

In the Crucible with Christ

The Shepherd's Crucible

Lesson #1 for July 2, 2022

Scriptures: Psalm 23; Romans 12:18-21.

1. As we start a new series, consider the following:

[From the Bible study guide=BSG:] **We are starting a long but all-important journey this quarter—a journey into the meaning of suffering, evil, and death.** Yes, suffering can be studied as a separate phenomenon of human existence; it can be studied from a scientific or psychological perspective in such terms as *perception*, *affections*, and *consequences*. However, the biblical view on suffering is much deeper. **The Bible explains the origin of suffering—an origin that exonerates God from any responsibility for bringing sin into existence. The Bible also shows how God uses suffering as a transformational framework for our own enrichment, victory, and eternal life. If we imagine life as a journey, Psalm 23 is one of the best places to start, because it talks about a path.** This path takes us through the highs and lows of our lives. More important, Someone is guiding us on that path. That Someone is more than a Guide; He is a caring and loving Shepherd. The most important questions for our journey, for our highs and lows, are: Do we know the Shepherd? **Do we trust Him [the Good Shepherd] whatever happens or wherever He may decide to take us?**—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13.†§

Psalm 23:3-4: ³He gives me new strength.

He guides me in the right paths,
as he has promised.

⁴ Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid, LORD,
for you are with me.

Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Psalm 23:3-4). New York: American Bible Society [abbreviated as *Good News Bible*].†‡

2. One of the primary questions that we will need to address in this quarter's series of lessons is the question: **Do we learn more about God from going through difficult times? Or, going through easy times?**

Psalm 23:1: The LORD is my shepherd;
I have everything I need.—*Good News Bible*.*

3. The Bible clearly teaches that God is love.

1 John 4:8,16: ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love....

¹⁶And we ourselves know and believe the love which God has for us.

God is love, and those who live in love live in union with God and God lives in union with them.—*Good News Bible*.*

4. Reading the Bible can be challenging. **Some of the stories might appear to make God look very bad.** Can we trust Him to be our Guide? Is God the same today as He was in Bible times? Even as far back as Adam and Eve?

Hebrews 13:8: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever.

[sic]—*Good News Bible*.*††

James 1:17: Every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven; it comes down from God, the Creator of the heavenly lights, who does not change or cause darkness by turning.—*Good News Bible*.*

5. During most of the time described in the Bible, people lived *pastoral lives*. What that meant was that they lived on what they could grow or what their flocks could produce. For this reason, almost every family had some animals. They were all familiar with the work of a shepherd.
6. Read Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 23:3-4; Ezekiel 34:12; John 10:14-16; and **1 Peter 2:25**. What do these texts teach us about our Shepherd-Guide? We learn that God will care for us and be with us in every situation. If we recognize God's presence with us, could we be afraid of anything? God constantly pursues us to win and woo us to follow His path which is the right path and the right thing to do. It is not just those who recognize their relationship and dependence on God whom He is pursuing; He is pursuing everyone! **God will do everything He can within the limitations of the great controversy and our freedom to bring us back.**

Psalms 23:1-6: The LORD is my shepherd;

I have everything I need.

²He lets me rest in fields of green grass
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.

³He gives me new strength.

He guides me in the right paths,
as he has promised.

⁴Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid, LORD,
for you are with me.

Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.

⁵You prepare a banquet for me,
where all my enemies can see me;
you welcome me as an honoured guest
and fill my cup to the brim.

⁶I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life;
and your house will be my home as long as I live.—*Good News Bible*.*

7. Can we trust these words about our Shepherd? If we can trust them, everything that a person could want is provided by God: Protection, food, health, restoration, and finally, a home with Him. For what more could we ask?
8. In our day-by-day lives, do we live as if we believe these truths? Does our life demonstrate this to those who know us?

9. Considering the great-controversy, trust-healing model, why do we blame God if something bad seems to happen to us or those around us? If we take a larger view, we know that the Devil is the one who has caused all the trouble in our universe. Why is it that terrible, natural disasters are called “acts of God”? Should they be called “acts of Satan”?

