

I Shall Not Want For Right Paths

Psalm 23:3

Pastor John Miller

We're going to do what we've done every time as we study this psalm. We're going to read it together. As I said, we're going to do it every week, and by the end of the series you're not going to have to even look at your Bible; you'll have it memorized. Let's all read it out loud together beginning in verse 1.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. 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. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

When the Lord is your shepherd, you shall not want for three things. I want you to notice them. You shall not want for rest, verse 2. "He makes me to lie down." Secondly, we shall not want for restoration, verse 3. "He restores my soul." And now we come to verse 3 that says we shall not want for right or righteous paths. "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

What a blessing it is to belong to the Good Shepherd. It is a blessing to be one of His sheep, and what a blessing to know that He's my shepherd and that He restores me, He gives me rest and He leads me in His righteous paths.

Sheep are foolish creatures and they can't survive without a shepherd. Sheep are some of the most foolish animals on planet earth. They need a shepherd to lead them, to feed them and to protect them. Phillip Keller, again, in his most excellent book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, says this about sheep: "Sheep are notorious creatures of habit." I found that interesting. "If left to themselves, they will follow the same trail until they have become ruts. They will graze the same hills until they become a desert waste. They will pollute their own ground until it becomes corrupt with disease and parasites."

He says that sheep are creatures of habit. We are like sheep. I bet that some of you came to church and sat in the same spot of the pews where you always sit. Busted. It's kind of like your little spot. It probably has your little indentation, and you fit just perfectly in that little spot. I've even seen some people go so far as when they show up for church they say, "Excuse me; you're in my seat."

We get in a rut like sheep, and we waste our own lives, because the Bible tells us in Isaiah 53:6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." In Proverbs 14:12, it says, "There is a way which seems right to a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." So if God left us to ourselves, we would end in decay, disease and destruction.

Like sheep, we tend to wander off God's path. We tend to go astray. So God not only gives us rest, God not only gives us restoration, but we see today in verse 3, that He gives us righteous paths to lead us. God is leading us and guiding us.

There are three truths that I want you to note about this statement about the Lord's leading, "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." I want you to note the reality of His leading. This is the fact that He leads us. Notice it in verse 3: "He leads me." This isn't the first time that David mentions God's leading. In verse 2, you find the same statement: "He leads me." So he mentions it in verse 2, and he mentions it in verse 3.

Did you know that eastern shepherds always led their sheep? They didn't drive them from behind. They led them from the front. Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. I go before My sheep, and My sheep hear My voice, and they follow Me." If you're a sheep that belongs to the Good Shepherd, then you are looking at Him, you are listening to Him, you're loving Him and you're following Him as your Good Shepherd. But He never leads us where He Himself would not go or hasn't gone. And He always leads us, we're going to see, in righteous paths. So after the Lord restores us, then He begins to lead us. If you are His sheep, you have His promise that He will not only restore your soul, but He will "lead you in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

Now how does God lead us? If we're going to talk about the fact that God leads us, I want to give you some specifics on how God leads us. We are introduced to the topic of the will of God. It has become quite controversial in Christian circles; debating whether you can know the will of God, does God have a particular will for each Christian and what is the will of God. There have been books written on the subject of how to know the will of God.

I want you to see some principles of God's leading in Proverbs 3:5-7. You know the verse so well. He says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not unto your own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths," or some translations say, "He will make your way straight." Verse 7 says, "Be not wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and depart from evil." I left off verse 8 in the King James. It says, "It shall be health to thy navel and marrow to thy bones." We all need healthy navels; don't we? The word "navel" there has to do with our nerves; it will calm your nerves if you follow these steps.

Let me give you the steps you need to take to find yourself in the will of God. Number one, trust in the Lord with all of your heart. That's fundamental. The Bible says, "The just shall live by faith," Hebrews 10:38. The word "trust" is a synonym for "faith" or "believing." You need to live a life of faith. You need to trust that God is leading you.

Another thing you need to do is to lean not to your own understanding. Don't try to figure it out yourself. Don't make your own path. Don't try to invent your own way. If I would have mapped out my plan for my life, it would have been totally different than what God had, and I would have missed the tremendous blessings of God leading me and guiding me. It is often said that God gives the best to those who leave the choice to Him. I believe that. And you should say, "Not

mine, O Lord, is the choice on what Your will is for my life. I want Your will, and Your way and Your hand to lead me.” Every Christian should pray that prayer and mean it from the bottom of their heart.

