

Paths of Righteousness

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 23, Psalm 23, and we'll continue our series, just a short series in Psalm 23. Last week we considered the first three and a half verses. We will touch on verse 3 and mostly, yeah, just verse 3 we will focus on this evening. Psalm 23, a Psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff. They comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. And then it ends with these words. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amazing words. Amazing words to you and to me, if you know the Lord as your own shepherd. Let's stand before we consider this to you. Very much helping us in our worship this evening.

[1 : 3 4] Turn back with me to Psalm 23, the passage we read earlier, and we'll spend the rest of our time just looking at this psalm together. We are continuing our series of studies in this well-known psalm from God's Word. I'm sure probably just during this short series, I probably won't say anything that you don't already know, but hopefully you'll just remind yourself that how much you're loved and cared for by the Lord himself. You remember last time we mentioned it. This is a personal psalm.

It's a psalm that's often mentioned at funerals, and yet it's not to do with death. It's a psalm that's to do with life. It's to do with this life and how we cope and survive in this life under the care of the good shepherd. So it's a psalm very much about life, and it does point to death, obviously, in the last verse about dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. But it's for the Lord's people.

The Lord is my shepherd. It's for those who have come to this psalm through Psalm 22. If you don't know what Psalm 22 is, you've no right to Psalm 23. Psalm 22, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? You know that that was the words that Jesus spoke on your behalf as he saved you on the cross, as your sins were placed upon him, and he was punished, and he died for your sins, the spotless Lamb of God who takes away your sins, the sins of the world. And therefore, he is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

And we considered that last time, the context of Psalm 23 coming after Psalm 22. Jesus lays down his life for the sheep. And that's why we can say the Lord is my shepherd. Verse 1, I shall not be in want. We were thinking this morning, do not worry about anything. Everything you need for salvation is provided for in Jesus. He's not done his bit, and you have to do your bit.

[3 : 45] salvation is yours. Eternal life is yours as a gift. It really is the gospel. So last time we looked at three aspects of the role of the shepherd, because this is really not about so much you and I, but the role of the shepherd and how he relates to you. Last time we looked at rest. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He helps us with all the irritations of life that would stop us from lying down. We looked at fear and friction, other bully sheep and so forth. Flies, small irritations, famine when you're in need and you're hungry. These four things that could cause us to be restless.

He is able to deal with these, and he often does in our own life. Sometimes our own unbelief gets in the way. He gives us his presence through his word and the Holy Spirit. Then there was refreshment. Verse 2, he leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes, not only gives us rest, but he recharges us, and he does this very much through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, taking the things of Christ, applying them to us, thrilling us once again, glad that we love him. We are saved, glad that we're saved, and because of these we can say I shall not be in want. We lack nothing.

Last time we touched on the aspect of sheep that wander. It's their tendency, and we looked at restoration. He restores my soul. He did this right at the very beginning of your conversion.

He showed you your sin. He showed you his son, and the death of Jesus was applied to your life. You cling to that as his finished work, and he restores you, and he does this often. Now David is going to expand on that briefly in verse 3, and we're looking at the second half of verse 3 tonight.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. He now expands on this aspect of sheep that wander. I mentioned last time sheep. Somebody's called sheep the most stupid animal on earth. I don't know if that's quite true, but here are some images of sheep where they can get up to. I think there's another one. Yeah, there it is. Goodness knows how a sheep managed to go on the roof of a house. Phil was telling us he's been to that rock. I think it's in Norway or something where the sheep is standing. I know when I did, I used to do the Monroes, you would find them in the wackiest of places. You think, how on earth do they get there? And even when there's food, and even when there's lush green grass, they have a tendency just to wander away. And when the Lord is looking for an animal to describe you and I, if we're honest, in our hearts, that we don't always walk steadfastly with the Lord, we can wander away. We can doubt. We can begin to despair. We can just become cold-hearted. And we begin to desire other things more than the Lord. And therefore, sheep is a great picture that the Lord uses to describe us. Maybe we can be the most stupid of God's people. Maybe that's us as we sit here this evening. Lord, I'm just bonkers. I just, my thinking's wayward and so forth. I don't always walk as pure as I should. So we do this. And here's another one. This is where you're more likely to encounter sheep driving along the road at high speed. And these guys just wander out for a picnic, just kind of completely oblivious. Never read the highway code. No idea just how dangerous tarmac is. And I yell, a white line down the middle. You just don't go there. But nobody's told them that. You can't explain it to them. It's just the way they'll do it. But you and I are the same. We wander into Bypath Meadow. We're in Doubting Castle. We wander away from the straight and narrow. It happens to us very easy. And you remember last time I gave a characteristic of a sheep that says, not only do they wander away, they've got a habit of staying where they are. Like these sheep here. They just stay there. And to their own damage. And as God's people, we can get into a rut. Not only can we wander, we can end up getting bogged down. Here's a sign that always makes me smile. Choose your rut well. You may be in it for the next 50 miles or so.

