



**Reflection card:** Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

**Talk (one minute):**

Unless we're very fortunate indeed, most of us will go through dark valleys at some time in our lives. It might be illness, redundancy, bereavement, or many other things. Shakespeare wrote about the 'heartaches and the thousand natural shocks' we face just because we're human.

While we can't escape this kind of experience, sometimes these valleys take on a deeper darkness as we are overwhelmed by what we face. Life becomes bleak. We see no hope.

There are two words in these verses that might help us. One is 'through' and the other is 'with'.

Most of us find that, however dark our personal valley might be, we don't stay in it forever. We go through it and we come out on the other side. We weren't designed to live in darkness: God wants something better for us.

And we do not go through it alone. This is the word 'with': God is with us, the psalmist says. The 'rod' of which the psalmist speaks is less like a walker's pole and more like a club. It's a support, but also a weapon to defend us against evil.

We go through the valley and God is with us.

**Discussion (two minutes):**

What has helped us in dark times?

**Reflection (one minute):**

Is there someone going through tough times I could help?





**Reflection card:** He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

**Talk (one minute):**

People who live in developed countries have more choices than ever. It's not true of everyone – many of us are still limited by circumstances – but on the whole we can choose where to live, what to eat and drink, what to wear, our jobs, our friends, our lifestyles. We can choose how to live, too: what are our values? What do we believe about right and wrong? What gives our lives meaning?

In lots of ways this freedom is great to have. In others, perhaps not so much. Even choice can seem oppressive, as we constantly worry about whether we've made the right decision. Everything from an Instagram post to a menu choice becomes another hurdle to jump. As for those big moral questions about our conduct and what we're really committed to – they're mountains we can't begin to climb.

This sense of confusion and rootlessness is in the Psalmist's mind when he says God leads him in right paths. He means there's a way through the wilderness; the pathways are there, if we can only learn to see them. And God leads us 'for his name's sake': guiding and protecting us is in his nature.

**Discussion (two minutes):**

What are some wrong choices we've made? What are some right choices?

**Reflection (one minute):**

Is there a choice I'm facing now? Is it hard to decide what the right thing is, or hard to do it?





**Reflection card:** He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.

**Talk (one minute):**

One of God's gifts in the Bible is the Sabbath, the day of rest. People sometimes think of the Sabbath as about things you're not allowed to do. It really means not having to labour 24/7 to stay alive.

Human beings are not machines. We weren't designed to work without ceasing. It's leisure time that produces music, art and poetry. And it's because we aren't working all the time that we have space for other people in our lives. We need that down time if we're going to flourish, with good friends and healthy relationships.

There's nothing that symbolises rest as well as a sheep in a green field on a sunny day. It doesn't do much except munch the odd mouthful of grass. It's just being itself – but it's also nourishing itself.

Many of us aren't good at resting. If we're at school, it's all about results. If we're at work, it's about productivity. Even when we aren't, there's pressure on us to hit the gym and exercise or hit the shops and consume. It's not good for us.

Listening to God makes us rest. He refreshes our lives.

**Discussion (two minutes):**

What do we do to relax? What do we enjoy about it?

**Reflection (one minute):**

Do I take enough time for myself? Can I help someone else take time for themselves?





## Reflection card: Meadow

### Talk (one minute):

Psalm 23 speaks of 'green pastures'. A green meadow is a picture of peace. Nothing much seems to be happening, especially if the sheep are in another field.

Of course, that's not really true. There's a lot of activity even in land sown for grazing. As well as wildlife like voles and hares, there can be a surprising variety of plants in the fields and verges – though not as much as there was, and nothing like the rich bio-tapestry the psalmist would have seen.

All this reminds us that meadows aren't just pretty. They're productive, and need to be sensitively managed. 'After all, a king who cultivates the field is an advantage to the land,' says Ecclesiastes (5.9).

But the Israelites are to leave the land fallow every seven years, 'so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat' (Exodus 23.11).

Another verse draws a fascinating parallel. Paul tells the Corinthians they are 'God's field' (1 Corinthians 3.9). It's a rich metaphor: we are to be productive, diverse, alive, complex – and peaceful.

### Discussion (two minutes):

Meadows have a lot going on under the surface. Have the group share something about themselves not many others would know.

### Reflection (oneminute):

Do I assume I know all about people? How can I see more deeply?





## Reflection card: Seating

### Talk (one minute):

Psalm 23 speaks of 'lying down in green pastures'. The psalmist writes in the first person – it's all 'me' and 'I' – but we all know that sheep are herd animals. He isn't alone.

In the Bible, where people are described as 'sitting', it's almost always an introduction to an encounter. People sit by a well, or under a tree, and someone – another person, or an angel – comes and talks to them.

One of the issues in our society today is loneliness. Many of us live quite isolated lives. We have high-speed broadband giving us access to all the information we need. We have services streaming endless entertainment into our living rooms. We don't even need to go to the shops; we can order anything we need online.

There are lots of positives about this new world – and lots of negatives, too. One of them is that we don't sit down with people and talk face-to-face. Human interaction is being replaced by electronic interaction.

In that light, a simple bench can be a powerful symbol. It says, 'Sit with me and let's talk.'

### Discussion (two minutes):

Do people connect personally with each other less than they used to?

