

“THE GOOD SHEPHERD (#2): THE LORD OUR GUIDE”

(Psalm 23:2b-3)

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[PROP NEEDED: SMALL GROUP COMMITMENT SURVEY]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 8-9-09]

–I–

1. Read Text: Psalm 23:2b-3 and Pray.

2. [STORY OF SON PRAYING FOR DIRECTION]

A Christian mother once decided to take her children to a skating party in a nearby town, but after several wrong turns, and stops to ask for directions, she finally pulled over to the side of the road and suggested they all pray and ask God to help them find the rink. Sure enough, shortly after the prayer, they found it, even though they were an hour late. Noticing how prayer seemed to work, the following week as they got into the car to go skating again, her 5-year-old son said, “*Mom, let's pray now and save time!*”¹

A–Well, what do *you* do when you need guidance and direction about something in your life? ...about a job? a relationship? a move? or something else?

B–Do you “drive around town” haphazardly (so to speak)? Do you “stop to ask directions” (probably *not* if you’re male!)?

C–OR... do you take time to stop, pray, and ask God – the “Shepherd” of your life – where *He* wants to lead/guide you?

3. Last week we began a series based on one of most well-known chapters in the whole Bible (Psalm 23) in which we’re studying the essential nature and character of God by exploring how each phrase of this beloved scripture presents a different word-image of God as “The Good Shepherd” of our lives.

A–Today in Verses 2b-3 we have a great description of how God can and wants to lead and guide us in our various decisions about life, *if* we’ll only allow Him to do so.

B–So let’s look at each phrase and see how God is portrayed as our “GUIDE” in life:

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4. Perhaps the most obvious phrase for this is the first one... “HE LEADS ME...”

A–Now, I want first of all to notice *how* a good shepherd guides: ...he “*leads*” his flock, *rather than* “driving” them – that is, he walks out in front and ahead of them, leading and modeling the way, and the sheep follow willingly, fanning out behind him.

1–Yet, too often today it seems that instead of a “Good Shepherd,” too many people understand God to be a judgmental goat-herder who drives us by the whip to do the right thing – and if we don’t God will “get us,” or send us to hell!

2–The result is a Christianity and a faith where serve God and do the right things because we fear the consequences of *not* doing them.

B–But this phrase is clear that God is not a goat-herder who “drives/forces” us, but a “Shepherd” who desires to *lead* us, and simply asks us to “follow” him willingly.

5. Now of course, God doesn’t just “lead us” in general, but more specifically “*he leads [us]... **BESIDE THE STILL WATERS.***”²

A–Now this phrase by itself is kind of puzzling, because “still waters” are stagnant and non-moving, and therefore are usually polluted and undrinkable.

1–However, in the ancient middle-east, “still waters” more often referred either to wells or cisterns of water in the arid countryside,...

2--...or to slow-moving streams/creeks where sheep could drink in safety from the powerful rush of a river-current that might wash them downstream.

B–[Story of Self-Lead Sheep Caught in Wire]

A man visiting in the countryside once noticed a sheep poke its head through a fence to nibble a plant, & later decide it was stuck. But rather than back away easily, the sheep panicked and plunged forward wildly. And by the time help could reach it, the sheep was hopelessly tangled in the fence wire, and it had to be cut just to get the sheep out.

C–In many ways, you and I are just like that sheep: we see something on the other side of the “fence” and reach out to “nibble” on it, thinking that we can manage its consequences all by ourselves.

1–We don’t need God, or our family, or the church telling us what’s right and what’s wrong – we don’t need to listen to anybody because we can do whatever we want!

2–But before we know it, we find ourselves in a tangled mess – a mess that only God (our Good Shepherd) can “cut us out of.”

3–And so, instead of letting God lead us “*beside still waters*” (e.g., to places of safety where we won’t get tangled or “washed away” by the torrents of life), you and I tend to lead *ourselves* right into the middle of raging seas of trouble!

4–I can think of so many “messes” I’ve found myself in because I tried to “take care of things” myself! And I’m sure you can, too.

5–So, if you’re tired of trying to “shepherd” yourself, ending up in tangled messes of your own making, why not let God “*lead you beside still waters*”?

6. Now, this last phrase is intimately tied to the next one: **“HE RESTORES MY SOUL.”**

A–According to Webster’s dictionary, to “*Restore*” means “*to put or bring back into a former or original state; to repair or renew something.*”

B–In other words, by providing “*green pastures*” for food and rest, and “*still waters*” to drink in safety, the shepherd is providing the *means* by which his sheep are refreshed and renewed for the struggles which lie ahead that day.

1–Where the sheep were once hungry, weak & tired, now (through the wise guidance of the shepherd) they are filled and invigorated with new life.

2–Their “soul” -- their entire being, if you will -- is made whole again.