[8 : 26] There are some places in the world where you drive. You have to choose your rut well. And it's the same if you're a Christian. We make decisions. And sometimes they can be like a rut. And we struggle.

And we get bogged down. Here's our car stuck, wondering how it's going to get out. Our nature is often to wander away from the Lord. There's something within us, even as Christians, that we are constantly having to bring ourselves back. And we can get stuck in the rut. Jesus says, I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. That is, so unlike the amusing pictures of sheep getting stuck in the most unlikely of places, when God's people wander from him, it is no laughing matter. And it's very, very difficult. Peter knew restoration, didn't he? Remember he denied the Lord three times. And he writes later on in 2 Peter 2, 19, for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.

And this is often the case. David knew this as well. Even the mightiest of God's people wandered in this life with Bathsheba. He wandered away, the mighty King David. And he who wrote Psalm 23 also wrote Psalm 32, if you just swap the letters round. And he says, Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgression to the Lord. And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Here is David, knew he could wander from the Lord and get into a rut. And he would come and he would confess. And David's conclusion in that same Psalm is, Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding, but must be controlled with bit and bridle. But we are to understand the ways of the Lord. Paul in Romans 7 also knew the temptation of sin. Romans 7, 14, We know that the law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, I do. I know that nothing good lives in me. That is in my sinful nature. I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do, nor the evil I do not want to do. This I keep on doing. For in my inner being, I delight in God's law. I see another law at work in my members, in my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin. What a wretched man I am, he says. Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Here is another image of somebody being towed out of the rut that they've got themselves into. If you're a Christian here, you know that you were under condemnation because of God's word, his law. We failed to keep this. Our life was in a rut. But not only did the Lord have to bring us out of that through his death, he came to rescue us. He does this often with us. He forgives us many, many times. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from sins. And that's why John says, confess your sins. And we need to do this. So what we're looking at today and tonight in these moments that remain is how does the shepherd relate to us? How does he lead us? How does he guide us?

[12:34] And that's what we're looking at. We've called this, this sermon, Paths of Righteousness. Douglas Macmillan in his excellent wee book, Evie took that away and read it in a couple of days, which is good. So there you go, folks. That's a challenge for you. Take it away on Sunday, give it back to me on Wednesday, although it's gone out and somebody else has got it. So a very easy book. And in that, he mentions as a shepherd himself, whenever he drives by and he sees sheep on the countryside, he wonders what the shepherd is like who owns that particular flock of sheep.

And I can imagine you would do that if you're a shepherd. I wonder what the shepherd that's looking after them is like, whether he's good to them, whether he really cares for them, whether he loves them, whether he attends them, whether he looks after them well. If you're wondering about our shepherd and how he leads us and guides us, verse 3 tells you something about our shepherd.

He guides me along right paths for his name's sake or paths of righteousness. Our shepherd is not only a good shepherd, he's a holy shepherd. And this is his desire. So I want to answer three questions. First of all, where does the Jesus guide us? He guides me in paths of righteousness. That's the older version of the NIV or right paths, whether it's 2011, whatever version. Commentators look at them both ways. He guides me in the right paths. Now that just might mean life's happenings. As you go through life, he leads you and guides you into the right path. And no two paths are the same for you and for me.

But often sin comes into our life and we need to sort this out. So that Hebrews 12 says, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

There'll be maybe a race, a course that the Lord has marked out for you, and we need to make sure that that we get rid of sin, that we're able to live the life that the Lord has marked out for us.

