

Psalm 23:3 The Guidance of the Shepherd

Introduction

This wonderful Psalm has presented to us a glorious picture of God as the Good Shepherd of his people. What a privilege is ours to experience fellowship with Him. Estate agents can produce the most remarkably worded descriptions of houses that defy mere observation of the property, being able to see the potential that may not have been realised by a previous owner of that home! Artists in painting pictures can choose to adapt the scene in front of them to make a better picture. For example, I was speaking to a particular artist, John Macdonald, whose work I admire, at the recent Fruit and Flower festival. He commented on a few of his recent works. One had a scene taken from a Starbucks café in Edinburgh has a splendid view of the Castle. I couldn't quite picture the exact location of the scene. However, the artist mentioned that he had lowered the height of the trees nearby and possibly 'moved' some of them in order to gain the perspective realised in that composition. This is of course legitimate for an artist to make these changes, but David is here speaking about life as he had experienced it. He is summarising what he has gone through, and is currently going through, without any varnishing of the truth. This is why his inspired words are so powerful. This is why we can be encouraged as we meditate on them because God has not changed. We too can say –if we are His- *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...* David has spoken in the first two verses of the blessings of fellowship with the Lord in the good times. Praise God for them –are we thankful enough to the Lord for them or do we take them for granted? However, the value of this Psalm is enhanced immeasurably by God's presence and support when things are not so good, in fact when they are extremely difficult. Verse three begins in a different context and speaks of restoration, of renewal, of beginning afresh with God –which assumes that there has been a departure from the level of fellowship and joy described in the previous two verses. Sheep (and are humans much different?) always seem to believe that the grass is greener and tastier on the other side of the fence or hedge. So they are often looking to find a way out of that field and into the neighbouring one. Some Christians are like that. When writing these words my mind drifted to another part of the country and a couple who were committed Christians, but in their district they were known for wandering from church to church. Whenever a new one started they were off from the previous one. Never staying more than a year or two at the most in any one fellowship; is that really in line with the teaching of Jesus in John ten? It goes without saying that it is better than not belonging to any church at all. Sadly there are a significant proportion of professing Christians who attend no church, opting out of using their gifts in a community of faith denying other believers their fellowship and service together for Jesus. The devil loves the sheep to be wandering rather than active, working within a local congregation and community. Do we who are committed Christians also share Jesus' heart for the lost and wandering sheep? Do we pray for them and seek to encourage them to associate with God's people once more –or for the first time. Jesus in John 10:16 said: *I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.* When we ourselves know the Good Shepherd and the joys of following Him we will want to share that with other people. What else does David declare in his testimony here?

1. He restores my soul (Psalm 23:3)

This phrase can also be translated: *He renews my strength* or *He revives my soul*. One commentator understood David to be suggesting that God was working in someone's life here where spiritual vitality was almost extinct or their strength greatly exhausted. In other words the sheep in this context was in no state to revive or restore itself. In Isaiah 53:6, familiar words to many of us, it states: *All we like sheep have gone astray and turned everyone to his own way...* The Shepherd has to take the initiative in this work. Rarely ever, in my experience of growing up on a sheep farm, did a sheep in difficulties sort out its own difficulties. We had to affect the rescue or locate the lost ewe or lamb and bring them home. I know that a sheep's eyesight is not good, but somehow they could find gaps left in the hedge or a fence but placed right in front of the same they could rarely ever get back through without physical assistance. When the Bible states: *All we like sheep...* it is not a compliment. When we wander from the Lord whether it is pride, stupidity or wilful disobedience or? How often another Christian is needed to guide us back to our heavenly Father with the aid and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. At times all of us need to be restored, though possibly in different ways. There are times of actual sin that requires repentance; times of coldness of spirit that requires encouragement from others to restart the discipline of daily Bible reading and prayer or fellowship with fellow believers. It is not only wilful backsliders that wander far from God to whom these words apply. It can happen in the hearts and minds of people who might physically be in church, but spiritually be in another place altogether. Where do sheep need restoration? (a) **When they have wandered from the pathway** Our farm was next to the River Lune. The river constantly undermined the banking in several fields causing parts of it to slide down into the water. This might mean that lovely juicy grass was visible above the water line but no longer attached to the rest of the field. Often the section of banking had slipped partly into the water so by jumping off the bank onto the grass or soil below a sheep could graze on the grass that looked so tempting. Unfortunately there were times when although a sheep could easily get down the return trip was considerably more difficult. The crumbling soil was no problem descending, but gaining the necessary grip for the return trip was another issue altogether. Making a number of unsuccessful attempts over several hours could exhaust a sheep. Yet assisting them was far from easy. To rush down the banking could prompt them to lose their balance and fall into the river and possibly be drowned. In that context falling into the water meant that the lovely wool coat soaked up water like a sponge and the soil now splashed with water became increasingly slippery. I vividly remember one such rescue that took hours. In the end we had a tractor parked near the edge with a bucket and arms lowered over the banking with ropes to assist in the rescue. That sheep had completely exhausted itself and was two-thirds in the cold water. It could only place its front feet on the banking and hold its weary head out of the water. Eventually it had stopped struggling and my dad was able to come close and secure the sheep with the ropes and slowly it was lifted from the water and up onto the dry land. Over that period of a good number of hours there was plenty of time for reflection. How tempting was that little bit of grass to that sheep, but was it really worth it? How tempting are the little sins, or some times even bigger ones that enter our minds. As Christians we can sometimes unintentionally mislead other people about sin. We sin because it is enjoyable or convenient at the time. Listen to these words from Hebrews 11 concerning Moses: ²⁴ *By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.* ²⁵ *He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.* ²⁶ *He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.* Sometimes we think why did 'x' steal or lie or break God's moral law in some other way? We need to be honest with our children or grandchildren and

