

The shepherd leads us

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[0 : 00] Is that how we're living our lives? Is that the way we want to go? We live the way I want, the way I feel is best.

I'll listen to the advice of the people I want to listen to and if they don't say good things to me, I'll listen to someone else. But I'm going to do it my way. The message that comes across to us in some films and TV shows is do it your way.

Follow your heart. Follow your dreams. I don't know if anybody's watched Moana. It's a great movie, but it is also sending us the message, follow your dreams. Follow your heart.

But her dad says to her, no, don't go out in the water. It's dangerous. And she doesn't stop to think, why is my dad saying that? She just thinks I'm going to go.

My heart wants me to go. I won't listen to anything else. I'll go the way my heart wants. But what does the Bible tell us about the way to go?

[1 : 19] Does it encourage us to follow our hearts? Follow our dreams? Go my way? Well, here's what the Bible says about the heart. The heart is deceitful above all things.

And beyond cure, who can understand it? Maybe that following your heart message isn't so good. But that's just a random verse in the Old Testament.

What about the Lord Jesus? What does he say about the heart? Does he say, follow your hearts? He says, for out of the heart come evil thoughts. Murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Okay, there's a problem with our hearts. And if our hearts are the map of our lives, we're not on good, firm foundations for walking through life.

So perhaps Frank Sinatra and perhaps Moana have actually got it wrong. Well, it's good that we can turn to God's word this morning and read from Psalm 23.

[2 : 35] And we're going to be in verses 3 and 4 this morning. But before we get there, just in case you weren't here last Sunday, we were in verse 1 last Sunday morning.

We saw that the magnificent thought that the mighty, eternal, creator God, Lord, I am, who needs nothing and no one to be in existence, He reveals Himself to us in this psalm as a shepherd.

Who comes in the muck and mud of our lives and leads us and guides us and protects us as we're walking through. And last Sunday night, we saw the green pastures that He makes us lie down in, the rest that He provides.

And we looked at various other passages of the Bible last Sunday night. to think about that theme. And this morning, as said, we come to verse 3, which is all about the way we walk through life.

What is guiding us? We're told, verse 3, He, our shepherd, guides us along the right paths.

[3 : 55] See, life really is a journey. David Gibson, who's written an excellent book on Psalm 23. I warmly commend it to you. He says, Life is a journey, not a viewing gallery.

We are always on the move. We're always traveling. And either going along Jesus' paths, the good shepherd's paths, or a different shepherd's paths.

Maybe even what our own heart says. Our own heart's paths. So let's think about the paths that the shepherd leads us on.

See first that He leads us. He leads us. Which is good news. Because following our hearts, following our own ways, are unreliable.

But if we know the Lord, who's created all things, who has made us, who loves us like a shepherd, loves their sheep, if we know Him, then it's good that we see this morning He leads us.

[5 : 04] And we're told He leads us on right paths. He guides me along the right paths. That word right really should be a righteous, righteous paths.

He leads us in righteousness. We know from the Psalms alone, if you're reading through the early Psalms, you'll see that the Lord is righteous. He's righteous in His character.

Meaning He is always doing what is right. He is always doing what is good. And what is just. He is completely righteous.

As one author put it, He's righteous beyond human comprehension. Wow. Our God is righteous. And we know from that quote of Jesus about our hearts that even if we think we are righteous, we're really not, are we?

Out of the heart comes all sorts of evil. We are not righteous. Certainly not righteous like God is righteous. But praise God that because of the Lord Jesus, the good shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep, we are covered in His righteousness.

[6 : 26] His righteousness becomes ours. We're closed in it. And that's a wonderful thing. But that doesn't mean that when we're saved, we can just take a seat and relax.

The Lord Jesus has done it all for me. I can just live however I want, relax. And no, no, we need to be walking with Him on these right paths.

It's not right that we walk in those harmful thoughts that we have. It's not right that we just say whatever our hearts want to say. Because Jesus has saved me in order to live in His ways, to walk in His right paths.

But we're not left alone to do that. Do we get that? Verse 3, He guides me along the right paths. Our shepherd is leading us along the right paths.

We're not left to make up the right way to live. That is really good news. Because if we were down, if it was left to ourselves, we'd make a real mess of it, wouldn't we?

[7 : 50] He guides us. That's a continuous thing. Continues to guide us along right paths day by day. Through all the days of our lives.

But how does He do that? How does He guide us along the right paths? Well, I thought of words from another psalm.

Psalms 119, verse 105. It's a big psalm. You can praise God we weren't reading that this morning in its entirety. Your word is a lamp for my feet.

A light on my path. The image there is of the words of God.

It's like a bright light shining there in the darkness in order that we may navigate our way through the worlds. Because we know that this world we live in is a dark world.

