

A photograph of two sheep drinking from a pond in a green field. The sheep are in the foreground, with their heads down to the water. The background is a lush green field. The text is overlaid on the image.

STILL WATERS

**A PRAYERFUL GUIDE TO
FOLLOWING JESUS AS SHEPHERD**

AARON BAUER

Still Waters

A Prayerful Guide to Following Jesus as
Shepherd

Aaron Bauer

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Dedication:

To all who have wandered enough to realize their need for The Good Shepherd.

Acknowledgments:

Thank you to my family, friends, and faith community who have walked this journey with me, encouraged my heart, and shared their stories of thirst and satisfaction.

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Preface

W elcome to *Still Waters: A Prayerful Guide to Following Jesus as Shepherd*.

This book is born out of both joy and concern. Over decades of ministry, I have witnessed the comfort and challenge of the Shepherd's care. Yet I have also seen a troubling reality: many of us know the Shepherd's name, but few have learned to listen for His voice or follow His lead in the grit and grace of daily life. How do we follow Jesus when He's not physically present? Are we meant to hear His voice audibly, or is there another way to discern His guidance?

This book invites you on a journey through Psalm 23—a journey that moves from personal restoration, through valleys and abundance, into the richness of community, and ultimately to the hope of God's renewed creation where we truly find our home. Each chapter is anchored in a phrase from this beloved psalm, tracing a path from the Shepherd's gentle leading to the promise of dwelling with Him forever.

You won't find formulas or distant theory here. Instead, you'll encounter honest questions, robust engagement with scripture, and practical prompts that invite you to bring your real story—your doubts, longings, and need for guidance—into the presence of the Good Shepherd. Each chapter weaves together biblical reflection, per-

sonal story, and spiritual practices, helping you not only hear the Shepherd's voice, but also discover your place in His flock and your hope in His promise to dwell with us forever.

Whether you're reading alone, with a friend, or in a group, this book is designed to help you:

- Recognize the difference between being driven by the world and being gently led by Jesus.
- Hear the Shepherd's voice above the noise of life.
- Experience His care, correction, abundance, and overflowing blessing in every season.
- Move from passive belief to active, loyal following.
- Find your place in a community shaped by the Shepherd's love.
- Anchor your hope in the promise of God's renewed creation—where heaven and earth meet, and home is found in His presence.

This book is, in many ways, my five-star review of Jesus as Shepherd. Like the old hymn says, *"Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take Him at His word, just to rest upon His promise..."* My own story is one of learning—often the hard way—that you truly can trust Him. Even in seasons when I tried to take the lead or when grief and disappointment clouded my trust, I have found Him to be gentle, faithful, and magnetically drawn to my need.

If you're ready to move beyond just questions and curiosities and into a living, listening relationship with Jesus—one that leads you

from restoration, through valleys and community, to the hope of God's new creation—let's begin this journey together.

Introduction

Thirty years ago, when I began my full-time pastoral ministry, I thought it was the most natural thing to ask people in church, “Where has following Jesus taken you this week?” The blank stares I received were both surprising and concerning. It seemed that many had not signed up for actually following Jesus in their daily lives.

That shock became a turning point for me. I realized that for many, faith was about holding the right beliefs or hoping Jesus would fix their problems—not about actually listening for His voice or trusting His lead through life’s intersections, storms, and seasons of abundance and lack. I was still young, but to me it seemed natural: you just do what Jesus says and follow Him where He goes. You stop where He stops and love whom He loves.

But the Bible paints a richer picture. From Genesis to Revelation, God reveals Himself as a Shepherd—one who calls, leads, protects, and provides. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, invites us not just to believe in Him, but to follow Him, to know His voice, and to trust His heart.

This book is a journey through Psalm 23, moving phrase by phrase, chapter by chapter. Along the way, you’ll move from personal restoration, through valleys and abundance, into the richness of community, and ultimately to the hope of God’s renewed creation—where heaven and earth meet, and home is found in His presence.

How to Use This Guide

- **Personal Devotional:** Each chapter is crafted for honest reflection, prayer, and journaling. You'll find scripture exploration, prompts for lament, practical action steps, and space to write your own story. Take your time—linger where you need to, and return as often as you like. In this print edition, you'll find space after each prompt and prayer for your own reflections, prayers, and next steps. Don't worry about perfect words—these pages are for your honest journey with the Shepherd. Use them to record questions, insights, prayers, or even doubts as you walk through each chapter.
- **With a Friend or Group:** This guide is also meant to be shared. Invite a friend, a small group, or a spiritual mentor to walk through it with you. Use the discussion questions and action steps to nudge each other toward the Shepherd. You don't have to have all the answers—just a willingness to listen, share, and encourage one another. Use the writing spaces for shared prayers, group insights, or notes from your discussions.
- **As a Spiritual Companion:** If someone you love is struggling to trust Jesus, this book can be a gentle companion. Read together, share your own journey, and let the Shepherd's faithfulness speak for itself.

Engaging with Scripture: The SOAPS Method

Each chapter features Key Passages—scriptures chosen to anchor you in the Shepherd’s story. To help you move from reading to real-life transformation, I recommend using the SOAPS method:

- **Scripture:** Read the passage slowly, more than once. Write down a verse or phrase that stands out.
- **Observation:** What do you notice? What is God showing you about Himself, people, or life?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your situation? What is God inviting you to do, believe, or change?
- **Prayer:** Talk to God about what you’ve read and what you sense. Ask for help to respond.
- **Share:** Who could benefit from what you’ve learned? Pray for them and consider sharing your insight.

Before each chapter’s Key Passages, you’ll find a brief prompt to help you engage with S.O.A. (Scripture, Observation, Application) as you read. Use the space provided to record your thoughts, prayers, and next steps. The “Prayer” and “Share” elements are woven into the chapter’s closing sections.

The R.O.W. Principle: Repent, Obey, Worship

Throughout this book, you’ll encounter the R.O.W. rhythm—Repent, Obey, Worship. This is more fully treated in my previous book, *ROW Against The Flow*. This simple, biblical pattern is a way

to return to the Shepherd's leadership, especially when you've drifted or doubted:

- **Repent:** Turn from self-reliance, sin, or distraction. Name where you've wandered and return to Jesus.
- **Obey:** Obey the Gospel announcement that Jesus is Lord. Take a concrete step in response to what He's saying. Trust is proven in action, not just words.
- **Worship:** Fix your eyes on Jesus. Offer gratitude and praise, even in the valley, as an act of trust.

This isn't about perfection—it's about believing loyalty. It's how you row against the flow of culture, spiritual opposition, and your own resistance, returning again and again to the One who leads you into life.

Lament: Getting Real with God

Lament is a lost art in much of modern faith, but it's central to the biblical story. To lament is to get real with God—to bring your grief, disappointment, and questions into His presence without pretending. The Gospel announces that the resurrected Messiah of Israel is the true Lord of the world. If Jesus is on the throne, He gets all the praise and all the questions as well.

The Psalms are full of honest cries: "How long, Lord?" "Why have you forgotten me?" "Restore my soul." Lament is not a lack of faith; it's faith refusing to settle for distance or silence. Lack of faith—or, as I call it, "believing loyalty"—would be to turn elsewhere to seek help.

In this book, you'll find space to lament. Use the journaling prompts to pour out your heart. If you're walking through grief or

loss, know that the Shepherd is magnetically attracted to your brokenness. He draws near, not away, when you open your heart in pain.

What to Expect

Each chapter will:

- **Anchor you in a phrase from Psalm 23**, the most beloved shepherd psalm.
- **Invite you to explore related scriptures in depth**, with background and context, so you can see the Shepherd's care across the whole sweep of the Bible.
- **Offer honest prompts and questions** drawn from real ministry and life—not just made-up stories—so you can reflect on your own journey.
- **Provide practical steps and prayers** for listening, responding, and following the Shepherd day by day.
- **Help you discover your place in the flock, and anchor your hope** in the promise that God's story ends not with escape, but with His presence making all things new.

You don't need to have it all together. You just need a willingness to listen, to reflect, and to take the next step. The Shepherd is already calling. Are you ready to follow? Start by reading Psalm 23 in your Bible and settle in for a journey of discovery—one that leads from restoration, through belonging, to the joy of God's eternal home with us.

Chapter One

Hearing the Shepherd's Voice

Many of us believe in Jesus, but few of us actually expect Him to lead us in the details of daily life. We might say He's our Shepherd, but if we're honest, the voices that shape our choices often sound more like anxiety, ambition, or the latest cultural trend than the gentle guidance of Jesus. I'm a fellow traveler in this struggle—rushing through my days with an audiobook playing at double speed in my ear, pretending that efficiency is a cure for anxiety.

In a world saturated with noise—social media, news, even well-meaning spiritual advice—it's easy to wonder: *Does God still speak?* Many Christians will admit that the enemy's voice seems loud and persistent: tempting, accusing, distracting. But when it comes to hearing Jesus, we hesitate. Does God speak today? Is His voice too quiet? Are we too distracted, or have we simply not learned what to listen for?

There are seasons of loneliness when I learn to rely on Jesus. Times of weakness and distress when I desperately need Him. There are

moments when I've been stuck in entangling sin and, coming to my senses, require the forgiveness of Jesus and experience great closeness. As I wrote about in *ROW Against the Flow*, when we reach that very weak point and need Jesus, it's actually a great day. We think it might be the worst day, but it draws us close to the Shepherd and brings us under His care instead of leaving us to go it alone.

But sometimes, after a short but impressive track record of obedience, I get a dose of personal strength and start to think maybe I don't need Jesus that much on a daily level. I realize how quickly I want to take back control—how easy it is to say, “Thanks Jesus, I'll take it from here.”

One season when the Shepherd's voice became especially dear was in the loss of my daughter Ella to suicide in 2023. Ella was 18 years old and had been battling mental illness. She was one of six adopted children and my youngest daughter. She broke my heart as hers stopped in my arms on the way to reverse the decision she had made as we started off to the hospital. That was the valley of the shadow of death.

I discovered something surprising: Christ was magnetically drawn to my brokenness. He was there. My cries of pain—“Jesus, where are you right now?”—were answered by a calm assurance that He was in tears with me and that He could lead me through. Think about the magnet with me. Imagine playing with two of them. You know how one side repels and the other attracts? It's like that with Jesus. He's ready to draw close, but maintains His distance when I flip the magnet. “I don't want to feel this way,” I say, and He says, “But when you do, I'll be there.” Even years later, when I finally let myself lament, admit my pain, and invite Him into the shadows, He doesn't scold or stay away. He draws close—not with easy answers, but with presence. The valley became a place of encounter, not just endurance. Do you desire

to hear the Shepherd's voice or are you afraid of what He will say to you? Perhaps you've found it easier to tune it out?

*For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you will hear his
voice. — Psalm 95:7*

We'll explore what sets the Good Shepherd apart from all the other voices clamoring for our loyalty, and we'll take a first step in practicing real, believing loyalty: not just saying "Your words are true," but actually following through.

The Shepherd's Heart: Gentle and Attentive

*I am gentle and lowly in heart. (Jesus) — Matthew
11:29*

Jesus's gentleness is His default posture. He doesn't force or drive; He calls, leads, and draws near to those who are weary and burdened. His voice is never manipulative or condemning, but always inviting, patient, and trustworthy.

Scripture Exploration

Throughout Scripture, God's people are described as sheep—vulnerable, easily distracted, and in need of guidance. The image of God as Shepherd is woven through the Old Testament (Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34), culminating in Jesus' bold claim to be the Good Shepherd in John 10.