[15 : 00] So that might be just the right path for you. And during such times, we need to trust in him. As we were thinking of Habakkuk, when things don't make sense, Lord, what's happening? We need to trust in him. Many times in life, the path that the Lord sets for us, we don't like it. It's too difficult.

But yet we need to trust in him. When we don't know the way he takes, he knows the way that we take, because he's led us along a particular path. Maybe on October the 1st. I like the start of every month.

I just love flicking the calendar over. It must just appeal to something deep within me. I just blow the dust off of September. Look at the mountain, because I have the Monroe calendars. I get them every single year. Love them. And I see what mountain it is in October. But whatever your path looks like tonight, he is able to lead you in the right path. He doesn't lead you into sin. Our heart leads us into sin. He would never lead us there. He's a good shepherd. He cares for us. As I say, as you might not know the way that he takes, but he knows the way that you take. And when he's tried you, you will come forth as gold. But the more natural reading of this is not so much right path, but paths of righteousness, holy paths. Not just a path that's personal to you, but a path that is common to us all, each and every one of us. It's a path of holiness. It's a path of righteousness, because the shepherd is righteous. He's a holy shepherd. He is the second person of the Godhead. And he's unlikely, therefore, to lead us into sin. And left to ourself, we don't have this righteousness. When we became his sheep, we needed that righteousness. Paul, in that great book, the book of Romans, he writes, there is no one righteous, not even one. And therefore, the Lord has to lead us into righteousness. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God, and so forth. There is no fear of God before their eyes. And then in verse 19 of Romans 3, you have this darkest of picture, not just for you, but for the whole of humanity. Now, we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world held accountable to God. God, Paul has put the world, the whole globe in the dock, and says the whole world is guilty before him. And that included you and I, before we heard his voice, before he called us to his path of righteousness. And that is the gospel, isn't it? Paul says he's not ashamed of the gospel.

And then in Romans 1.17 has to be one of the best verses in the whole Bible. If there are only one verse that you wanted to get tattooed on your body, let that be the verse. Romans 1.17. Let me read it to you.

For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith, from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith. The law condemns, but when we come and we trust in the death of Jesus Christ, we are not only forgiven, but the righteousness of Christ, his obedient life is credited to our account. Without righteousness, none of us will see heaven. None of us. Jesus says, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will in no way enter heaven. And Christ suffered for us to bring us to God. He is not only our salvation, but he is our righteousness. And that's why when we start to follow Jesus, we are pronounced righteous by the Lord himself. But righteousness and being pronounced righteous is only the beginning. Sanctification is a process. We are justified once for all in an instant. You're not more justified today than you were in 1965. Whenever you became a Christian, you're justified once. But your sanctification is a process. Being made holy. As Jesus leads us in paths of righteousness, as we seek to follow in his steps, then we become more like him. And that is always God's desire, our holiness, our moral obedience. And Jesus leads us there. Psalm 119, oh, how I love your law. I meditate on it all day long. If you love God's word, even if sometimes you don't understand it, but you know in your heart you love God, you love the Savior, you're so grateful for what he has done. And his word is like oxygen to you. You love it. You know that the best path is always the path of righteousness. It's never been angry or jealous or sinning. These make us miserable. But the shepherd is always desirous to lead us in a holy way. And it's always his priority, more than a job, a good job, or money, or whatever it is, or even health. You might think the biggest thing that you need from the Lord is everything to go well in the doctor's surgery on Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday.

[20 : 40] His main priority is to lead you in paths of righteousness, teaching them to obey. Remember the Great Commission? Go into all the world and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

Douglas Macmillan. I wonder what the shepherd is like who leads those sheep. The shepherd that leads us is a holy shepherd. He's not just good and a God who is good to us. He is a holy shepherd. So that's where he leads us. He always leads us in holiness and in righteousness. How does he lead us? He leads us.

So secondly, how does he lead us? He leads us through God's word. God's word is the path that we tread. And it's basically reading God's word and putting it into practice. James, the book of James.

Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourself. Do what it says. James 1.25. The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it, he will be blessed in what he does.

