

38. The Book of Psalms 23:3b

The Great Shepherd-Part 6

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(6/21/26)

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Psalm 23:1–3 (NKJV)

¹ The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. ³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.

From what I understand sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves, they will follow the same trails until they become deep ruts and graze the same area until it turns into bare ground.

Many of the world's finest sheep ranges have been ruined beyond repair by over grazing due to poor management by indifferent and or ignorant sheep owners and shepherds.

A commonly held but serious misconception about sheep is that they can '*get along anywhere*'—but in fact just the opposite is true. No other class of livestock requires more careful handling than do sheep.

No doubt David as a shepherd himself had learned this firsthand from experience.

He knew that if the flock was going to flourish and the shepherd's reputation was to be held in high esteem, the sheep had to be constantly under his meticulous control and guidance.

To safeguard against over-foraged pasture lands which could be damaged beyond repair and the danger of the sheep picking up disease and parasites from grass that had been constantly urinated on and littered with manure—a good shepherd would have to keep his flock on the move.

He had to keep leading them to new fields and pastures because the key to healthy sheep was to keep them moving from one place of green pastures to the next.

Even as the key to being a healthy Christian is that we are constantly moving, following the lead of our Good Shepherd. Our Christian experience is described in Scripture as a walk—which implies movement, progress and growth. The minute we stop walking, settle down and become complacent is the moment we stop growing and our spiritual health begins to deteriorate.

Now for a shepherd to lead his sheep to new pastures he had to follow certain paths or trails to get there. When David said, **"He leads me in the paths of righteousness"**—the literal translation is **"He leads me in the 'right paths.'"** The idea was that on the trail there were many paths—some leading to dangerous places where the sheep could fall down a ravine or off a cliff.

There were other paths made by predators which would lead right to their den or lair.

There were even paths made by thieves and robbers which would lead the sheep into their trap. The shepherd knew which ones were which—he knew which paths led to green pastures and which ones led to danger and death.

As long as the sheep followed their shepherd's leading they had nothing to fear.

That really is the issue here—no matter how diligent, concerned and careful the shepherd was in leading his sheep in the right paths—if they were not willing to follow, they could still find themselves facing danger and even death.

You see, the whole issue that David is raising in his statement, **“He leads me in the right paths...”**—is God's guidance and God's protection. But this is all predicated upon my obedience to Him and my willingness to follow where He leads. If I refuse to obey Him as He tries to lead my life in the right paths, but instead follow paths of disobedience—then He can't guide my life or protect me from the dangers that are waiting for me at the end of where those paths lead.

Again, the shepherd could only do so much to protect his sheep—no matter how good and faithful the shepherd was in watching over them if they were determined to go their own way they would get themselves in trouble.

And remember that David said **“paths”** plural—in other words, I must be obedient to all that God has commanded me in His word if He is going to lead my life in the right paths—not just the things I like or agree with.

In other words, I can't just pick and choose which parts of the Bible I'm going to be obedient to and reject the rest because it doesn't fit in with my lifestyle or plans for my life it's all or nothing—either Jesus Christ is Lord of all, or He isn't Lord at all!

When God likened us to sheep in the Bible, He wasn't being flattering or even endearing—He was being brutally honest about our nature. First of all, the Bible says that all of us like sheep are stiff-necked, stubborn and prone to wander.

We prefer to do our own thing and follow our own desires—even as Isaiah said, *“All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way...”* (Isaiah 53:6) That speaks of stubbornness, self-will, and rebellion against the will and leading of God for our lives.

Let me stop and say this—there is something almost terrifying about the destructive self-determination of a human being.

This destructive self-determination has its roots in pride where we insist we know what's best for our lives even though we know the dangers of the paths we have chosen to walk—we often brush aside the consequences with a casual—*“It won't happen to me”* attitude.

Just as sheep will blindly, habitually and stupidly follow one another if left to themselves along trails that will lead them over a cliff or into the enemy's den—so too human beings follow the same paths which they have seen destroy so many which have gone before them (Office or Facebook flirtations that often lead to adultery and the death of a marriage, drug abuse, alcoholism, workaholis, etc.)

God's word gives a solemn warning along these lines—*“There is a way that seems right to a person but in the end, it leads to death”* (physical, financial, marital, and spiritual destruction of our walk, ministry and relationship with God!)