C–And that’s precisely what God’s guidance and leadership can do for *us* in *our* lives, too!

1–Maybe it takes the form of a hobby, a vacation, a sport or recreation time, or some other wholesome form of diversion.

2–But whatever it is, when we truly let God guide us (rather than trying to guide ourselves), then along the way He’ll always lead us to and through experiences and opportunities for our whole being to be restored and refreshed.³

7. Now, in Vs. 3 we also find that God as a “Shepherd” **“LEADS ME IN RIGHT PATHS...”**, which is the *better* translation for the Hebrew phrase that more popularly is rendered as “*paths of righteousness.*”⁴

A–In other words, a good shepherd always guides his sheep along paths which (on the one hand) lead *to* places of nourishment, drink, and rest, ...and which (on the other hand) *avoid* places of danger and potential harm.

B–Now, this isn’t an easy task, because whether today or in ancient times what would happen is that the night shadows would quickly gather in the ravines and mountain passes, and sheep could then easily get lost or fall over the edge.

1–And what’s more is that wild animals and thieves would often lay in wait for a flock and its shepherd in those dark, hidden places.

2–So, in order to guide the sheep safely, a good shepherd had to know both the *right* paths (i.e., the safe ones) to walk in, *AND* the *dangerous* paths to avoid, as well.

C–And the good thing for us today is that we follow a Shepherd (God) who knows the “right paths” for our lives – He knows which ones are safe, and which ones aren’t; which ones will lead to blessing and fulfillment, and the ones that will only lead to heartache and pain.

1—So if we'll follow *God*, rather than trying to lead ourselves, then He'll guide us along paths of safety and provision – ...

2—...Paths which may not always make sense to us at the time (as sheep), but that we nevertheless trust are “right” because we follow a Shepherd who’s in possession of the Master Map for our lives. ⁵

3—After all, it’s been said that “*the hand of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.*” ⁶

8. Now, there’s one final phrase that I want us to look at today: **“FOR HIS NAME'S SAKE.”**

A—We’ve got to understand that in ancient times, a name was more than simply a way to identify people; No, it also conveyed the essence/character of a person.

B—So, for the Psalmist to say that God “*leads*” and guides us “*for his name's sake*” simply means that God does these things because it is His very nature and character to do so!

C—As one author has put it, “*God's love & care are wholly in keeping with his character.*” ⁷

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9. In other words, God “*leads [us] beside still waters,... restores [our] souls... and leads [us] in right paths*” precisely *because* that kind of care and leadership and guidance describes exactly *Who God Is!*

A—God is love. And whatever God allows and wherever God leads, we must trust that He does so because He loves and wants the best for us as the “sheep” of His pasture.

B—So instead of trying to lead yourself, are you trusting God – the “Good Shepherd” – to be *your* Guide through life?

10. [One way we can be led and guided by God is through the opportunity for spiritual growth and development we experience in small groups. So in just a few minutes, you’ll have a chance to commit yourself to being “guided” by God through your participation in such a group by completing the brochure in your bulletin. But for now, let’s pray...]

11. [PRAY: “*Too often, God, we try to lead ourselves and end up in a tangled mess. Forgive us for our selfishness and willfulness in trying to go our own way. Instead, Lord, help us to look to you, our ‘Good Shepherd,’ to lead and guide us in all decisions and directions we need to make in our lives. Whether it be concerning our families, our marriages, our relationships, our jobs or careers, our financial situations, our spiritual lives, or any other area, “lead us in right paths...” for the sake of your good character and name. We trust in you to guide us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*”]

12. [CLOSING SONG: (Traditional) UMH#128 “He Leadeth Me”]

ENDNOTES:

1. Pegi Tehan (Dayton, OH), cited in the article “Heart to Heart,” Today's Christian Woman magazine.
2. There are three essentials that any good shepherd must provide for their sheep: food; drink; and rest. In the first sermon in this series we discussed the food and rest, which are implied in the phrase “*green pastures.*” The drink, however, is implied in today’s passage by the phrase “*still waters.*”
3. If you’ve not been experiencing these feelings of restoration and refreshment lately, then perhaps you need to reevaluate whether or not you’re actually letting God lead you!
4. If we think about it, “*paths of righteousness*” (the phrase rendered in the KJV) have no meaning for sheep, as paths themselves are neither “*righteous*” or “*unrighteous*” – they’re just “paths.” That’s why the better way to translate this original Hebrew phrase into English is what we find in the NRSV version: “*he leads me in right paths.*”
5. Isaiah 55:8 reminds us that “*God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and God's ways are not our ways.*”
6. Heard on the radio stated by Rev. Michael Yosef, Pastor of “Church of the Apostles” (Episcopal), Atlanta.
7. Bible commentator David Alexander.