So therefore, the path that the Lord would lead us on is always in line with his word. He leads us through his word. The Holy Spirit empowers us to walk in that way. We know the blessing of this. So the path is the word of God. The actual walk itself is through the Holy Spirit. If the path is marked out through the word, we walk on this through the power of the Holy Spirit. This, he comes to us, he renews our heart and our mind, and he really encourages us. I just, I must confess, one of the greatest privileges that I have, that maybe you don't have if you're so busy, is a minister of the Lord. I just spend most of my day in the word of God. It's never a burden. I feel sorry for you guys stuck in the bypass hours and end, and in the workplace where your boss is driving you nutty, and so forth. I don't have that. I can have a, usually at least an hour quiet time. Ever since I was a young Christian, and I went to a conference in prayer, could you not watch with me one hour? That was the whole point of the seminar, and since then, I very seldom have a quiet time lesson on that. I don't do it legalistically. You just, I just, it's great to be in the Lord's presence. Sometimes you're stuck in Leviticus, and it can be heavy duty, but most of the time, because I'm in the Old Testament and

[23 : 10] New Testament, there's something there to just get your teeth into. It is, it is great. That's when the Lord is speaking to you. It's as real as that. It's not duty. It's not, you're going through the motions. There are times it is, at times it can appear dry, but when the Lord speaks to you from his words, when you meditate on it, we are useless in the, in the, the Western meditating. We just don't do that. We think that's for other people, but Bible people meditate on the Word of God, and I've, I've really enjoyed that last week. It was just, just the way the Lord just spoke to me, just encourage me, and you know that for yourself. So if you're, your, your devotions, if it's a wee bit rusty, just come back to the Lord. Come back to the path. Come back to, to that path of righteousness. This is rules of righteousness. This is where the Lord warms your heart and encourages you through the Holy Spirit. He will always want to do this with you. Just before New Year, hopefully,

I'll have the opportunity to help you as you, before, I like to try and prepare God's people before January the 1st, to look at your prayer life, to look at your own devotional life, to give you practical pointers, helpers, so that when January the 1st comes, boom, you're ready to go.

The starting blocks are out. There it's there. Whole year's lying ahead of you. How are you going to walk with the Lord? It's a good time to do it, not just to plod through and drift, wandering, getting into all sorts of trouble, and then coming back, but to walk that straight and narrow pathway.

We need the Holy Spirit to energize us and to incline our hearts to walk that path of righteousness. So how does he lead us? He leads us through his word on the path and also through the Holy Spirit's influence that causes us to walk, but also through other believers. Other believers help you on that path. God uses other sheep. That's quite a special thing. I wonder if you can point—I'm really struggling to remember a time when another sheep came along and just said, let's walk this way together to encourage us. Galatians 6, brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, in a rut, whatever, being somewhere where they shouldn't be. You who are spiritual should restore him gently. This is in the heart of God.

He's never there to whip us and to cajole us and just to make us feel guilty for the sake of it. It's always to restore us and to restore us gently. And sometimes he will use another sheep to do this, those who are spiritual sheep, that is. Also through discipline. Sometimes that the Lord's hand is heavy, as David mentioned this, your hand was heavy upon me. When I kept silent, when I wasn't really thinking of the path that I should walk on, that I wasn't really interested in the good shepherd, I went my own way, did my own thing, your hand was heavy upon me. The Lord sometimes does this.

[26 : 16] Hebrews 12, 7, endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as children, for what children are not disciplined by their father. There are times God does discipline us. He brings hardship into our life, not to punish us, but to restore us, to bring us back. And often he leads us as well, not just through the Holy Spirit, through discipline, through others, but through personal circumstances. I mentioned this before, that how he leads us and guides us through just life's events. If it's raining on Monday, that might teach you something, something happens, it doesn't quite go the way you want. That's the Lord teaching you, maybe patience to trust him more when things don't make sense. As I was reading over these notes this evening, just before I came out, I was reminded of a hymn. And I think it's a hymn by John Newton. You can correct me after this. I love that there's this song. I don't know if you know this to sing. You probably do. It's a long time since I've sung it. Maybe you can suggest it sometime by John Newton. I ask the Lord that I might grow. Do you know that one? That's a great song.

