



"He Guides Me in Paths of Righteousness" - Chapter 6  
A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Faber McMullen- Facilitator)

Sheep are notorious creatures of habit. They will follow paths till the paths become ruts. They will overgraze the same place until it is barren and ruined. Wherever sheep are they can destroy the land. Formerly productive grasslands are now ruined in many parts of the world. Why? Because sheep were left alone to graze the land on their own. To prosper, they must have a good shepherd that guides them and directs them. Left to themselves, they will destroy the land, thereby destroying themselves. They will end up drinking from polluted pools, and they will end up full of parasites.

Contrary to a prevalent misconception, sheep cannot just "get along" anywhere. And they surely can't get along on their own. No other livestock needs as much handling as sheep. If the owner is not a good manager, the land will be ruined and the sheep will be sickly and eventually die. For example, if a pasture is overgrazed, the outcome is disaster for land and animal.

Once I bought a farm that had been owned by a careless tenant. The sheep had been left to themselves, and the indifference of the tenant rancher led to the ruin of the land. The sheep stayed in areas where they liked the roots and plants, and they ruined the land and themselves. The flock became thin, wasted, and sickly. The intelligent rancher must take safeguards against such bad habits. The single best safeguard for health is to keep the sheep on the move. This prevents overgrazing of forage, the rutting of trails, and avoids parasites since the sheep are moved before parasites can fill their life cycles.

There must be a planned rotation from one pasture to another. This is what David was talking about when he talked about being led in paths of righteousness. The rancher must do this or he will lose his reputation. The one who directs his flocks is sure of success. I remember over the years that the moving of the sheep was THE most important principle of my being a good rancher. When I felt that the land and the sheep were no longer grazing to the maximum good of both, I planned and executed a move.

I moved them about once a day during the summer. I would take them to the hills and put them out on fresh grass daily. I would keep them down at a base camp and I would take them up to the good pastures to feed. When I would open a gate to a new pasture, even the old ewes would kick up their heels excited about getting onto the new grass.

Scripture tells us we're a stiff necked group that have each turned to our own ways. (Isaiah 53:6). We do this repeatedly even to our own disadvantage. It is tied up with our pride and self-determination. In the same way that sheep blindly follow each other, we cling to the same habits that we have seen ruin the lives of others. We each have the desire to assert our own wishes and carry out our own ideas. In Proverbs 14:12 and in Proverbs 16:25 we read, "<sup>12</sup>There is a way *that seems* right to a man, but its end *is* the way of death."

The ways that seem "right to us" (the places our errant hearts take us) will lead us to death. They will lead us to destruction. We do not know how to direct ourselves. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:5) Jesus also said, "<sup>10</sup>The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly." Left to ourselves, we will never find the abundant life.

Most of us do not want to be led in paths of righteousness. We prefer to go our own way. We are stubborn and want to continue grazing on the same thing and drinking out of polluted pools. It goes against our grain to follow what God desires for us. We prefer to turn our own way even if it leads to our destruction. We will end up a "bag of bones on ruined ground". We have a sick society filled with people who have turned their own way. This has led to millions of broken homes, broken hearts, and derelict lives. The world is full of broken people with twisted personalities.

Jesus says if we want to follow Him we must give up control of our lives and deny ourselves. Frankly, we just don't want to do that. Jesus was clear when He said, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (Mark 8:34) We however do not want to give up our lives. We are stubborn. Most of us would deny that we are stubborn. We like to think that we are truly obeying. We sing songs that we will follow wherever He leads, but precious few of us follows where He leads. There are many willful, wayward, indifferent, self-interested people who might be Christians, but they are not "Christ-Followers". The Christian life is a rugged life of self-denial. It is not the ordinary way to live. Seven fresh attitudes have to be acquired to find an abundant life that is filled with the wholeness that God desires for each of us. Nothing will please God more than doing the following:

1 Instead of loving yourself the most, you must be willing to love Christ most . This is done with a deliberate act of pouring yourself out on behalf of others. We talk a lot about this, but few really do it. This is what God did for us in Jesus. Jesus laid his life down for us. (John 3:16) Love is self-sacrifice. Are you willing to sacrifice your own self interests to follow Him?

2 Instead of being one of the crowd, are you truly willing to be singled out and be different? Most of us like sheep are gregarious. We really don't want to be different from the crowd. We try to blend in with the world. Jesus said only a few will find His way acceptable.

To be marked as His, we will be marked with cynicism by society around us. This can bring personal suffering and humiliation. We may be called on to enter into the suffering of others.

3 Are you willing to give up your own rights in serving others? Even in our homes or in our church family we struggle with those we love the most. Self assertion is part of our pushy selfish old sin nature. The person who is willing to play second fiddle or take the back seat is free from self and is moving on with the things of God. It is hard to hurt such a person. A person with no sense of self-importance is not able to be hurt. Such a person cannot be offended or deflated. They are at peace. They are whole with contentment.

4 Instead of being boss, are you willing to be at the bottom of the heap. Are you willing to be the "tail ender" instead of the "top ram"? If you are not determined to be "top dog", the fretting and the strains of daily living will fade away. The person willing to put his or her will aside will find a life that is much more stress-free.

5 Instead of finding fault and always asking why, are you willing to acknowledge the sovereignty of God in your life? If you are, then every event will be taken as part of His plan. This brings tremendous peace. You will then be able to find an attitude of gratitude instead of an attitude of self-pity and self-absorption. When you encounter problems, don't look for someone to pin the blame on. If you really believe your life is in His hands rest in Him come what may.

6 Instead of exercising your will, you must be willing to learn to step aside and comply with His will. The early saints pointed out that 9/10 of real Christian living involves removing your will and replacing it with His will. This is the "taking up of the cross daily".

7 Instead of choosing you own way you must be willing to do what He asks you to do. You must act and react in the way He desires. You must be willing to say what He asks you to say. It is simple straight-forward obedience. Doing this is in our own best interest and will be best for His reputation. Many Christians have great knowledge about what God desires, but they plainly just don't do it. They are into themselves. Very few Christians are really truly committed to do what HE WANTS THEM TO DO. There are those that feel the demands of being a Christ-Follower are TOO DRASTIC or even IMPOSSIBLE. But if we are earnest and obedient, He gives us the Holy Spirit that gives us the power to do this. (Acts 5:32). If we have to depend on ourselves and our own strength or will, we can't do it and we will NEVER do it. But if we let Him work through us, we CAN and WILL do all that He requires because He is able.

<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)