In contrast to this Jesus, the Good Shepherd said, *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”* (John 14:6)

The bottom line is that most people don't want to follow Jesus—they don't want to be led by Him in the paths of righteousness.

It goes against their natural inclinations and desires; they prefer instead to go their own way even though in the end it's the way of death (if they're an unbeliever)—or in the case of a stubborn Christian—the way of disaster!

One author said,

"These stubborn, self-willed, rebellious sheep that insist on going their own way and continue grazing in old, polluted pastures will end up sick, messed up and wiped out.

*The world we live in is populated by people with this kind of testimony—broken lives, broken families, broken hearts everywhere you look. These are tragic testimonials of people who have gone their own way. We live in a society that's sick and dying with the consequences of its own sin and rebellion against the leading of God."*⁰

So, what is the right path for a child of God to walk (in general)? The answer is the way of Jesus—the way of the cross.

Matthew 16:24 (NKJV)

²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

The cross is a symbol of obedience—even as we read of Jesus in Phil. 2:8: *"He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."*

So that when Jesus said for us to follow after Him we would have to deny ourselves—He was talking about the necessity of us as His disciples that we stop being stubborn and self-willed and start obeying God in all He has commanded us as His children.

Yet I'm concerned that for most Christians living today—they really don't want to do this.

They don't want to deny themselves, give up the right to make their own decisions, esteem others more important than themselves or be led by anyone else—not even by the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ! Of course, most of us if confronted with this charge would deny it—we would strongly insist that our lives are being led by God, and that we would follow Him wherever He leads!

We sing songs proclaiming this and mentally and verbally affirm this to be true—but the actions of our daily lives tell a different story.

Truth be told—precious few Christians really follow Jesus in all He has commanded them on a daily basis.

Jesus always discouraged casual followers for in His mind discipleship describes a way of life, a life of obedience and self-sacrifice, a life that demands total commitment—nothing else will do.

John 6:66–68 (NKJV)

⁶⁶ From that *time* many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. ⁶⁷ Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" ⁶⁸ But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Phillip Keller—

"And this is where the rubber meets the road. Many who start out following Jesus when they find out what's really involved, the sacrifices that must be made—they turn back and follow Him no more."

Of course, the biggest obstacle that stands in the way of denying yourself, taking up your cross, following after Jesus, and letting Him lead you in the right paths—is the old fallen nature!

The only way to have victory over your fallen nature
is to strengthen your new nature in Christ!

New attitudes have to be cultivated in our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit.

These attitudes will then allow Him to begin to lead us, and as He leads us we will begin to grow—and the results will be, increased spiritual health; entering into the abundant life Jesus promised us; holiness and victory over sin; and fruit coming from our lives like never before!

So, with regard to this, let me give you 7 attitudes we need to cultivate through prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit that will allow the Good Shepherd to lead our lives in the right paths.

These are things I'm borrowing and adapting from Phillip Keller's book, *"A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23."*

1. Loving Jesus first and then others more than I love myself

Biblical love isn't mushy sentimentalism—it's not feelings oriented but rather it's action oriented (1Cor. 13 defines God's love using all verbs).

1 John 3:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

Biblical love (God's love) is a sacrificial love that puts the needs of others before my own. Jesus commanded us to love others even as He loved us—how did He love us? He died for us! (John 15:13)

1 John 3:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren.

God's love is meeting someone's needs—which when I do something for God or others that costs me something (time, talents, money etc.)—I'm expressing God's agape love.

This takes humility because love means becoming the servant of others—proud people don't serve others because they're too busy loving and serving themselves.

It's only when I start loving others sacrificially that I really start following Jesus!

2. A willingness to stand up for Jesus instead of being one of the crowd

Most of us, like sheep, are gregarious (latin for 'flock' or 'herd')—in other words, we don't want to stand out or be different—we want (and need) to be part of a group. Sometimes, that can be a problem because peer pressure is a powerful force—especially in the lives of young people.

Standing up for Jesus takes courage because you're probably going to be ostracized from your social circle of friends (I was when I got saved).

You're going to become the target of ridicule, sarcasm, and criticism—and a lot of people can't deal with that since their need to belong is too strong and so they fall away from Jesus (the seed that fell on the rocky soil—Matthew 13).

But Jesus said, *“Those who love friends and family more than Me are not worthy of Me.”* (Matthew 10:37 and *“Whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father in heaven...”* (Matthew 10:33)

Standing up for Jesus and walking with Him in your daily life isn't easy but it's always necessary for growth and for God to lead you in the right paths.