You’re trusting in the Lord, step one, you’re not leaning to your own understanding, step two, and step three, verse 6, in all your ways acknowledge Him. What does that mean? It means that you want God’s will in everything—in your marriage, in your parenting, in your job, what you do with your vacation time, what you do with your money, what you watch on TV; in everything about your life. “Lord, I want to acknowledge You. I want You to be honored in all my ways.” And then His promise in verse 6 is, “He shall...”—not “might,” not “maybe,” not “if you’re lucky,” not “if you deserve it”—“...direct your paths.”

Notice step four in verse 7, “Be not wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord.” That’s the step: Fear the Lord. Do you know that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”? That is foundational for every Christian’s life: a reverence for, a respect for, a love for God. What it means when it says “the fear of the Lord,” it’s talking about a reverential fear, that you want to love God and serve God and honor God. You don’t want to offend God or wound the heart of God. If you love somebody, you don’t want to hurt that person. So if you love God, in the sense of fearing God, you don’t want to do anything to wound God’s heart or offend Him. There is nothing more important than you, knowing the will of God, to have a respect or reverence or fear of the Lord.

Then the last, and fifth, step in verse 7: Depart from evil. In other words, when you are reading God’s Word, and you are asking for direction, and God points out a sin in your life that you need to avoid, what do you do? Avoid it. If God says that lying is evil—“Thou shalt not lie”—what do we do? We don’t lie. If God says, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” what do we do? We don’t commit adultery. If God says, “Thou shalt not steal,” what shall we do? Not steal. Some of you said, “Don’t get caught.” No. That’s why we come back to a fear of the Lord. You can look this way, and no one’s looking, and that way and no one’s looking, and you can look in front of you and behind you and no one’s looking, but you forget to look up. Remember that? That “All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do,” Hebrews 4:13. God always sees. Your concern should not be so much will my husband know or will my wife know or my friends know, but will God know. Yes, He will. So we want to honor and respect Him.

We trust in the Lord, step one; we don’t lean on our own wisdom, step two; we acknowledge God in all that we do for His glory, step three; we fear the Lord, step four; and step five, we depart from evil. So five steps to finding the guidance of God.

But let me tell you some things you should not do when you are trying to find God’s will for your life. You shouldn’t turn to your horoscope. You shouldn’t look at your horoscope and say, “Well, it’s a good day; I can go to church. It’s a good day; I can go to work.” You shouldn’t turn to a Ouija board or a palm reader. You shouldn’t turn to occult practices to try to discern the future. You should turn to the Lord.

Secondly, you shouldn't turn to what I call "Biblical roulette." Some people practice Biblical roulette to know the will of God. They say, "Okay, God, I pray that You'll speak to me. Lord, show me. I'm just going to touch a verse right now, and speak to me." They open their Bible and point to a Scripture. It says, "Judas went out and hanged himself." "Let's try again. Lord, just speak to me. In the name of Jesus!" And then you look down at a Scripture, and it says, "Go and do likewise." "God is a trinity, so I'll try it three times. Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Lord, just speak to me now." Then you look at a Scripture that says, "What thou doest, doest quickly." And then you say, "I don't think this is working today." You have to be careful with Biblical roulette; just kind of picking out a verse and saying that God spoke to you.

Don't get me wrong. God speaks to us through His Word; we do have the objective truth of God's Word. But we need to take it in its historical context. That promise may be to Abraham. Abraham sold everything and took a journey into a strange land. That doesn't mean you're to move to Africa. It might but you can't be sure about that.

Another thing you have to be careful about is fleeces. We Bible students know the story of Gideon when he went against the Midianites. Gideon laid the fleece out and said, "Lord, if it be Your will, let the fleece be wet and the ground be dry." He woke up and, sure enough, the fleece was wet and the ground was dry. He said, "Well, Lord, let me try it one more time because the Midianites are bad dudes, so I want to make sure this is working properly." So he said, "This time let the fleece be dry and the ground be wet." And he laid out this fleece.

