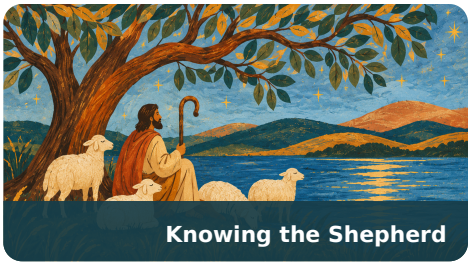
RS JOURNEYS
Go Deeper. Become More.

CHAPTER 1

The Shepherd


Knowing the Shepherd

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd whose sheep know his voice and follow him. But how do we learn to recognize that voice?

Through these encounters, we'll explore the Shepherd revealed throughout Scripture—his character, his care, and the ways he leads his people. As we come to know him more deeply, we'll discover what it means to recognize his voice, trust his heart, and follow his ways.

ENCOUNTER 1

Knowing the Shepherd

PREPARE

Jesus describes a shepherd who calls his sheep by name and sheep who recognize his voice. As you read, pay attention to the relationships Jesus describes and what distinguishes the shepherd from everyone else who approaches the sheep.

PONDER

1. What seems to make the Shepherd's voice recognizable to his sheep? As you consider the relationship Jesus describes, how does it compare with the way you've understood recognizing God's voice?
2. Notice how Jesus contrasts the shepherd with strangers, thieves, and hired hands. What do these differences reveal about his character, and which of them most challenges or deepens your picture of God?

READ

John 10:1–18

LOOK AGAIN

Did you catch how Jesus describes knowing his sheep in verses 14–15? He compares that relationship to the way he knows the Father and the Father knows him.

What might that comparison add to your understanding of what it means to know the Shepherd?

PRACTICE

Throughout today, pay attention to the voices shaping your thoughts, decisions, and expectations—whether from other people, the culture around you, or your own inner dialogue.

Choose one of those influences and consider how it compares with the character of the Shepherd you've encountered in John 10. Return to his words as you seek to become more familiar with his voice.

PRAYER

Talk with Jesus about your desire to know him. Ask him to make you increasingly attentive to his character and ways.

ENCOUNTER 2

The Shepherd's Care

PREPARE

Long before Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd, David described the Lord as *my shepherd*. Psalm 23 is familiar to many of us, but familiarity can sometimes cause us to overlook what is actually there. Read it slowly, noticing the different ways David describes the Shepherd's care. Then consider how Jesus draws upon this picture in John 10.

PONDER

1. Look closely at the different scenes in Psalm 23. What does the Shepherd provide, where does he lead, and what does he do when the surroundings become dangerous? What kind of life does David seem to envision under the Shepherd's care?
2. Jesus says he came so that his sheep might have life abundantly and then describes himself as the Shepherd who lays down his life for them. How do these words deepen or perhaps challenge your understanding of the life David describes? Where might your own expectations of God's care differ from these pictures?

READ

Psalm 23 · John 10:10–11

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice that the psalm begins by describing God as *he* but in the valley David begins addressing him as *you* (verse 4 (Psalm 23:4))?

What might be significant about that change? Consider how the language of the psalm becomes more personal precisely when the path grows darker.

PRACTICE

Choose a phrase from Psalm 23 that especially speaks to you today. Carry it with you, returning to it at several ordinary moments—perhaps while driving, taking a break, or preparing for bed.

Rather than simply recalling the words, pause to remember the Shepherd whose care they describe.

PRAYER

Thank the Shepherd for the ways he provides, restores, and guides you. Talk with him honestly about the places where the path ahead feels uncertain or difficult. Ask him to deepen your trust in his goodness and to help you recognize his presence and care, even when the way leads through dark valleys.

ENCOUNTER 3

The Shepherd's Justice

PREPARE

In the ancient world, shepherds were a common image for kings and leaders responsible for the welfare of their people. Through Ezekiel, God confronts Israel's leaders for caring for themselves while neglecting those entrusted to them. As you read, notice the contrast between what these shepherds have done and what God promises to do himself.