Revelation 12:7-10: ⁷ Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, who fought back with his angels; ⁸but the dragon was defeated, and he and his angels were not allowed to stay in heaven any longer. ⁹The huge dragon was thrown out—that ancient serpent, called the Devil, or Satan, that deceived the whole world. He was thrown down to earth, and all his angels with him.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, “Now God’s salvation has come! Now God has shown his power as King! Now his Messiah has shown his authority! For the one who stood before our God and accused our brothers and sisters day and night has been thrown out of heaven. ¹¹Our brothers and sisters won the victory over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the truth which they proclaimed; and **they were willing to give up their lives and die.** ¹²And so be glad, you heavens, and all you that live there! But how terrible for the earth and the sea! For the Devil has come down to you, and he is filled with rage, because he knows that he has only a little time left.”—*Good News Bible*.*†

10. What does it mean to say that Jesus “leads me in right paths for his name’s sake”? (Psalm 23:3, *NRSV**) If we can accept Scripture—which we do—with God’s help, the paths of righteousness lead all the way from where we are now to the time when we will join God in His “house” and live with Him forever. That does not mean that there will not be any bumps on the road or any problems on the way.
11. So, how did David describe those detours on our paths? David saw not only paths of “deepest darkness” in “clear view of his enemies,” but also “paths of greenest grass and still waters.” But, our final destiny will be God’s home.

[BSG:] But why are these paths called “paths of righteousness” or “right paths” (*NIV, NRSV*)? Here are four important reasons. **First**, they are the right paths because they lead to the right destination—the Shepherd’s home. **Second**, they are the right paths because they keep us in harmony with the right Person—the Shepherd Himself. **Third**, they are the right paths because they train us to be the right people—like the Shepherd. **Fourth**, they are the right paths because they give us the right witness—as we become the right people, we give glory to the Lord. They are “right” or “righteous” paths, whether the going is easy or hard.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, June 27.†‡§

12. People like Job and Abraham seemed to have had a very personal relationship with God. How much of the Bible did they have? None! They felt comfortable even in asking Him very blunt and very pointed questions and even “arguing” with Him! The children of Israel were led by God in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night! God spoke to them on Mount Sinai!

13. So, with a God like Jesus, why do we have problems in our life? And why do we have challenges? If Jesus was our Example, how could we think that we could avoid all problems? Think about what happened to Him! David certainly understood that there would be some challenges for each one of us on our path.

Psalm 23:4: Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid, LORD,
for you are with me.
Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me.—*Good News Bible*.*

14. Think back over what you know about the story of David. He began life as the youngest son of a landowner and shepherd, living in the city of Bethlehem. When he reached the appropriate age, David, as the youngest son, was expected to herd sheep and goats and, perhaps, cattle. There were times when that proved to be a very dangerous job. David himself described fighting lions and bears while trying to protect his father's sheep.
15. In Psalm 23, David recognized that there will be detours in our journey as we follow Jesus Christ.
16. Wouldn't it be nice if the paths of righteousness led only along grass-covered banks and beside cool streams? But, David recognized that the lives of sheep, as he knew them from his childhood, were not like that. What is a "valley of the shadow of death"?

[BSG:] At certain times of the year, the wadis and ravines found in Israel are prone to flash floods that can come unexpectedly and prove overwhelming. These places also are characteristically narrow, with steep sides that block out the light. Hence, "the shadow of death" is an image for "very deep shadow," or "deep darkness."—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, June 28.‡

17. We do not know exactly when this psalm was written. Ellen White hinted that this psalm may have been written during David's youth while he was working as a shepherd in the hills of Bethlehem or possibly a little later in his life when he was being pursued by Saul.
18. Have you ever had a scary, even life-threatening, event happen to you? At that point, did you think about the Shepherd who was beside you?
19. Of what was David thinking when he talked about the sheep wandering in a wadi or valley with the potential for death? Did the sheep get there by wandering away from the herd without the notice of the shepherd? Or, is it possible that, at times, the shepherd even led the sheep into such a valley to keep them cool?
20. In our case with our divine Shepherd, we may not see Him; however, no matter what difficulties we travel through, we can be sure that He is present with us.
21. One Bible commentator wrote:

[BSG:] "A lamb who found himself in the valley of the shadow of death might conclude that he had been falsely led. It was needful for him to traverse that darkness in order to learn not to fear. The shepherd is still with him."—Elisabeth Elliot, *Quest for Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell Books, 1996), p. 218.—[as quoted in the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, June 28].‡§

22. Have you ever had the experience of being led into a dangerous situation by a false shepherd? The Devil would do anything he possibly could to falsely lead us into one of his dark valleys.
23. The time when the sheep are in greatest need is not when they are quietly resting in the green grass beside still waters, but rather, when they are in greatest danger even threatened with loss of life. Would that not be the time when the true Shepherd is nearest us? That is a time when our fair-weather friends abandon us!
24. David also recognized another surprising detour as he wrote Psalm 23.

