

He guides me

If you have a Bible with you, open it with me to Psalm 23.

And let me begin by reading **Psalm 23** for us right from the top.

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul.*

He guides me in paths of righteousness 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.*

*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.*

Let's pray...

If you are just joining us, we are on week three of a summer study in Psalm 23 – one of the most beloved passages in the Bible.

And today we come to one of the lines in this psalm that I have run to countless throughout my life – **Psalm 23:3** - “He guides me in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.”

I know the next verse says that it's the Shepherd's “rod and staff” that comfort us. But **this verse** is probably the verse that has most often comforted me.

And not just in a huggy, warm, hot chocolate sort of way.

But in the original meaning on the word – “*to give strength*” [comfort – “with/strength”]. This is a verse that has given me strength to live and move forward with hope and confidence that God will *lead me in paths of righteousness for His Name’s sake*.

Oh, there is so much **there** that we need.

In every season and stage of our lives.

It’s easy and common to think of our **young adult years** as a critical time of discernment and decision – a season in our lives where we **uniquely** need wisdom and guidance – to know and choose the right paths.

And it’s true. But **it’s also a lie** – because **every** season and **every** stage in our lives – whether younger or older, in the early days of making life-commitments or decades into living out those commitments, or faced with new ones... **Every season and stage in our lives requires wise discernment and the need for God to be our Guide.**

Truth is, **life** requires this.

And that’s one of our struggles, I think.

Because when we talk about the **need** for God’s guidance and **seeking** God’s guidance, **so** often, maybe **too** often we are in the throes of the hugest decisions of our lives (or at least that’s how it feels).

But one of the critical learnings in regard to *God’s guidance, the need for God’s guidance and how to discern God’s guidance* – is that God’s guidance is an everyday matter... an ***at-all-times in-all-things*** matter.

Right?

Janet and I have been married for 20 years now – and I thank God for guiding me in choosing to ask her to marry me and committing my life to her.

But, let’s be honest, ***I need God’s guidance today*** – as much as then, if not ***more*** – to live faithfully the vows that I made 20 years ago.

Discernment and guidance are not just something we need in the big moments of our lives. ***It is what we need every single day.***

It’s not just about choosing which path to walk. But choosing again and again to *stay on the path* we’ve chosen – and *to walk it well* – *with God.*

I could say the same thing about our discernment process to come here – three years ago now. (Yes, we *just passed* the ***3 year mark!***).

I often look back with thankfulness for how God led us here.

But my need for God’s leading didn’t stop the day we said yes to God and your invitation. All that changed was the **location** of my calling to seek and follow God’s leading.

All that to say, this verse – **Psalm 23:3** – “*He guides me in paths of righteousness for His Name’s sake*” – isn’t just for those facing critical, life-altering decisions these days or in the coming days.

No, this is a verse that speaks with urgency and relevance to **every one of us today**. We are **all** people who need to know and follow God’s guidance today...

Psalm 23 invites us to **a guided Life – a LIFE that is guided by God** – and *not just when something big comes along*.

And there’s something vital about knowing and living this – not just because God wants us to know His wisdom and leading all the time – but because our **capacity** to discern God’s leading in the big, epic, high-pressure decisions of our lives is *a capacity that is learned and developed as we seek to discern and follow God’s leading in the ordinary, everyday, incremental decisions and matters of our lives*.

Let me say that again – because it’s vital for us.

Our capacity to discern God’s leading in the big, epic, high-pressure decisions of our lives is *a capacity that is learned and developed as we seek to discern and follow God’s leading in the ordinary, everyday, incremental matters of our lives*.

This is the beautiful revelation of Psalm 23 – that the Shepherd is actively seeking to guide His sheep **every day**.

So, where do you need God’s guidance today?

Where do you need to know and follow God’s lead?

To help us hear this verse in context – one that I think we can relate to – **Kenneth Bailey explains,**

"The open wilderness in the Holy Land often exhibits **a maze of faint trails** worn by countless flocks of sheep. The shepherd alone knows which of them leads out of that valley to the next stage in the day's journey, rather than abruptly ending in some dead end or at a cliff edge."

I love Bailey's description of "**a maze of faint trails**".

That's how life feels for many these days – in our day and age and shifting culture...

It often feels like **all we have left** are "**a maze of faint trails**".

And not even that, at times.

Which is what many **want!**

This, to many, is the ideal – the freedom of **a life utterly unscripted.**

Which sounds **attractive** – *until you find yourself lost* – as sheep often do.

Until you realize that the path you're on – the path **you've** chosen – the path others have forged before you and you've followed, or the path your own heart has chosen – has led you to **a dead end** or **a barren field**, to **a dried up creek** or **a perilous ridge**, to someone else's ranch, or simply to a place **you never wanted to be** – and don't want to be – and you don't know your way out, or even back.