PONDER

1. What specific behaviors does God condemn in Israel's shepherds, and what do those failures reveal about what God values? As you consider his response, what do you discover about the kind of Shepherd he is?
2. Compare what the failed shepherds have done with what God promises to do for his flock. How does this picture of God challenge or enlarge your understanding of his goodness, especially toward those who are weak, wounded, or overlooked?

READ

Ezekiel 34:1–16; 34:23–24

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice how often God says "*I will*" in Ezekiel 34:11-16? Read those verses again, paying attention to the actions God promises to take.

Then look at Ezekiel 34:23-24. God promises to appoint one shepherd, his servant David, over the flock. Since Ezekiel is speaking centuries after David's death, what might this promise suggest about the kind of shepherd God intends to raise up? How might it deepen your understanding of Jesus' words in John 10?

PRACTICE

Pay attention today to someone who may be overlooked, burdened, or in need of care.

In light of God's promises in Ezekiel 34, choose one concrete way to reflect the Shepherd's concern for that person. It might be listening attentively, offering encouragement, providing practical help, or speaking up for someone who needs support.

PRAYER

As you reflect on God's concern for his flock, bring before him someone who may be neglected, wounded, or in need of protection. Ask him to help you recognize his heart for that person—and to reflect his care in the way you treat others.

ENCOUNTER 4

Power and Tenderness

PREPARE

Through Isaiah, God speaks words of comfort to a people facing exile and uncertainty. The prophet describes the Lord's coming with images of extraordinary power, then unexpectedly pictures him as a shepherd gently carrying his lambs. As you read, notice how Isaiah moves between God's greatness and his tender concern for his people.

PONDER

1. Isaiah describes God as a mighty ruler, a tender shepherd, and the incomparable Creator. What surprises you about these different pictures appearing together? How does each one deepen your understanding of the others?
2. In Isaiah 40:27-31, God's people wonder whether he has overlooked their troubles. How does Isaiah respond to their concern? When you face circumstances that leave you feeling weary or forgotten, which aspect of God's character in this passage is hardest for you to hold onto?

READ

Isaiah 40:9–11; 40:25–31

LOOK AGAIN

You probably recognized the familiar promise at the end of this chapter about soaring on wings like eagles, running without growing weary, and walking without fainting.

But did you notice who makes that promise possible? Look back at Isaiah 40:10-11; 40:28-29. The everlasting God, the Creator who never grows weary, is also the Shepherd who gathers his lambs and carries them close to his heart.

How does seeing these familiar promises in light of the Shepherd's character deepen their meaning for you?

PRACTICE

Take a few minutes today to observe something that reminds you of God's greatness—the sky, the natural world, or the vastness of creation.

Then return to Isaiah 40:11. Spend a moment considering that the Creator of all you see is also the Shepherd who gathers his lambs and carries them close to his heart.

Let that awareness become an act of quiet worship.

PRAYER

Spend a moment considering both the greatness and tenderness of God. Praise him for who he is, then speak honestly about where you feel weak, weary, or uncertain. Ask him to help you trust both his strength and his care.

ENCOUNTER 5

When We Wander

PREPARE

Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep in response to religious leaders who criticize him for welcoming sinners. As you read, pay attention not only to what the shepherd does, but also to the people listening to Jesus and the reason he tells the story.

PONDER

1. Compare the shepherd's actions in Luke 15 with God's promises in Ezekiel 34. What do these passages reveal about God's initiative toward those who have wandered from him?
2. Jesus tells this story to religious leaders who object to his welcome of sinners. How does the shepherd's response challenge the way you imagine God treating those who have wandered—including yourself?

READ

Luke 15:1–7 · Ezekiel 34:11–12; 34:16

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice how Jesus identifies the lost sheep at the end of the parable? In Luke 15:7, he speaks of a sinner who repents.