Here, Jesus contrasts Himself with false shepherds—leaders, voices, or spiritual powers that exploit or abandon the flock. The true Shepherd calls, knows, and leads His sheep. The sheep’s security and direction depend on their ability to recognize and trust His voice.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God’s character or your own need?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of longing or confusion?

Key Passages: Psalm 23:1; John 10:1–6, 14–16, 27; Isaiah 40:11; Psalm 95:7

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

“I tell you the solemn truth, the one who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. The doorkeeper opens the door for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought all his own sheep out, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they recognize his voice. They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him, because they do not recognize the stranger’s voice.” ... “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not come from this sheepfold. I must bring them too, and they will listen to my voice, so that there will be one flock and one shepherd.” ... “My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

Like a shepherd he tends his flock; he gathers the lambs in his arms, carries them close to his heart; he leads the ewes gently.

For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you will hear his voice.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- Where have you experienced disappointment, grief, or loss recently?

- What do you wish you could say to God about it—without editing or pretending?

- When have you sensed the Shepherd's presence in your pain? When has He felt distant?

If you're reading with a group, share what you're comfortable with, or simply invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you been following other voices or relying on yourself? Pray: "Jesus, I admit where I've tried to lead myself. Forgive me for ignoring Your voice."

- **Obey:** What is the next step Jesus is asking you to take? Write it down in your journal: "Today, I will take this step: _____."

- **Worship:** How can you honor Jesus as your Shepherd today? Pause to thank Him for His gentleness and nearness, even in your struggle.

Reflection & Discussion

- Who or what has been the loudest “shepherd” in your life recently?
- When have you sensed a nudge or prompting that felt like it came from beyond yourself, inviting you to trust or act?
- What makes it hard for you to believe that Jesus’ voice is real and trustworthy?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

Set aside ten minutes this week to sit in quiet and pray, “Jesus, what do You want to say to me today?” Write down any thoughts, scriptures, or impressions that come. Then, take one step of obedience in response—even if it feels small. With whom will you share these discoveries?

Prayer

Gentle Shepherd,

You are patient with my wandering, attentive to my weakness, and never harsh with my doubts. When my days are crowded with noise and anxiety, draw near with Your gentle voice. Quiet the accusations and distractions that threaten to drown You out. Teach me to recognize Your invitation, even when it’s soft or unexpected.

When I am broken, magnetize Your presence to my pain; when I am proud, gently call me back to dependence. Help me not only to hear Your words, but to trust Your heart and follow where You lead.

Thank You for carrying me close to Your heart, for knowing me by name, and for never abandoning me in the valley. I worship You as the Shepherd who is both strong and gentle, always near and always good. Jesus, what do You want to say to me? I’m ready to listen.....

For Further Study

Read the following related passages. Write out the scriptures to practicing hearing from God and respond with a few lines as well.

- Ezekiel 34:1–16

- Psalm 80:1–3

- 1 Peter 5:1–4

Chapter Two

Led to Restful Places

If you've ever tried to get a child—or a dog—to lie down and rest, you know it's not always easy. When Heather and I were raising our kids, many of them resisted nap time. We would tell them, “You don't have to sleep, you just need to close your eyes and rest on your bed.” Sometimes, you have to simulate the conditions of rest even if you don't feel it.

Jesus is always inviting us into a state of rest. That doesn't mean He calls us to be unproductive; rather, He teaches us to live in a rhythm where meaningful work and restorative rest both have their place. This stands in stark contrast to a culture that traps us in tedious toil and lazy leisure. The Shepherd's way is not about endless striving or empty downtime, but about a balanced life where our labor has purpose and our rest brings renewal.

As I admitted in the first chapter, I have a hard time with rest. I immediately feel lazy when I take a break. My idea of productivity and efficiency drives me. I also struggle with being a people pleaser—if

others aren't experiencing joy or connection, I feel responsible to fix it. Once, my therapist even assigned me to invite friends over but to let them know I'd be watching a TV show on my phone the whole time—exposure therapy for my need to host and care for everyone. The thought alone made me uncomfortable, but it revealed the real issue. No, I didn't do that assignment; I'm not that crazy.

Raising kids, I wanted to model productivity and responsibility, so I rarely felt I could rest well at home. I know some of my children rejected those traits, while others may have overworked them. I'm not particularly proud of that. With my youngest graduated from high school and an emptying nest, I'm learning to allow myself rest.

The title of this book, *Still Waters*, comes directly from the Shepherd's promise in Psalm 23: "He leads me beside still waters." In the ancient world, you didn't just turn the faucet into the barrel and sheep would not drink from rushing streams—moving water frightened them, and their thick wool would quickly become waterlogged if they slipped in, putting them in mortal danger. A wise shepherd would divert water from a stream into a calm pool, creating a safe place for the sheep to drink and rest.

This detail is more than a quaint pastoral image; it's a window into the Shepherd's character. He knows our fears and vulnerabilities. He doesn't drive us toward what overwhelms or endangers us. Instead, He creates safe spaces—still waters—where we can be refreshed without fear. If a sheep falls into rushing water, the wool becomes sodden and the animal can be swept away. The Shepherd's care is both practical and profoundly gentle.

Still waters are not just about physical rest, but about the soul-deep peace and security that come from trusting the Shepherd's presence and provision.

Sheep don't rest unless they are well fed, and grazing is their full-time job. A sheep lounging in the grass is content, and with a shepherd nearby, they feel safe. Rest doesn't come naturally to those who feel threatened, anxious, or responsible for keeping everything together. The same is true for us. We live in a culture that equates busyness with importance and exhaustion with virtue. We keep moving, producing, scrolling, and striving—often long past the point of health.

The Shepherd's Heart: Gentle Provider

The Shepherd leads us to rest and nourishment, not by force, but by invitation and attentive care.

Scripture Exploration

The Shepherd's way is different. "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." These aren't just poetic words; they're a radical invitation. Yahweh, the covenant name of the Creator God, is also represented in the Old Testament as LORD.

*Know that the LORD is God. He made us, and we
belong to him; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

— Psalm 100:3

To say that Yahweh is God is to call on His Creator status and His goal for human flourishing. Do you trust His ability to instruct and guide you, or are you running around like a sheep without a shepherd?

Then Jesus went throughout all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were bewildered and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd — Matthew 9:35-36

He desires to lead and guide, not harass or consume us. The Shepherd doesn't drive us to exhaustion. He leads us to rest, to nourishment, to places where our souls can breathe again. But to receive this rest, we have to trust Him enough to stop moving, to let go of our own agenda, and to believe that He knows what we need even when we don't.

Many of us resist this invitation. We worry that if we stop, something important will fall apart—or that we'll miss out. But the Shepherd knows that rest is not a reward for finishing our work; it's a gift that enables us to keep going. True rest is not just about sleep or downtime; it's about being restored in the presence of the One who cares for us.

Maybe you're tired in ways you can't even name. Maybe your soul is restless, always searching for the next thing. The Shepherd is inviting you to pause, to lie down, to let Him restore what's been depleted. Will you trust Him enough to rest?

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?

- **Observation:** What do you notice about God’s character or your own need?

- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of exhaustion or striving?

Key Passages: Psalm 23:2–3a; Psalm 100:3; Mark 6:31–34

He takes me to lush pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my strength.

Know that the LORD is God. He made us, and we belong to him; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

He said to them, “Come with me privately to an isolated place and rest a while” (for many were coming and going, and there was no time to eat). So they went away by themselves in a boat to some remote place. But many saw them leaving and recognized them, and they hurried on

foot from all the towns and arrived there ahead of them. As Jesus came ashore, he saw the large crowd and had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began to teach them many things.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- Where in your life do you find it hardest to rest or let your guard down?
- What keeps you moving when you sense the Shepherd inviting you to pause?
- When have you experienced rest as a gift, not just a break from work?

If you're reading with a group, share what you're comfortable with, or simply invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you resisted rest or tried to prove your worth through busyness? Pray: "Jesus, forgive me for trusting my effort more than Your care."

- **Obey:** What is one practical way you can accept the Shepherd's invitation to rest this week? Write it down in your journal: "Today, I will rest by _____."
- **Worship:** Thank Jesus for being a gentle provider who leads you to rest. Offer your trust as an act of worship.

Reflection & Discussion

- Where in your life do you find it hardest to rest or let your guard down?
- What keeps you moving when you sense the Shepherd inviting you to pause?
- How might you receive rest as a gift from the Shepherd, not just a break from work?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

Choose one time this week to intentionally rest—turn off your phone, step outside, or sit quietly with God. As you do, pray, “Shepherd, help me receive Your rest.” Notice what comes up in your heart and bring it honestly to Him.

Prayer

Gentle Provider,

You know my needs before I do. When I am restless or driven by anxiety, call me to Your green pastures and still waters. Quiet the voices that tell me I am only as valuable as my productivity. Teach me to trust that Your rest is not a reward for finishing my work, but a gift that restores my soul.

Help me to let go of my need to control, to please, and to keep everyone happy. Lead me into rhythms of meaningful work and true rest. Thank You for inviting me to pause, to breathe, and to be restored in Your presence.

I worship You as the Shepherd who cares for my soul, who never drives me to exhaustion, but always leads me to life.

Amen.

Chapter Three

Restored and Renewed

We all know what it's like to feel depleted—physically, emotionally, spiritually. Sometimes it's the result of overwork or stress, but often it's deeper than that. A vacation or a day off might give us a brief escape, but it can't fix the way we live and work. Something has to change in our daily rhythms, in how we carry our wounds and regrets, and in how we deal with disappointments that quietly sap our strength. The cycles of tedious toil and lazy leisure we addressed in the last chapter often leave us running on empty.

We try to patch ourselves up, to keep going, to ignore the ache. But eventually, we hit a wall. The Shepherd's promise is not just to provide rest, but to restore our souls. "He restores my soul." Restoration is more than a quick fix. It's a process of healing, of bringing back what's been lost, of making us whole again. The Shepherd knows every place we're broken, every place we've wandered, every place we've tried to hide. He doesn't shame us for our weakness; He meets us in it.

Therefore since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest incapable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace whenever we need help. – Hebrews 4:14-16

Life can leave us with scars—not just physical, but emotional and spiritual ones too. Loss, betrayal, disappointment, trauma—these experiences can wound us deeply, leaving us feeling broken and shattered. I know this firsthand in the area of the loss of my daughter, but being a pastor has also brought opportunities for betrayal and hurt.

Many people struggle with “church hurt,” and I get it. There are false shepherds, and we’ll talk about this in the coming chapter. But what’s often forgotten is the kind of hurt that pastors go through. We’re under-shepherds, not the Chief Shepherd, tending the flock on behalf of Jesus. Sheep sometimes butt heads and even bite. They may leave the flock in search of a different under-shepherd or greener pastures. I understand that Jesus is the Chief Shepherd and can move sheep around, but the pain can be real. Sometimes sheep leave in a flurry and take others with them. Those who once said they were with me decided not only to leave, but even made up accusations to justify their exit.

There were times when I felt like I would never recover, that the pain would be a permanent part of me.

Restoration often begins with honesty—naming what’s broken, admitting what we can’t fix on our own. It continues as we allow the Shepherd to lead us, to heal us, to bring us back to Himself. Sometimes

that means facing hard truths or letting go of old patterns. Sometimes it means receiving grace in places we've only known guilt.

If we say we have fellowship with him and yet keep on walking in the darkness, we are lying and not practicing the truth. But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we do not bear the guilt of sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness. — 1 John 1:6-9

Here is the ground for hope: God's faithfulness isn't measured by our perfection, but by His character. He is faithful to His covenants and righteous in setting things—and us—right. Restoration, then, is God's relentless project even when we have lost our way. He seeks us out, brings us home, and restores souls others might have written off. Whether your wounds are fresh or old, whether you feel bitter or just numb, the Shepherd offers real renewal—a return to wholeness and joy.

