

November 3, 2024

When the Road is Long or Confidence in God's Shepherding
Psalm 23

Unifying Principle (Focus)

People seek out trustworthy guidance and direction in all of life's experiences. How do we find assurance that we are on a good path? The psalmist asserts that the Lord leads us just as a good shepherd leads and tends the sheep, and in John's Gospel Jesus identifies himself as a true shepherd.

Goals for the Learner

1. To apply the attributes of shepherd to God's care for them in 2024.
2. To adopt the psalmist's sense of security in knowing God as a shepherd.
3. To create a scenario in which you could experience God's "leading beside still waters," and "restoring my soul."

Challenges For the Next Week

1. Read and sing hymn versions of Psalm 23. What are your emotional connections to the psalm and the hymn settings?
2. Prepare a presentation for your church on the ancient practice of shepherding and the reasons why it serves as a compelling metaphor for the covenant relationship between God and God's people. Add information on the age-old notion that kings were the shepherds of their people.
3. Note that the psalm only speaks of God as a shepherd in verses 1-3. The Lord becomes a travel companion (v. 4) and a host (vv. 5, 6).
4. How are the metaphors of a shepherd, travel companion, and host illumine the character of God? How do the metaphors address human conditions and the need for guidance?
5. Watch the Bible Project video (bibleproject.com) on "Nephesh-Soul." What are some spiritual practices that "restore my soul" in light of the video's message?
6. Connect God's words to Moses in Exodus 3 ("say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'") to Jesus's use of the Greek phrase *Ego eimi*, "I am." What is the theological significance of Jesus's use of the words?

November 10, 2024

Who Can You Trust or Songs of Praise
Psalm 146, 150

Unifying Principle (Focus)

People extol the virtues of their leaders. What attributes are most worthy of praise? Psalms 146 through 150 reflect Israel's worship and praise for God as their Creator, Sustainer, and Everlasting Guardian

Goals For The Learner

1. To validate the virtues or character qualities the psalmist ascribes to God.
2. To identify with the psalmist's sense of God's personal care and concern for all God has created.
3. To name the ways that God's care for them is reflected in those who give spiritual leadership in their congregation.

Challenges For The Week

1. Prepare an infographic poster that breaks down the structure of Psalms 146–150—praise of God begins with the individual (146:1), involves the community (147:1, 12), extends to heaven and earth (148:1, 7). The whole world will celebrate what the Lord has done for Israel (148:13-14) in response to the praise of a people committed to God's mission (149). Finally, everything that has breath will praise the Lord (150:6).
2. Watch "How to Read the Bible: The Book of Psalms" at bibleproject.com to set Psalms 146–150 in literary/historical context.
3. List the virtues or qualities Psalms 146 and 150 ascribe to God. Link the qualities with familiar stories in the Old Testament.
4. What is the tension between Psalm 146:3-4's warning against giving our ultimate allegiance to any human or institution, and the nationalism prevalent in US politics/governance. Compare the tension between serving God and Caesar (Matthew 22:15-22).
5. Describe the psalmist's sense of God's personal care and concern for all God has created. What are ways this care is expressed in your church's worship and outreach ministries. Name the ways that God's care for the poor is reflected in your congregation. In what ways does your church praise God for calling you to do justice in a world of inequality, oppression, and suffering?
6. Search your church's hymnbook for hymns based on Psalms 146 and 150. Read and sing these, offering your own praise to the Lord

November 17, 2024

A Gratitude Attitude or A Song of Thanksgiving
Psalm 100

Unifying Principle (Focus)

When we receive gifts and benefits, we like to show gratitude to our benefactor. To whom should we express our appreciation for life's graces? Psalm 100 is a song of worship and praise directed to the Lord who made us and whose faithfulness was and is for all generations.

Goals For the Learner

- . To validate the psalmist's reasons for grateful praise.
2. To personalize God's care for them based on God's acts of faithfulness in Israel's salvation history.
3. To interpret a song or hymn of thanksgiving that celebrates God's faithfulness.

Challenges For The Week

1. How does your church's worship evoke the psalm's themes: entering into God's presence with dynamic praise, singing, gladness, and devotion.
2. Name what you are thankful for. Write a hymn or psalm using the things you have named.
3. Diagram the structure of the psalm. There are two sections (vv. 1-3, 4-5), which include four sets of threes—verses 1-2, three calls; verse 3, three affirmations; verse 4, three invitations; and verse 5, three assertions. Comment on the symbolic significance of three and four in the ancient Hebrew world. They signify perfection and completion. ($3+4=7$, as in 7 days of creation; and $3 \times 4=12$, as in 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles). Wonder aloud why the psalmist wrote his praise with this symmetry.
4. Do you have a personal story of liberation or justice that demonstrates God's care for you? Make connections with the story of God's faithfulness and steadfast love expressed throughout Israel's salvation history.
5. Research hymns based on Psalm 100 and interpret those hymns through art, movement, poetry, and music.
6. Note the connection between creation (v. 3) and the temple (v. 4) in the psalm. Watch "Temple" at bibleproject.com to gain a broad understanding of this connection.

November 24, 2024

Wonderful Marvelous or God's Promised Presence

Psalm 139:1-12

Unifying Principle (Focus)

We all want to feel accepted and valued. Where do we find someone who loves and accepts us just as we are? The psalmist praises God as a Creator who stays intimately involved with our lives and who possesses precise knowledge of each person's spiritual and physical traits and well-being.

Goals For The Learner

1. To compare the psalmist's conviction that God knows persons intimately with their own experience of God.
2. To nurture a confident awareness of being known and valued by God.
3. To design a practice of gratitude that could cultivate an intimate and trusting relationship with God.

Challenges For The Week

1. Name someone who has loved and accepted you just as you are. How is this similar to the way the psalm talks about God knowing us?
2. Do a word study of the Hebrew verb *yadá*, "to know." Uncover the many dimensions of meaning in the word.
3. Compare the psalmist's conviction that God knows persons intimately with your experiences of God.
4. Do you think people are resistant to the idea that they are wonderfully and fearfully made by God? If so, how is it evident? How would you expect people who reject the idea of their created-ness to behave?
5. If God has already examined us and knows us (v. 1), why ask God to examine and know us again (v. 23)?
6. What kind of spiritual practice could cultivate an intimate and trusting relationship with God. How does Psalm 139 inspire you to worship God?