

## INTRODUCTION

We are continuing to look at the implications of having the Lord as your Shepherd. So far we have discovered that having the Lord as Shepherd means that he supplies all our needs so that we lack nothing. It also means that we will find our rest in him as he makes us lie down in green pastures. It also means as we saw last time that he refreshes us as he leads us beside the quiet waters and when we wander he goes after us and restores us our soul.

Now let's take the next phrase.

### 1. THE SHEPHERD GUIDES HIS SHEEP IN PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS (v 3)

Not only do we discover that the Shepherd goes after wandering sheep and restores them to their original usefulness but he actually guides his sheep every day onto the right paths; to stop His sheep from wandering. If you watch sheep you will know that sheep do not walk along a straight path by themselves left to their own devices, they wander all over the place. But if their Shepherd is leading them or driving them then you soon discover that sheep follow the path decided upon by the Shepherd.

The word that is translated as 'guides' here is a word that was used of guiding cattle or sheep to a predetermined destination. If we think about the Shepherd who is moving his sheep from one field to another or in David's day from one area to another. When he starts to lead his sheep he knows exactly where they are heading from the moment he starts on the journey.

The sheep might not always appreciate that the Shepherd is leading them to a particular destination but they will soon see that the Shepherd had a particular destination in mind. Now God is our Shepherd if we are trusting in the Lord Jesus as Lord and Saviour. He guides us every day and his leading within our lives is not meaningless but he is taking us to his eternal destination.

It might seem sometimes to us that God's leading is a bit haphazard. Why did God bring that incident into my life? Why did God allow me to face that trial or to have to endure that pain? Why is God putting me through this period in my life, it seems all so meaningless. But God is leading us in a certain direction he is leading us to heaven and in preparation for that he is leading us in such a way that he is transforming us into the image of Christ. All his dealings in our life are to make us more Christ like. He has a certain destination fixed for all who are his sheep but his leading in taking us there might be very different for each one of us. Of course we all started at the same place. We started at the cross in humble repentance and in true faith but since that day our paths have been very different and varied. Some of us have had to suffer pain and grief but that is God's leading to make us more like Christ.

Others of us have a relatively easy time perhaps we have had much success in everyday life but that is God's way of making us more like Christ. Perhaps for some of us we have had a mixture of up's and downs well that is God's way of leading us to be more like Christ.

There will be plenty of times in this world when we simply have to follow our Master even though we fail to understand how exactly what is happening to us will work out for our ultimate good or his glory. At such times we have to trust our Shepherd even though his leading might not make sense to us.

Our Shepherd may lead us in different ways but he has our heavenly home in mind and all that he is doing in our lives while on earth is preparing us for our final destination by making us more like the Lord Jesus.

The word translated 'guides' also implies tenderness in the guidance. While God has a plan for our lives and as he is seeking to conform our life to his purpose he guides us with great tenderness and with gentleness. He is all powerful and could easily force us by his power to go his way but our Shepherd is very gentle with us he leads us but he is not driving us in a direction that we do not want to go.

He is always before us leading the way rather than behind us cracking a whip. Of course if we have been Christians for any length of time we know that we will never follow the Lord in our own strength because of our sinful nature. This is why before we knew the Shepherd we had no desire to follow Jesus we went our own way and we were very happy to do so. This is why knowing the Shepherd involves a conversion we need a new heart with new desires.

This is what God does when we come to know the truth that the Lord is my Shepherd. He puts new desires within us and he puts new motivation and new goals. He does that for us through the giving of His Holy Spirit so that we now have a desire to follow the leading of our Shepherd. If you find this evening that there is not a basic desire to follow the lead of the Shepherd then there can only be two answers. Either you are not saved and do not know the Lord as your Shepherd or you are allowing sin to rule your life at present rather than the Lord Jesus. The bible encourages us to put out of our lives daily sins so that we are able to follow the lead of our Shepherd because we will have a desire to obey him and follow him.

However if we fail to put sin out of our lives and instead of putting it to death as instructed in God's word we encourage it then we will find that although the Saviour is leading there is a greater reluctance in our hearts to follow his lead. That will cause us untold heartache and it will rob us of many a blessing that God has in store for his obedient children.