The shepherd isn't simply recovering a sheep that has become dissatisfied with the flock. Jesus is describing the joy of restoration when someone who is lost turns back toward God.

How does that distinction sharpen your understanding of what it means for the Shepherd to seek the lost?

PRACTICE

Think of someone you may have quietly written off as unlikely to change or return to God. Bring that person to mind today and deliberately pray for them with the hope and compassion reflected in these passages.

PRAYER

Talk with God about the ways you have wandered from him, whether in obvious actions or quieter movements of your heart. Thank him for his pursuing grace, and ask him to deepen your compassion for others.

ENCOUNTER 6

When the Waters Rise

PREPARE

God's people have often faced circumstances that made his promises difficult to understand. Isaiah speaks of God's presence through threatening waters, while Mark tells of frightened disciples caught in a storm with Jesus himself aboard their boat. Read both passages, noticing what God promises and what the disciples fear.

PONDER

1. What does God promise his people in Isaiah 43—and what does he not promise? As you read Mark's account, what do the disciples seem to assume about Jesus because he is sleeping through the storm?
2. The disciples ask Jesus whether he cares that they are perishing. How does their question reveal the relationship between fear and trust? When circumstances seem threatening or God seems inactive, what assumptions about his care are you most likely to make?

READ

Isaiah 43:1–3 · Mark 4:35–41

LOOK AGAIN

During the storm they ask Jesus, “Don't you care?” (Mark 4:38). After he calms the wind and waves, they ask one another, “Who is this?” (Mark 4:41).

The storm hasn't merely exposed their fear. It has brought them face-to-face with a deeper question about the one traveling with them.

Return to Isaiah 43:1-3. How might God's promise to be with his people through the waters illuminate the question the disciples are now asking?

PRACTICE

When anxiety or uncertainty arises today, pause before trying to resolve it. Name what you are afraid of, then return to one phrase from Isaiah 43:1-3. Spend a quiet moment remembering the Shepherd who has promised to be with his people.

PRAYER

Bring a present fear or uncertainty before God. Speak honestly about what you wish he would change and ask for grace to trust his presence even when you cannot understand his timing or actions.

ENCOUNTER 7

The Shepherd Who Gives His Life

PREPARE

Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Centuries earlier, Isaiah described a servant who would suffer on behalf of God's wandering people. As you read, consider how these passages illuminate one another and what they reveal about the nature of God's love.

PONDER

1. Jesus contrasts the Good Shepherd with a hired hand who abandons the sheep when danger comes. What does his willingness to lay down his life reveal about the kind of relationship he has with those who belong to him?
2. Isaiah describes people who have wandered like sheep and a servant who bears their suffering and sin. How does reading these passages together deepen your understanding of what Jesus means when he says he lays down his life for the sheep? What assumptions about God's love might the cross challenge?

READ

John 10:11–18 · Isaiah 53:4–6

LOOK AGAIN

Look closely at John 10:17-18. Jesus says that no one takes his life from him. He has authority both to lay it down and to take it up again.

Jesus is not describing himself merely as a victim of circumstances beyond his control. His death is a willing act of self-giving love. Think about how this changes the way you understand the Shepherd's sacrifice—and the character of the God who gives himself for his people.

PRACTICE

Set aside a few quiet minutes today to return to John 10:11. Read it slowly several times, pausing over the words *for the sheep*. Rather than rushing to explain or apply the verse, allow yourself to dwell on what it reveals about Christ's love.

PRAYER

Thank Jesus for his willingness to give himself for you. Speak with him about anything that makes his love difficult to receive or trust and ask him to deepen your confidence in his goodness.

ENCOUNTER 8

Held in His Hands

PREPARE

Jesus returns to the image of the Shepherd as religious leaders question his identity. He speaks of sheep who hear his voice, follow him, and receive eternal life. As you read, pay attention to what Jesus says about the relationship between the sheep, himself, and the Father.

