

Experiencing the Shepherd's Path

How does God keep me living the right life?

Psalm 23:3

Disclaimer: The following are Dr. Jeff Stott's sermon notes and manuscript. They have not been carefully proofed for spelling or grammar. All Scripture quotes are from the New International Version unless noted.

Take God's Word and open it to Psalm 23. We are in the middle of a series on Psalm 23 and we are learning that God is our Shepherd, we are His sheep, and that's all we need.

Psalm 23:1 says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. (2) He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, (3) He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

Our focus is on verse 3 and I want to answer three questions today: (1) What kind of life does God want me to live? (2) How does He lead me in that life, especially when I'm off the path? (3) Why does God help me to live right? We've got a lot to look at today so let's get started.

1. The Description of the Path: "paths of righteousness"

First of all, let's look at the description of the path. The Bible says that God guides me in "paths of righteousness." What is a *path of righteousness*? A path of righteousness is a course of actions that you do that honors God.

This kind of "righteousness" can be described as anything moral, honest, pure, just or virtuous. It is practical righteousness. It deals with your thinking, feeling, and doing. God wants you to think right, feel right, and do right.

But notice that God wants to guide you on a "path" of righteousness. A path is made up of many steps and many actions. This is not one thought of righteousness but many in a row. It's not one moment of feeling right but a pattern of feeling right. It's not one right action, but several in a row. We are talking about a lifestyle of righteousness, a path of righteousness.

But look even closer at this statement by God's Word. It says, "He guides me in paths of righteousness." God didn't say *path*, but "paths." There are many paths of righteousness you will need to take in life.

There is the path of righteousness when it comes to being a parent. When it comes to parenting you want to think right about your children, feel right toward your children, and do right in training them up for life. There is a right way and wrong way to do this, but God wants to lead you down the path of righteousness as a parent.

There is a path of righteousness when it comes to your money. God wants you to think right, feel right, and act right when it comes to managing the money He has blessed you with. God has a lot to say about earning money, saving it, sharing it, tithing it, enjoying it, and managing it. There is a right way and a wrong. When it comes to your money God wants to lead you down the path of righteousness in handling it.

There is a path of righteousness for marriage. There is a path of righteousness for church. There is a path of righteousness for salvation. There is a path of righteousness in how you treat people. Your God wants to guide you in all these paths of righteousness. He knows that on these paths are the blessings, the abundance, the victory, and the peace He wants to give you. **Proverbs 4:18¹** says, "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day." On the path of righteousness there is a whole new day. It's a bright day. It's a great day. When you are on the path of righteousness you look forward to getting up every day knowing that you are going to bring glory to God in your home, at work, and at school.

2. The Direction on the Path: "He guides me"

We have seen the description of this path, **but now I want us to look at the direction on the path.** Sometimes we get off the *path of righteousness* and onto the *path of wrongness*. How does God restore us when we get off His path? How does He help us get back on the right path in our life? How does He help you to think right, feel right, act right, decide right and react right.

This is the Shepherd's Psalm so we need to see this from a shepherd's perspective. What would cause a sheep to get off the path the Shepherd wanted him own? Sheep

¹ Psalm 16:11, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." Proverbs 2:9, "Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path."

get off the path for different reasons. Sometimes sheep will get off the path because they are stubborn, some because of careless straying, and others because of sickness. Depending on why the sheep is off the path will determine how the shepherd gets him back on the path. Depending on how you got off the path of righteousness will determine how God will restore you back to the right path. Let me explain each one briefly.

A. The rod that restores the stubborn sheep.

First, let's look at the rod that restores the stubborn sheep. This tells me that God will discipline me when I am rebellious. The shepherd's rod was a fascinating tool. The shepherd would dig up a sapling by hand in order to preserve the hard knob located just under the ground. Then with his knife he would work at the knob until he had a round, smoothly finished ball. He would trim the sapling or rod to a few feet in length.²

This rod served two purposes. It was a *club of defense* that the shepherd used to protect the sheep against thieves and wild animals, which we will talk about in another message. It was also a *club of discipline* with which to correct the ways of a stubborn sheep.