[8 : 55] It's a broken world, isn't it? That follow your heart message is not a good, it's not a light giving message.

It's not going to help us navigate our way through this dark world. Our hearts are dark. If we're following our dark hearts in this dark world, we'll stumble and fall.

Like you would if you were walking around in darkness, you would stumble and fall. So we need God to guide us. We need God's words. Which lightens up the way, shows us His way, shows us the right way of living.

We need God to guide us along the right paths and we have it in His words. In His word, He reveals to us His righteous character, His righteous ways, and the righteous way to live.

If you've been with us throughout the summer looking at the Psalms, you'll remember we started in Psalm 1. That Psalm which speaks of the two ways to live, the blessed, righteous way, or the wicked way.

[10 : 17] And we saw that the blessed way, it's the way of the Lord Jesus, the perfectly righteous one. And that blessed way involves delighting in the words.

Delighting in seeing the way in which we should go, the light for our path. And not just reading it, not just delighting it, but also meditating upon it, thinking about it, chewing over it, applying it to our hearts to help us to keep walking in His way.

And we've not got time to really consider, but in the New Testament, we are told that we should walk in step with the Spirit. God's people are so blessed to have the Word of God, but also the Spirit of God in us, who helps us to walk those righteous ways.

But we've got to do the walking too. We've got to walk in step with Him. We've got to walk along these right paths that the shepherd is leading us on. But imagine a shepherd whose sheep do not follow Him.

They keep wandering off, running away from their right paths into other farmers' fields or onto the road and causing havoc with the traffic.

[11 : 52] Here's some sheep running that I've got AI to produce for me. That's the sort of world we're in now. Now, if you had watched any of the Clarkson's Farm series, Jeremy Clarkson, learning to be a farmer on Amazon Prime, you'd see sheep running off into places that you didn't want them to go.

And it caused great embarrassment for him to just go constantly and bring these sheep back into the way they should go. And it's not unusual with sheep for them to do that.

Philip Keller is a Christian shepherd who's written a lovely little book on Psalm 23 and he said this about sheep. No other class of livestock requires more careful handling than sheep.

No other class of livestock requires more detailed direction than sheep. They need a lot of directing. Otherwise, they're running off into the wrong paths that the shepherd says, no, that's not my way. That's not the way you should go. Come back. Come back. And doesn't that describe us all too well? We sometimes pray that prayer of confession which says we follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.

[13 : 21] We sang in that hymn just now, we are prone to wonder, prone to leave the God I love. We're like wandering sheep who stray off into the wrong ways.

But gloriously, our God is a tender shepherd who doesn't just leave us to wander into those wrong paths, but he's one who is completely committed to the welfare of his sheep.

So much so that his name is staked on us walking in the right paths. Do you see that in verse 3? He guides me along the right paths for his namesake.

It can only really be for his namesake that we're walking in those right paths. Left to our own, we will go off onto destructive habits.

We're wandering sheep, we have deceitful hearts, but for his namesake, he will help us to keep going along those right paths.

[14 : 36] for his namesake, for his glory, for the honor of his name. And so it's for the glory of his name that we follow his word that tells us we should worship only him and have no other gods before you.

It's for his glory, it's for his namesake that we do that. It's for the glory of his name that we obey that command to honor our parents, to love our neighbors, to follow him in the way that he says we should go.

It's for his glory that we should do as the Lord Jesus says and pick up our cross daily and follow him. It's for his glory that we walk in these ways. thinking about walking in right ways.

You may have heard there's a new shop in town, a new Ikea. And if you've either been to this new Ikea or you've been to others, you will know that at Ikea there's very much a right way to walk, isn't there?

They set it out for you, they direct you along the right paths around Ikea. But if you want to skip a section, maybe you don't want to walk around the kitchen section or the office section, you can take the shortcuts, can't you?

[16 : 11] You could even, I noticed on R1, you could even skip straight to the good stuff, the cafe, get your coffee and cake.

but the right paths that our shepherd leads us on, there is no taking shortcuts, I'm afraid.

And you may look at verse 4 and wish that we could because look at where these right paths lead us. Verse 4, even though I walk through the darkest valley.

the reality is that these right paths that the shepherd leads us on in our lives here are not all straightforward.

There will be dark valleys. And actually, maybe for some of us that's a bit of a relief to hear that because up until now in the psalm, it's all been lovely.

[17 : 25] Green pastures, the Lord's my shepherd, I lack nothing, it's lovely. Quiet waters, it's lovely. Right paths, wonderful, but that's not the reality for our lives right now.

And we hear that and think, oh well, that's okay for others, that's not where I'm at. And so actually it's good that we're not skipping over this. Because these are a reality for some of us even now, we are treading those dark paths, those dark valleys.

And what are they? Those times when just pain is so excruciating, or when the sorrow is so deep, or when the uncertainties of where we'll live or where we'll work in the next few weeks or months become so real and challenging.