Psalm 23:5: You prepare a banquet for me,
where all my enemies can see me;
 you welcome me as an honoured guest
 and fill my cup to the brim.—*Good News Bible*.*†

25. What kind of situation is that? God is preparing a banquet for us in the full presence of our enemies? Enemies can be very difficult to deal with. Sometimes, we might even lay awake at night trying to figure out how to deal with them. In some cases, you might lie awake at night trying to think of ways to avoid your enemies who might even be the people with whom you have to work every day. Have you had to deal with people who wanted to do you harm? When you were in such a situation, did you think of Matthew 5:44? Or, Romans 12:18-21?

Matthew 5:44: [Jesus said:] “But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”—*Good News Bible*.*‡

Romans 12:18-21: ¹⁸Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody. ¹⁹Never take revenge, my friends, but instead let God’s anger do it. For the scripture says, “I will take revenge, I will pay back, says the Lord.” ²⁰Instead, as the scripture says: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them a drink; for by doing this you will make them burn with shame.” ²¹Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good.—*Good News Bible*.*

26. Instead of talking about how he dealt with his enemies, David talked about God’s presence and how God cared for him even while his enemies were looking on!

[BSG:] In David’s culture, when an honored guest came for a feast, the host would anoint his head with oil as the guest was about to enter the banqueting hall. The oil was a mixture of olive oil and perfume. Then the guest would be seated in front of far more food than one could ever eat.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, June 29.‡

27. David mentioned a table, oil, and a cup. What do those items make you imagine? Does God sometimes treat us as a special guest at a banquet?
28. Our most serious enemies are not those we see but rather those we do not see! We are surrounded by the forces of evil which are constantly seeking to lead us astray or to damage us or harm us in some way.

Ephesians 6:12: For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age.—*Good News Bible*.*

29. There are times when it is impossible to explain what is happened without having a clear picture of the great controversy and the role of God and the role of the Devil in our world.

Psalm 23:6: I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life;
and your house will be my home as long as I live.—*Good News Bible*.*

30. After talking about “the valley of the shadow of death” and “sitting in the full view of” our enemies, what kind of a conclusion is that? Would God ever leave us alone in the presence of the Devil or his fellow evil angels? That would occur only if we choose to follow the Devil instead of following God. Notice very carefully that David recognized that God’s goodness and love would be with him all his life and finally, ultimately, God’s home would be his home.

31. Recognizing the truth about the great controversy, we also recognize the following facts:

Ephesians 1:4: Even before the world was made, **God had already chosen us to be his** through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him.

Because of his love....—*Good News Bible*.*†

2 Peter 1:10: So then, my brothers and sisters, try even harder to make **God’s call and his choice of you** a permanent experience; if you do so, you will never abandon your faith.—*Good News Bible*.*†

Hebrews 11:13-15: ¹³ It was in faith that all these persons died. They did not receive the things God had promised, but from a long way off they saw them and welcomed them, and admitted openly that they were foreigners and refugees on earth. ¹⁴ Those who say such things make it clear that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ They did not keep thinking about the country they had left; if they had, they would have had the chance to return.—*Good News Bible*.*

Since Hebrews 11 is the great chapter on faith, does that mean that everyone mentioned in that chapter is going to be saved? Samson? Gideon? The children of Israel?