ourselves at times that sin is tempting because in the short-term it can bring genuine pleasure and many people appear to get away with wrongdoing. It doesn't have to be robbing a bank or acts of violence against defenceless people. Making up a degree qualification to put on a C.V. for a job interview; plagiarising another person's work in a school or university essay is so easily done. The fact that students at reputable institutions have, for a time, got away with using major sections or virtually a whole thesis composed by someone else for postgraduate degrees at major universities in the USA or Western Europe is a salutary reminder of how easy it is to succeed in an unethical manner. The temptation to sexual promiscuity only takes one act that has on occasions resulted in an untreatable disease that cannot be cured or the transmission of the Aids virus. Life isn't fair when some people appear to get away with a lot of wrongdoing and others pay the full price of one act of folly. Like the sheep stuck down the riverbank sinful choices can be a lot easier to get into than out of! May we heed the guidance of the Good Shepherd in the choices we make. (b) **When their fleeces are heavy** In the month or so prior to sheep being sheered they can be vulnerable to getting 'rigged' –that is stuck on their backs in a hollow and are genuinely unable to right themselves. At that time of year a shepherd has to make additional patrols around the flock to ensure that this is not a problem for any of his flock. Although it is likely that one or two at least will need to be rescued from this predicament. The problem appears on the surface so slight, but outside assistance to turn over is required. A shepherd may in milder cases help the sheep to stand up and hold them firmly in an upright position until their head clears and their legs are able to take their weight once again. The first few unsteady steps are encouraged until that animal is able to manage on its own once again. Others that have been in trouble for a longer period of time may need taking to the farm and keeping inside in a pen until their have regained their health and strength. In this case the restoration is needed not because of anything wrong the sheep has done, but weighed down by something legitimate it has been unable to function properly. It is not only sin that causes us to loose the joy of salvation it can be exhaustion due to overwork or excessive demands upon our time and energies. It may be the stresses and strains of caring for a loved one with ongoing health issues; it could be the legitimate concerns over the inappropriate lifestyle choices of a friend or family member we are trying to assist and in combination with other pressures causes us to collapse under its 'weight'. Sometimes people can physically, mentally or emotionally, even spiritually break down. The process of healing and restoration, in some cases, can take a long time. For some people a few weeks or a few months off work is sufficient to get back on track for others the damage may even be permanent, restricting what they can do in the future. David in this situation of national crisis had come to the end of his energies and collapsed exhausted at Mahanaim. Yet with the gracious provision of these local rulers and their servants, he and his colleagues were enabled to regain their health and strength. *He restores my soul* wrote David, He can also restore, renew or revive yours and mine as well. At times we can feel profoundly guilty at our limitations and be consumed by a sense of inadequacy. Some people in our society appear to have no 'get up and go' or any desire to do any meaningful work, but at the other end of the scale others of us struggle to handle time off. One colleague in ministry spoke some years ago of feeling so guilty for taking a day off when there was work to be done and unable to settle to anything else. Few of us will be confident that we have always got the balance right with the claims upon our time, talents and energies, but even when we have, circumstances outside our control can quickly engulf us and the best laid plans become history... On an earlier occasion of crisis when seized by some Philistines in Gath, David felt overwhelmed by that situation. God granted him deliverance as Psalm 56:12-13 records: *I am under vows to you, O God; I will present my thank-offerings to you.¹³ For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.* God wants to revive and restore us in these difficult times. Psalm 19:7 speaks of God's Word being used to renew His people.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. Paul in his letter to Christians in a number of churches in Southern Turkey wrote: *Let us **not become weary in doing good**, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*¹⁰ *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers* (Galatians 6:9-10). There are times when you may be the encourager; on other occasions you may be the recipient of such support. Sometimes a little act of kindness or an encouraging word is sufficient; on other occasions a person may need support over a longer time period to regain their vitality. However, may we like David have the assurance that the Lord will sustain and strengthen us for the calling He has entrusted to each one of us.