Rather than waiting until you feel “put together,” come as you are. He isn't asking you to manufacture healing, but to trust Him with the process. Restoration means letting Him heal what is hidden, bring light to what is dark, and renew what has faded. That is His promise.

The Shepherd's Heart: Healing Shepherd

The Shepherd doesn't just patch us up; He brings deep, lasting renewal. He seeks out the lost, binds up the wounded, and patiently restores what's been broken.

Scripture Exploration

God is faithful to His covenants and righteous in that He sets things—and us—right. So, we admit we've done wrong and thank Him for forgiveness and His ability to set us right.

If you're feeling worn out or far from God, you're not alone. The Shepherd specializes in restoration. He's not waiting for you to pull yourself together. He's already searching for you, ready to bring you home, ready to restore your soul. But let's not pretend we haven't gone astray or brought about our own sickness when we come to Him for restoration.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?

- **Observation:** What do you notice about God's character or your own need?

- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of brokenness or longing for restoration?

Key Passages: Psalm 23:3; Luke 4:14-22

He restores my strength. He leads me down the right paths for the sake of his reputation.

Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the surrounding countryside. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by all. Now Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in

the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to tell them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled even as you heard it being read." All were speaking well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words coming out of his mouth. They said, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

Lament & Honest Journaling

- Where do you feel most in need of restoration right now?
- What would it look like to let the Shepherd restore you, rather than trying to fix yourself?
- How have past wounds or regrets shaped your sense of hope for healing?

If you're reading with a group, share what you're comfortable with, or simply invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you tried to fix yourself or ignored your need for restoration? Pray: "Jesus, I admit my brokenness

and my attempts to handle it alone. Forgive me for not letting You in."

- **Obey:** What is one step you sense the Shepherd inviting you to take toward healing? Write it down in your journal: "Today, I will take this step: _____."

- **Worship:** Thank Jesus for being the Shepherd who restores. Offer your hope and your wounds as an act of worship.

Reflection & Discussion

- How has God restored you in the past? Where do you still long for renewal?

- What would it look like to let the Shepherd restore you, rather than trying to fix yourself?

- What does it mean to you that the Shepherd specializes in restoration?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

This week, bring one area of brokenness or weariness to God in prayer. Ask Him to restore you. Then, share with a trusted friend, mentor, or group what you're asking God to restore and invite their prayer or encouragement. Let your journey of restoration become a testimony that can encourage someone else.

Prayer

Healing Shepherd,

You see every place I am wounded, every scar I carry, every disappointment I try to hide. You do not shame me for my weakness or turn away from my pain. Instead, You draw near, seeking out what is lost and binding up what is broken.

Restore my soul where I am weary. Lead me back to wholeness when I have wandered. Give me courage to walk in the light, to name what hurts, and to receive Your grace where I've only known guilt.

Thank You for being faithful to forgive, righteous to set me right, and patient to renew me again and again. I worship You as the Shepherd who specializes in restoration—who is not content to patch me up, but who makes me whole.

Amen.

Chapter Four

Courage in the Valley

Every journey with the Shepherd eventually leads through valleys—places of shadow, fear, and uncertainty. You can't get to the sunny green pastures Jesus wants for you without going through some dark areas. These valleys aren't detours or evidence that we've lost our way; they are part of the landscape of a life of faith. For many, the "valley of the shadow of death" is not just a poetic phrase but a lived reality—seasons of grief, anxiety, or spiritual struggle. In these moments, our natural instinct is to run, hide, or try to find our own way out. But the Shepherd does not abandon us in the valley. He walks with us, closer than ever, even when we can't see Him clearly.

Dark places are frightening. It's where the creepy, crawly things come out, where danger lurks unnoticed. Human evil often flourishes at night—"men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil." In my neighborhood, the coyotes begin howling after sunset, setting off a chorus of agitated dogs. Sometimes the bears, bobcats,

and coyotes cross our paths in the daylight, but at least then you can see them coming.

There's something about darkness—literal or metaphorical—that makes us feel vulnerable. The unknown, the unseen, the threats we can't name or predict: these are the things that keep us awake at night, physically and spiritually.

David's Shepherd Experience: Rod and Staff

Before David became the shepherd of Israel, he was a shepherd of his father's flocks. He knew firsthand the dangers that lurked in the wilderness—lions, bears, and thieves. In 1 Samuel 17, David recounts how he defended his sheep, striking down lions and bears with his shepherd's rod and sling. The rod was a sturdy club or stick, used as a weapon to defend the sheep from predators. The staff, with its curved end, was used to guide the sheep, rescue them from danger, or pull them back to safety when they strayed.

David saw Yahweh as his Shepherd in the same way: a fierce protector and gentle guide. The rod and staff weren't just symbols—they were practical tools. The rod defended against threats; the staff drew the sheep back when they wandered too far. Both were essential for the sheep's survival and comfort.

Spiritual Enemies and the LORD of Hosts

In *ROW Against the Flow*, I explored how our greatest enemy is not flesh and blood but spiritual.

the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour — 1 Peter 5:8

The darkness in our lives isn't just the absence of light; it's often the presence of opposition, temptation, and spiritual attack. But we are not defenseless. The LORD is called the "LORD of Hosts"—the commander of angel armies. When we call out to Him, He protects us in the darkness.

[Yahweh] will shelter you with his wings; you will find safety under his wings. His faithfulness is like a shield or a protective wall — Psalm 91:4

The Shepherd's presence is our defense, and His authority is greater than any threat we face.

The Presence of the Shepherd Changes Everything

The valley may still be dark, but we are not alone. The Shepherd's rod and staff are not just symbols of authority—they are tools of protection and guidance. They remind us that even in the deepest darkness, we are cared for and defended. The valley is a place of testing, but also of transformation. Here, fear gives way to trust, and self-reliance gives way to dependence.

If you find yourself in a valley right now, know this: the Shepherd is with you. He is not impatient with your fear or frustration. He is not waiting for you to "get it together" before He draws near. Instead, He invites you to experience His presence in a way that is only possible in the shadows. The valley is not the end of the story—it is a place where the Shepherd's love and faithfulness become most real.

The Shepherd's Heart: Present and Protective

The Shepherd is magnetically attracted to our brokenness. He draws close in the valley, not away, and His presence is our greatest comfort.

Scripture Exploration: Psalm 91 and the Ancient Battle Against Evil

The valley motif in Psalm 23:4 reflects the real dangers of ancient shepherding—predators, steep ravines, and sudden storms. The Shepherd's presence and tools were the sheep's only security. Throughout scripture, God's people face valleys but are assured of His presence and protection.

But the assurance of God's protection in the valley is not just a poetic comfort—it has deep roots in the spiritual warfare of both ancient Israel and early Judaism. Psalm 91, in particular, was treasured as a powerful prayer of deliverance and protection, especially against evil spirits and demonic attack.

Psalm 91 in Jewish Tradition and Qumran Scrolls

At Qumran, among the Dead Sea Scrolls, a remarkable text known as *11Q11* was discovered. This scroll preserves a tradition of using certain psalms—including Psalm 91—as exorcism texts, recited to drive away evil spirits and combat demonic oppression. It specifically references four psalms (Psalms 91, 121, 126, and 129) as being used for protection and spiritual warfare. Psalm 91 stands out as the most prominent, often called the “Exorcism Psalm” in Qumran literature. The scroll describes the recitation of these psalms as a means to “expel

demons” and “protect from evil spirits,” showing that the ancient community saw the words of Psalm 91 as a direct weapon against the devil and his forces.

This tradition continues in later Jewish and Christian practice, where Psalm 91 is invoked for spiritual protection, deliverance, and comfort in times of darkness or oppression.

The Shepherd as Spiritual Protector

This ancient use of Psalm 91 deepens our understanding of the Shepherd’s role—not only as a comforter in the valley but as a spiritual defender. The Shepherd’s rod and staff are not just for physical threats; they are also for spiritual warfare. When we walk through the darkest valleys, we are not only facing earthly dangers but also spiritual opposition. The Shepherd stands between us and every threat, wielding His authority on our behalf.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God’s character or your own fears?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your current valley or uncertainty?

Key Passages: Psalm 23:4; Isaiah 43:1–4; Psalm 91:1-3

Even when I must walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff reassure me.

Now, this is what the Lord says, the one who created you, O Jacob, and formed you, O Israel: “Don’t be afraid, for I will protect you. I call you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I am with you; when you pass through the streams, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not harm you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer. I have handed over Egypt as a ransom price, Ethiopia and Seba in place of you. Since you are precious and special in my sight, and I love you, I will hand over people in place of you, nations in place of your life.

As for you, the one who lives in the shelter of the Sovereign One, and resides in the protective shadow of the Mighty King— I say this about the LORD, my shelter and my stronghold, my God in whom I trust— he will

certainly rescue you from the snare of the hunter and from the destructive plague.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- What “valleys” are you walking through right now?
- Where do you feel most alone or afraid?
- When have you experienced God’s presence in dark or uncertain times?

Write honestly about your valley. If you’re in a group, share what you’re comfortable with, or simply invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you tried to run, hide, or handle the valley alone? Pray: “Jesus, forgive me for doubting Your nearness in my pain.”

- **Obey:** What is one way you can invite the Shepherd into your valley this week? Write it down: “Today, I will let You walk with me here: _____.”

- **Worship:** Thank Jesus for being present in your darkest places. Offer Him your trust, even when you can’t see the way forward.

Reflection & Discussion

- What does it mean to trust the Shepherd’s protection, even when you feel afraid?

- How has God used a valley in your life to deepen trust or dependence?

- How can you support someone else who is walking through a valley right now?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

This week, name one fear or shadow you're facing. Bring it honestly to God in prayer, asking Him to walk with you. Consider sharing this with a trusted friend who can pray with you.

Prayer

Shepherd and Defender,

You are the One who walks with me through every valley—seen and unseen, physical and spiritual. When darkness presses in and fear rises, remind me that Your presence is my refuge and fortress.

You wield Your rod to drive away every enemy, and Your staff to draw me back when I wander. You shelter me under Your wings and command Your angels to guard me, even when I am unaware of the dangers around me.

When the enemy prowls, let me rest in the shadow of the Almighty. When I am overwhelmed, speak peace to my soul. Give me courage to trust Your protection, to let go of self-reliance, and to lean into Your faithful love.

Thank You for never abandoning me in the valley, for transforming my fear into faith, and for fighting battles I cannot see. I worship You, Shepherd of my soul, who is present, powerful, and always victorious. Amen.

Chapter Five

Comforted and Protected

There's a difference between comfort that coddles and comfort that strengthens. The Shepherd's comfort is not about removing all difficulty—have you noticed that yet? It's about equipping us to move through difficulty with confidence. But this isn't self-confidence; life tends to erode that, doesn't it? It's about God-confidence: Do I believe Jesus can handle a situation like this, or do I have to go into control mode and take over?

In ancient times, a shepherd's rod was a weapon, used to defend the flock from predators. The staff was a tool for guidance, gently nudging sheep back onto safe paths. Together, they represent the Shepherd's commitment to both protect and correct.

I know this part intimately. I was a troubled young man, often out of control—sometimes, I even wanted to be caught, to come under someone's care. I had a recurring dream as a teen: I'd jump so high over our farmhouse that it became terrifying, as if I couldn't come down. Much of my life felt out of control, shaped by both past abuse

and my own reactions. Deep down, I needed someone to bring me under control. After an encounter with Jesus at age 18, those dreams stopped. One night, falling apart after failing yet again to live up to what I thought Jesus wanted, I told Him, “I don’t have what it takes to be the Christian you want me to be.” I sensed Him reply, “I never said you would have what it takes—that’s something I am going to do through you.” That night, I told Jesus He could have my whole self.