PONDER

1. What does Jesus promise about those who belong to him, and what reasons does he give for their security? How does Paul's language in Romans 8:31-39 deepen the picture of God's faithfulness?
2. Both passages describe a security grounded in God's power and love. How does that compare with the things you ordinarily depend upon to feel secure? What might it mean to live with greater confidence in the Shepherd's care?

READ

John 10:22–30 · Romans 8:31–39

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice the language of separation in both passages?

In John 10:28-29, Jesus says that no one can snatch his sheep from his hand or the Father's hand.

In Romans 8:35-39, Paul asks what can separate believers from the love of Christ, then names suffering, danger, persecution, and even death.

Read those verses again. Notice that neither Jesus nor Paul describes a life without threats. Instead, both direct our attention to the power and faithfulness of the One who holds us.

What does that add to your understanding of security in the Shepherd's care?

PRACTICE

Notice one situation today in which you feel compelled to control the outcome. Take a moment to acknowledge the limits of your control and deliberately entrust that concern to God. Return to Jesus' words about his hand and the Father's hand as you do.

PRAYER

Speak with God about the things you are afraid of losing or unable to control. Thank him for his faithfulness and ask him to help you live with greater confidence in his care.

ENCOUNTER 9

Teach Me Your Paths

PREPARE

Throughout Scripture, God's people ask him for guidance. But guidance involves more than knowing which direction to take. In Psalm 25, David asks God to teach him his ways and lead him in truth. As you read, notice what David asks God to do and the kind of relationship with God that makes such guidance possible.

PONDER

1. Notice how often David asks God to show, teach, or lead him. What does he seem to want from God beyond simply knowing what to do next? How does his prayer challenge the way you ordinarily seek God's guidance?
2. David connects God's guidance with his mercy, goodness, faithfulness, and forgiveness. What does this suggest about the relationship between knowing God's character and learning his ways? Where might you need to become more teachable?

READ

Psalm 25:1–15

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice something interesting in verse 8 (Psalm 25:8)? David says that because the Lord is good and upright, he instructs sinners in his ways.

Then, in verse 9 (Psalm 25:9), he says God guides the humble.

The people who need guidance aren't necessarily those who already have everything right. Look again at how God's goodness and human humility come together in these verses.

PRACTICE

Before making a decision today—even an ordinary one—pause and pray the words of Psalm 25:4-5. Rather than simply asking God to bless what you've already decided, consider whether your desires or assumptions need to be brought under his guidance.

PRAYER

Ask God to make you teachable. Speak honestly about places where you resist correction, prefer your own way, or struggle to trust his direction. Invite him to shape your desires as well as your decisions.

ENCOUNTER 10

Hear and Do

PREPARE

James warns believers about a subtle danger: hearing God's Word without allowing it to shape their lives. He uses an ordinary experience—looking into a mirror—to describe the difference between hearing and doing. As you read, consider what the mirror reveals and what happens when someone walks away.

PONDER

1. James compares hearing God's Word without acting on it to looking in a mirror and immediately forgetting what you've seen. What do you think makes this comparison so effective? How might it describe the way we sometimes engage Scripture?
2. Jesus says his sheep hear his voice and follow him. How does James help you think more deeply about that relationship between hearing and following? What might change if you approached Scripture expecting not only to understand it but also to be shaped by it?

READ

James 1:19–27 · John 10:27

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice that James describes God's Word as something planted in us (v. 21 (James 1:21))?

Before he speaks about doing what the Word says, he tells his readers to receive it humbly. Later, in verse 25 (James 1:25), he describes someone who looks intently into God's Word and continues in it.

Return to those verses. Notice how receiving, attending to, and responding to God's Word belong together.

PRACTICE

Return to one of the Scriptures you've read during this Journey. Choose one thing it has brought to your attention about the Shepherd's character. Then identify one concrete way you can respond to that discovery today.

