



# SELAH

## BIBLE STUDY

## SELAH IN MY LIVING

### INTRODUCTION

**T**his Bible study is part of a larger group of generosity materials centered around the biblical word “Selah.” It appears 74 times in the Bible, mostly in the book of Psalms, though a few times in Habakkuk. When we see it in Psalms, we might think it refers to a person or place. It actually is more of a direction, a kind of punctuation for the reader, or since Psalms is more of a songbook in the Bible, to the singer. Interestingly, 31 of the 39 Psalms that contain “Selah” notations are titled “To the Choirmaster,” implying that they are providing musical direction.<sup>1</sup> Opinions differ on what the word actually means, but the common understanding seems to be that it is a pause — a chance to reflect on what you have just heard, whether spoken or sung.

Within this group of resources, we have broadened our understanding of Selah beyond just a direction for singing or reading to a direction for living. Living in the hectic, information-overload time we are experiencing, we need to take time intentionally to pause and reflect on where we are in our lives and to answer a question we ask others but often not ourselves, “How is it with your soul?”

Throughout the materials we have referenced in this package, we have highlighted the Psalms that use the notation of “Selah.” For this Bible study, the Psalm we will explore does not include the “Selah” direction; yet, it speaks to what I’m calling the “Selah of Living.” I hope that as you complete this time of study, you will offer yourself the gifts of moments of Selah.

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Soroski, “What Does Selah Mean in the Bible and Why Is It Important?” Crosswalk.com, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/what-does-selah-mean.html>.

## BACKGROUND

### Psalm 23: The Divine Shepherd

Most would agree that the 23rd Psalm is the most widely known portion of the Bible. Its use is strongly associated with funerals. J. Clinton McCann, in his commentary in the New Interpreters Bible, writes, “To be sure it is appropriate that Psalm 23 be read and heard in the midst of death and dying. It may be more important however that this Psalm be read and heard as a Psalm about living, for it puts daily activities such as eating, drinking, and seeking security in a radically God-centered perspective that challenges our usual way of thinking.”<sup>2</sup>

This will be our focus as we look at Psalm 23 in light of “Selah living.” What can the psalm teach us about living lives that are not randomly reactive to the pressure of relentless deadlines and grueling scheduling but, instead, are intentional and well examined. Selah living may call us to change our pace, plan less and reflect more.

#### Questions for Reflection:

How long has it been since you:

- spent a whole day without adding or checking off things on your to-do list?
- read Scripture that wasn’t in preparation for a class, worship or some other task?
- awakened on a day that you had nothing planned?

## PART I

### REFLECT GOD’S CARING

#### A Psalm of David.

- <sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;[a]  
<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.[b]  
He leads me in right paths[c]  
for his name’s sake (Psalm 23:1-3. NRSV).

The image of a shepherd in the Bible can easily be misunderstood. We have polished it up some, referring to pastors and other religious and moral leaders as shepherds. Shepherding, as the vocation in Bible times, was often at the bottom of the social strata. Yet, scholars tell us that rulers of that day would often describe their care for their subjects “like a shepherd,” which was probably no more than political jargon. The psalmist (whether it was David or not) realizes that God is the only ruler who truly cares like a shepherd.

#### Questions for Reflection:

How long has it been since you:

1. In your life, where are the places of “green pastures” and “still waters”?
2. Recall a time when your soul was restored. How did God get you there?
3. Was there a particular time in your life when you asked God to help you stay on the right path?

<sup>2</sup> J. Clinton McCann; Commentary (on Psalm 23), The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol. IV, Psalms (Abingdon Press, 2015), 767.

## PART II

### REFLECT GOD'S COMFORT

#### A Psalm of David.

<sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley,<sup>[d]</sup>  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).

Reflecting on this single verse makes it clear why Psalm 23 has become a standard for inclusion in funeral services. When reading this at funerals, I always point out that a valley is something with an entrance and an exit; it is something we pass through. The “valley of the shadow of death” is not the main focal point of this verse; the presence and comfort that God provides enable us to walk through the valley (something we all will do) without fear. Funerals for the faithful who have leaned on this comfort and presence to navigate without fear have the capacity to be celebrations.

It's important to point out that the rod and/or staff of a shepherd are tools for protection of the sheep, not punishment. Occasionally, they are used to fight off predators, but mostly they are used to guide the sheep away from danger.

## PART III

### REFLECT GOD'S GENEROSITY

#### A Psalm of David.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows (Psalm 23:5).

Imagine yourself and your family sitting at a long table filled, not only with food, but also with all the good things of life. The one who is preparing the table and setting everything before you is the Almighty God, Creator of the universe! That's the image the psalmist conjures up for us, the enormous generosity of God. In the picture, the enemies are present but rendered no longer a threat by this unimaginable generosity. The anointing of someone's head with oil is reserved for the most honored guests, which include the psalmist in this picture, but we are there also. Finally, the cup that overflows should remind us that we have more blessings than our cups can hold, and our response in generosity would be to help those whose cups are nearly empty.

#### Questions for Reflection:

1. Did you memorize Psalm 23 as a child or youth? Do you remember reciting it to yourself?
2. Does reading this verse remind you of a valley in your life?
3. Can you remember ever feeling the staff of God giving you a little tap or poke to lead you away from something dangerous?

#### Questions for Reflection:

1. When have you felt overwhelmed by God's generosity, and how have you responded?
2. When your cup overflows, are you more apt to share or to get a bigger cup?
3. Can you remember being around someone who had much less than you, and yet their happiness with life made you wish you had something they possessed?

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## PART IV

### REFLECT GOD'S LOVE

#### A Psalm of David.

<sup>6</sup>Surely<sup>[e]</sup> goodness and mercy<sup>[f]</sup> shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long<sup>[g]</sup> (Psalm 23:6).

This last verse is not about our good fortune, but, rather, about God's relentless love. While most translations suggest the psalmist is asserting that "God's goodness will follow me," a few suggest that a more accurate translation of the verb would be a more active sense of "pursue." I love the idea that God's love pursues me, chases me down. God loves us, so that watching us turn our back on that love or wander away because we are distracted by the world is not a reason for God to write us off but, instead, to "get the keys and come after us." O love, that will not let me go.

#### Questions for Reflection:

1. Have you identified something as "good fortune" that was, in fact, God's relentless love?
2. Was there a time in your life when you felt God was pursuing you to bring you home?
3. What does the phrase "dwell in the house of the Lord" mean to you?

## CONCLUSION

As this Bible study ends, remember that this psalm (like most Scripture) has messages to share and uncover that have not been touched. What we have learned from the direction "Selah," intentionally placed through the psalms and elsewhere, is that the direction to pause, rest and reflect will allow Scripture, other reading, conversations and life itself to be more meaningful and relevant. Pausing, resting and reflecting will make you hear new things in the Bible, but they will also help you hear more from your soul. ■