Here's how it worked. Occasionally a sheep would **refuse** to follow the shepherd's directions. He would **repeatedly disobey** the Shepherd. This sheep is a **repeat offender**. He is **stubborn**. Knowing the sheep may endanger itself, the shepherd has to step in and sometimes take drastic measures with **extremely stubborn sheep**. Out of love, the shepherd would carefully break the leg of the stubborn sheep with his rod of correction. Immediately afterwards, the shepherd would bind the leg in a splint, carry the sheep on his shoulders, and pour oil on its leg to help it heal and love on it.

After the sheep's leg heals, an amazing thing happens, the sheep that had been so stubborn is now the sheep that stays closest to the shepherd! During the time of intimate care a bond had been formed between sheep and shepherd that will never be broken. That once-stubborn sheep has become the most responsive sheep in the flock.

Is it possible that our Heavenly Shepherd would resort to drastic measures (even pain) to correct the ways of a stubborn child of God? **Hosea 6:1** gives us an answer. The Bible says, "Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but He will heal us; He has injured us but He will bind up our wounds." There are times in your life that God causes or allows things to happen to you that break your will, break an unhealthy

² Sometimes shepherds would imbed pieces of metal into the knob.

attitude or to break your stubbornness so that He can heal and carry you close to Himself.

Is that cruel or loving? When a parent disciplines a child for something they have done wrong is that loving or cruel? When a father disciplines his son or daughter its not to make the father feel better but to train the son or daughter to be a better person and to stay away from things that would hurt them greatly in the long run.

The same is true for our loving Heavenly Father. He uses discipline in order to train us so that we can experience the power of righteousness and peace in our lives. That's what **Hebrews 12:5** says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, (6) because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son.... (11) No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." God can use whatever He wants to correct us. But the bottom line is every time He corrects us it is for our good and benefit. He is training us through it and He wants to see a harvest of righteousness and peace in your life. That's the goal of the discipline. So, as God's sheep, He may use His rod to correct us when we are extremely stubborn about following Him, but He always does it out of love and it's always for your best. But remember, this rod of discipline is for when you are very stubborn.

B. The staff that restores the straying sheep.

As His people, God wants us to stay on the path of righteousness. He wants us to make right decisions and respond to Him and others in the right way. He wants us to treat our spouse right. He wants us to behave correctly toward our parents and our kids. He wants our lives to be a righteous life. When a stubborn sheep steps off the path of righteousness God will use the rod to bring Him back.

But what about the sheep who stray? **This brings us to the staff that restores the straying sheep.** The shepherd's staff is one of the most recognizable shepherd's tool. It is usually considered a gentle reminder of the shepherd's love for His flock. With his staff the shepherd restores straying sheep back to the fold and guides his flock along steep, rocky trails. The shepherd also uses his staff to push away branches while leading his sheep through narrow, thorny passages.

Now listen closely: Carelessness, not defiance, is usually the reason sheep stray from the group and off the path. They simply do what all sheep do – nibble a little here,

nibble a little there, poke around here, poke around there. Pretty soon they've nibbled their way right out off the path and into trouble. They may slip over a ledge, entangle themselves in a thorn bush, or stumble into a rocky creek bed. Maybe they were startled by the sight of one of their enemies the lion or the wolf. What the shepherd uses for a straying sheep is not the rod of correction but the staff of guidance.

Isn't that how we are? A little nibble here and a little nibble there. A Sunday missed here and a Sunday missed there, time in God's Word missed here and time in God's Word missed there, a bad decision here and bad decision there. Then we find ourselves having strayed away from God's path for our life. Over time we allowed people to affect us with a negative attitude, weaken our faith, and get involved in things we know are not right. Its not that we are intentionally leaving God's path it's that we have strayed from it slowly over time. When that happens God takes His staff and pulls us out of the pit we got ourselves in, looses the thorns we have become entangled in.