But whether we follow his lead or not if he is our Shepherd he is leading and desires to lead you in his paths of righteousness. Perhaps some of us might need to face up to the truth that we don't know the Shepherd we have never had that change of heart and will. That is when it comes down to it we have no real desire to follow Jesus. Our religion is a religion of convenience for us but there has been no fundamental change of heart. It could be that for some of us we need to have God search our hearts and expose to us the sins that we are holding onto, the sins that are hindering us from obeying our Shepherd and are stopping us from following his lead. O we know the Shepherd personally but for some reason we have allowed sin to hinder our walk with him so that we are no longer following his lead as once we did.

The good news is that whatever spiritual condition we are in this evening we can turn to the Shepherd or return to him and be forgiven and therefore we can begin to follow the wonderful gentle lead of the Shepherd.

Now as we think about the Shepherd leading us I want us to notice that not only does the word 'guides' speak of leading us to a certain destination and leading us gently but it also has the idea of God causing us to be led. The picture is not of a Shepherd behind his sheep prodding goading or even beating his sheep so that they will go his way but of the Shepherd going before his sheep encountering any dangers before the sheep do.

That is how our Shepherd guides us and leads us today. He causes us to be led because he goes before us and he encounters the difficulties before we do. This is what our lovely Shepherd is doing for us He is guiding us by going before us and pointing out the footholds and the dangers as we follow his lead. It's easy to follow someone if we see them going before us it encourages us to follow their lead.

This is how God causes us to follow the Shepherd; this is how he guides us. We follow him in faith; we go the pathway that he trod before. We know the pathway of our Shepherd because he

has walked in our world and he has faced what we faced. Christmas is all about God coming into our world and facing what we face. He experienced temptation as we face temptation.

He suffered pain as we do and he knew the disappointments of life as well as the joys. So whatever we are facing today whatever path we are being guided down let's remember that our Shepherd has gone before us. He knows the dangers we face but he also knows where the footholds are so that we can climb up our mountain and overcome the difficulties that we face.

Perhaps we feel this evening that we are being guided down a particular difficult path at present. Well be assured your Shepherd has gone before and is leading you down that path for your ultimate good and for his glory. He understands all about the dangers and trials that we face but he also knows how to overcome such things. This should cause us to follow his guidance no matter where he leads us.

Another way that God causes us to be led is by showing us through his word the beauty and attractiveness of our Shepherd. I don't mean physical beauty but the attractiveness of his character. When we study his word and see his character we find our Shepherd so compelling that one glimpse of his lovely character and we want to follow him. By studying who God is and what he is like as God creates within us a hunger that can only be satisfied by knowing this Shepherd better.

We know that we can only know him better as we in faith follow his guidance because we know he will never guide us into sin and will never guide us in paths that will ultimately destroy us. No he only guides us down paths that are for our ultimate good. That does not mean that we will instantly understand and recognise that God's leading is for our good it might seem that it is doing us a great deal of harm. But if we respond to his guidance with the right attitude and with the right desires then whatever path we are going down will do us good spiritually and ultimately. But how do we cultivate right desires and attitudes towards God? Through the reading of his word of course.

As we study God's word we will find God changing our hearts and minds and we will find him guiding us in certain directions. Of course most of those directions are the same for all of us, we are to obey his commands as we discover them in his word for that is his guidance for us all. There are times when God might guide us in a certain direction that he will not guide others in.

By certain direction I mean a specific direction that God wants you to go in, it might be a career he wants you to follow or a Christian work he wants us to be involved in his church. He might guide us to give money to a certain missionary or Christian organisation but all of those specific pieces of guidance will always be in line with his general principles as they are found in his word.

God never guides anyone into sin and we can never excuse our disobedience because we believe God has guided us. I have heard people say God led me to marry an unbelieving person when it is clear that the bible teaches that it is sinful to do so. We actively disobey God. I have heard people claim God guided them to do something, which clearly the bible says, is wrong and should be avoided.

God never leads us into the wrong paths for we read here that he guides us in 'paths of righteousness.' The word translated 'paths' means something like ruts. Now perhaps the best way to describe this word is to consider a tractor going daily into a field on a very wet day. The tractor cuts up the grass and as the sun comes out and it hardens you can see the ruts where the tractor has been.