The times when we just feel so lonely, even in a crowd of people like this, we might feel really deeply lonely. And the times when the doctor gives us a diagnosis that we just never dreamed of. The time when the friend abandons us or a loved one dies. And you can insert many other things there, I'm sure. Dark valleys.

[18 : 56] And they are a reality for us as we follow our shepherd in this world. And we may, we may say in those times when we're walking in those dark valleys, valleys, or even we might say the valley of the shadow of death.

That's what some of our Bibles say. And we're reminded that the death is coming. The death is a reality that the one day I'm not going to be here, one day my relatives aren't going to be here, one day my friends aren't going to be here.

that's what dark valleys bring up for us. But in these dark valleys, we can know the comfort of the shepherds who leads us through them.

That they're not an accident. He guides me along the right paths. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, they're not an accident. the Lord knows about them.

And actually he does even more for us than lead us through. See, he walks beside us. He walks beside us.

[20 : 23] Our shepherd in this psalm also becomes our companion in verse four. Our companion walking right there beside us in the valley of darkness, in the overwhelming sorrow, in the painful loss, in the face of uncertainty, in the crippling anxiety, he is walking beside us.

And if our shepherd who is the Lord Yahweh Almighty, all powerful, if he says he walks beside us, we can trust that he is faithful.

to do that. We can trust that he is faithful to his promises, faithful to his flock, his sheep, to provide for them, to protect them, to lead them, even in those dark valleys.

And so we don't need to fear, and yet I stand here and know that when dark valleys come in my life, I know that I do fear.

So how can we say, how can David say, I will fear no evil? evil? How can we say we fear no evil when we're fearing what's going to happen now that that person has gone?

[21 : 57] When we're fearing how can we put bread on the table? If I don't get that job soon, how bad will this illness get for me? And we fear the worst.

yet if our Lord, our good shepherd is with us, we don't need to fear. Well, let's consider this carefully together and we need to keep remembering who has written this psalm.

It is written by David. He's a familiar character to many of us in the Bible. He knew the darkness of lions and bears coming to attack his sheep.

He knew the darkness of his own family members being against him. He knew the darkness of his own heart and consequences of sin.

He knew the darkness of losing a baby. He knew dark valleys, they were a reality for him. But he also knew his Lord, his shepherd, man and he does.

[23 : 10] Do you see how the language changes in verse 4? It goes from saying true things about who the Lord is for David to David talking with the Lord.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil for you are with me. He is talking to the Lord.

He has a relationship with the Lord. He knows him. I know you, I know your character, I know you're a shepherd and I know you're with me in this.

Notice that little word, second word in verse 4, not second word in verse 4, I can't count, the word through, the word through.

I will walk through the darkest valley. He doesn't say I find myself in a dark valley with nowhere to escape.

[24 : 20] No, I will go through this. It's like if you go on a train and you end up in a tunnel and it's dark around you, eventually that tunnel will come out into the light.

The light will come again. It may feel like a long tunnel but it will come again. And so for the dark valleys that we go through, they may seem long.

It may feel like there is no light but light is coming. You will get through them. We will be kept on the right path.

for us to go through those dark valleys but to come out the other side is for his glory, for his name's sake.

For our good he uses these dark valleys and will come out the other side safely with our shepherds.
[25 : 25] We know from other parts of the Bible he uses those dark valleys to grow our faith, to grow us in the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Perhaps he may even use those dark valleys as a way to just rebrick us from ways when we're not living as we should in order that we might be kept on the right path.

but every step of the way whatever it is and whatever the reason he will keep you. At Christmas we remind ourselves as the Lord Jesus comes into the world born as a baby and we remind ourselves he's given the name Emmanuel.

Emmanuel God with us. God comes to be with his people. God comes to dwell with us even though we're sinful, even though this world is broken and isn't fit for the Lord of all yet he comes amongst! us. And that's a comfort that we need to know but he does even more than that. He has even gone through the dark valley for us.

[26 : 54] John chapter 18 verse 1 Love to just read that to you mate, lights, turn it up. John chapter 18 verse 1 speaks about Jesus crossing a valley.

John 18 verse 1 When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley and as he goes through the valley, on the other side was a garden and he and his disciples went into it.

And it's not recorded there for us in John's Gospel but that's the garden, the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus faces a very dark night where he anticipates the anguish of the cross that's coming and in his anguish he sweats drops of blood and says Lord, Lord, take this cup away from me and yet not what I will but what you will.

He crosses the valley to the darkness of that garden and look how dark it gets down in verse 12 then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus.

They bound him and brought him first to Annas who was the father and law of Caiaphas the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people.

[29 : 00] The darkness gets even darker. Jesus is arrested. Emmanuel, God with us is arrested and we know what happens next.