3. Denying self and esteeming others better than yourself

This goes directly against my old fallen nature which is selfish and self-centered.

I instinctively look out for #1 (me)—but as His disciple Jesus requires me to flip myself upside down by putting myself last and others first.

That's what He did—

Philippians 2:5–8 (NLT)

⁵ You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. ⁶ Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. ⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Phillip Keller—

“There is a tremendous liberation from ‘self’ in this attitude. I’m set free from the shackles of pride. It’s pretty hard to hurt a person who is already dead—dead to self. A person who has no sense of self-importance can’t be offended. These are the ones who are truly free in Christ. Free from self, free to serve Christ in whatever ministry He chooses for them no matter how lowly. These are the people who are the most joyful and at peace, those who enjoy their Christianity the most because they’ve been freed from pride and all the baggage and bondage that goes with it.”

4. A willingness to put aside all my personal goals and desires to put myself under His guidance and control

One of the main hinderances to a person following after Jesus is an unwillingness to put aside everything in life they've attained or have worked for or are working towards to allow God to take their lives in a totally different direction if He chooses to do so.

So often we want to come to Jesus with strings attached—but God won't accept that—He wants total surrender on our part (the rich young ruler).

Only the person who is prepared to put total control of their life into the hands of Jesus for direction will be able to be led in the right paths in life.

➤ You say, *“I’m scared to do that!”*

So, was I (fear of public speaking) but the alternative scared me more!

5. Instead of finding fault with every adversity and trial that comes into my life and constantly asking ‘why’ I must be willing to accept every circumstance of life with an attitude of thanksgiving as being from the hand of my loving heavenly Father

Somehow, we feel that we are entitled to question and receive an answer for everything that happens to us. Some people get so obsessed and weighed down by ‘whys’ they wind up withdrawing from life and ultimately from God.

Let me say this—if you’re going to walk with Jesus you’ve got to put the ‘whys’ behind you and walk by faith and not by sight.

Asking ‘why’ is Satan’s way of separating us from fellowship with God by causing us to doubt His character and get our eyes off of God and on to ourselves and our problems. The bottom line is we’re not going to always know ‘why’—in fact with most things we’ll probably never know!

God never did reveal to Job ‘why’—He just pointed him to Himself!

You see if I know my God I will trust in Him unconditionally and I won’t have to know why because I know Him (His character and love)!

The most important issue facing us in the Christian life is not that I know or even understand everything God is doing in my life—the real issue is will I trust Him and walk with Him by faith regardless of what my circumstances are in a given situation.

If I really believe He’s got everything in my life under control, then I can be thankful no matter what comes my way. (1 Thessalonians 5:18 → Romans 8:28)

6. A willingness to lay my will aside to be obedient to His will for my life

This doesn’t just apply to the ultimate direction of a person’s life—it also applies to the everyday decisions of life. This is the meaning of denying ourselves daily and taking up our cross and following Jesus—the One Who said, *“I do always those things that please My Father.”*

This is what it means to have ‘*the mind of Christ*’ where my will no longer matters but His will—as Jesus prayed to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, *“Not My will but Your will be done.”*

7. Learning to call Jesus ‘Lord’ in the sense of a title and not a name

‘Jesus’ is His name, ‘Lord’ is His title—the title for the Person who controls our lives.

Phillip Keller—

“Very simply, it means I do just what He commands me to do in His Word, I go where He leads, say what He instructs me to say, and to act (and react) in a manner that is consistent with His nature because I’m following Him. Many Christians have an enormous amount of information with regards to the Word. A lot of knowledge as to what our Lord expects from us as Christians—but few have either the will, intention or dedication to translate it into a lifestyle where they are actually being obedient to what He has said. If you’re not going to obey Him then He’s not your Lord. Even as Jesus declared to a group of His so-called disciples, “Why do you call Me Lord, Lord but don’t do the things I tell you?” (Luke 6:46)”

One last thing—the Lord leads us in the paths of righteousness for—**“His names sake.”**

His name is at stake—His name is on the line.

Whatever you do as a child of God reflects on Him—for good or for evil. Paul said that we are *‘living epistles’* read by all we come in contact with. What kind of message are people getting from your life as to Who Jesus is and what He is really like?

It is an incredibly important thing that we properly represent Jesus to this fallen world. In that regard we are probably the only contact with Him that many people will ever have.

May the Word become flesh in our lives!

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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