

Week #:	86	Series:	Walking with God in the Desert	Title:	Session 6: Ears to Hear
Text:					
Songs:	My Life Is In You, Lord (2:57)				
	Trust In You – Lauren Daigle (3:30)				
	The More I Seek You – Kari Jobe (4:04)				
Video:	Walking with God in the Desert: Ears to Hear (Ray Vander Laan) (21:26)				

“The Lord is my shepherd,” these familiar words from Psalms 23 have brought hope and encouragement into the lives of God’s people for more than three thousand years. But even greater meanings emerge when this phrase is understood in the context of the way Middle Eastern shepherds lead and care for their flocks.

The Israelites were desert people and raised sheep and goats that could survive on the meager grass and water found there. For both the shepherd and the flock, life in the rugged terrain and harsh climate of the desert was difficult. Flocks were rarely fenced in, so they were totally dependent on their shepherds to provide shelter, protection, and enough daily pasture and water to survive. The flock’s helpless dependence on the shepherd’s leading and provision became an appropriate metaphor for the relationship between God and His people.

Like sheep in the desert, the Israelites learned to depend totally on God to provide “just enough” food, water, and protection to survive each day.

The shepherd was both the flock’s leader and constant companion. As protector, the shepherd carried a “rod” – a club-like weapon – and a “staff” to drive away predators. Yet the shepherd treated the sheep gently, anticipating their every need and even carrying those that became weak or injured. As provider, the shepherd called the flock, leading them to water and fresh pasture by voice. Shepherds in Biblical times were so closely linked to their flock that they could separate it from larger flocks simply by calling to their animals. The sheep, in turn, respond only to the voice of their particular shepherd.

What an amazing picture of the kind of relationship God desires to have with His people! God led His people out of Egypt and into the desert in order to show them that He was their Shepherd who cared deeply for them and would provide for all their needs. As their Shepherd, He lovingly taught them to listen to His voice, obey His words, and follow wherever He led.

To better understand the metaphor of God as Shepherd of His people, we must remember that in the Middle East flocks are not found in the lush landscape of belly-deep alfalfa where they might survive on their own. Rather, they are found in the barren desert wilderness where the presence of a good shepherd can mean the difference between life and death. So it is with us.

God, our Shepherd, meets us in the desert too. He is committed to lead and protect us during our desert experiences – the painful times of significant suffering and struggle in our lives.

As scary and difficult as these deserts may be, they provide the opportunity for us to learn to follow His voice and discover that we can trust and depend on Him completely. Through His Word, God invites each of us to experience Him as our compassionate Shepherd who loves us, cares for us, and faithfully provides just what we need for each day – and sometimes much more.

⁵² But his own people he led out like sheep, guiding them like a flock in the desert. ⁵³ He led them safely, and they weren't afraid, even when the sea overwhelmed their foes.

Every culture values some things more highly than others and perceives the world through that lens. One culture, for example, may value physical beauty or artistry and view the world according to what they see. Another may value athletic prowess or economic power and evaluate the world according to what they can achieve.

What do you think your culture values most highly, and to what extent do those values influence your beliefs and choices and affect what you are able to hear, see, and understand? _____

WATCH DVD

1. Imagine that you had lived as a Hebrew in ancient Egypt with its sophisticated culture, planned cities, elaborate and colorful temples, and lush, fertile farmlands. When God uprooted you to lead you into the vast desert wastelands on your way toward the "green pastures" of the Promised Land, would He have captured your full attention? Why or why not? _____

2. In what ways do you see that radical desert experience changing your spiritual perception from what you can see with your eyes to that of understanding God through your ears? _____

3. Think about how you perceive God today. How might God get your attention so that you could learn to hear Him, know Him, and obey Him better than you do now? _____

4. What surprised you about the "green pastures" of Israel, and how do they differ from what you expected? _____

5. In what ways do these green pastures cause you to rethink your view of what God, our Shepherd, provides for us and what it means for us to depend on Him daily? _____