Sometimes God's staff will take the shape of a friend or even a stranger giving you advice you don't want to hear but you need to hear. Sometimes it's a parent sitting down to have a heart to heart talk with their son or daughter. Sometimes it comes through a Sunday School lesson, or just a thought that God places in your heart while driving to work or sitting in school. Sometimes His staff comes in the form of an inner conviction of what you are doing is wrong. You sense the pull of God in your conscience. Whatever form His staff takes it's to put you back on the path of righteousness that God has for you. If you have strayed off the path that God wants you on I can promise there is something or someone that God is using as His staff in your life to bring you back on course. Pay attention and listen.

C. The oil that restores the sick sheep.

Our Shepherd has a rod to restore the stubborn sheep. He has a staff to restore the straying sheep, **but he also has some oil that restores the sick sheep**. This tells me that God will heal your hurts.

At night, when the shepherd would head the sheep back into the sheepfold, not only did he count the sheep, but he called them each by name. He moved among them, caressing their coats while looking for hints of disease or wounds. He would take a mixture of oil, sulfur and tar and apply it to the wound or sore places on the sheep. It would help heal the wound and kept flies out of the wound to promote healing.

Isn't that a beautiful picture of the Heavenly Shepherd's tender love? He leads us home. He comes alongside us, calling us by name. He touches us. And before we can point to our broken places and wounded hearts, He is already rubbing the healing oil of love into our lives.

Psalm 45:7 says, "You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." Do you need joy in your life on your pain and hurt? Your Heavenly Shepherd wants to call you by name and place on your pain the oil of joy.

God loves you and wants to restore you to the path of righteousness. He will use the rods of life to restore you when you stubbornly walk away. He will use His spiritual staff to restore you when you carelessly stray away and God will use His oil to restore you when your spiritual sickness leads you away.

3. The Reason for the Path

But why does God want to lead us? Why does God want to restore us? Why does the shepherd use the rod to restore stubborn sheep, the staff to restore straying sheep, and oil to restore sick sheep? Why does He want us to stay on the path of righteousness? **This brings us to the reason for the path.** Look at **Psalm 23:3** again, "He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." God's honor and reputation is at stake when it comes to how you live. If the followers of the Heavenly Shepherd are not walking in righteous paths, what will people say about the One who is leading them?

What would you think of a shepherd who had a flock of sheep that were undernourished, scarred from injuries, had open sores that have been uncared for, and roaming aimlessly on a hillside? What if they were left in a field unprotected? The condition of the flock speaks volumes about the character of the shepherd.

Let me quickly say, that God doesn't need us to make Him look good. God is infinitely good. Regardless of how we live, God will always be good. Yet, to a watching world, we can give the impression, by our choices, that He is not a good Shepherd. When we refuse the correction of His Word, complain about what He is or isn't doing in our lives and when we don't give thanks for the wonderful things He has done how does that make Him look to those around us. When we don't listen to Him, look to Him and love Him the way we should it makes Him look like an uncaring God.

When God leads us onto the paths of righteousness it will benefit you and bless you and strengthen you and your life will be one of fulfillment, joy, hope, contentment and enthusiasm but the ultimate goal is to glorify God. It is “for His name’s sake.”

Conclusion

So let me ask you, which sheep best describes you today?

Are you a stubborn sheep? Constantly fighting against the will of God in your life. Maybe that crisis in your life is the rod of God trying to get your attention in order to draw you close to Him so He can carry you.

Are you a straying sheep? You didn’t mean to get off the path, but little decisions and little distractions have lead you away from where God wants you. You look over the last few weeks, months or years of your life you’ve noticed you have drifted away from the Lord and His plan for your life.

Are you a sick sheep? On the inside you are hurting, lonely, tired and weak. You don’t feel like walking on God’s path because you hurt too much. You don’t have the energy for righteousness you once had. Its not that you are stubborn or have strayed, you are just tired. You are on the path but you have stopped on the path. You just don’t feel like going on.

No matter what kind of sheep you are today, God loves you and He has a wonderful path for you to walk on. It will result in influence, victory, peace, and joy in your life.

Maybe you would like to become one of His sheep. You are tired of trying to figure out life by yourself. You need a God who will guide you, love you, heal you, and give you what you need to live the kind of life you were created to live. It all starts with having a relationship with Jesus Christ [salvation]. Are you ready?