

RESTORED SOULS AND RIGHTEOUS PATHS

"He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."
Psalm 23:3.

Psalm twenty-three is a love song. It is a song of the love and intimacy that exists between the shepherd and the sheep. It illustrates the relationship that exists between God's sheep on earth and their Shepherd in heaven.

Daily the shepherd leads his flock from the fold out to pasture and to drink. The paths in Palestine are many. They have been made and traveled by shepherd and sheep for many generations. Paths run every way. Some of them are paths of peril, paths that run near a precipice, paths that run through shadows where wild beasts lurk, paths that are rough and steep. The shepherd knows the paths and the passages, and leads the sheep in safe paths. The shepherd watches the sheep constantly lest they go astray, yet with all his care some do wander away. When a sheep does go astray, the shepherd goes after it and brings it back.

David wrote, "He restoreth my soul." Note how personal that statement is. He did not say, "He restoreth a soul, some soul, or the soul." He said, "He restoreth my soul."

There may be several meanings to this sentence. It can mean that the shepherd restored the sick to health. The shepherd will care for the sick sheep. He will hunt out the hurt sheep or lamb and anoint and dress its wounds. He will bind broken bones. So our Lord is a true Shepherd Who restores us.

"The great Physician now is near,
The sympathizing Jesus;
He speaks the drooping heart to cheer,
Oh, hear the voice of Jesus."

The sentence may mean that he restores the weak and weary to strength. From early morning the shepherd and the sheep have been wandering. When they come to the intense heat of the noon hours, both shepherd and sheep are fatigued.

The original meaning of the word "restoreth" is "to bring back." The old Saxon translation is, "He is bringing back my soul." Bringing back implies wandering. Christ is the home-bringer of the wandering sheep. How sad it is that after we have heard the voice of the Shepherd saying to us, "Thy sins are forgiven;" after having enjoyed the green pastures and the still waters of His provision; after knowing the Father's house with its "bread enough and to spare;" we should turn away to the filthy rags of sin and to the husks of the swine. How sad that straying should ever occur. How sad that restoration should ever be needed. It is a wretched heart, indeed, that requires such grace.

Sheep stray easily, and so do people. Sheep are very stupid. They do not have any responsibility. One thing that sheep are good for is going astray. They cannot take care of themselves. They are weak and ignorant, and when they do wander away they are the same helpless sheep. They never find the way back. A dog will always find his way home. A cat will come back. Chickens come home to roost. A bee finds its hive. But a sheep will never come home unless brought back by a shepherd. Sheep do not know enough to remain in the flock. They do well at going astray. We are like that, for "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way." Your own way is not the way of righteousness.

"All we like sheep have gone astray." That old sheep of God named Noah did. He was old enough to know better. That old sheep, Abraham, wandered away from God's promised pastures down into Egypt. That old sheep, Moses, lost his temper and in rage wandered from the path of righteousness. Solomon was one of the wisest sheep God ever had, yet how silly he was over women. David, that sheep whose very name means "Beloved," wandered far from

the path of uprightness. The sheep named Peter did the same thing. So have you. So have I.

Sometimes when a shepherd saw a sheep begin to drift away from the flock, he would put a pebble in his sling and drop it in front of his sheep as a warning to turn back. God restores us by warning, by exhortation, by trouble and by chastening. He deals with us in every possible way to bring us back. In the case of Abraham it was by trouble. In David's case it was by threatened judgment. In the case of Simon Peter it was by a look. There is a sense in which we all come back in the same way, for we have to go to the fountain of cleansing for our sins. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." He restores us to fellowship and to service.

"I was a wand'ring sheep,
I did not love the fold,
I did not love my Shepherd's voice,
I would not be controlled;
I was a wayward child,
I did not love my home,
I did not love my Father's voice,
I loved afar to roam.

"I was a wandering sheep,
I would not be controlled;
But now I love the Shepherd's voice,
I love, I love the fold!
I was a wayward child;
I once preferred to roam;
But now I love my Father's voice,
I love, I love His home!"

Thank God there has been revealed to us a love which is not measured by our merits, and which our needs cannot exhaust; a love which bears with us tenderly and patiently in the midst of all unfaithfulness; a love stronger than death. In our most distant wanderings the eye of God wistfully follows our course, nor will He suffer our disloyalty and ingratitude to baffle His purpose of mercy, or sunder the ties that bind us to Him.