We know it got even darker for him as he was then sentenced to crucifixion. The cross, the darkness of the cross where he himself knew excruciating pain, where he knew deep sorrow, where he knew loneliness as his friends had abandoned him, where his father turns his face away and he comes to grips with the horrors of sin and face death itself for us.

Jesus has been in the dark valley for us, for you. So when we're in our dark valleys, do not interpret them as the Lord is far away.

Do not interpret them as the Lord doesn't care for me. he does. And we know he does because he himself was willing to go through a dark valley for you.

Jesus knows what our dark valleys are like and Psalm 23 shows us that our good shepherd is utterly committed to walking us, walking beside us through them.

[30 : 39] he himself knows how you will get through them. He knows how you will get through tomorrow and the next day and the next day.

And even if your dark valley is not just the shadow of death, but in it you face death itself, know that you are so secure in him the Lord Jesus in that passage about him being the good shepherd says, John 10 28, I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.

No one will snatch them out of my hands. We are secure with our shepherd who walks beside us now and eternity and there is glory that awaits us.

and he just in case we don't realize he himself has shown that to us as his dark valley came to an end and he was placed in the darkness of a tomb.

Remember he does not stay in that tomb. He rises again to new life and so will all who know him as their shepherds rise to new eternal life with him.

[32 : 16] And finally he comforts us. If that's not comfort enough we see in verse 4 even more comfort. End of verse 4 your rods and your staff they comfort me.

What's the rod and staff? Got a picture of them both on the screen for us. A rod a relatively short heavy club like device and the staff a longer and thinner thing with a hook or crook at one end.

How are these a comfort? Let's just consider what they're used for so that the rod is pretty lethal. A short heavy club like device. Lethal.

But it wasn't for the sheep. Not used on the sheep. It was used to fight away dangers, lions, bears, wolves, whatever it might be to protect the sheep.

That's why the shepherd had a rod. Keeping his sheep safe. Apparently it was also used to count the sheep in at the end of the day.

[33 : 31] So the shepherd would hold up the rod and the sheep would pass under it into the sheepfolds because the shepherd cares that all his sheep are safe and that not one is missing.

Perhaps that reminds us of that wonderful story that Jesus tells of a shepherd who has a hundred sheep and he counts them and there's ninety-nine. Where's the other one?

But surely he wouldn't leave those ninety-nine just to go for one? And yet he does. He goes off and finds that one lost sheep and cares that he's brought back safely into the folds.

so the rod is both used to ward off enemies and to make sure the sheep are there and they're safe. It's a comfort and that should remind us, the rod should remind us that Jesus keeps us. He keeps us safe.

[34 : 43] in those dark valleys he will ward off the enemies from us and he will make sure you're still his. Sometimes we sing that song, he will hold me fast.

That should give us confidence that he will indeed hold us fast, even in those dark valleys. and the staff, that was used for the shepherd to guide his sheep along the right paths for them.

And here as we know, the Lord, the shepherd guides us along those righteous paths. And the staff is also the shepherd's firm but gentle way of keeping the sheep, the crook at the end.

he might, if a sheep's wandering off of where it should go, just hook it round its neck and just bring it gently back into the path. And sometimes we need that, don't we?

Sometimes we come to the word of God and we find we're being corrected. As the New Testament tells us, God's word is used for correcting and rebuking so that we might be trained in the way of righteousness, in the path of righteousness.

[36 : 01] And so it's good, as we did when we prayed just now, at the beginning of the sermon, it's good to pray that we'll be encouraged as we look at God's word.

But it's also good to pray, Lord, correct me, Lord, teach me where I'm not living your way, so that we'd be helped to keep going along those right paths. Psalm 23, 3 to 4.

wonderful verses that show us a far better way to live than the Frank Sinatra or Moana way of following our own hearts, of doing it our own way.

Instead, we go the shepherd's way. We walk along the shepherd's right paths, paths, and even though they lead us down those dark valleys, there's no shortcut.

He is there. He walks beside us, and that rod and that staff will bring us comfort. prophets. We'll continue looking at Psalm 23 this evening, but for now, we're going to respond.

[37 : 18] We're going to respond in two ways. Firstly, in a moment, we're going to listen to a song, a song that will be on the screen, a song called In the Valley.

One of the writers of the song said about this, every song has a story, and the story of this song is one of sorrow and loss, but it is also a story of God's sweet comforts, and of his people blessing his name, even in the darkness.

And it seems appropriate just for us to listen to this song, maybe you want to sing along quietly, maybe you want to use the next few minutes with a song playing, just to quietly reflect on what we've heard, reflect upon that psalm, maybe say a prayer to the Lord as our hearts respond, as we meditate on what we have heard.

So I'll just find the song on YouTube, and then we'll listen to it together.