6. How did seeing what the "straight path" or "paths of righteousness" actually look like help you to better understand what it means to be led on them? _____

7. What did you learn about the constant, watchful care of the shepherd who leads the flock on paths of righteousness? _____

8. If you are a sheep, how important is it for you to always listen for the Shepherd's voice and promptly follow wherever it leads? What might happen if you don't? _____

9. What else did you learn through the video that amazed you or gave you a new understanding of God and the relationship He desires to have with you? _____

10. As you think about the whole picture of God being our Good Shepherd that you have just seen, to what extent can you now hear His voice just a little bit better? Follow Him a little closer? _____

THE DESERT: WHERE THE FLOCK LEARNS TO TRUST THE SHEPHERD

What do you picture when you think of the Biblical metaphor of God as shepherd and His people as sheep? Many of us think immediately of the protection, comfort, and contentment God provides for those who follow Him. An image of a relaxing vacation at a pristine lake surrounded by green, grassy meadows may come to mind. Although God can (and does) provide abundantly for His people, we tend to overlook the fact that often He provides for us when we're facing difficult circumstances in the desert. The sun is still hot, our path is still steep, but God gives us just enough to keep us going.

The "just-enough" blessings shape and mold God's people into a trusting community that loves Him and depends on Him to provide for its every need. Consider the trust and obedience the Israelites learned when God provided just enough manna for each day and any remaining manna spoiled (except the extra Sabbath ration). Even when His people settled in the Promised Land, each family received just enough land to live contentedly in a relationship of trust, obedience, and dependence on Him. God still desires to shape and mold those who follow Him into a people who trust Him fully and obey Him faithfully. So He leads us, like sheep, into the "desert" where we learn to love Him as our Shepherd.

11. During Biblical times, in what kinds of locations did shepherds typically tend their sheep? (See Genesis 13:1-6; Exodus 3:1 | Samuel 25:1-2; Jeremiah 23:10) _____

FLOCKS IN THE DESERT

In the ancient Middle East, most shepherds lived in tents and tended their animals in the barren desert. To use fertile land as pasture for flocks and herds would have made it difficult for God's people to produce enough olives, grain, figs, and grapes to survive. Flocks occasionally grazed in cultivated areas during times

of political unrest. They also entered the fields and ate the remaining stubble after the grain harvest. So when the Bible describes God and His people as a Shepherd and His flock, the original readers – as Middle Eastern readers do today – assumed that the flock was in the desert.

12. In what ways do you think the nature of these lands would tend to shape the relationship between sheep and the shepherd, and what might you expect that relationship to look like? _____

Isaiah 49:8-10 and 49:13

⁸ Here is what Adonai says: “At the time when I choose, I will answer you; on the day of salvation, I will help you. I have preserved you, and I have appointed you to be the covenant for a people, to restore the land and distribute again its ruined inheritances to their owners, ⁹ to say to the prisoners, ‘Come out!’ to those in darkness, ‘Show yourselves!’ They will feed along the paths, and all the high hills will be their pastures. ¹⁰ They will be neither hungry nor thirsty; neither scorching wind nor sun will strike them; for he who has mercy on them will lead them and guide them to springs of water.

¹³ Sing, heaven! Rejoice, earth! Break out in song, you mountains! For Adonai is comforting his people, having mercy on his own who have suffered.