Restoration and salvation must not be confused. The sinner who comes to Christ in faith and accepts His atoning work on His behalf becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus. He is "born again," and does not lose his salvation, though he may lose the joy of it. In that sense we are:

"Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it;
Prone to leave the God I love."

But "He restoreth." The manner in which He restores us to fellowship is shown in I John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." His restoration of us is for a definite purpose, namely, to lead us in paths of righteousness.

The shepherd guides his flock along the right paths. He considers the limitations of the slowest and the feeblest, and sets the pace to suit their needs, even though the livelier members of the flock find his movements tediously slow. He does not drive his sheep, but he leads them. He goes before them and they follow him.

"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness." Every soul requires guidance. The path of righteousness is never clear before our sin-darkened eyes. "He leadeth ME." This indicates that there is special guidance for each soul. He has trodden the path before

us. His footmarks are on life's roads. The future is as unknown to us as the heart of darkest Africa was to Stanley. It is tomorrow that fills men with dread, but our Shepherd is already there. He knows what tomorrow and every other day holds, and so is able to lead us aright. He knows our every need. In Him is the manifestation of every virtue there is for us to acquire and by faith to appropriate. By gentle and gradual guidance He leads His own in the path of righteousness. He will always lead us if we are willing to be led. However, we must be willing to be led before we can expect the divine guidance. Our responsibility is to follow Him. We are not to rush ahead of the Shepherd, nor are we to wander away from Him. If we, who are God's sheep, are wayward and insist on going astray, we will suffer the discipline that is necessary to make us obedient.

Jesus Christ is the guide we need. To follow the right course through life is no easy matter. It is the most difficult thing we have to do. Clear vision, earnest devotion, strong determination, patient endurance and even heroic sacrifice may be necessary to keep us in the straight path. The secret of walking in an undeviating line in this evil world is to keep looking unto Jesus. He goes before us, pressing right on in the doing of the Father's will. We keep on the straight track when we follow Him.

"He leadeth me" carries with it the thought that we cannot rightly order our own steps. We know not the way that we should take. It is also a statement which suggests that there is a God-planned life. We are not only saved, but we are assigned to a definite task and plan ordained of God.

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

Christ is our Guide. He will lead you rightly if you will place your life in His hands. At times He may lead you in ways that you do not understand, but remember that He always knows what is best for you. Do not murmur nor rebel against Christ, but surrender your life to Him. If you will only do this, He will lead you in the way that will bring honor and glory to His name. There will not be any limit to the blessings you will enjoy when you place your life fully in the hands of the Lord.

If the Lord is to guide you, there must be a complete surrender of your life to Him. There are three ways by which God reveals His will to us. The first is through the reading of the Word of God. He will never ask you to do that which is contrary to His own blessed Word. If you want His guidance, then fellowship daily with the Word. Second, there will also come to you, through the study of God's Word and prayer, an inner conviction as to the particular way that Christ would have you go. Third, there will come the outward opportunity for the carrying out of His plan. Notice this carefully--the Word of God, the inner conviction and the outward opportunity. When the three coincide, you may be sure that you are being led by the Lord, and you will never go wrong in following His leadership.

This verse reminds us that we are not led in the paths of righteousness primarily for the sake of our own goodness, but for His name's sake. It is not for our glory, but for His. All of His leading is to the end that the name of the Lord be glorified. Christ's own glory is involved in the leading and the restoration of His sheep. He will keep His sheep because His reputation is at stake.

When a sheep strays the shepherd always goes after it himself. He will leave the flock with a keeper and go in the heat of summer or in the cold of winter to bring the stray sheep back to the fold. Why does the shepherd take this trouble? Why doesn't he send someone else on the arduous search? Why should he expose himself to all the fatigue and danger? Why should he leave the rest of the flock for just one sheep? The answer is that "His reputation is at stake." When shepherds gathered for months or even years afterwards,

it would be mentioned as a disgrace to any one of them to have permitted a stray lamb to perish without going in search of it. On the other hand, if he exposed himself to great danger in order to rescue a lamb, that would be mentioned to his credit. Others would praise him as a great shepherd. That is the meaning of the parable of our Lord in Luke 15:4-6.

"What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost."