

He Leadeth Me

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Bible Text: Psalm 23:3
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Let's turn together the book of Psalms to Psalm 23. Psalm 23,

1 A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever.

The text I call our attention to is verse 3, "He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." It's a beautiful hymn based on the words of this text. You might know it.

"He leadeth me, O blessed thought!
O words with heav'nly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me."

This hymn became a favorite hymn of mine when it was sung at a funeral that I attended some years ago, and the words of the final stanza really leapt out at me on that particular occasion,

"And when my task on earth is done,
When by Thy grace the vict'ry's won,
E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,
Since God through Jordan leadeth me."

It's a short phrase, just three words, but it really captures the entirety of the Christian life and experience, doesn't it? He leadeth me. I may be standing with tear streaks on my face

next to the bed of affliction of one of my loved ones. I may be filled with shame and guilt after failing once more in my battle against besetting sin in my life. I may be confused. I may be lost wandering around in the darkness of depression. I may have joys in my life. I may be standing there on my wedding day, anticipating the future with my bride or with my husband. I may be holding a new daughter or a new son for the first time. I may be standing on a field of victory, enjoying the spoils of war. Whatever it is that my experience is at the current moment, this I believe if I am a Christian, "He leadeth me. Through life, through death, he leadeth me. In body and soul, he leadeth me. And if it is he who leadeth me, my Shepherd, Jehovah God, I know he will lead me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake and if it is he who leadeth me, then I know he will lead me to a house where goodness and mercy will follow me."

People of God, as we gather in the house of the Lord one last time this year, let's think on this powerful word that the psalmist is saying and that God's people have treasured throughout the ages and that speaks to us now, "He leadeth me." That's what I call our attention to this evening as a theme for the sermon. He leadeth me, first, in paths of righteousness; secondly, to a restored life; and finally, for his name's sake. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness; to a restored life; and for his name's sake.

I'm not a shepherd personally. I've never worked with sheep. Maybe some of you have. But I've been told reliably that sheep are destructive animals. Philip Keller wrote a book called "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23." Maybe you've heard of it. Maybe you've read it. But he who himself was a shepherd and then later a preacher, says in that book that sheep will stubbornly follow the same path again and again and again. They will go in the same old rut until that rut becomes a muddy mess riddled with their own manure and with the parasites that their bodies expel in that manure. And they will snap up every blade of grass in sight until the pasture that once was a beautiful green pasture land becomes all but ruined. Leave a flock of sheep in an area unmanaged and soon that area will become a muddy wasteland. Sheep are destructive creatures and they have a tendency also to wander off by themselves. Jesus used a picture that's true to life when he spoke of that one sheep that wanders away from the 99 and gets lost, and if you know how predators work, you know why that's such a problem for that one erring sheep. A sheep that is isolated and is all by itself becomes easy pickings for the prowling wolf or the lion and this is the picture that scripture gives not just for a few Christians who are especially prone to wander, although there may be more egregious examples of this. Well, you know what Isaiah says. We've been hearing it if we've been listening to the Messiah in our homes lately. "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way," Isaiah 53, verse 6.

Destructive creatures, wandering creatures, erring creatures prone to their own self-destruction and ruin, nevertheless, the psalmist David, who himself was familiar with sheep and their ways, says, "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness." The paths of righteousness are good paths. The paths of righteousness are paths not so destructive of the environment as when the sheep are left to themselves. They are paths that keep the sheep together rather than isolated and exposed to predators. Paths of righteousness, good paths, paths that may be difficult to follow at times. It's easier to trudge in that same old

rut. That's why the sheep do it but they are paths of righteousness that the shepherd leads me in, and therefore they are the paths to follow. They are the good paths.

Beloved, can you relate to those foolish sheep walking stubbornly in the rut of their own filth? There is an easy way that the Bible speaks of, a big, broad, wide highway full of pleasures, full of distractions, enticing to our flesh, enticing to our human nature, and many go down that way. It's the path of least resistance, we might say, but it's a path that leads to destruction. It's a path that runs finally over a cliff and drops the many who follow it to its end into hellfire and damnation. Perhaps you enjoy watching those programs that are full of violence, full of murder, full of sexual content, forgetting about or ignoring the fact that there are little eyes looking over your shoulder, little ears that are listening from the other room, and learning, learning, always learning. They begin to follow in the same ruts that they see dad and mom trudging in every day and they begin to pick up the same parasites of sin and friendship with the world. Is this worldly entertainment a path of righteousness, a path that you want your children to walk in, a path that the Good Shepherd would lead his little lambs down?

Can you relate to those erring sheep who go off from the flock, everyone to his own way, beloved? Are you the rebellious young person who scoffs at the wisdom of dad and mom as outdated and old fashioned? Are you the church member who is always right and who knows that everybody else is always wrong? Are you the one who will not be disciplined? Are you the one who will not be taught? To some extent, that's the nature of all of us, isn't it? Proud. Stubborn. Self-righteous. Self-seeking. Foolish. Sheep. But those aren't the paths of righteousness, those are the paths of destruction, the paths of sin.

Straight paths, true paths, paths that may be hard to walk in, paths that go against the grain of what our flesh desires, paths that challenge us, challenge our endurance, our perseverance, paths that at times lead us straight through the valley of the shadow of death, these are the paths of righteousness, beloved, the paths that the shepherd lays before his sheep. What a blessing to know that it is he, the shepherd, who leadeth me in those paths. If he didn't lead me in those paths, I would never walk in them, and neither would you. But he leadeth me, the psalmist says, he leadeth me in paths of righteousness. He does. Maybe he does it by letting me go off the path in my rebellious ways for a time until, like Jonah, I have to learn the hard conclusion of my way of unbelief so that I'm finally brought back to the paths of righteousness in a difficult way, a long way. Maybe he does it by letting me see the consequences in my life or in the lives of my children of my own foolish decisions. Maybe he does it by bringing me to the end of myself, finally, so that all I can do is cry out, cry out from the muddy mess of my life, "Shepherd, come help me!" But the sheep may know this confidently, he leadeth me in paths of righteousness. By his spirit, he is carefully, wisely, wonderfully, powerfully, progressively shaping my path before me and causing me to walk in the path that he chooses for my life, sometimes gently prodding me along with his staff as shepherds do, sometimes correcting me firmly with his rod as shepherds also do, but always he leadeth me, we confess and we believe, and always his leading is in the paths of righteousness.

On the part of the shepherd, this means that he must know those paths of righteousness himself. He, the shepherd, must be intimately acquainted with those paths in which he aims to lead his sheep. He must be walking on those paths and walking on them enough that he has firsthand knowledge of them, firsthand experience of those paths. What this means for the shepherd is also this, that he must be one or two steps ahead of his sheep. He must know where the pitfalls are. He must know where the dead ends are. He must be able to anticipate the forks in the road where the sheep may be prone to wander. He must be ready sometimes to leave the 99 in order to go off and to seek and to save that one sheep that is lost. He must have his rod in his hand and the courage to face those prowling lions and those stalking wolves. He must be a leader. That's what a shepherd is. He's a leader. He leadeth me, we say. And there is none better acquainted with the paths of righteousness than our Shepherd, beloved. There's none better acquainted with the paths of righteousness than the Lord Jesus Christ. He walked on those paths his whole life. He walked on those paths. He walked on those paths even when they led him into trouble and turmoil. He walked on those paths even when they brought him into conflict with the scribes and the Pharisees, and it was a hard way. He walked on those paths even when it meant he had to confront the unbelief that he saw in those around him. He walked on those paths even when those paths led him through the valley of the shadow of death. He walked on those paths even when those paths seemed like they were running right into a dead end, and that's what the disciples thought, "Why is he going that way? Why is he going to Jerusalem? He's going to die there." But he went that way, never straying to the side, never erring, never wandering, never going his own way, never adopting the spirit of the maverick or the individualist. He was a leader, a leader of his sheep, a shepherd, and because he walked on those paths, he knows every pitfall and every fork in the road. He knows every off ramp that would lead off of the straight and narrow and difficult way onto that broad highway that leads off into hell fire.

He was tempted by the devil. Imagine that, face to face with the devil himself who was personally investing all of his considerable resources to get Jesus to take that off ramp. But he didn't do it. He was given every opportunity to serve himself, his own pleasure, his own convenience rather than his God. He has been tempted in every way that we are. In far more ways than any one of you has ever been, he was tempted. Yet without sin. Never giving in to sin. And he is able, therefore, as the shepherd, as the leader, to lead us in the paths of righteousness, and he does. That means, first of all, that he is able to give us a righteousness that comes only from him, a righteousness that is alien to ourselves, but which comes from him, the Lord Jesus Christ. For as our shepherd, he is also our head and our legal representative before the judge.

That's the first verse. "The Lord is my shepherd." There's a bond between the shepherd and his sheep, a union, a union that is so close that they are one unit. Shepherd and sheep go together always and everything the shepherd possesses becomes the possession of the sheep, including his righteous status before the lawgiver and the judge of heaven and earth. A righteousness that is imputed to everyone who believes. Everything that is Christ's, the shepherd, becomes the possession of the sheep. We share one life with him, one fellowship with him. We become bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, united to him ever more deeply, ever more closely. And the God of heaven declares to everyone who

believes in this, Christ declares to them, "Your sins, they are forgiven you. You are righteous, approved by God." It's just as if you never walked in those ruts of sin. It's just as if you were never be spattered by your own filth. It's all cleansed away. His righteousness becomes your righteousness by faith. By faith.

But the shepherd also makes us walk in those paths of righteousness ourselves. It's not only that righteousness that he imputes to us and that becomes ours through faith, but having that righteousness that comes by faith now he sets our feet in the path and he makes us walk in the paths of righteousness. He does so himself as the shepherd, knowing personally every danger and himself knowing personally every pitfall, so that if we wander from the path in our weakness, he is ready, he's there ready to go off the path to seek and to save that which was lost. And if we stumble into the lair of the predator, he comes with his rod and he delivers us from the mouth of the lion. He brings us back to the path. But he will bring us back to the path, but he will have us walk in that path, beloved. The paths of righteousness, though that path is difficult, though that path is filled with perils, though that path makes us fear and wonder, how can I ever go that way, he will have us walk in that way.

He knows that we're not up to the task. He knows that we're sheep who left to ourselves will go back to the same old rut so what does he do? He leadeth me. He leadeth me. You know that, beloved? You believe that? Maybe you say if you don't say it out loud, you say it to yourself, "But I can't. I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't do it. I can't renounce my own will. I can't resist that easy way that everybody else is walking down. I can't." But if you talk that way, you're back in that rut, that muddy, parasite-ridden, sin-bespattered rut, and if you are one of his sheep, I tell you, he will come for you. He will and he will take you and he will put you back on the path. That might not be easy for you, but he will do it. And he will tell you, "Oh, yes, you can." He might have to use his rod and his staff, but he will put you on the path. Don't say it, beloved. Don't say, "I can't," for what you are really saying is not, "I can't, but I won't. I won't. I refuse. I reject his leading." Don't say that, say this, sing it, "He leadeth me. O blessed thought, a word with heavenly comfort, 'Whate'er I do, where'er I be, Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.'" Say that. Believe that.

And because he leadeth me, I can walk on the paths of righteousness for the shepherd who leadeth me also restoreth my soul. The fact is, sheep do sometimes fall into such peril that their very life is in jeopardy. They become lost, isolated and alone with no way of getting back to the flock. The jaws of the lion or the wolf are around their necks. The example of peril that Philip Keller uses in "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23" is when a sheep is cast, and a cast sheep apparently is a sheep that falls on its back with its feet up in the air. Because of the way sheep are, apparently they cannot get themselves back up on their feet and so they just lay there on their back helpless with their feet in the air. Unless somebody finds them that way, there they will be and, of course, that's easy prey for a predator. Or if the predator doesn't find it, this will cause complications and the internal bowels and intestines of the sheep that will cause it to die.

"He restoreth my soul," therefore, is an important aspect in which he leadeth me, and the word for soul here in the Hebrew is not just referring to the invisible part of your human

nature, the part that we when we die goes to heaven, but it is a word that refers to the whole of your life. Your soul, your life, my very life is in jeopardy, the psalmist is admitting by making this confession. I'm slipping into a dark hole with no way out. I'm cast. I'm lying on my back with my feet in the air and there's no way of righting myself and if I stay this way, I will die. But he restoreth my soul. He brings me back from the brink of death to life. He delivers me from the jaws of the lion or the wolf. He returns to me to the flock.