13. What does this passage reveal about how passionately God desires to care and provide for His people? _____

14. Where would God’s people be if they needed this kind of care? _____

15. In what ways does this passage describe the way a shepherd cares for a flock? _____

16. How descriptive is this passage of the kind of care people today need in their “deserts”? _____

17. For what specific purposes did God, through Moses, lead His people into the desert? (See Exodus 15:22-26; Deuteronomy 8:1-3) _____

18. Do you think God allows His people to endure painful desert experiences for the same purposes today? If not, why not? If so, how might this change the way we view and respond to our desert experiences? _____

19. While the Israelites were in the desert, in what ways was God like a shepherd to them? _____

Exodus 13:20-22	
Exodus 14:19-20	
Exodus 16:4-5, 13-15	
Exodus 17:1-7	
Exodus 23:20-2	
Psalms 78:51-55	
Isiah 40:11	

20. Why is the condition of the hearts of God's people so important to Him? (See Psalms 95:6-10) __

21. What happens when the members of the flock harden their hearts to the shepherd's voice? ____

22. When Israel (Jacob) was very old and had been reunited with his son Joseph in Egypt, he had the opportunity to bless his grandsons. What did he say about who God had been in his life and what God had done for him? (See Genesis 48:10-16) _____

23. What testimony of who God has been in your life and what He has done for you do you want to leave for future generations? _____

24. How much time might you need to spend in the desert in order to become a "sheep" that shares such an intimate and rewarding relationship with the Shepherd? _____

FAITH LESSON

One way to understand the relationship between shepherd and sheep in the desert is to realize that all people experience times of "desert" – pain, illness, rejection, loss, grief, struggle, and heartache/ That is the nature of living in a sinful, broken world. But it is also the nature of God, our Shepherd, to lead,

provide for, and care for His flock. In fact, some of the most experienced desert travelers who have gone before us would say that even during their most difficult times in the desert, the Lord provided so that *they lacked nothing!*

In His final speech to the Israelites before they left the desert, Moses said, “The Lord your God has blessed you... has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything” (Deuteronomy 2:7). David said, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing” (Psalms 23:1).

25. How do you think Moses could say this when God’s people had been living in tents in the desert, running out of water, and gathering manna daily instead of living in houses in the Promised Land where they could grow wheat, grapes, olives, pomegranates, and figs? _____

26. How do you think David could say this when he had been running for his life in the scorching heat of the Judea Wilderness and hiding in caves when he knew that a palace and the life of a king awaited him? _____

27. What would you say about God’s provision for you during your desert experiences? _____

Many of us are at least a little like the man Jesus spoke of who had more than he needed for the day and stored up enough food for many years.

Luke 12:16-21

¹⁶ And he gave them this illustration: “There was a man whose land was very productive. ¹⁷ He debated with himself, ‘What should I do? I haven’t enough room for all my crops.’ ¹⁸ Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and I’ll store all my wheat and other goods there. ¹⁹ Then I’ll say to myself, “You’re a lucky man! You have a big supply of goods laid up that will last many years. Start taking it easy! Eat! Drink! Enjoy yourself!”’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night you will die! And the things you prepared — whose will they be?’ ²¹ That’s how it is with anyone who stores up wealth for himself without being rich toward God.”

28. How do you think some time in the desert might have helped him regain an attitude of trust and dependence on God for what he needed each day? _____

29. To what extent do you believe that God will “shepherd” you well – whether you are in fruitful farmland or the barren desert – and provide enough to satisfy your needs one day at a time? _____

30. When the Lord is your Shepherd (meaning that you are part of His flock, listening for His voice and obeying His words), what do you think it means that you will lack nothing? _____

31. What is the difference between having everything you want as opposed to everything you need?

32. Who determines what the sheep need – the Shepherd or the sheep? What does that mean for you and your trust in the Shepherd? _____

Psalms 23:1-6

⁽¹⁾ *ADONAI* is my shepherd; I lack nothing. ² He has me lie down in grassy pastures, he leads me by quiet water, ³ he restores my inner person. He guides me in right paths for the sake of his own name. ⁴ Even if I pass through death-dark ravines, I will fear no disaster; for you are with me; your rod and staff reassure me. ⁵ You prepare a table for me, even as my enemies watch; you anoint my head with oil from an overflowing cup. ⁶ Goodness and grace will pursue me every day of my life; and I will live in the house of *ADONAI* for years and years to come.