve because of what I've told you. (7) But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you. (8) And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment.*

After He left them, Jesus' disciples still had to contend with the enemy, the devil, who wanted to destroy the disciples. Satan thought if he could get Jesus' followers to stop telling others about Jesus, he could put an end to Christianity before it even got started! Satan, the enemy of God, wanted to harm the disciples and stop them from doing any good for Jesus, just as he does today.

But Jesus, like a Good Shepherd, had already gone before His sheep to prepare the land to eliminate the predator and the poison of sin.

Matthew 25:34 (the verse for this lesson)

*Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world.*

Jesus had planned since before He created the world that He would go to the cross for us so that we might be able to come to heaven with Him. When Jesus explained these things to His disciples, it strengthened them. It gave them courage and confidence.

Thank God Jesus has prepared the way for us to be forgiven of our sins and to live eternally with Him. He has gone before us to prepare a place for us!

There's no place the sheep will go that the shepherd hasn't gone to first and checked it out for them. In the same way, there is no place or situation we will ever face that Jesus hasn't been to and checked it out for us. Jesus cares so much about us as our Shepherd that He goes before us in every area of our life to prepare the situation before we get there.

What a comfort! No matter what you're going through, Jesus has gone before you to root out the evil, to destroy the predators and make water available. Whether we are in the valley or on the mountaintop (the tableland), we know that *“He prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies!”*

## Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that you have gone before us in every situation that we will ever face. You have prepared the way for us. If we would but trust You, You will lead us along the right paths in life and we will arrive safely wherever our lives lead us. Thank you for being such a good and caring Shepherd. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

## Learning Activities

### *Piece of Cake*

#### **Materials:**

Put the following items in a large bag or box:

- one box of cake or muffin mix (or a no-bake cookie recipe)
- ingredients needed in the mix, and other ingredients not needed, like ketchup, mustard, pancake syrup, juice, flour, sugar, and so forth
- many kitchen utensils, including ones you will not need! For example, bring many cups and measuring spoons of various sizes as well as forks, spatulas, and so forth; many different sizes of bowls some obviously too small to mix the cake batter in, and various sizes of baking dishes.

Give the cake mix or recipe to the children and tell them that they must prepare the snack. Show them the instructions. Dramatically dump all the utensils and possible ingredients out on the floor so they make a huge mess. *Say:* Just like the shepherd must work hard to get rid of the bad things for the sheep, you must get rid of the bad utensils and ingredients and choose the good ones to make a snack.

Allow children to work together to make the batter. Give as little help as possible and let the children struggle to find the appropriate materials. When needed, give a little guidance. Once the batter is made and poured in the pan, bake the cake, if an oven is available. Have a pre-baked cake ready to use for the snack if there is no oven or if there is not enough time.

*Say:* Wow! You worked hard to prepare the snack. In the same way, Jesus prepared the way for you to have an abundant life! He worked hard to get rid of the things that you didn't need. When finished, share the snack!

## Game Center

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

1. What did Jesus tell the disciples He was going to do for them at the beginning of the story? (He was going on ahead of them to prepare a place for them)
2. Why did Jesus tell them this? (He didn't want them to feel abandoned after He left.)
3. Who did Jesus say He was going to send in His place? (The Holy Spirit.)
4. What did Jesus say that the Holy Spirit would do for them? (He will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment.)
5. How did Jesus act as the Shepherd in this story? (Jesus has gone before us to root out the evil, to destroy the predators and make water available.)