Now, there are certain times in which the child of God relates in a special way to what the psalmist is describing here, of course. There are times when the child of God really feels like he's groping around in the darkness of despair. There are times when the child of God feels the power and the fear of death closing in around her, times when he is brought to the end of himself, and then the Lord opens the way, sets this son or this daughter back on his feet, leads him back to the still waters and the quiet streams. He restoreth my soul. Every Christian experiences this kind of restorative help from the shepherd to greater or lesser degrees in their lives. And maybe as you look back on your lives, you can think of special moments when the Lord did that for you. And yet the reality is, this isn't just describing certain special occasions in the lives of God's children, but this is simply a description of God's entire way with us. He restoreth my soul. He brings me, who am otherwise dead in trespasses and sins, back to life. He delivers me, who am appointed to destruction, back from the brink and he gives me hope. He gives me salvation. He leads me through the valley of the shadow of death, to the other side, to a table that he has prepared for me, that he sets for me in the presence of my enemy. He puts me in that house where goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. That's his way with me. That is salvation. He restores me to life. He restoreth my soul.

You need to be thinking this way as you look back on the previous year, beloved. The year 2023 was no doubt another year of problems. It was a year in which various matters in church and state disappointed us, made us wring our hands, made us afraid perhaps. It was a year in which personal struggles came into our lives. It was a year when some of us perhaps stood by the graveside of a loved one whom we buried. It was a year of loss. It always is. "Afflicted through the weary years," we sang a while ago. That's the way it is for pilgrims in this fallen and cursed world and the year 2023 is no exception. But this is also true for everyone who believes and confesses and has believed and confessed from childhood that the Lord is my shepherd, this is also true, the year 2023 was a year in which the Lord was busy restoring my soul. The year 2023 was a year in which the Lord was busy leading me through death, through the valley of the shadow of death, so that he might give me life and show me life. The year 2023 was a year in which he was pouring his Spirit into me. Whether I felt that Spirit as a trickle or whether I felt that Spirit as a great rush like a waterfall into my life, he was doing it. He was feeding my soul steadily, regularly through the word that was preached from this pulpit and the word that I read in the quiet in my own home. The year 2023 was a year in which he was teaching me about my weaknesses and about my fears, about my failures, and he was doing that so that I would not trust in myself as I'm so prone to do, but that I would trust in him.

"He restoreth my soul," because of myself all I have is death, but he was leading me through that, do you believe it? Do you know it? With the valley of the shadow of death all around you, beloved, do you know this? He restores us to life, beloved, and the life to which he restores us is his own life. That's how he leads us. He leads us by chastening sometimes. Yes, he leads us by bringing us to the end of ourselves sometimes. That's true. He leads us through the external means that he provides, such as the preaching of the gospel and Christian discipline. He leads us through his rod and his staff sometimes. But it's deeper than that. He leads us also from the inside by the Spirit that he has placed in our soul. He leads us by living within us. He leads us by taking those corrupt, depraved desires that are of the flesh and killing them and changing us from the inside so that now our will is to desire good, the desire to walk in the way that he walks, and to be the way that he is, and to desire the things that he desires. He does that. He leads us from the inside by his Spirit, teaching us from inside out the way of love, the way of hope, the way of godliness. That's why you must never say, "I can't," for then you contradict what God says when he puts this confession in your mouth as one of his sheep, "I can. I can do all things through Christ who is in me, who strengthens me. I have a life that has been restored to me. He restoreth my soul. There's a Spirit who lives in me. I can. I can and I will follow the Shepherd who leads me."

Remember that, beloved. Remember that, young Christian father, young Christian mother, before you're tempted to flip on that garbage entertainment again and feast your eyes on the violence and sexual perversity of this world. Remember that, young person, before you are tempted to write off the wisdom of your parents and to walk in a way of rebellion rather than honoring father and mother for the Lord's sake. Christ is in you. Christ is in your spirit. Christ is behind your eyes. Christ is in your mind. Christ is in your soul. Christ is in you.