Many of us resist correction, associating it with shame or failure. But in the hands of the Good Shepherd, correction is a form of care. He loves us too much to let us wander into danger or settle for less than His best. His protection is not always obvious; sometimes it comes as a closed door, a challenge, or a timely word from a friend. The Shepherd’s comfort is active, not passive. It reassures us that we are never left to face our battles alone.

If you’ve ever felt the sting of correction or the relief of protection, you’ve experienced the Shepherd’s rod and staff at work. These are not signs of His displeasure, but of His deep investment in your well-being. The Shepherd’s comfort gives us the courage to keep going, even when the path is hard.

He provides a comfort that strengthens us in our trials so we can comfort others (see 2 Corinthians 1). We become “team comfort”—receiving from God so we can share with others. He doesn’t comfort the comfortable; as some have said, He comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. My friends can attest that the empathy I have for people who are grieving losses has grown exponentially in the last years of my grief process. He is remaking me and I’m so thankful he has not given up on me. My Abba is treating me as a son.

The Shepherd's Heart: Comforting and Correcting

The Shepherd's comfort is strong, not soft; it equips us to endure, grow, and help others. He corrects because He loves, and protects because we belong to Him.

Scripture Exploration

Shepherds in the ancient world relied on the rod and staff for the safety and guidance of the flock. The rod defended against threats; the staff guided and rescued. In scripture, God's discipline is always connected to His love and desire for our flourishing. He comforts us so we can comfort others, making us agents of His care in a hurting world.

In the previous chapter, we explored the Shepherd's rod and staff as symbols of protection in the valley. Here, we focus on how the Shepherd's correction and discipline are expressions of His love, equipping us for maturity and ministry.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God's character or your own resistance?

- **Application:** How does this speak to your experience of correction or comfort?

Key Passages: Hebrews 12:4-8, 11; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

You have not yet resisted to the point of bloodshed in your struggle against sin. And have you forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons? “My son, do not scorn the Lord’s discipline or give up when he corrects you. “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son he accepts.” Endure your suffering as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? But if you do not experience discipline, something all sons have shared in, then you are illegitimate and are not sons...Now all discipline seems painful at the time, not joyful. But later it produces the fruit of peace and righteousness for those trained by it.

Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we may be able to comfort those experiencing any trouble with the comfort

with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow toward us, so also our comfort through Christ overflows to you. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort that you experience in your patient endurance of the same sufferings that we also suffer. And our hope for you is steadfast because we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you will share in our comfort.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- Where do you feel most vulnerable or in need of comfort right now?

- When have you experienced God's discipline or correction as painful rather than loving?

- When have you been comforted in a way that made you stronger, not just safer?

If you're in a group, share what you're comfortable with, or invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you resisted God's correction or misunderstood His discipline? Pray: "Jesus, forgive me for seeing Your correction as rejection. Help me trust Your love."
- **Obey:** What is one step of obedience you sense God calling you to take in response to His guidance or correction? Write it down in your journal: "Today, I will take this step: _____."
- **Worship:** Thank God for being a Shepherd who loves enough to correct and protect. Offer your gratitude as worship, even if the path is hard.

Reflection & Discussion

- How have you experienced God's correction or protection in your life?
- In what ways has God's discipline led to growth or maturity in your life?

- How can you welcome the Shepherd's comfort, even when it comes through challenge?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

Reflect on a recent moment of challenge or correction. Ask God to show you how He might be using it for your growth. Thank Him for His care, and take one step of obedience in response.

Prayer

Shepherd who Comforts and Protects,

You know every place in my life where I am vulnerable, restless, or afraid. Thank You for being the One who stands between me and every threat, wielding Your rod to defend and Your staff to guide. When I am tempted to run from correction or bristle at Your discipline, remind me that Your love is not soft or indifferent—it is strong enough to challenge, patient enough to restore, and wise enough to lead me where I need to go.

Thank You for loving me enough to not leave me as I am. When Your correction stings, let me see it as a sign of Your deep investment in my good, not as rejection or anger. Teach me to trust that Your boundaries are for my safety, and Your guidance is for my flourishing.

Help me to receive Your comfort not as an escape from difficulty, but as strength to move through it with courage. When I am tempted to

Chapter Six

The Table in the Wilderness

These days, in the U.S.A., it only takes a moderate income to live as royalty once did. With our smartphone scepters, we can summon nearly anything we desire. Whether it's bargains from Amazon or Temu, or luxury from Neiman Marcus and Bloomingdale's, a click makes us feel in control. Beyond goods, we summon food, entertainment, and distraction from around the world in moments. We live like kings and queens, used to providing our own abundance and crafting our own realities. It's part of the illusion of control we wield.

But when we face real hurdles—relational breakdowns, opposition, or grief—our ability to celebrate or feel secure evaporates. Our schemes to control and provide abundance fail, and suddenly, we're barely getting by. What if we could trust God as Provider? What if Jesus, the Shepherd, could find us a feast even when we're under duress?

The Table in the Wilderness

It's one thing to be provided for in peaceful times; it's another to be fed in the presence of your enemies. The Shepherd's care is not limited by our circumstances. He prepares a table for us right where opposition and anxiety threaten to overwhelm. This is a radical image: abundance and welcome in the very place we feel most vulnerable.

For the ancient Israelites, sharing a meal was an act of deep fellowship and security. To eat at the Shepherd's table is to know that we are safe, seen, and honored—even when surrounded by trouble. The Shepherd does not wait for the battle to be over before He blesses us. He invites us to feast in the middle of the struggle, declaring His sufficiency and our belonging.

Many of us try to avoid conflict or discomfort, believing that peace is only possible when problems are solved. But the Shepherd offers a different kind of peace—a feast of grace, joy, and hope that is not dependent on our circumstances. His presence at the table is our assurance that we are never alone, never abandoned.

If you're facing opposition, fear, or uncertainty, know that the Shepherd's table is set for you. You are invited to receive His abundance, even here.

A Personal Story: Provision in Grief

In our grief journey after losing our daughter, we experienced so much love as provision from the Good Shepherd that we were floored. Churches we barely knew sent funds. The church I had served previously took an offering, and we received the largest check I'd ever been given to cover funeral and other expenses, with the encouragement to

let them know if there was any more need. That same pastor organized a preaching team to give me ten weeks off from pulpit duty so I could begin healing and simply be loved by the church family.

One night, Heather and I were invited to a boutique Italian restaurant—just ten tables in the place—where the owner provided a multi-course meal and a bottle of wine for free, blessing us in our grief. Take that, Satan. The body of Christ is alive and well. We were stunned at the feast set before us.

The Shepherd's Heart: Providing Host

The Shepherd's generosity is not limited by threats or scarcity. He welcomes us to His table, even in the midst of adversity, and honors us with abundance and belonging.

Scripture Exploration

In the ancient Near East, a table set in the wilderness was not just a place to eat—it was a declaration of safety, victory, and belonging. Who has time to dine when the battle is so close by? Those who are on Yahweh's side are told to rest and feast under his protection. Enemies might be near, but the host's protection was stronger. When David writes, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies," he's describing a feast that defies fear and scarcity.

Taste and see that the LORD is good... those who seek the LORD lack no good thing — Psalm 34:8,10

Even young lions—symbols of strength—can go hungry, but those who trust the Shepherd are never truly empty. Philippians 4 brings the lesson into the New Testament: Paul’s secret of contentment is not in circumstances, but in Christ’s sufficiency. Whether in need or abundance, he finds strength at the Shepherd’s table.

Throughout Scripture, God’s provision is not just physical. It’s relational, emotional, and spiritual—a feast of presence, peace, and hope. The table is set not after the battle, but in the very midst of it. The Shepherd’s abundance is not the absence of enemies, but the presence of God.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God’s character or your own need?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of lack, threat, or longing?

Key Passages Psalm 23:5; Psalm 34:4-10; Philippians 4:11-13.

You prepare a feast before me in plain sight of my enemies.

I sought the LORD's help and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him for help are happy; their faces are not ashamed. This oppressed man cried out and the LORD heard; he saved him from all his troubles. The LORD's angel camps around the LORD's loyal followers and delivers them. Taste and see that the LORD is good! How blessed is the one who takes shelter in him! Remain loyal to the LORD, you chosen people of his, for his loyal followers lack nothing! Even young lions sometimes lack food and are hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content in any circumstance. I have experienced times of need and times of abundance. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of contentment—whether I am well fed or hungry, whether in

abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- Where do you feel most vulnerable or exposed right now?
- What circumstances or inner struggles make you feel like you're "feasting in the presence of enemies"?
- When have you been surprised by God's provision in a place you expected only lack?

If you're in a group, share what you're comfortable with, or invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you doubted God's ability to provide in hard places? Pray: "Shepherd, forgive me for believing that your care is limited by my circumstances."

- **Obey:** What is one way you can receive or share God's abundance this week? Write it down in your journal: "Today, I will accept your invitation to the table by _____."
- **Worship:** Thank God for His presence and provision, even in the midst of struggle. Offer gratitude as worship, trusting His sufficiency.

Reflection & Discussion

- How does the Shepherd's invitation to feast change your perspective on adversity?
- What practical steps could help you recognize or receive God's abundance in a hard season?
- Who in your life needs an invitation to experience this kind of table fellowship and provision?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

This week, set aside a meal as an act of gratitude. As you eat, thank God for His provision—especially in areas of struggle. Invite Him to refresh and fill you with His presence.

Prayer

Providing Shepherd,

Thank You for preparing a table for me, even in the presence of my enemies. When I feel threatened, anxious, or empty, remind me that Your abundance is not limited by my circumstances.

Help me to receive Your provision with open hands and a grateful heart, even when I am surrounded by trouble. Give me the courage to trust Your care and to share Your abundance with others in need.

Let Your presence at the table be my peace, my security, and my joy. I worship You as the Host who welcomes, honors, and satisfies me—no matter what surrounds me.

Amen.

For Further Study

Read the following related passages. Write out the scriptures to practicing hearing from God and respond with a few lines as well.

- Exodus 16:1–18

- Matthew 14:13–21

- Revelation 3:20

Chapter Seven

Called to Shepherd Others

There comes a point where following Jesus means stepping into the privilege and responsibility of shepherding others. Jesus is in the business of training shepherds to multiply His care—not just for our sake, but for the sake of the whole flock. The invitation is not just to belong, but to participate—moving from being cared for to caring for others, from being led to leading, always within the context of God’s people. He leads me, so that I can help lead others as well.

Do you think of your influence that way? Jesus’ final words to Peter after His resurrection were not just “follow me,” but “feed my sheep.” This marks a turning point: from receiving the Shepherd’s care to becoming a vessel of that care for others.

One of my favorite parts of being an under-shepherd is helping others step into leadership and care. I’m called to multiply disciple-makers to all nations, and it’s exciting to see that happen both in and beyond the local church. Men and women I’ve trained have become

trainers themselves. Many have started to lead ministries and care for others, multiplying the Shepherd's love in new places.

The Shepherd's way is always about multiplication—His care flowing through us, so that the flock grows, matures, and flourishes together.

For many, the idea of shepherding others feels daunting. We're all too aware of our own failures and weaknesses. Yet, the Shepherd calls ordinary people—flawed, imperfect, and still learning—to participate in His work. This isn't about taking control or becoming the center of attention. True shepherding means pointing others to Jesus, not ourselves. Sometimes, one sheep nudging another sheep toward the Shepherd is all that's needed. Whether you hold a formal role or simply offer a listening ear, your influence matters more than you realize.