Here again we see and feel the gift – the grace – of the Shepherd in Psalm 23.

A Shepherd who does not abandon us to go wherever we want because our life means nothing to him...

No, Psalm 23 invites us to embrace the grace of a life wisely and lovingly **guided by a Good Shepherd** – who knows what’s over the hill and beyond the horizon, who knows where the hungry wolves are lurking, when we ate our last meal and when the rains are coming – and who loves us enough to guide us to where we need to go and be.

“He guides me in paths of righteousness for His Name’s sake.”

Now, some versions translate the paths as “**right paths**”.

“**He guides me along right paths**” – which makes sense in the context of the **sheep/shepherd metaphor**, and has been helpful to me over the years in moments where I have found myself wrestling to discern the right path or paths.

It is a gift to know that I – God’s sheep – don’t need to know everything. That God does and He’s **my shepherd** – the One who guides me.

None of us can know everything. Right? Especially about tomorrow. We can’t know all the variables. We can’t know how and when the weather will change, and where the wolves are lurking, and which stream is calmer today, and which field is ripe and ready for consumption.

And so it is a **profound** gift to know that my Shepherd knows all this and **He will guide me** along the right paths.

This psalm (and the larger witness of the biblical revelation) invites us to live with this confidence and trust.

But the better translation is “**paths of righteousness**” – and for good reason.

Because David, the psalmist, knows that God’s guidance isn’t just or primary concerned with **where we end up going**, but **who we end up being** – wherever we are. Right?

“He guides me in **paths of righteousness** for His Name’s sake.”

Not that God isn’t interested in the particular outcome of the decisions we face – what school to go to, what career to pursue and when, whether to pursue marriage or remain single, and on and on.

God is intimately **interested** and **invested in** all the decisions and directions of our lives.

But here, in Psalm 23, **David emphasizes something else** – something that we need to take to heart as we stand in the quandary of impending choices or as we live **in the wake of** critical decisions.

God’s concern isn’t just with **where we go**, but **who we are** wherever we are or will be.

He wants to lead us in paths of **righteousness**.

Which doesn’t mean **religious** paths, right?

But **righteous** paths. Paths – ways of being and doing – ways of living in relationship with God, with ourselves and with others – that reflect **God’s character and priorities and ways... wherever we are...**

Which has been a gift to me in a few particularly confusing seasons in my journey – where I’ve followed what I **believed** to be God’s leading – and found myself in a situation quite different than I had thought I was signing up for... Obviously, God knew it, *but I didn’t*.

And in these places of deep tension, this psalm and its invitation to look to God not to change my situation, or redirect me – but *to guide me in **paths of righteousness*** – has been core for me.

Leading me to ask and pray – **not**: *How can I get out of this?*

But: **How can I follow and honor Jesus here?**

How can I walk in righteousness here – in ways that honor God’s values and priorities?

And I’m thankful as I look back on one season in particular – that I still can’t make sense of. I still can’t understand why God led me there, and where He was in the midst of so many of those days. I felt lost so often.

And yet, as I reflect on that season – amidst all of my confusion – and all the ways that it seemed God was doing nothing – I can see now how God **did** lead me “*in paths of righteousness for His Name’s sake.*”

I may not have always known what to do, but I knew that I needed to honor seek and honor Christ in it all. And in His grace, He led me...

“He guides me in paths of righteousness **for His Name’s sake.**”

For His Name’s sake.

This last phrase might seem odd to some. It could feel second-rate. Less than ideal. Wouldn’t it be better if the verse read – “*because he loves us*”? – “He guides me in paths of righteousness **because He loves me.**”

“For His name’s sake” sounds a bit self-serving. Maybe **a lot!**

I’m sure I’ve thought that at times.

But over the years I’ve come to **love** this last phrase and what it means – about God’s commitment to me – and you – and every one of His sheep.

So, what does it mean?

It means that **God’s Name is on the line with us.**

God has put His own reputation – His character – His Name – on the line in us and with us... with our lives and the paths we walk.

That is stunning to me.

It doesn’t need to be this way. God **could** lead us in paths of righteousness simply because He loves us.

But I think what the verse says here is actually **better news than that.** Because it means that **He has staked His reputation on us.**

He has bound Himself to us – and us to Him.

What a gift that God’s commitment to guide us is staked on His Name!

Because although much shifts and changes with us and in us, God’s Name – God’s character – God’s reputation – is the most solid thing I can think of.

There is nothing about God’s character than can or ever will change.

And **because of this**, you and I can live and rest *in the deepest confidence* that God will never abandon us – but will always seek to guide us in paths of righteousness – because His Name is on the line with us.

And this, friends, is an incredible **comfort** – a gift that strengthens us – to know that in our places of deepest anxiety, where we wrestle to know the right way to go – we’re not the only one eager to know God’s leading. But **God Himself** is eager for us to know His leading...