"He restoreth my soul." You believe that, don't you? There's more. The life that he restores in us is his own life, his own desires, his own affections. He writes that right inside of us. It's an amazing wonder of regeneration, beloved. That's what's going on in sanctification. Christ is making himself known within us. But the life that he restores in us isn't merely for the present, the life that he restores in us is the life of heaven. The life that he restores in us is not the temporal life that will one day be buried in the grave, the life that he restores in us is eternal life. That's why I find the final stanza of that hymn so moving when it's sung at a funeral. "And when my task on earth is done, When by Thy grace the vict'ry's won, E'en death's cold wave I will not flee." I won't run from it. I won't be afraid of it. "For God through Jordan leadeth me." Also then, also then. Do you know that? Do you know that he leads you all the way to the end? Do you know that he leads you through every single beat of your heart until the last one? Every breath of air you breathe until you breathe no more? He leadeth me to that coming day, the day of which no man knows the hour or the time, the day when the sun that is so familiar that for however many years has been rising faithfully in the morning and setting faithfully in the evening will flicker and go out. He leadeth me to that day. He leadeth me to that day when the stars above that I have seen every night of my life if it's not cloudy out, he leads me to that day when I will see those stars flicker and go out. He leadeth me. Do not hesitate to follow, do not be afraid to follow when he leadeth me, beloved, for he leads you to life.

He leads you to the end, and then after the end, to life, always to life, to joy in heaven when I breathe my last breath, and when my heart stops beating to a new perfect world that needs no more sun and needs no more stars because the light in that place will be from the face of the Lamb himself. He leadeth me there to life. He leadeth me to joy.

He leadeth me. He restoreth my soul. Do you believe it? Do you confess it? Do you know it? And all this he does for his own name's sake. That's an amazing phrase. Don't overlook it, "for his name's sake." The shepherd's own reputation is on the line when it comes to how the sheep are doing, you know. It looks pretty bad if the sheep are destroying the pasture lands and walking off all the time. It looks bad on the shepherd. People will talk. "Does this shepherd know what he's doing? Does this shepherd even care about his sheep? What kind of a manager do we have here?" That's a powerful motive all by itself that will spur any shepherd into action to make sure that he's leading his flock properly, my own name, my own reputation is on the line. But all the more so when it's the glory and honor of Jehovah God himself that's on the line, beloved. Do you understand? The Shepherd has put his own name his own honor, his own reputation, and he's attached it firmly to his sheep. He's not going to do that and then allow those sheep to go off into ruin by leaving them to their own foolishness. No, he's going to manage them. When they fall on their backs, he's going to find them and he's going to set them back on their feet. He's going to lead them in the paths of righteousness, in straight paths, in good paths, in wholesome paths.

For his own name's sake, he will do this and that ought to give us a tremendous deal of confidence. Beloved people of God, he's not doing this just for you, for you as a congregation or for you as individuals who follow him. If he was doing it just for you, maybe you'd come up with all kinds of reasons why he might say, "Well, enough is enough. Look at me. Look at the mess that I've made in my life." But he's not doing it just for you, he's doing it for his own name's sake. He wants to show you, and he wants to show his enemies, and he wants to show anybody who's watching that he is a God, that he is a Shepherd who can take these foolish, sickly, degenerate sheep and he can restore them back to life and he can lead them in paths of righteousness and he can make them flourish and he can make them thrive and he will do it. He will do it. He will stop at nothing, beloved, not even the death of his own Son on the cross to make it so.

"For his name's sake." And that also ought to give us a great deal of motivation to follow his lead, beloved, not to be stubborn, not to dig in our heels, to keep going down those ruts, but to be conscious of the fact that this gracious Shepherd, this merciful, merciful God who is righteous and blessed in himself and needed us not, was willing to put his own name on the line for me. For me? I want to walk in those paths that he's leading me on. When that rod smites me, I want to receive it with humility and be corrected. When that staff nudges me, I want to go. I want my life to be a living display of his glory and the power of his grace.

Beloved, follow him. Follow him. Follow him joyfully. When you get stuck, when you get afraid, don't give up. Don't despair. Don't say, "I can't." Take heart. Be confident. Put this song back in your soul and sing it and believe it, "He leadeth me, O blessed thought.

A word with heav'nly comfort fraught fraught, Whate'er I do, where'er I be, Still 'tis
God's hand that leadeth me." Amen.

Let us pray.

*Our Father in heaven, thank you for this truth, not just a song, not just a confession, not
just words but truth. Write it in our souls. Make it our confession. Make it our song.
Make it our whole life, O Father. Lead us. Amen.*