2. **He leads me in the paths of righteousness** (Psalm 23:3b)

This term righteousness, in essence means to conform to a standard to act within certain legitimate boundaries. In our Christian lives it describes what we do as well as what we are by grace in Christ when we place our faith and trust in Him. It is a relational word, with respect, for example, to our fellowship with the Lord. He is righteous and holy and to be pleasing to Him we must endeavour to reflect these qualities in our own lives. I Peter 1*As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.*¹⁵ *But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;*¹⁶ *for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy.* This is of course a quotation by Peter from Leviticus 11:44. God does not look for majority votes on ethical issues or anything else from His people, rather He promises to do what He did for David. We can take great assurance from passages such as Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;*⁶ *in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.* Ezekiel 34, a whole chapter reflecting on the theme of God as the Shepherd of Israel, in contrast to the false shepherds that claimed to lead His flock, included this promise from the Lord: *I Myself will search for My sheep and look after them; As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so I will look after My sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.*¹³ *I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land.*¹⁴ *I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.*¹⁵ *I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.*¹⁶ *I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak... I will shepherd the flock with justice.* David has testified here that he has complete trust in the Lord's guidance of his life's pathway. These words said in the midst of one of the toughest times of his life, not sat on the beach on his summer holidays away from it all. To go our own way is to risk getting lost and losing a sense of perspective on why we are here on earth. Proverbs 14:12 warns us that: *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.* Jesus, the Good Shepherd said: *I am the way* (John 14:6) –are you following Him? Psalm 78, written by Asaph, includes these words concerning God, with respect to Israel: *But He brought His people out like a flock; He led them like sheep through the desert.*⁵³ *He guided them safely, so they were unafraid; but the sea engulfed their enemies* (Psalm 78:52-53). In many situations in life we simply do not know the future, and we are increasingly glad of that –or at least I am! Is it not wise to put our lives into the hands of a guide who knows the way we take who will go before us each step of our way? Now God's plans for our lives are not always through smooth and easy pathways. We sing sometimes an older hymn in Church [CMP 132]:

Father, hear the prayer we offer:
Not for ease that prayer shall be,

But for strength that we may ever
Live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures
Do we ask our way to be;
But the steep and rugged pathway
May we tread rejoicingly.

Not for ever by still waters
Would we idly rest and stay;
But would smite the living fountains
From the rocks along our way.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
In our wanderings be our guide;
Through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be thou at our side.

These words are not always easy to sing. But the Good Shepherd knows what is best for His sheep and will walk with us on this pathway. Each summer on our farm some of the sheep went for a few weeks holiday to my aunt and uncles farm. Their farm was a hill farm and the fields were full of rush and tougher vegetation on the moors. It was far removed from the flatter lower green pastures our sheep were used to. They would not look forward to munching on the fare available at the venue to begin with. However, there was a method behind this action. Spending time in the better weather on this hill pasture would toughen and strengthen the sheep for the winter months back home. They would cope more easily with the cold or wet winter conditions having had this time away. The sheep never knew what was going on. They had never requested a change of scenery, but their shepherd had arranged it for their good. Yet they sometimes reluctantly went along with their shepherds plan and accepted that he knew best. This was supremely put to the test on the night of Thursday 5 September 1975. Our valley at Aughton had one of its biggest flash floods in my lifetime. In a very short time the entire valley was a silver sea of water. The sheep were surrounded with water. All the farmers in that valley and probably others too were very nervous knowing the storms that had been predicted, but never expecting such a deluge of water. In the early hours of that morning my dad was awoken by the rain and quickly grasped the seriousness of the situation. With his trusty sheepdog Bob he set off to find the sheep. He could not see the course of the river or the many pits or channels in the valley. All had to be memorised that night in assisting the sheep. Over the course of a series of hours with dad in front and Bob behind the sheep filed behind their shepherd through the water to the one lot of high ground in the valley where a neighbouring farmer had a barn. It was a considerable distance through the water, but steadily they made good progress until at last they reached the place of safety as the full morning light was revealing the extent of the flooding. One lamb thought he knew better and tried to take a short cut and was quickly swept away and drowned, but all those that trusted the shepherd were saved. A couple of hours later the air-sea rescue helicopter from Anglesey arrived to winch dad and Bob to safety. The waiting press were gathered in the field where the helicopter landed. It was an unforgettable day in our family. However, the lesson so obvious from a Christian point of view came from the attitude of the sheep. All they could see was water which they feared. A few wrong steps meant certain death. They had to trust their shepherd 100% to be saved. Only when they arrived at their destination did they know this had been accomplished. Our spiritual journey is like that –only when the Lord calls

us home will we know we have arrived safely home, but along the way we need to walk by faith, not by sight, in His footsteps. At times this is really hard as we cannot see where we are going or how a situation will turn out, but He does and our lives are secure in His hands. Will you follow the Good Shepherd for the rest of your life, through the good times and the tough?

3. For His name's sake (Psalm 23:3)

A name in the Scriptures is representative of the character and reputation of the individual concerned. God restores, God directs His people as His honour is at stake. The world around us looks at Jesus through the Christian Church, His representatives. How are we reflecting the character of Jesus? Tertullian, the great North African Christian leader in the 3rd Century AD, said that the Christians of his day reflected the words of Jesus in John 13:35: *All men will know that you are My disciples if you love one another.* He was thrilled that even opponents of the Church acknowledged it. Have you put your trust in the Good Shepherd –if not will you trust Him today? Are you in need of restoration, revival or renewal- ask the Good Shepherd to touch your life afresh by His Spirit even today? Are you a Christian –if so are you following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd as you should? I hope each one of us can say as David did: *He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake, Amen.*