When I was a Youth Pastor, I mentioned to one young man that I thought it would be a great idea if he took a little more leadership in the group. He was clearly not excited about the idea. He said, "I don't want to be a leader, leaders always want something from you." He had picked up the idea from somewhere, but what I tried to communicate was that good leaders want something not *from* but *for* other people. We envision a better future and try to help people get there. The Shepherd's way is not about taking, but about giving—about leading others into the green pastures and still waters we ourselves have found.

The Chief Shepherd's Invitation

The Chief Shepherd is forever in charge. We do well to listen to His voice, go where He leads, stop where He stops, and love who He loves. But He is calling us further still—inviting us to become under-shepherds, assisting in pointing people to Him.

The Cost and Care of Shepherding

In 2014, I visited Morocco with a ministry team and met with a local pastor. Because he was known to the authorities and on a watch list, we had to meet him outside his area of ministry. He described the difficulty of discipling people and nudging them toward Jesus in a hostile country. I had been a pastor for many years at the time, but listening to him put me to shame.

He spoke of his tenacity—going to people’s homes when they didn’t show up to gatherings, refusing to let anyone drift away from Jesus, the Chief Shepherd. He wasn’t willing to let a single sheep be lost. I was convicted. In big churches, when people stop coming, we often assume they’ve made their choice to leave the flock or maybe are attending elsewhere. But this under-shepherd showed me how precious each sheep is to the Shepherd.

The Countercultural Call

In a world obsessed with self-promotion and spiritual celebrity, the call to under-shepherd is radically countercultural. It’s about humility, service, and multiplying the care you’ve received. Whether you’re a parent, a friend, a mentor, or a leader in your church, you are invited to reflect the Shepherd’s heart to those around you. The goal is not to gather followers for yourself, but to help others listen for the Shepherd’s voice and walk in His ways.

The Influence We All Carry

Everybody has influence of some sort. Sometimes it’s through a formal role, but more often it’s simply through presence, encouragement, or

a listening ear. You don't need a ministry degree to listen and care, in fact it might be better without if formal training made you speak more than listen. The Shepherd's invitation is for all of us to participate in His work of guiding, caring, and pointing others back to Him.

- Influence is not about position: it's about availability and willingness.
- Small nudges matter: sometimes the most powerful act is simply to encourage someone to seek the Shepherd for themselves.
- Community is essential: we grow best when we help each other follow Jesus, not when we try to go it alone.

Expanding the Analogy: Sheep and Shepherds

Remember, sheep are not meant to be hand-fed every bite. The Shepherd leads to good pasture, but each sheep must graze for itself. In the same way, spiritual leaders are called to guide others to the places where nourishment is found, not to do all the feeding themselves. This relieves the pressure on leaders and empowers everyone to take responsibility for their own spiritual growth.

- For those reluctant to lead: Remember, the Shepherd equips those He calls. Your inadequacy can become your greatest qualification, as it keeps you dependent on Him.
- For all believers: Your influence matters. Whether you lead a group or simply offer a word of encouragement, you are participating in the Shepherd's work.

The invitation is clear: as you follow the Good Shepherd, you are also called to shepherd others—not by force, but by humble presence, gentle guidance, and a willingness to point others to the One who leads us all.

One sheep nudging another sheep toward the Shepherd is sometimes all that's needed.

The Shepherd's Heart: Faithful and Multiplying

The Shepherd is faithful to entrust His work to others, multiplying His care through ordinary people who are willing to lead with humility and point others to Him. Jesus' way is never about building our own kingdoms, but about multiplying His care—one act of encouragement, one listening ear, one nudge at a time.

Scripture Exploration

Shepherding is woven deeply into the story of God's people. In the Old Testament, God rebukes Israel's unfaithful leaders and promises to personally seek, rescue, and care for His scattered sheep (Ezekiel 34:11–16). He declares that He will raise up a shepherd after His own heart—fulfilled in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who embodies God's tender pursuit and faithful provision. After His resurrection, Jesus restores Peter with a threefold commission: “Feed my lambs... Shepherd my sheep... Feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17). This moment is not just about Peter's healing, but about entrusting ordinary, imperfect people with the care of others.

Later, Peter urges fellow leaders to shepherd God's flock with humility, willingness, and example, not domination (1 Peter 5:2–4). Together, these passages reveal that shepherding is not reserved for spiritual elites; it is the invitation and responsibility of all who follow Christ. The Shepherd's heart is to multiply His care through us—guiding, protecting, and nurturing His flock in a world that often prizes self-promotion and independence.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God's character or your own need?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of longing, challenge, or invitation?

Key Passages: Ezekiel 34:11–16; John 21:15–17; 1 Peter 5:2–4

'For this is what the sovereign LORD says: Look, I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his scat-

tered sheep, so I will seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a cloudy, dark day. I will bring them out from among the peoples and gather them from foreign countries; I will bring them to their own land. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams and all the inhabited places of the land. In a good pasture I will feed them; the mountain heights of Israel will be their pasture. There they will lie down in a lush pasture, and they will feed on rich grass on the mountains of Israel. I myself will feed my sheep and I myself will make them lie down, declares the sovereign LORD. I will seek the lost and bring back the strays; I will bandage the injured and strengthen the sick, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them—with judgment!

Then when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus told him, "Feed my lambs." He said a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus told him, "Shepherd my sheep." He said a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" and said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

Shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that never fades away.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- Who has shepherded you in your faith journey? What did they do that didn't reflect Jesus' heart?
- Where do you feel inadequate or unqualified to care for others?
- What fears or hesitations come up when you think about shepherding others?

If you're in a group, share what you're comfortable with, or invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you avoided the call to care for others, or tried to make yourself the center? Pray: “Jesus, forgive me for shrinking back or seeking my own reputation. Help me to serve with humility.”

- **Obey:** Who is one person God is inviting you to encourage or support this week? Write it down: “Today, I will reach out to _____.”

- **Worship:** Thank Jesus for trusting you with His work. Offer your willingness as worship, asking Him to multiply His care through you.

Reflection & Discussion

- Who has shepherded you in your faith journey that reflected Jesus’ heart?

- In what ways might God be inviting you to care for or guide others?

- What fears or hesitations come up when you think about shepherding others?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

Identify one person you can encourage or support this week—through prayer, a conversation, or a simple act of service. Ask God to help you point them to the Good Shepherd, not just to yourself.

Prayer

Chief Shepherd,

Thank You for inviting me to share in Your work of caring for others. I confess my inadequacy and my fears—You know my weaknesses better than I do. Yet You entrust me with Your flock, not because I am strong, but because You are faithful.

Give me a heart like Yours—humble, gentle, and willing to serve. Grant me wisdom to discern Your voice, courage to step forward when You call, and compassion to seek out those who wander or are weary.

Help me to point others to You, not to myself. Let my words and actions reflect Your love, Your patience, and Your truth. Where I am tempted to seek recognition or control, remind me that the flock belongs to You alone.

Multiply Your care through me, Lord. May those I lead find rest, nourishment, and hope in Your presence. Teach me to rejoice in small acts of encouragement and to persevere in love, even when it is costly.

Chapter Eight

Life in the Shepherd's Fold

No sheep thrives alone. The Shepherd's design is for His flock to live, grow, and flourish together. Life in the fold—God's community—is both beautiful and challenging, a place where transformation happens through shared joys and struggles. Here, we learn to practice unity and purity, to bear with one another, and to experience the Spirit's work in relationships that stretch and shape us.

Jesus told a story about a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one lost sheep. When he finds it, he doesn't leave it to wander as an individual "saved" sheep. Instead, he brings it back to the fold and rejoices with his friends. The celebration is communal—the lost is restored to belonging, not just rescued for solitude. In God's family, salvation is always an invitation back into relationship and shared life.

While the Shepherd knows each sheep by name, He also gathers them into a flock. Our faith is deeply personal, but never private—it is meant to be lived out in the company of others.

The Tension of Individual and Community

Many of us have grown up in Christian traditions that emphasize individual salvation—and rightly so. Each person matters deeply to God. The apostle Paul reminds us that we are each temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and together we are also a temple, a living body (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; Ephesians 2:21–22).

But the one united with the Lord is one spirit with him.

– 1 Corinthians 6:17

Yet, one hazard of an entirely individualistic mindset is the belief that you can go it alone—that “just me and Jesus” is enough. Certainly, there are seasons—like imprisonment or isolation—where Jesus is all you have, and He is always enough.

Taste and see that the LORD is good! How blessed is the one who takes shelter in him! – Psalm 34:8

He is a feast for any one person. But we are also the body of Christ, members of one another, and we owe one another love (Romans 12:5; 13:8). It is neither good nor safe to go it alone. The Shepherd pursues the one because she is vulnerable to predators; we need the protection of both the flock and the Shepherd. My Moroccan pastor friend knows that life in the fold is the best place for a sheep in the darkness of night.

The Early Church: A Model of Community

The early church modeled this kind of community. They devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. They shared their lives, met each other's needs, and navigated differences with grace and truth (Acts 2:42–47). But unity is not the same as uniformity. The flock is diverse, and real community requires humility, patience, and a common allegiance to the Shepherd. The early church's devotion to shared life stands in stark contrast to today's culture of division and isolation. Their witness depended on unity—and so does ours.

In today's world, where division and isolation are rampant, the church's witness depends on our ability to love across differences and pursue holiness together. The Shepherd's fold is a place of belonging, growth, and mission—a living testimony to His leadership and love. This need for community isn't just theological—it's deeply practical. I've seen it firsthand...

The Struggle for Interdependence: A Personal Story

One of my main struggles (ask my wife for the others) is the desire to be independent. I grew up with a “can-do” attitude and a pioneering sense of self—my family roots trace back to the Denny family, pioneers in Seattle, Washington. That mindset persists in my desire to go it alone and be seen as a self-determining individual. My siblings and I were raised by loving parents on a hobby farm, where chores and tasks built confidence that remains to this day. But the spirit of independence, while valuable, can develop into a pride that isolates.

Interdependence is the goal. One evening, I was sitting in a hospital room with my daughter, who had just broken her femur. It had fractured at the site of a bolt in a halo frame around her leg. Ours was a busy family—Heather was at work, the neighbors were watching our two boys. In the hospital, I caught up on work email using free Wi-Fi from a nearby building. One of the volunteers who mentored students reached out and asked if there was anything they could do to help. Instinctively, I replied, “No, I think we’re managing just fine, but appreciate the offer.” Thankfully, before I hit send, Jesus gently rebuked me for my smug self-assurance—the cocksure independence that was keeping people at arm’s length. They just wanted to help. What did I have to lose by letting people in? What did I stand to gain by keeping them out? I deleted the email and, instead, thanked him for offering help in our time of crisis, letting him know that bringing a meal would be a great blessing.

In the Shepherd’s fold, we discover that true flourishing comes not from self-sufficiency, but from shared life under His care. Where do you find it hardest to let others in? What might you gain by opening yourself to the help and presence of the flock?

The Shepherd’s Heart: Unifying and Patient

The Shepherd gathers His flock, holding together a diverse people with patience and love. He calls us to unity, not uniformity, and empowers us to bear with one another in grace.

Scripture Exploration

Throughout the New Testament, the church is described as a flock under the care of the Shepherd, called to live in unity, mutual care, and

spiritual growth. The early believers devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer, modeling a community where needs were met and diversity was embraced. Paul's letters remind us that we are one body with many members, each belonging to one another and uniquely gifted for the good of all.

True unity is not automatic and it is not the same as uniformity. Unity requires humility, gentleness, patience, and the Spirit's help to bear with one another in love. These passages invite us to see Christian community not as an optional extra, but as the context where the Shepherd's care is experienced, shared, and multiplied—a place of belonging, transformation, and mission.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God's character or your own need?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of longing, challenge, or invitation?

Key Passages: Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12:4–5; Ephesians 4:1–6

They were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... All the believers were together and held everything in common... Every day they continued to gather together by common consent in the temple courts, breaking bread from house to house, sharing their food with glad and humble hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number every day those who were being saved.

For just as in one body we have many members, and not all the members serve the same function, so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members who belong to one another.

I, therefore, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live worthily of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you too were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one

*God and Father of all, who is over all and through all
and in all.*

Lament & Honest Journaling

- When have you felt most at home—or most isolated—in Christian community?
- What blessings or challenges have you experienced in trying to love across differences?
- Where do you struggle most to give or receive grace in community?

If you're in a group, share what you're comfortable with, or invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you contributed to division, withheld forgiveness, or avoided community? Pray: “Shepherd, forgive me for resisting Your call to unity and mutual care.”
- **Obey:** What is one step you can take this week to build unity or serve someone in your community? Write it down:

“Today, I will reach out to _____.”

- **Worship:** Thank Jesus for making you part of His flock. Offer your commitment to love and serve others as an act of worship.

Reflection & Discussion

- How have you experienced the blessings and challenges of Christian community?
- What makes unity difficult in your context? What helps you pursue it?
- How can you contribute to the health and growth of your local flock?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

Reach out to someone in your church or Christian community this week—offer encouragement, ask how you can pray, or invite them to share a meal. Look for a way to build unity and deepen connection.

Prayer

Shepherd of our souls,

Thank You for placing me in Your flock. I confess how easily I drift toward isolation, pride, or self-sufficiency. Forgive me for the ways I have withheld love, avoided community, or contributed to division.

Give me a heart like Yours—patient, gentle, eager to bear with others in love. Teach me to value the beauty and diversity of Your body, to rejoice in shared joys, and to bear burdens together.

Empower me by Your Spirit to pursue unity, to forgive quickly, and to serve humbly. Let my relationships become a living testimony to Your grace and truth.

Help me to build up Your church, to welcome the lonely, and to seek reconciliation where there is hurt. May our community shine with Your love, drawing others to the safety and joy of Your fold.

Lead me, Shepherd, into deeper belonging and greater love, for Your glory and the good of Your people.

Amen.

Chapter Nine

Believing Loyalty

At the heart of the Shepherd's call is loyalty—not just a fleeting feeling, but a deep, enduring allegiance. In a world where loyalties shift with trends, opinions, and circumstances, Jesus invites us to anchor our lives in Him, the true Shepherd. This loyalty isn't about perfection; it's about a steady, daily return to Jesus, no matter what storms or temptations arise.

The sheep know the Shepherd's voice; they hear and respond. With so many other offers and voices, our loyalty is tested day in and day out. Good things become ultimate things and turn into idols. This happens daily as we hear the whisper that God is holding out on us and there is a better offer elsewhere.

Performative individualism is, in many ways, a cultural and spiritual trap—one that tempts us to worship ourselves first and foremost. In today's society, the message is everywhere: "Look inside yourself. Be true to your desires. Express your authentic self to the world." Identity becomes something we not only discover but are expected to display—constantly performing, branding, and promoting ourselves in hopes of approval and fulfillment. It's not enough just to "be your-

self”; there’s pressure to be seen, to stand out, and to gather affirmation from others.

Underneath this pressure, something deeply spiritual is happening. We may look at world religions and shake our heads at the idea of millions of gods, but in our own cultural moment, each person is encouraged to treat their own desires and self-expression as ultimate. In effect, our society becomes crowded with as many “gods” as there are people—each person enthroning their own will and preferences. That would be 340,110,988 at the time of writing.

It’s no wonder our loyalties are so fractured—but it’s precisely at this crossroads that Jesus’ call to a different kind of loyalty becomes both countercultural and desperately needed.

This is why loyalty to Jesus stands out so sharply. Instead of being tossed around by every inner urge or cultural trend—or constantly performing in hopes of being noticed—He calls us to find our anchor, our identity, and our purpose in His love. The invitation is to step off the exhausting stage of self-performance and rest in the steady, unshakable allegiance to the Good Shepherd.

Believing Loyalty in Scripture and Theology

Believing loyalty is the heart of salvation—faith that is not just intellectual assent, but an active, ongoing allegiance to Yahweh through Jesus. In the Old Testament, salvation was never about mere ritual or works, but about turning from other gods and giving exclusive loyalty to Yahweh. This same principle applies in the New Testament: salva-

tion is about transferring our allegiance from all other “gods”—including self, idols, or cultural ideals—to Jesus, the visible Yahweh. Loyalty is demonstrated not by perfection, but by refusing to worship another, by returning to Jesus as the only true Shepherd when we stray. Moral perfection does not save us and moral imperfection will not damn us. It is allegiance to Jesus that saves.

Paul’s warning in Romans 1 illustrates how humanity slides from failing to thank and honor God into worshipping created things rather than the Creator. When we exchange the truth of God for a lie, we inevitably give our loyalty to something or someone else—whether success, comfort, approval, or self. The call is to resist the drift inward toward self, to anchor our lives in Christ, and to let our loyalty be shaped by His steadfast love.

When Ministry Becomes an Idol: A Personal Story

Let me tell you a secret. Being a pastor is difficult work—not because of the particular tasks required of me (though there are some interesting stories there). No, it’s difficult—maybe even corrosive to my soul—because it’s easy to turn ministry into a way to soothe my people-pleasing tendencies. Ministry can become an idol. I’m a recovering people pleaser.

Sometimes the way you do the work of God destroys the work of God in you.

Jesus and I have gone round and round about this over the years. I remember many conversations where I thought Jesus should’ve plat-

formed me a lot better. I shouldn't be as hidden as I felt. He continually took me to a particular verse:

*for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in
God — Colossians 3:3*

I would tell Him, "I don't want to be hidden." And He would gently reply, "But you do want to be with Christ in Me, correct?" Of course, I would say yes. Then He would remind me of the next verse:

*When Christ (who is your life) appears, then you too
will be revealed in glory with him. — Colossians 3:4*

He assured me that I will be revealed when Christ appears. He wanted me to decide whether that would be enough for me. I can't tell you how many times I've had this conversation with Him over the years, but recently, we stopped going round and round.

Reflection

Loyalty to Jesus is not about never failing or never struggling with misplaced affections. It is about returning, again and again, to the Shepherd who alone is worthy of our allegiance. Even ministry, when untethered from Jesus, can become an idol. The Shepherd's invitation is to let go of every other "god"—even good things—and find our life, our identity, and our reward in Him alone.

He is enough. And when He appears, we will find that being hidden with Him was the safest, richest place to be all along.

As I mentioned above, recently we stopped going around and around in a debate over these verses. He revealed to me that whether my platform grew another inch wider or another inch taller, His pleasure in me remains. His pleasure is not measured by influence or visibility. My role is to guard my integrity; His role is to handle my influence.

I control my integrity, He controls my influence.

Now, whenever I step up to preach or serve, I remind myself: I am Abba's beloved boy—creative, energetic, relational—and He is already pleased with me. My privilege is to stand before others, celebrate His goodness, and simply point people to Him. That is enough.

The Shepherd's Heart: Faithful and Steadfast

Jesus is unwavering in His love and commitment. He remains with us, even when we're tempted to wander, and His faithfulness empowers our loyalty.

Scripture Exploration

Loyalty to the Shepherd is a central thread woven through the entire biblical story. From the earliest days, God's people were called to wholehearted devotion—turning from false gods and divided allegiances to trust Yahweh alone. In the Old Testament, faithfulness was never just about outward rituals, but about exclusive allegiance to the living God, even when surrounded by competing voices and cultural

pressures. The prophets warned against idolatry, urging God's people to return to Him with undivided hearts.

In the New Testament, this theme is deepened and fulfilled in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who calls His followers to remain in Him and resist the drift toward self or created things. Paul's words in Romans 1 expose the human tendency to exchange the truth of God for lesser loves, while his letter to the Colossians urges believers to set their minds on things above, anchoring their identity in Christ. Jesus Himself uses the image of the vine and branches to show that fruitfulness and true life come only from abiding in Him. These passages remind us that believing loyalty is not about flawless performance, but about a daily, relational return to the Shepherd who alone is worthy of our allegiance—a loyalty that is tested, refined, and sustained in the everyday choices of our lives.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God's character or your own need?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of longing, challenge, or invitation?

**Key Passages: Romans 1:20-23; Colossians 3:1-4;
John 15:4-5**

For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made. So people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Keep thinking about things above, not things on the earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ (who is your life) appears, then you too will be revealed in glory with him.

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me—and I in him—bears much fruit, because apart from me you can accomplish nothing.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- Where do you sense your loyalty to Jesus being tested or divided?
- What “false shepherds” or competing voices most tempt you to drift?
- When have you experienced the cost—or the reward—of remaining loyal to Jesus?

If you're in a group, share what you're comfortable with, or invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you given your allegiance to other voices, ambitions, or idols? Pray: “Jesus, forgive me for divided loyalty. I want to return to You as my true Shepherd.”

- **Obey:** What is one concrete step of loyalty you can take this week—especially where it’s hard? Write it down: “Today, I will choose to follow You by _____.”

- **Worship:** Thank Jesus for being faithful to you, even when your loyalty wavers. Offer your trust and allegiance as worship.

Reflection & Discussion

- What practices help you stay anchored in Christ’s love and truth?

- How can you encourage others to remain loyal to the Shepherd?

- Where do you see divided loyalties affecting your community or relationships?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

This week, identify one area where your loyalty to Jesus is being challenged. Bring it to Him in prayer, asking for strength to remain anchored. Consider sharing your commitment with a trusted friend for accountability.

Prayer

Faithful Shepherd,

I confess that my loyalty is often divided. I am drawn to other voices—comfort, success, approval, or my own desires—and I have given my allegiance to things that cannot satisfy or save. Forgive me, Lord, for the idols I have allowed into my heart and for the times I have wandered from Your side.

I repent of trusting in myself, of seeking my worth in the world's promises, and of neglecting the daily return to Your voice. Wash me clean of divided loyalties. Restore in me a heart that treasures You above all else.

Anchor me in Your steadfast love. Give me discernment to recognize false shepherds and courage to resist their pull. Teach me to remain in You, to trust Your goodness even when Your path is hard or bidden.

Thank You for Your unwavering faithfulness, for seeking me when I stray, and for holding me fast. You are the Faithful One and You are the Author and Perfecter of my faithfulness. By Your Spirit, renew my allegiance and empower me to walk in loyal love, today and every day.

Amen.

For Further Study

Read the following related passages. Write out the scriptures to practicing hearing from God and respond with a few lines as well.

- Romans 12:1–2

- John 15:16

- Hebrews 12:1–3

Chapter Ten

Overflowing with Blessing

We live in a world where “enough” always seems just out of reach. We chase after more—more time, more security, more affirmation—yet rarely feel full. The Shepherd’s way is different. Psalm 23 paints a picture of abundance that doesn’t depend on circumstances:

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. —

Psalm 23:5b

This is not the overflow of striving, but of being filled by God’s own presence and care.

When you get bumped, what spills out from your cup? Bitterness, a curse, or does joy slosh over the side and people get splattered with love? What overflows from your life right now?

When I was growing up, it was common to think that sports build character. That is more true during practice but not so much in the

face of real competition. Over time, I've come to believe that these challenging athletic environments actually reveal your character more than they build it. You start to see who you really are when someone takes a ball away from you—it's quite a revelation. I've had many situations where something erupts from me out of a sense of justice or pride, and I watch myself do something rather dramatic. It's always good to sit back and think about what's deep inside my heart, because I need to double-check what is flowing out.

There came a time in the last eight years when I decided I would be a little less focused on my "witness" while playing basketball. By that I mean, as a pastor, I was always trying to pastor while on the court instead of playing freely. I found that I was worried about what might come out if I was to joke around and be playful with my teammates. So I stopped. I started trusting that the Spirit of God had been doing a deep work within me to produce the fruit of the Spirit. Almost everybody I play with is very gracious and understanding, and I'm actually both learning a lot about myself and having a lot of fun, because what's coming out is from the Spirit of God and not the fruit that comes from pleasing my flesh (Galatians 5:16-26).

You've got to take time to examine the fruit!

Overflow in the Life of the Flock

In the ancient world, anointing with oil was a sign of honor, healing, and welcome. A cup that overflows is a symbol of joy, generosity, and satisfaction. The Shepherd doesn't just give us what we need to survive; He delights to bless us beyond what we imagine, even in hard

seasons. This blessing is not just for us—it spills over into the lives of others.

Overflow is not about material excess, but about a heart so rooted in the Shepherd's love that it cannot help but bless, encourage, and refresh others. As we learn to live from this place of abundance, we become conduits of God's grace in a world that desperately needs it.

There are times when I run out of love, joy, peace, and patience. My resources are dried up and I have nothing left to give. I think many of us experienced that during the pandemic starting in 2020. We realized our resources had been drained. It was like looking at a lake that had all the water drained out of it, and we saw what was at the bottom—carcasses and debris. That was the state of our hearts. We realized we had very little left, and some of us dug deeper wells to go after Jesus. In my book, *Living Waters*, I explore how we can go deeper with Christ and receive living water from the Spirit.

When I ask Jesus for the resources to live out what He's called me to do, He always provides. I've found that He never asks me to do something He's not also willing to resource. Sometimes I have to take a step, but then He comes through. In the middle of raising our six kids in a wonderfully chaotic and loving family, I would often drive home from work with a prayer in my heart. There was a spot in the road where it turned directly toward my house, and if I hadn't been praying by then, I was reminded. I would pray, "Jesus, you are uniquely qualified to be the husband, father, neighbor, friend that I need to be when I arrive home." It was amazing to see God providing what everyone needed through me. That continues to this day, and I'm excited to be a conduit of His blessing.

Many people think we are blessed in order to be blessed so we can say we are blessed, but it's clear that God blesses us in order to become a blessing. We are a through street, not a cul-de-sac. We're not meant

to just pile up the blessings—we're meant to pass them on. This is part of the original idea of the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12.

The Shepherd's Heart: Abundant and Generous

The Shepherd delights in blessing His flock—not just with survival, but with overflowing joy, honor, and satisfaction that spills out to others.

Scripture Exploration

Anointing and overflowing cups in the Old Testament signify God's favor and the joy of His presence. To be anointed was to be set apart, honored, and welcomed. A cup that overflows is a declaration: there is more than enough. Jesus, in the New Testament, promises living water that becomes a spring within us, overflowing to eternal life and blessing for others. The oil and overflowing cup are signs of honor and abundance, not just survival.

In the ancient world, anointing with oil and the overflowing cup were powerful symbols of honor, healing, and abundance. When the psalmist says, "*You refresh my head with oil; my cup is completely full,*" he's describing the Shepherd's lavish hospitality and care. Anointing a guest's head with oil was a gesture of welcome, refreshment, and blessing—especially meaningful in a dry, dusty land. It meant you were not just tolerated, but deeply valued and honored at the table.

The overflowing cup, meanwhile, is a picture of abundance that exceeds mere sufficiency; it's the host's way of saying, "You will never lack here. I will provide more than enough." Together, these images remind us that God's provision is not stingy or reluctant.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?

- **Observation:** What do you notice about God's character or your own need?

- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of longing, challenge, or invitation?

Key Passages: Psalm 23:5b; John 7:37–38; Galatians 5:19-26

You refresh my head with oil; my cup is completely full.

On the last day of the feast, the greatest day, Jesus stood up and shouted out, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come

to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. Just as the scripture says, 'From within him will flow rivers of living water.'

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envying, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and similar things. I am warning you, as I had warned you before: Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God! But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also behave in accordance with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, being jealous of one another.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- Where do you sense God's abundance in your life? Where do you feel lack?

- When have you tried to fill your cup with things other than God's presence?

- How has God's blessing overflowed into the lives of others through you?

If you're in a group, share what you're comfortable with, or invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you lived from scarcity or tried to manufacture your own abundance? Pray: "Shepherd, forgive me for doubting Your provision or hoarding what You've given."

- **Obey:** What is one way you can bless someone out of what God has given you—time, encouragement, resources, or prayer? Write it down: "Today, I will bless _____ by _____."

- **Worship:** Thank God for His abundance. Offer your gratitude and willingness to overflow to others as an act of worship.

Reflection & Discussion

- Where have you been operating out of scarcity?
- What has been your experience of others who operate out of scarcity?
- What would it look like to live from overflow, not scarcity, this week?

Action Step

Identify one way to bless someone out of what God has given you—time, encouragement, resources, or prayer. Thank God for His abundance as you give.

Prayer

Shepherd,

Thank You for filling my life with Your presence and for the abundance You so generously pour out. Forgive me for the times I have lived from a place of scarcity, fear, or self-reliance—boarding Your blessings or doubting Your provision.

Anoint my head with the oil of Your Spirit. Let Your joy, peace, and love overflow from my heart, especially when life “bumps” me and my

Chapter Eleven

Pursued by Goodness

For much of my life, I lived with a sense of being driven—haunted by the imagined crack of a whip behind me. Even as I longed for rest and refreshment, I felt compelled to keep moving, as if lack or failure were always nipping at my heels. We've been learning that we lack nothing and Yahweh has surrounded us with protection. The apostle Paul reminds us:

What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things? —

Romans 8:31-32

Yet, for years, I couldn't shake the sense of obligation and low-grade fear. Only recently have I realized—the whip isn't cracking anymore. When I turn around, it's not punishment or lack chasing me, but Jesus

Himself. He is the relentless Hound of Heaven, pursuing me with love. His goodness and mercy continue to follow me, not to condemn, but to fill me, draw me close, and transform me. What I once thought was trouble chasing me is, in fact, the Holy Spirit inviting me deeper into Jesus' presence.

In *Living Waters*, I describe how Jesus is calling me to the Eden He's creating within me—a place of intimacy, restoration, and joy. He calls me to sit with Him, to see life's struggles from His perspective. I want to be led by the Shepherd, not driven by the wolves. My hope is that this book has helped you make that same shift.

Some people live as if trouble is always chasing them, waiting for the next shoe to drop. But the Shepherd's promise is startling: "Surely goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life." God's goodness is not passive; it actively seeks us out, even when we wander. His mercy is relentless, following us through every detour and disappointment.

This isn't wishful thinking or naïve optimism. It's a declaration of faith in the Shepherd's character. Even when life is hard—even when we're pursued by regret, fear, or failure—God's goodness and mercy are more persistent. They do not depend on our performance, but on His covenant love.

To be pursued by goodness is to live with hope—not because we know what tomorrow holds, but because we know Who holds us. The Shepherd's pursuit is not just for our comfort, but for our transformation. He is always drawing us back, always inviting us deeper into His love. Start looking over your shoulder: it's about to get good.

The Big Scoop Syndrome: Learning to Trust God’s Delight

I grew up learning a lot about God’s discipline, but not always about His goodness. One story from my childhood sticks with me: There was a local ice cream place called Big Scoop. One Sunday after church, my siblings and I asked my dad if we could “stop by Big Scoop on the way home.” My dad, with his dark sense of humor, said “sure,” drove half a mile out of the way, pulled into the parking lot, stopped—and then drove off, to our protests. We didn’t just want to stop by; we wanted to go in and enjoy the ice cream!

As funny as it was, that moment mapped onto my view of God. I learned to be very specific in my prayers—or not ask at all. I expected God’s judgment more than His blessing. Years later, in a small group, I confessed that I didn’t really feel God’s love or favor; I mostly tried to “straighten up and fly right” to avoid His discipline. A friend looked at me and said, “Aaron, you have Big Scoop Syndrome!”

That phrase stuck. It made me realize how easy it is to believe in God’s discipline but doubt His delight—to expect Him to pull away just as we draw near, or to stop short of blessing us. But Psalm 23 insists: “*Surely goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life.*” The Shepherd’s heart is not just to correct, but to bless, to overflow, and to welcome us in.

The Shepherd’s Heart: Pursuing and Relentless

The Shepherd’s goodness and mercy are not static; they chase us down. Even when we wander, He seeks us out, determined to bring us home and restore joy.

Scripture Exploration

God's *hesed*—His steadfast love—and His goodness are woven throughout the Old Testament, culminating in Jesus' pursuit of the lost in the Gospels. The Shepherd's pursuit is not just a poetic metaphor; it's the story of God's relentless love for His people, no matter how far they stray. Even when we hide, wander, or doubt, His goodness and mercy are more persistent than our fears, regrets, or failures.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God's character or your own need?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of longing, challenge, or invitation?

Key Passages: Psalm 23:6a; Psalm 139:7–10; Hosea 2:14–15; Revelation 3:20

Surely your goodness and faithfulness will pursue me all my days.

Where can I go to escape your Spirit? Where can I flee to escape your presence? If I were to ascend to heaven, you would be there. If I were to sprawl out in Sheol, there you would be. If I were to fly away on the wings of the dawn, and settle down on the other side of the sea, even there your hand would guide me, your right hand would grab hold of me.

However, in the future I will allure her; I will lead her back into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give back her vineyards to her, and turn the “Valley of Trouble” into an “Opportunity for Hope.” There she will sing as she did when she was young, when she came up from the land of Egypt.

Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come

into his home and share a meal with him, and he with me.

Lament & Honest Journaling

- When have you experienced God's goodness or mercy pursuing you, even when you didn't deserve it?
- Where do you need to trust that God is seeking you, even now?
- Do you ever find yourself expecting discipline more than delight? How might "Big Scoop Syndrome" show up in your prayers or expectations?

If you're in a group, share what you're comfortable with, or invite others to pray for you.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you assumed that trouble or regret is your only companion? Pray: "Shepherd, forgive me for doubting Your goodness and mercy. Help me to trust Your pursuit."

- **Obey:** What is one way you can watch for and respond to God's goodness this week? Write it down: "Today, I will look for Your mercy in _____."
- **Worship:** Offer thanks for specific ways God's goodness has found you in the past. Let gratitude become your worship.

Reflection & Discussion

- What practices help you become more aware of God's pursuit in your daily life?
- How might you encourage someone else who feels pursued by regret or fear, rather than by goodness?
- In what area of your life do you most need to receive—not just believe in—God's delight?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

This week, look for signs of God's goodness and mercy in your day. Keep a list, and thank Him for each one you notice. If you catch yourself expecting disappointment, remember: the Shepherd delights to bless His flock.

Chapter Twelve

Home in the Shepherd's House

The journey with the Shepherd leads somewhere: home. Yet, as Scripture reveals, this home is not an escape from earth or a retreat to some distant, immaterial realm. It is the fulfillment of God's promise to dwell with His people in a renewed creation—a world where heaven and earth are finally united. When David declares, "*I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever*," he's expressing more than a longing for a place; he's voicing the hope of true belonging—being at home in God's presence, secure in His love, and welcomed as part of His family. The Shepherd's care is not temporary or conditional; it is eternal, embodied, and world-renewing.

The Complexity and Longing of "Home"

For many, "home" is a complicated word. It may evoke memories of warmth and safety, or it may stir up longing, ache, or even pain. Perhaps "home" is something you've never truly found, or always

yearned for. The ache for home is a universal experience—a longing to be known, to belong, to rest in a place where you are truly welcomed.

For Heather and me, home is a wonderfully complex idea. As adoptive parents, we brought six children into an environment we always wanted them to call home. When our first son was declared legally ours—though he still lacked immigration status—Heather announced she was moving to Guatemala. I figured I should tag along. So we went down to Guatemala City, set up life in a hotel room, and did our best to create a temporary home for our son while waiting to bring him home for good. We stayed for over a month, ushering the lawyer through her paces to bring our child home. In that season of waiting, improvising, and longing, we caught a glimpse of the heart of our adoptive Father—Abba, the Creator of the universe—who desires to bring us close, make us family, and give us a place to belong.

The Promise of an Unshakable Home

The Shepherd promises a home that cannot be shaken—a place where we are known, loved, and never alone. This home is both present and future: we taste it now in worship, prayer, and community, and we look forward to its fullness when heaven and earth are made new. The biblical story is not about us leaving earth behind, but about God coming here—renewing all things, making His dwelling with us, and restoring the world as His home with His people.

The Shepherd's Heart: Welcoming and Eternal

The Shepherd's invitation is always open. He prepares a place for us, calls us family, and promises that His welcome will never end. The Shepherd's heart is not merely to rescue us from earth, but to renew

earth itself, making His dwelling with us forever. In the end, home is not just a destination, but a relationship—a life lived in the presence of the Shepherd, now and always.

Let this vision of home shape your hope: a place of belonging, restoration, and joy, where the Shepherd's welcome is eternal and His presence fills every longing heart.

Scripture Exploration

Throughout the biblical story, the “house of the LORD” is much more than a distant heaven or an immaterial afterlife—it is the place where God's presence dwells with His people, where heaven and earth meet. For David and ancient Israel, this meant the Tabernacle (and later the Temple), the sacred space filled with Eden imagery—cherubim, trees, fruit, and flowing water—reminding God's people of His original intent to dwell with humanity in a garden-temple. The Tabernacle and Temple were not just religious buildings; they were the very intersection of heaven and earth, the place where God's glory rested and where worshipers experienced a taste of home.

This longing for God's presence as “home” continues through the prophets and into the New Testament. Jesus Himself is described as the true Temple—God with us, the Word made flesh who “tabernacled” among us. Paul, in Romans 8, anchors our hope not in escape from earth, but in the liberation and renewal of all creation: the world itself will be set free and made new as God's dwelling place. The story reaches its climax in Revelation, where heaven comes down and God makes His home with humanity forever: “Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them.”

For the early church, and for us today, the promise is not that we leave earth behind, but that God comes here, renewing all things and

making His home with us. The Shepherd's invitation is to belong in this new creation—a world remade, filled with His presence, where every longing for home is finally fulfilled.

Engaging the Key Passages

Before you read, remember the SOAPS method from the introduction. For these passages, focus on:

- **Scripture:** Read slowly. What word or phrase stands out?
- **Observation:** What do you notice about God's character or your own need?
- **Application:** How does this speak to your current place of longing, challenge, or invitation?

Key Passages: Psalm 23:6b; John 14:2–3; Romans 8:18–25; Revelation 21:1–5

and I will live in the LORD's house for the rest of my life.

There are many dwelling places in my Father's house. Otherwise, I would have told you, because I am going away to make ready a place for you. And if I go and make ready a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me, so that where I am you may be too.

For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us. For the creation eagerly waits for the revelation of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly but because of God who subjected it—in hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of decay into the glorious freedom of God's children. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers together until now. Not only this, but we ourselves also, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with endurance.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had ceased to exist, and the sea existed no more. And I saw the holy city—the new Jerusalem—descending out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband. And I

heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "Look! The residence of God is among human beings. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more—or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist." And the one seated on the throne said: "Look! I am making all things new!" Then he said to me, "Write it down, because these words are reliable and true."

Lament & Honest Journaling

- What does “home” mean to you—comfort, safety, longing, or something else?
- Where do you feel most at home with God? Where do you feel like an outsider?
- How has God met you in your longing for belonging or welcome?

Use this space to reflect honestly. If you're in a group, share what you're comfortable with, or simply invite others to pray for a deeper sense of belonging.

R.O.W. Response: Repent, Obey, Worship

- **Repent:** Where have you looked for belonging apart from God's presence? Pray: "Shepherd, forgive me for searching for home in places that cannot satisfy. Draw me back to Your house."
- **Obey:** What is one way you can embrace your belonging in God's family this week—or extend His welcome to someone else? Write it down: "Today, I will _____."
- **Worship:** Thank God for making a home for you. Offer your gratitude and trust as worship, resting in His eternal welcome.

Reflection & Discussion

- How does the promise of God making His home with us shape your daily life and hope for the future?

- What would it look like to live as a citizen of the new creation, even now?

- Who in your life needs to hear the Shepherd's invitation to come home?

Discuss with a friend or group.

Action Step

Create a “homecoming” moment this week—light a candle, share a meal, or spend time in prayer—marking your belonging in God's house. Invite someone else to join you, if possible.

Prayer

Shepherd of my soul,

Thank You for leading me on this journey home. Thank You for the promise that my true home is not found in a distant place, but in Your presence—here and now, and in the world You are making new. You are the One who welcomes me, not as a guest, but as family. You prepare a place for me, call me by name, and promise that Your love will never end.

Forgive me for the times I have searched for belonging in lesser places, or settled for temporary shelters that cannot satisfy the longing of my heart. Forgive me for the moments I have doubted Your welcome, or

believed I was too far away to be found. Draw me back to Your house, and remind me that I am never outside Your invitation.

Anchor my hope in Your promise to dwell with us forever. Let me live each day as a citizen of Your new creation—welcoming others, extending grace, and resting in the security of Your love. When I feel lost or alone, remind me that You are the Shepherd who seeks, restores, and brings me home.

Make my life a reflection of Your hospitality. Teach me to create spaces of welcome, forgiveness, and joy for others, just as You have done for me. Fill my heart with gratitude for the home You have given, and anticipation for the day when all things are made new and every longing is fulfilled in Your presence.

Until that day, help me to walk with You, to trust Your leading, and to rest in the assurance that I am—and always will be—at home in Your love. Amen.

For Further Study

Read the following related passages. Write out the scriptures to practicing hearing from God and respond with a few lines as well.

- Hebrews 10:19–25

- Romans 8

- Psalm 27:4

Conclusion

As you reach the end of this journey, pause and remember the heart of the Shepherd you've encountered in these pages. Each chapter has revealed a facet of Jesus' character—His gentleness, patience, faithfulness, abundance, and relentless pursuit. He is the Gentle Shepherd who draws near to the weary, the Healing Shepherd who restores what is broken, the Present Shepherd in the valley, the Comforting Shepherd who corrects and protects, the Providing Host who welcomes you to His table, the Faithful Shepherd who multiplies His care through you, the Unifying Shepherd who gathers His flock, the Abundant Shepherd who overflows your cup, the Pursuing Shepherd who never gives up, and the Welcoming Shepherd who prepares a home for you.

These aren't just poetic titles—they are lived realities for all who choose to follow Him. Each trait is an invitation: to trust, to rest, to return, to receive, and to share His care with others.

When life gets shaky, we all lean on something, look to someone. The world offers many voices, many "shepherds," but only One has proven Himself trustworthy at every turn. Only One has laid down His life for you, and only One has promised to walk with you—through green pastures and shadowed valleys, through seasons of abundance and times of loss.

This book is, in the end, my five-star review of Jesus as Shepherd. I have found Him to be enough—gentle when I am fragile, strong when I am weak, faithful when I am wandering, and always present when I am afraid. He has never failed to meet me in my need, to restore my soul, and to call me home.

So let me leave you with this question:

When life gets shaky, who do you lean on? Where do you look for comfort, guidance, and hope? Are you convinced—truly convinced—to lean on Jesus?

If you are, then keep listening. Keep following. The Shepherd's adventure continues, and His heart for you is steadfast, overflowing, and eternally welcoming. You truly can trust Him—today, tomorrow, and forever. And as you continue, remember: the Shepherd's journey leads not just through this life, but into the world He is making new—a home where you will dwell with Him, fully known and forever loved.

If you would like to discuss the book feel free to reach out.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Aaron Bauer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Aaron" and last name "Bauer" clearly distinguishable.

Aaron Bauer

Issaquah, WA

July 2025

aaron@issaquah.cc

Appendix

As you walk with the Shepherd through every season, the Father, Son, and Spirit each minister to you uniquely and together. These prayers are offered as companions for your journey—whether you need comfort, guidance, courage, or renewal. Use them as written, adapt them for your own story, or let them inspire your own words as you rest in the care of the Triune God.

1. The Father: Creator, Provider, and Protector

Prayer for Belonging and Provision

Father, You are the Maker of all things, the Giver of every good gift, and the One who calls me by name. Thank You for welcoming me into Your family, for preparing a place at Your table, and for calling me beloved. When I am anxious or afraid, remind me that I am safe in Your hands. When I feel alone, draw me close to Your heart. Provide for my needs—body, mind, and spirit—and teach me to trust Your goodness even when I cannot see the way ahead. Let Your love be the foundation of my life, and help me to rest in the security of being Your child. Amen.

2. The Son: Shepherd, Savior, and Friend

Prayer for Guidance and Restoration

Jesus, Good Shepherd, thank You for seeking me when I wander, for calling me by name, and for laying down Your life so I could be found. You lead me beside still waters, restore my soul, and walk with me through every valley. When I am lost or weary, help me to hear Your voice above all others. Guide my steps, correct me gently, and teach me to follow where You lead. Forgive me when I stray or try to lead myself. Remind me that Your grace is enough, and that Your presence is my greatest gift. Help me to trust You, to abide in Your love, and to become a vessel of Your care for others. Amen.

3. The Holy Spirit: Comforter, Empowerer, and Guide

Prayer for Strength and Transformation

Holy Spirit, You are the breath of God within me, the Comforter who draws near in weakness, and the One who makes me more like Jesus. Fill me with Your presence—renew my mind, soften my heart, and empower me to live with courage and joy. When I am empty, pour out Your living water. When I am tempted to despair, remind me of hope. Grow in me the fruit that only You can produce—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Lead me into truth, guide me in every decision, and make me a witness to Your grace in the world. Amen.

4. Trinitarian Prayer: The Journey Together

Prayer for the Road Ahead

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— Thank You for walking with me every step of this journey. Father, hold me in Your love. Jesus, lead me as my Shepherd and Friend. Spirit, fill me with Your presence and power. Unite my heart to Yours. Let my life reflect Your compassion, humility, and hope. Keep me from wandering, and when I do, pursue me with relentless mercy. May I find my true home in You, and may my journey bring honor to Your name. Amen.

5. Blessing for the Journey

May the Father's arms surround you, May the Son's voice guide you, May the Spirit's presence fill you— And may you dwell in the house of the Lord, Now and forever. Amen.

Feel free to return to these prayers whenever you need to remember the Shepherd's care, the Father's embrace, the Son's leading, and the Spirit's empowering presence. You are never alone on this journey.