So we've adopted this concept of fleeces. "Lord, if it's Your will, let the doorbell ring sometime this year." I think sometime this year, someone will ring your doorbell. Ding. "Did you hear the doorbell? It's God's will." Don't be stupid. I do love you though. I mean, sheep are foolish; they just do stupid stuff. It's like, "I know it's the will of God, because the sun came up today." "It's the will of God, because this friend called me," or "I turned on the TV to that channel, and I knew it was God's will for me." All this crazy stuff that people do. Calm down. Cool your jets. Don't be silly about the will of God.

One woman was praying about taking a trip from the west coast to the east coast, and she wanted to know if she should book her flight. "Lord, Lord, shall I book my flight?" And her digital alarm clock went off early one morning and said "747." She knew it was the will of God for her to get on that airplane and fly to the east coast. I think it would have been definitely God's will if the clock had said "DC10," and that would have been a real sign from God. So we need to be careful about discerning the will of God.

Here's what I would say: Primarily God leads us through His Word. I want you to note that the will of God is first found in the Word of God. The Word of God has universal, moral principles that are God's will for everyone. Here is something that is sometimes forgotten or missed when we are talking about the will of God that I want you to understand: God has given every one of us His will in His Word. Until we align ourselves with His Word—and it takes a whole lifetime of aligning yourself with God's Word—God's not going to tell us what house to buy, who to marry, what car to buy or what college to go to. God will lead us, but first of all, He speaks to us in His

Word.

Let me give you an example. If you're married, the Bible says for "husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church." Do you know that I can actually tell you that God's will for every husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church? Some of you say, "Well, you don't know my wife. She wasn't alive when Paul wrote that. If she'd been around, it wouldn't be in the Bible." I don't think so, Buckaroo. The Bible is the universal will of God for everybody. I've had men ask me, "Oh, Pastor John, I want to know what kind of rifle I'm supposed to buy." "Are you loving your wife as Christ loved the church?" "No, no. I just want to buy a rifle." "Not to shoot your wife!" They want to know God's will in all these crazy areas, but I'm thinking, "Dude, you should begin to read your Bible. Just get your life aligned with God and the purposes of God."

If you're a married woman, God's will for you—you knew I would get to it; didn't you? I'm not going to miss this opportunity. The Bible says—you can check it out; I'm not making it up—"Wives be subject [or submit] to your own husbands as unto the Lord." That is God's will for you. In the Ten Commandments, God's will says, "Thou shalt not have any other gods before Me." That's God's will for everybody. You want to know God's will? There it is; read the Ten Commandments. God's will is that you shouldn't lie, you shouldn't steal, you shouldn't murder, you shouldn't commit adultery, you shouldn't covet. That is the will of God, beloved, for you, for me and for all of us.

And what I'm saying is that once you get aligned with God's will in God's Word—His moral, universal will for everyone—then God will begin to lead you step by step by step by step. God will begin to open doors, God will begin to give you desires. In Psalm 37:4, the psalmist cried and said, "Delight thyself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." When the Lord is your delight—you're trusting in Him, you're not leaning on your own wisdom and understanding, you're acknowledging Him in all your ways—He's directing your paths. When you're fearing the Lord—you're departing from evil—then guess what's going to happen? He begins to lead you and guide you "in the paths of righteousness," and you look around and see the good hand of God led you all the way.

When you look back even at your childhood and your adolescence, and you look back even at times of pain, darkness and difficulty when you thought God wasn't there with you—"all the way my shepherd led me." I love that. "All the way my shepherd has led me. What have I to fear?" I don't need to be afraid of the future. The shepherd's going to lead you. I don't need to be afraid of getting old and being alone and getting sick and losing health and wealth; I know that my shepherd will lead me and guide me and protect me. So the will of God is found in the Word of God. I need to delight in His will, and He'll put His desires upon my heart. We pray, we surrender and we wait upon the Lord, and the Lord leads us.

The second main point I want to show you is where he leads us, seen in this statement in verse 3, "He leads me in the paths of righteousness." That He leads me is a fact. How He leads me? Through His Word. Where He leads me? "In the paths of righteousness." God is righteous and God is holy, so His paths are always righteous and always holy. So if I'm aligned with God's

will, found in God's Word, I find that I'm walking in paths, and the paths that I'm walking in are always the right path, always the righteous paths.