This is the words to that. I ask the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace, might more of his salvation know, and seek more earnestly his face. I'm sure there's not a Christian in here tonight. I wouldn't echo that. Yeah, I want to grow, Lord. It was he who taught me thus to pray, and he, I trust, has answered prayer. But it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair.

Does this ring a bell a song? Do you know this? Some of you do. No, it's a great song. I mean, John Newton is as rough as a diamond. I hope that in some favored hour at one, he'd answer my request.

And by his love's constraining power, subdue my sins and give me rest. Instead of this, he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart, and let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part. Yea, more with his own hand he seemed, intent to aggravate my woe, crossed all the fair designs. I schemed, cast out my feelings, laid me low. Lord, why is this? I trembling cried.

Will thou pursue thy worm to death? Tis in this way, the Lord replied, I answer prayer for grace and faith. These inward trials I employ, from self and pride to set thee free, and break thy schemes of earthly joy, that thou mayst find thy all in me. That is how the Lord works. He works in ways that are far higher than our ways. And we say, Lord, help me grow. If you said here this evening, Lord, help me grow in faith and in grace. Who knows what woes might come your way on Monday or Tuesday, when you're left stripped with nothing but the Lord. His desire is always to lead us in paths of righteousness. It is not a natural path for any one of us to walk. It is a hard path to walk because of our sinful nature. So that's how he leads us through his word, through the Holy Spirit, through others, through discipline, and also through personal circumstances as the Lord molds us and shapes us to be like Jesus. Lastly, with this I'll close, why does he do this? Why does he guide us in this way?

[29 : 54] The psalm tells us, he guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. That is something we need to hear afresh. We are not the center of our own universe. The Lord is the center. And over the whole of redemptive history, it is not about you. It is always about the glory of God, the Father and the Son.

And we need to remember of this. Every act, every miracle, every person that's saved is for his glory. You remember I did just two parts of a 20-part series, I've still got 18 to do, on what makes the good news good news. Before it means forgiveness for you and reconciliation, it means glory for God, the Father and glory for God, the Son. That is why he works in us. His own reputation is at stake.

And you remember when I mentioned the centripetal force and centrifugal force, remember? Centrifugal force, that force that throws you off the roundabout when you're a kid. Centripetal force, the force that draws inward. That is why God chose you primarily for his own glory. Our chief end is to glorify him. Remember when God chose Israel, Ezekiel 36, therefore say to the house of Israel, this is what the sovereign Lord says, it is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the sovereign Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes. That is what the Lord does.

He wants to show you as holy, as an impressive sheep. Not these nutters that there were on bridges on the roof of a building, a sheep that can just wander away. That's not impressive. You look at those sheep and you think, what kind of shepherd is looking after those sheep? But sheep that are shining, as it were, and we're thinking of Philippians, impressive sheep. People see us and think, I know what that shepherd looks like. He must be a holy, loving, gracious shepherd. He does it for his name's sake. The Lord leads us as his sheep in holy paths of righteousness, not only for our good and our blessing, but ultimately for his name's sake. May the Lord cause us to want to walk with him humbly, willingly, even this week, as we come to his word personally, daily, as we hear him, as the Holy Spirit rises up within us, as we begin to walk in a way that pleases him and blesses ourselves.

Let's stand and we'll sing. It could be your testimony. Oh Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end. If anybody wants this hymn that I printed out in the last few minutes before I come out of the house, you're welcome to have it. Indeed, you can have my notes any. These just go in the bin when I go home. If you ever need sermon notes and think, I wouldn't mind scribbling all them down. They look like that, mind you. So you can always have my notes. You can make paper hats out of them. You can say, you wouldn't believe what I heard tonight. There are the notes there. You can have them. Let's stand and sing. Oh Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end.

[33 : 38] Here we go that The A loving Heavenly Father, we come as the sheep of your Son, Lord, the one who died to make us his own.

And Father, you know our hearts, Lord, all things are laid bare before your eyes this evening. Lord, we pray that in each one of our hearts is that strong desire, Lord, to be done away with sin, that our walk with him, Lord, might be holy and pure.

And Father, we pray for his guidance, even this coming week. Lord, lead us in paths of righteousness. We pray, not just for our good, but ultimately for the glory of your own name.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you, folks.