God Himself is eager to guide us – *because His Name is on the line with us...*

*“He guides me in paths of righteousness **for His Name’s sake.**”*

Ok, so how? Right? That’s the question many of us are asking.

And that, my friends, deserves another sermon, if not its own series – but that would be mean and unhelpful...

So, let me name a few **foundational** points on **how God guides us** – **how we can recognize and discern God’s leading.**

And it starts with the simple, yet mysterious reality that God’s primary way of guiding us is with His **Voice**. Not with signs, but with His Voice.

Which is not always what we want. Sometimes it just seems too complicated. We’d rather God just gave us **a sign, right?**

Or maybe **a road map** that tells us everything. Which is how some Christians think of the Bible – as the complete manual for everything you will ever face in your life.

But as we read the Bible, we discover something else – an invitation to a life **deeply rooted in** and **devoted to** God’s revelation in Scripture, but not limited merely to **a relationship with** scripture.

No, although the Bible is **indispensable** to our hearing God’s Voice and knowing God’s leading in our lives... God offers us something more than the Bible. He offers us **Himself**.

As one of my profs years ago, Paul Stevens, **once said**, “The word *guidance* is never found in the Bible. Instead what we are given is something much better. We’re given a **guide** – a shepherd – Jesus.”

Who leads us with His Voice.

[I suspect my prof was overstating in saying that the word *guidance* is **never** found in the Bible. I suspect it’s there, but his point is clear & true.]

Jesus says this explicitly in **John 10:3-4**

“The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.”

And then again in **v.27 Jesus says to his disciples**, “*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*”

So, if God’s primary way of guiding us is with His Voice – **how do we come to hear and know His Voice?**

And **this** is where scripture – the Bible – comes into play!

Because it is through our immersion in the biblical story that we come to know God, and with this, in this, to **develop the capacity** to discern His Voice today – so that **when God speaks**, we can know that it is, in fact, **God** speaking to us and leading us in His Way...

Because we’ve come to know God’s Ways...

Because we have come to know – through the biblical revelation – **what God is like** – to know His character and concerns, to know what God cares about and what stirs His heart, to know what God thinks about the world and us and is passionately pursuing – all the time – including right now...

Truth is, this is what we are doing right now, isn’t it?!

This is why we are studying Psalm 23 this summer – that, **through this**, we would come to know God more – to better understand God’s **ways** in our lives – and, **in this**, to hear where God **IS** speaking to us today...

And in the grace of God, here and there, **it happens.**

As we listen to God’s revelation in scripture, we find ourselves, at times, not just learning God’s liberating truth, but hearing the Living Voice of

Jesus – our Shepherd – speaking to us – and inviting us to follow Him “*in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake*”...

By attending to how God has spoken and acted in the past – as revealed in the biblical narrative – ***we develop the capacity to discern His Voice today.***

But before we run off to just read our Bible’s more – on our own – we need to acknowledge that the gift of Scripture – through which God has spoken and continues to speak – ***comes to us – always – through the gift of this messy thing called the church – the community of Jesus’ followers.***

Right? We would not have the Bible without the Church – the community that God has inspired and sustained by His Word.

The community in which Jesus now uniquely dwells...

Again, this is why we’re here, aren’t we?

We’ve come together today – to worship God and listen ***to*** and ***for*** His Voice – because, in the mystery of God, God has chosen to make Himself known to us ***not only through Scripture, but through His people – the church...***

Neither of which are that easy to live with. We wrestle with the Bible and we wrestle with one another – and sometimes we wrestle with one another about the Bible.

Both of these relationships are **challenging** and **require the work of the Spirit...**

And yet it is **here**, as we immerse ourselves in the biblical story together – as we lean into one another with Jesus – that we find **ourselves caught up in the Story, addressed by Jesus and led in paths of righteousness for His Name’s sake.**

Let me close with one **final word of encouragement** and hope – to you who are convinced that you’re no good at this, or you’ll never learn this.

Let me ask you – in the relationship of a shepherd and the sheep – **who bears the biggest responsibility?**

That’s right. ***It’s the Shepherd!***

Everything hinges on the Shepherd. On the diligence and faithfulness of the Shepherd; on the goodness of the Shepherd; on the attentiveness and wisdom of the Shepherd; on the love and care and devoted leadership of the Shepherd.

So, why are some of us so afraid that we’ll never know God guiding us in paths of righteousness?

As this verse tells us – for the sake of His own Name – our Shepherd **will** see that we are led in His Way.

All we have to do is listen and follow His Voice.

Everything else is in His court.

All we need to do is listen and follow His Voice.

So, are we? Are you?

-----→ Let's pray.

→ *Invitation to the Lord's Table*

Read John 10:11-15