### Reflection (one minute):

How can I come alongside someone who might need company?





**Reflection card:** Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

**Talk (one minute):**

There's a deep insight in this verse and an inspiring hope. David is in a place of danger, alone and threatened by enemies too powerful for him. He might have thought he deserved better from God after all his faithfulness. There are many other examples in the Bible of believers going through terrible times. Having faith doesn't mean we're exempt from sadness.

David believes that God will protect and comfort him. However, he puts that in a very interesting way. God's goodness and mercy will 'follow' him, he says. So, it isn't necessarily that he will always experience these blessings all the time – but they are never far away. If he looks ahead, things might seem very dark and confusing – but goodness and mercy are close behind him.

There's also a great hope here. He says he will 'dwell in the house of the Lord forever'. The table in the presence of his enemies is a foretaste of eternity. We're thankful for blessings in the midst of our trials today, but we still want those trials to have an ending. David's psalm tells us that they will.

**Discussion (two minutes):**

Can we think of times someone's helped us unexpectedly, or when things have turned out right when we thought they wouldn't?

**Reflection (one minute):**

What am I hoping for right now?





**Reflection card:** The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

**Talk (one minute):**

Shepherds in ancient Israel were heroes – at least if they were good at their jobs. The landscape wasn't tamed, as it is in most of the UK. There were dangerous predators including lions and bears, and in mountainous areas the terrain could be perilous too. Protecting and caring for the sheep was a job for someone who was mentally and physically tough – a sort of Israelite Bear Grylls.

David, who wrote this psalm, had been a shepherd himself. When he says to God, 'You are my shepherd', he was speaking out of his own experience – and admitting something deeply personal. He was saying that, tough and wily as he was, God was even stronger.

David was used to being in control, but he knew he needed to lean on God. There were problems he couldn't solve. He was a protector and a carer, but there were times when he needed someone to protect and care for him. The shepherd needed a shepherd.

We often like to think we've got everything sorted. Psalm 23 tells us that it's OK if we haven't.

**Discussion (two minutes):**

Who do we admire? Do we think less of them if we know their weaknesses?

**Reflection (one minute):**

Who can I be honest with? Is there something I should be sharing that I'm keeping to myself?





## Reflection card: Trees

### Talk (one minute):

In the Bible trees are used as symbols of life and blessing. In one verse, Isaiah 61.3, the prophet says that the poor, broken-hearted, captive mourners will be crowned and comforted, 'that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified'.

Why 'oaks of righteousness'? Perhaps because oaks are so enduring. It might be the idea of being rooted in the right place, able to outlast storms and drought.

There's something else about oak trees, though. We might think of one standing on its own in a field. Its branches spread widely. Cows and sheep shelter under it from the sun and rain. It's full of birds.

But the field oak is not as useful to the carpenter and builder as the woodland oak that grows with other trees. The woodland oak grows straighter and higher, because it reaches towards the light.

The oaks of righteousness are plural. They are woodland oaks, growing together.

Some of us enjoy solitude, but we are not meant to be alone. Being with others straightens us out. It encourages us to reach higher. We're more useful.

### Discussion (two minutes):

How many kinds of tree can the group name between them?

### Reflection (one minute):

How does being with other people make me a better person?





## Reflection card: Water

### Talk (one minute):

Water is the most precious of all natural resources. Pressure on the world's water supplies is one of the most alarming features of climate change.

Psalm 23 speaks of the 'still waters' by which God leads his flock. The image is of a tranquil pool rather than a rushing stream or a waterfall. It's a gift: if you're really thirsty, you don't want to have to struggle for something to quench your thirst, you just want a drink.

Water is an image used elsewhere in the Psalms, too. In Psalm 1, the writer compares a good, God-oriented person with 'a tree, planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither' (verse 3).

Spiritual nourishment can be hard to find in an age that's fast-moving and materialistic.

In his Gospel, John tells of Jesus calling out to a crowd, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."'

Spiritually satisfied people are able to be a blessing to others.

### Discussion (two minutes):

What are your favourite experiences of water?

### Reflection (one minute):

Am I someone who refreshes others? If not, how can I change?





**Reflection card:** You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

**Talk (one minute):**

Meal tables are full of meaning. They're where families sit together, where couples' eyes meet and where we enjoy life's good things. They're also where things fall apart – families row and relationships break up. It's painful if there are tables to which we are not invited and where we are not welcome.

The Psalmist, though, pictures God as a gracious host who invites us 'in the presence of my enemies'. At a time when we may be alone, excluded and afraid, he offers us sanctuary and a place to sit. At a table in the wilderness, he treats us as an honoured guest.

In Jewish tradition, the psalm was written when David was facing a fight for his life. The table God prepares for him was to strengthen him for the coming battle.

Many of us face our own battles today, and we need strength too. For Christians, our minds might turn to the shared Communion meal. But the table in the psalm is a very ordinary, material thing as well. It's often in human contact, the blessings of friendship and the love of other people that we find God strengthens us.

And who knows? Those enemies that surround us might sit down at the table with us too.

**Discussion (two minutes):**

Would you rather be a host or a guest? What are the most memorable meals you've had?

**Reflection (one minute):**

Do I have any enemies, and could I make friends with them?