It may be a change in how you speak, a choice to forgive, an act of kindness, or a willingness to trust God in a particular situation.

PRAYER

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you receive God's Word with humility and respond with faithfulness. Pray that Scripture would increasingly shape not only what you believe but also how you live.

ENCOUNTER 11

Do You Love Me?

PREPARE

After Peter denied Jesus three times, the risen Lord meets him beside the Sea of Galilee. In their conversation, Jesus repeatedly asks Peter whether he loves him. Pay attention to how Jesus connects Peter's answer with a responsibility toward others—and how the conversation ends.

PONDER

1. Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him, but each answer is followed by a command to care for his sheep. What connection does Jesus seem to be making between loving him and caring for others? How might this challenge the way you ordinarily think about expressing your love for God?
2. Years later, Peter instructs church leaders to shepherd God's flock willingly and without selfish ambition. How does his counsel reflect what Jesus taught him? What might these passages reveal about the kind of people the Good Shepherd is forming us to become?

READ

John 21:15–19 · 1 Peter 5:1–4

LOOK AGAIN

Did you notice that Jesus ends this conversation with Peter by saying, “Follow me” (John 21:19)?

Earlier in the Gospel, Peter had confidently promised to follow Jesus even to death, only to deny him (John 13:36-38).

Now, after Peter's failure, Jesus entrusts him with caring for his sheep and calls him to follow once again.

Consider what this encounter reveals about the Shepherd's relationship with those who have failed him.

PRACTICE

Think of someone God has placed within your circle of care—a family member, friend, neighbor, or fellow believer. Find one specific way to demonstrate the Shepherd's concern for that person today.

Rather than doing something impressive, choose an act of attentive love: listening, encouraging, helping, or simply making time for someone.

PRAYER

Thank Jesus for the grace that restores and calls us to follow him. Ask him to deepen your love for the people around you and to help you care for them with the patience and tenderness he has shown you.

ENCOUNTER 12

Where the Shepherd Leads

PREPARE

We began this chapter listening to Jesus describe himself as the Good Shepherd. Along the way, we've encountered the God who knows his sheep, seeks the wandering, remains faithful through danger, and gives himself for those he loves.

Now Revelation offers a remarkable final picture: the Lamb standing at the center of God's throne, shepherding his people into the fullness of life with God. As you read, notice how this vision gathers together images and promises you've encountered throughout the chapter.

PONDER

1. Look at the promises in Revelation 7:15-17 and compare them with Psalm 23. What connections do you notice between these passages? How does John's vision enlarge the picture of the Shepherd and his care that you encountered earlier in the chapter?
2. Think back over the Shepherd you've come to know through these encounters. Which aspect of his character has most challenged, surprised, or deepened your understanding of God? How might knowing him in this way change how you recognize his voice, trust his heart, or follow his ways?

READ

Revelation 7:9–17 · Psalm 23

LOOK AGAIN

Did you catch the surprising reversal in Revelation 7:17? The Lamb is also the Shepherd.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus described himself as the Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Now John sees the Lamb at the center of God's throne, leading his people to springs of living water.

And notice the final promise: God will wipe away every tear.

The Shepherd's care reaches beyond our present circumstances toward the restoration of all things. Return to Psalm 23:6 and consider how David's confidence in dwelling with the Lord finds its fullest expression in this vision.

PRACTICE

Take a few quiet minutes to revisit the Scriptures you've encountered throughout this chapter.

Choose one image or description of the Shepherd that has become especially meaningful to you. Write it down or mark it in your Bible.

Over the next several days, return to that passage. Let it become a familiar place where you continue learning to recognize the Shepherd's character and ways.

PRAYER

Thank Jesus for what you've discovered about him through these encounters. Speak with him about where your understanding of God has been challenged or deepened. Ask him to continue forming you into someone who recognizes his voice, trusts his heart, and follows his ways.