Now that doesn't mean that it won't be dark and it won't be difficult. How many of you, as God's people, have found yourself in the dark? I have. How many of you have ever found yourself in a difficult place? We all have. But I love what someone said: "Never doubt in the dark what God has spoken in the light." You have His promises. No matter how dark life gets, no matter how difficult life gets, you can hold on to His promises: "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." You might find yourself flat on your back in the hospital, but you can say, "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." God is in control.

Do you remember when Jesus told His disciples one afternoon to get in the boat and to pass over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a freshwater lake? What did they encounter on the lake in the middle of the night? They encountered a storm. Have you ever been on one of those trips where everything goes crazy, and you ask yourself, "Whose idea was this"? "It wasn't mine. I didn't want to take a midnight boat ride!" If I'd been in the boat, the whole time I'd have said, "This is stupid. What are we doing? Why?" "Because Jesus told us to, you knucklehead! So just get in the boat!" They got in the boat and they were following His command. They were walking according to His lead: "Get in the boat. Cross over to the other side." Notice He didn't say "go under." He said "cross over." They should have remembered His words.

So they started rowing and they get in the middle of the lake, and it's two miles out and two miles to the other side. The lake's four miles wide; that's a pretty big body of water. Thirteen miles long and four miles wide. I always thought I was a good swimmer, but when I went on a ride across the Sea of Galilee, I thought, "If this thing goes down, I'm dead, unless there are life jackets on this thing." It's a big lake.

So it was dark and the waves were crashing over the boat, and they started to cry out and to fear and to despair, and they were all upset. And, again, if I were on the boat, I'd say, "Whose idea was this midnight boat ride?" And the answer would have been, "Jesus'." "Where is He? He's not even in the boat! It was His idea and He's not here!" But the Bible tells us that He was on the mountain watching them toil. He saw them. Do you know that your Good Shepherd always has His eyes on you?

The first night that I ever went to the Sea of Galilee on my first trip over there, there was a full moon, and there was this beautiful moonlit sea that night. You could see the light streaking across the water, and anyone who rowed a boat by that light could have been seen silhouetted against the moonlight on the Sea of Galilee. It's beautiful. I believe that if Jesus wasn't using His omniscience, which He certainly could have, Jesus would have been able to see them in the moonlight on the sea.

A couple of miles out, they're rowing and toiling, and the Bible says that "He came to them..."—I love it; it's almost as though the Lord's messin' with them, a little humor in the story—"...and

He made as though He was going to pass right by.” They’re rowing and they’re screaming; they thought He was a ghost. “Ah! It’s a ghost!” And this “ghost” starts to walk by and they say, “Wow! Lord, is that You?” And He says, “It is I.” And we know Peter is called to “Come,” and he steps out of the boat and he walks on the water. The whole episode. Jesus gets into the boat, and the boat is miraculously on the shore where it should go.

The very waves that we think are going to undo us and drown us are the very thing, the instrument, that God uses to bring Jesus closer to us. You might be in a storm right now and you’re freaking out. This is the thing that brings Jesus closer to you. And in those times when it’s so dark and the way is so difficult and you think that God has forsaken you, He’s leading you. He’s guiding you. He’s got a purpose and a plan that is oh, so wonderful, if you’ll just trust in Him and put your faith in Him.

So even though the way is dark and dreary and difficult, Jesus is leading us in righteous paths. He’s all wise. He’s all knowing. He’s all powerful. He’s everywhere present. And He’s taking care of us by leading us step by step. Someone said, “Faith never knows where He’s leading, but it loves and knows the One Who leads.” I love that. “I don’t know where God’s going, but I know I love Him and He loves me and that ‘the will of God will never lead me where the grace of God cannot keep me.’”

Let me give you one third, and last, point, and that is the reason for His leading. First of all, there is the fact of His leading: “He leadeth me”; secondly, where He leads me: “in paths of righteousness”; and thirdly, in verse 3, notice the reason He leads me: “for His name’s sake.” Isn’t that great? Why does God lead us in the dark places, in the light places, in the valleys, on the hill tops? We’ll be looking at all of verse 4 the next time. “Even though I walk through the valley of deepest darkness, the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

But we find here that He’s leading us “for His name’s sake.” What does that mean? “For His name’s sake” means “for His purpose and for His glory.” Whenever you read about “the name of the Lord,” it’s a “strong tower, and the righteous run into it and are safe.” It’s a statement that conveys the nature and the character of God. The name of the Lord is holy. It means that God’s nature and character are holy, so His paths are holy. His paths are righteous. It speaks of His person, His character and His nature.