[BSG:] Some translations say that goodness and unfailing love (God’s covenantal commitment) will “follow” me all the days of my life. However, the original verb is much stronger, and the text should read that **goodness and unfailing love will “pursue” me** all the days of my life. (In fact, it’s the same Hebrew verb used in such verses as Genesis 14:14, Joshua 10:19, and 1 Samuel 25:29, where the idea of “pursuit” is very clear.)—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Thursday, June 30.†‡

Genesis 14:14: When Abram heard that his nephew had been captured, he called together all the fighting men in his camp, 318 in all, and **pursued** the four kings all the way to Dan.—*Good News Bible*.*†

Joshua 10:18-19: ¹⁸ “Place some guards there, ¹⁹but don’t stay there yourselves. **Keep on after the enemy** and attack them from the rear; don’t let them get to their cities! The LORD your God has given you victory over them.”—*Good News Bible*.*† [That surely is pursuit!][‡]

32. How has it impacted your personal life to know that **God is pursuing you with His love and goodness**? Can you even imagine anything better than that?

33. If we keep in mind that God's unfailing love and goodness is following us and pursuing us wherever we go, shouldn't that make life easier? The best way to deal with present problems is always to think of them in the context of the great controversy which God through Jesus Christ has already won! We know what the final ending will be! **God wins!**
34. Think of all the evidence that God has given that He is pursuing us with His love! Imagine all that Jesus did to try to convince us of His love! In imagination, look again at the cross where God Himself is hanging and the human Jesus is dying for you. **Jesus was crucified as a traitor against the Roman government. The Romans intentionally treated traitors in as embarrassing and insulting a way as they possibly could.**
35. If you are not sure how much God cares about you, notice these passages from Ellen White.

[EGW:] **Every soul is as fully known to Jesus as if he were the only one for whom the Saviour died.... He cares for each one as if there were not another on the face of the earth.**—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages** 480.1.††

[EGW:] **The soul that has given himself to Christ is more precious in His sight than the whole world. The Saviour would have passed through the agony of Calvary that one might be saved in His kingdom. He will never abandon one for whom He has died. Unless His followers choose to leave Him, He will hold them fast.**—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages** 480.5.††

Of course, we know that Christ died not just for us, but for the entire onlooking universe. They needed to learn the truth about God and the truth about Satan.

[EGW:] "Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down My life, that I might take it again." That is, [Jesus was saying,] **My Father has so loved you, that He even loves Me more for giving My life to redeem you. In becoming your substitute and surety, by surrendering My life, by taking your liabilities, your transgressions, I am endeared to My Father.**—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages** 483.5-484.0.††

36. Can you think of times in your life when you might have been disciplined in the "school of Christ"? Take a few minutes and review carefully the chapters entitled *Calvary* and *It Is Finished* in the book *Desire of Ages* by Ellen G. White. If you had any questions about the lengths to which Jesus was willing to go for you personally, these chapters should answer those questions!
37. In this week's lesson, we have noted these three major themes as stated in the Bible study guide:
1. It is very important to understand that our life is a journey that takes different turns.
 2. It also is crucial to remember that this path does not wind chaotically, by chance. God is our Guide and Shepherd, and He may allow us to traverse, or actively take us through, the valleys of suffering and death. But God does not expect us to make this journey blindfolded. Rather, He gives us a sure promise that He will lead us to salvation.

3. There is no way to survive the crucibles of life if we do not trust our Shepherd to take us through them.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13.

38. However, let us be certain of the following truths.

[BSG:] One biblical representation of life is of a path through a landscape. This path follows a trajectory from birth to death. There are not one but two paths. The first is the good path, the path of justice or righteousness (*Prov. 8:20*) that leads to prosperity and life (*Ps. 1:2, 3*), for God Himself makes the path smooth (*Prov. 2:8, Isa. 26:7*). Those who walk on the good or righteous path are guided by the divine Word that serves as a lamp for their feet when life is dark (*Ps. 119:105*). Eventually, their path becomes progressively brighter as the midday (*Prov. 4:18*). Those on this path also acknowledge God in all aspects of life (*Prov. 3:5, 6*). Although this path leads to life, it is narrow, and few walk on it (*Matt. 7:14*). The second path is the bad, or the sinful, path. This is the wide path that leads to iniquity, superficial existence, and death (*Ps. 1:4, 5; Prov. 14:12; Matt. 7:13*).—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 13-14.†§ [Are we sure which of these two paths we are on?][‡]

39. These two paths are described in considerable detail in various portions of Scripture. We know for sure that God clearly understands both of those paths. Don't we also understand that God can see clearly which of those two paths we are taking?