These ruts are deep and firm and if you take a ball you can roll the ball along the rut and it will not deviate from the rut. It will stay on that path because it is deep enough and firm enough for it to

stay in that rut. Well this is a good description of God's paths. They are not slippery like some of our footpaths this past week but they are firm and secure and easily stayed upon. These paths are paths of righteousness. I don't think David is talking about the moral qualities of these paths although it is always true that God leads us in the right moral paths. He never guides us into immoral paths. But I think David is using the word to mean right paths, or in the right way. He always guides us through his word to the place where he can ultimately bless us and do us good. I read a good illustration this past week that will help us here.

It concerns a young boy who went out in the evening with his Dad to look the cattle. His Father told him that cows knew the best path to take up a hill. So if he just follows the path that the cows have taken he will find it the easiest way. Well this boy felt he knew better than some stupid cow and set up the hill on a different path only to find himself stopping because he was out of breath.

However his Father had taken the well-worn path of the cows and reaches the top with a lot less effort than his son. That is how God guides his sheep in 'paths of righteousness.' A certain way might not seem the easiest way, there might be another way that looks more attractive and easier but ultimately it proves to be harder.

In the Christian life the way that seems easier is very often the hardest way and the way that seems hard often turns out to be the easiest way.

God our Shepherd knows what is best for his sheep and for his church. Sometimes as we look at his principles we find them hard to obey because sometimes we find them hard to believe.

Yet when we step out on that pathway we find it to be exactly right but if we step out on an alternative pathway that looks easier we soon find out that it is the wrong path. We must follow our Shepherd where he leads us.

There will be times when we might question his judgement in guiding us down a certain path but at such times we must trust our Shepherd and follow his leading and we will soon find that he leads us in the right path. God never makes a mistake in his leading of us. Following him is not always easy nor is it always logical but it is always right. Our task is to submit to him as he reveals his way to us through his word.

Our task is to remember that his paths are always secure places to be and they are easy to follow even when we can't always understand his reasoning. But you can be sure of this that if we humbly follow his guidance he will lead us in the right path and those paths will always and ultimately bring blessing into our lives. We will only know the blessing that he has in store for us either personally or as a church if we actively obey his guidance and follow in his paths of righteousness.

## 2. WHY DOES THE SHEPHERD LEAD HIS SHEEP IN PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS?

But why does God go to so much bother to guide us in the right paths. Why does he not just leave us to find our own way to learn from our own mistakes and to decide which pathway is right for us? After all that is how the world speaks today everyone has to make their own way in life and live and die by their own decisions. But God does not leave his sheep to make their own way he guides them in paths of righteousness.

The reason he does this is for 'his own name's sake.' To the mind of the original reader of this Psalm a person's name was synonymous with his or her character. In other words God guides his sheep because his reputation is at stake. The sheep speak loud and clear about their Shepherd and if they are all taking the wrong paths then what does that say about the Shepherd? We are in one sense God's reputation in this world.

That is how God designed it to be and let's be honest would you if you were God stake your reputation on people like us? That is why our Shepherd goes to so much trouble to give us his word and to grant us his Holy Spirit. He does that so he can lead us in paths of righteousness. When we as his sheep follow his pathway then our Shepherd's reputation is at stake. When we disobey his guiding hand and go our own way and choose what seems an easier pathway then we are damaging the reputation of our Shepherd in this world. My dear Christian friend let me encourage us all to follow the leading of our Shepherd.

He is so faithful in leading us in the right paths and he does so with such tenderness. He graciously puts his reputation at stake in how he guides us and he can do so because God is so faithful and so trustworthy and so committed to us that he knows he will always lead his sheep in the right path. Therefore if we follow our Shepherd His reputation will be increased in our world and ultimately glory will be brought to his name.

This is amazing he stakes his reputation on how he cares for his people he is willing to allow people to judge him by his treatment of his people. God always leads us in conformity with his character so that as we his sheep follow his lead and as people watch our lives his reputation on earth will conform to his character in heaven. We are God's exhibits in this world and as people watch how God guides us God proves to this world that he is faithful and trustworthy and one that everyone should come and know as their own personal Shepherd.

He is a great and faithful Shepherd. He guides his sheep into paths of righteousness for his own name's sake.

Amen