Everything that God does is for His glory. God created you for His glory. You were created for the glory of God. This is why evolution is such an affront to God; the idea that we don’t need a God of creation, that we are here by happenstance and we all just evolved, that there was no purpose or meaning, that we’re just kind of an accident, that there’s no purpose or meaning behind anything and there’s no need for God. We’ve all evolved. No. We were created by God.

One of the greatest verses in all the Bible is the first verse in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis. “In the beginning God...” And then it goes on to say, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” There is so much in that one statement. I’m not an atheist; I

believe in God. "In the beginning God..." I'm not an evolutionist; I believe God created the heaven and the earth. I'm not a pantheist; I don't think God is the trees, or God is the bushes or God is the rocks. God created. God transcends His own creation. God is the One Who created the heaven and the earth, and He is above and beyond and separate from those things. I'm not the tree, and if you really need to cut down a tree, it's okay.

I'll never forget being in San Jose and meeting tree huggers there. I was sharing the Gospel, and they said, "This tree is just as important as a human being. This tree is just as important as a human life." I thought, "Wow! I hope there's no wood in your house. What do you do? Just sit naked on a hill somewhere? Let the ants, that are just as important as you, bite you without stepping on them?" No. If there's a cockroach in my house, I'll step on it. If I need to cut a tree down, I'll cut a tree down and put it in the fire to give me warmth. Thank you, Jesus. I love trees. "What was the sermon about, John?" "I wanted to whack trees." "Pastor—anti- green."

I'm just saying that you were made in the image and likeness of God. You're special. God created you. But He did it for His glory. You were created for the glory of God. Secondly, He redeems us for His glory. Thirdly, God transforms us for His glory. And fourthly, He leads us for His glory.

In Ephesians 1, where it talks about our blessings in Christ from God the Father, and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit—three times in Ephesians 1, in verse 6, 12 and 14—it says that we should be "to the praise of the glory of His grace." So all the blessings of God come to us by His grace. They are unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor. They are all for the purpose of His glory. I don't deserve to have God's hand leading me. Neither do you. But He loves us just the same. There's no reason, no cause, why God should love us, create us, save us, sustain us, lead us and guide us. All praise and all glory and all honor be to God, because He's the God of grace. So He leads us in a way that will honor Him and glorify Him. It involves His purposes and His glory.

Notice the emphasis in this psalm on "He." "He gives me rest." "He restores my soul." "He leads me in the paths of righteousness." It's Him. I hope you now have a great sense of God's love and mercy and grace and goodness to you; that all the way the shepherd has led you. You have nothing to be afraid of. You have nothing to be fearful of.

I don't know what your circumstances are. I don't know what's going on emotionally or spiritually or financially or in your marriage or with your relationships, but God loves you. And He won't let you go. He's the Good Shepherd. Jesus said, "I am the way, I am the truth and I am the life." If you're lost, He's the way; you can follow Him. If you're ignorant, He's the truth; He'll enlighten you. And if you need to go to heaven, He's the life; He'll give you spiritual life and take you to heaven when you die. Jesus—the way, the truth, the life.

When I was thinking about the shepherd concept and Him leading our lives, there are three words that stand out for me. They are, first of all, that we need to look at the shepherd—keep our eyes on Him. A sheep can turn around in a flock and start grazing in a different direction

and lose sight of the shepherd and get lost. Secondly, the sheep hear His voice and follow Him. We need to keep listening to the shepherd; reading His Word, letting God speak to us through His Word. And thirdly, we need to love the shepherd. So it's look, it's listen and it's love. Loving the Lord "with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind."

And someday you're going to look back and say, like Asaph, who closed Psalm 73, saying, "Lord, You've been with me and You hold me by Your right hand. You guide me with Your counsel, and afterwards, You're going to receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but Thee? There's none on earth that I desire more than You."

Let's pray.