Proverbs 5:21: The LORD sees everything you do. Wherever you go, he is watching.—*Good News Bible*.*

Proverbs 4:14: Do not go where evil people go. Do not follow the example of the wicked.—*Good News Bible*.*

Psalms 1:1: Happy are those
who reject the advice of evil people,
who do not follow the example of sinners
or join those who have no use for God.—*Good News Bible*.*

Ezekiel 33:11: [Ezekiel told the people that God had told him to say:] "Tell them that as surely as I, the Sovereign LORD, am the living God, I do not enjoy seeing sinners die. I would rather see them stop sinning and live. Israel, stop the evil you are doing. Why do you want to die?"—*Good News Bible*.*‡

40. In his official position in the government, did Daniel have opportunities to communicate with or meet with other Jewish believers?

41. Our Bible study guide comes to the following conclusions:

(1) **Yes, the end of each of the two paths is determined: the path of righteousness leads to life, and the path of iniquity leads to death. But being on one path or another is a matter of our choice.** (2) **If we decide to be on the path of righteousness, God promises that the righteous path will take us to life.**—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study*

*Guide** 14.† [Being on the right path does not mean there will be no problems!]‡

42. Consider what the Bible study guide says about “the Way” and “walking” in the Way.

[BSG:] Fledgling Christianity was at first called “the Way” (*Acts 9:2; Acts 19:9, 23; Acts 22:4; Acts 24:14, 22*) or “the way to be saved” (*Acts 16:17, NIV*). Apollos was “instructed in the way of the Lord” and received even more instruction while on it (*Acts 18:25, 26, NKJV*). The apostle Paul also associates religion with “walking” and insists that Christians can “no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind” (*Eph. 4:17, NKJV*). The apostle John exhorts us to “walk” in God’s commandments and in His love (*2 John 1:6*).—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 15.‡§

43. Is the Christian religion still the right way to live? Is Christianity still relevant in our day?

[BSG:] It is true that the history of Christianity is littered with apostasy, abuse, deception, and corruption; **numerous times Christianity took divergent routes from Christ’s path**. But this does not mean there is no path of righteousness to be followed. Jesus remains the Path, and He promises us that His path is the truth and that it will take us to life, eternal life.... **Even if it is narrow, even if it has crucibles, it is the only, and the best, path to life**. Our Shepherd will take us there.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 15.†‡

[BSG:] The Western concept and word “religion” comes from the Latin *re* (again) plus *ligare* (connect, tie)—to tie again, to reconnect. While it has been developed in the Western Christian environment, this term makes sense from the biblical perspective, too, and can be connected to the biblical view of religion as a “path” and “journey.” When humanity took the path to perdition, we lost the connection with God. **Religion is that process through which humans and God are reconnected**. But how do we reconnect with God? If religion is a “path” or “journey,” it is not an atemporal, ahistorical phenomenon, as in the pagan mythological or philosophical religions. Rather, in the biblical view, religion (or the reconnection of humanity with divinity) is a process in time and space. It is a personal and historical journey, both for God and for us. God comes to us and meets us where we are, in history. Another difference between pagan and biblical religions is that in pagan religions people must clear a path for themselves, to find the way to the world of the gods, to earn their favors, to reconnect to them, or to steal their secrets or the secret to eternal life. **In the biblical religion, on the contrary, it is God Himself who clears the path to us**. He comes to us, seeking to save us, to take us back to the path of life, to take us back to Himself. In fact, He Himself becomes the Path and the Guide and the Shepherd. He walks with us through that valley, guiding us on that path of reconnecting to God. This is God’s religion, the religion of grace!—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 15-16.†‡§

44. **Are you sure which of those two paths you are on? Are you sure who it is that is your guide?** Do you have friends who are on the right path as well? How many people

that you associate with are on God's path? Are you afraid that they might be using the opposite path? What could you do to help them? Let us never forget that we are never going to be asked to go through something that Jesus did not go through before us.

[BSG:] We can trust our Shepherd to take us through the crucibles of life because, before permitting us to pass through crucibles, the Shepherd Himself went through that crucible. But there is an essential difference between His crucible and ours. **Many of our crucibles are caused by ourselves or other humans, or by the consequences of sin in general.** The Shepherd's crucible was caused by us [or by Satan], and He [God] took it upon Himself sacrificially, substitutionally, and redemptively. How does this understanding help you go through suffering?—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 17.[†]

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