

THE LORD GUIDES**PSALM 23:3b**

How is your sense of direction? Jessica Levin never gets lost. "I have a weirdly good sense of direction," says the 33-year-old president of a marketing company in Edison, N.J. "If I've been to a place before, even 10 or 20 years earlier, I can go back and know how to get around." People like Levin don't really have an innate sense of direction. What they do have is outstanding recognition and spatial memory: that is, the parts of the memory that record aspects of their environment and where those aspects are in relation to each other. But human beings can't really compete with some animals who seem to have an incredible inner compass – an innate ability to find their way back home sometimes over remarkable distances. A couple from West Palm Beach, Fla., lost their cat in Daytona Beach in November, only to have the animal show up two months later less than a mile from their house. The cat had apparently walked 200 miles. An Australian cat reportedly traveled 1,000 miles to get home. A Labrador named Buck traveled 500 miles from Winchester, Virginia to Myrtle Beach, S.C. last year. How do some animals find their way home from such great distances? Scientists tell us animals depend on scent trails, chemical trails, and the ability to detect magnetic fields.

Guess what animal has a remarkably poor sense of direction? Of course, the sheep! Apparently, sheep have very poor vision. They can only see clearly 10-15 yards ahead of them. Sheep desperately need someone to provide guidance and direction for them or they can get themselves into a world of hurt very quickly. Over and over again in the Bible, God or Jesus is compared to a shepherd and human beings are compared to sheep. The more we understand about literal sheep and shepherds the more we understand some remarkable spiritual parallels to God's relationship with us.

One of the best examples of this sheep and shepherd metaphor is a very well-known portion of Scripture – Psalm 23. Right now we're in the Christian season of Lent – a period of time every year when Christians all over the world reflect again on the central event of our faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus. So what does Psalm 23 have to do with Good Friday and Easter? Jesus made the connection. He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (John 10:11 NLT) Each week we're going to read Psalm 23 out loud and together in a different English version. We've read it in the New International Version and the New King James Version. Please join me now as we read Psalm 23 in the New Living Translation. We've already reflected on how Jesus, our good Shepherd, provides for us and how He restores us. Today, we're going to reflect on how Jesus guides us in life. That truth is found in the last part of v. 3. "He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name," (NLT) or "He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake." (NIV) Here's the first of three simple truths today.

MY SHEPHERD KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR ME.

What's David getting at when he says, "He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name" (NLT); or "He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake"? (NIV) David is thinking about sheep first and foremost, and the responsibility to lead or guide

them along right paths – paths that led them to fresh, green pastures and quiet waters. He likely knew something we don't being, as we are, urbanites and suburbanites. No other class of livestock require more careful handling and detailed direction than do sheep. Sheep cannot manage themselves and thrive. Do you remember the old Mother Goose nursery rhyme about Little Bo-Peep? "Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep, And can't tell where to find them; Leave them alone, and they'll come home, Bringing their tails behind them." Apparently, Bo-Peep wasn't much of a shepherd herself because she lost her sheep. But whoever was advising her – maybe it was Mother Goose herself, for all we know - gave her really bad advice. If you leave sheep alone, they will not come home on their own bringing their tails behind them! Sheep have a terrible sense of direction. They desperately need to be led and guided. Given the opportunity, sheep will almost always get it wrong.

Here's just one example. A few years ago, shepherds eating breakfast outside a town in Turkey were surprised to see a lone sheep jump off of a nearby cliff and fall to its death. They were stunned, however, when the rest of the nearly 1,500 sheep in the flock followed, each leaping off of the same cliff. I told you sheep are dumb! When it was all over, the local newspaper reported that 450 of the sheep perished in a billowy, white pile. Why didn't all the sheep die? Because those that jumped towards the end of this mass "ewe-icide" were saved as the pile became higher and the fall more cushioned. The estimated loss to the shepherd families topped \$100,000 - an extremely significant amount of money in a country where the average person earns about \$2,700 annually. It all started with one self-destructive leap by own really dumb sheep.

In addition, I've learned sheep are creatures of habit to the point of being destructive. If left to themselves, sheep will overgraze a pasture until it's ruined. They'll use the same route in pastures over and over again so that trails turn into ruts which promotes soil erosion. They'll pollute their own pasture until it's filled with disease and parasites. It's apparently quite easy to find - anywhere in the world – pieces of land that have been permanently ruined because too many sheep had too much access to it for too long. Sadly, they probably had an indifferent, careless, and lazy shepherd who wanted to believe sheep can fend for themselves. A good shepherd realizes his flock must be under his meticulous control and guidance all the time. The single best safeguard is just to keep sheep moving. That's exactly why David writes about "right paths" here. A good shepherd doesn't keep his sheep in the same pasture for too long. He's leading and guiding them here and there regularly so they get fresh, green pasture and still, clean water. Sheep don't know what's best for them. Shepherds do. And a good shepherd takes it upon himself to provide whatever is best for his sheep.

The point of the analogy is pretty clear. Just like sheep, we don't just naturally know what's best for us when it comes to life and living. Left to ourselves, we usually get it wrong. If you're content to run or direct your own life, you will ruin it. The Bible makes it clear that's a direct result of the fact all of us have a sin nature that pushes us toward whatever offends God, brings heartache to other people, and is self-destructive. It says, "All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own," (Is. 53:6 NLT) as well as "There is a path before each person that seems right, but it

ends in death.” (Pro. 14:12 NLT) So just like sheep, we desperately need to be led, guided, and managed carefully by a shepherd who loves us and wants our best.

The promise here is that Jesus, the good Shepherd, will lead us along “right paths.” Now, we know what that phrase means for sheep, but what does it mean for followers of Jesus? What’s a “right path”? Obviously, it’s an analogy to something Jesus provides spiritually. Right paths pretty much cover anything and everything about how to start a personal relationship with God through His Son, the good Shepherd, Jesus Himself, and then both maintain and grow into it day by day. Right paths mean knowing the truth about God, life, people, myself, and everything that truly matters. We get that truth in Scripture and through the Holy Spirit who lives in us and enables us to choose the right paths. Right paths mean more than just knowing those right paths exist, however.

Right paths imply that we’re allowing Jesus to apply the truth we learn and actually experience it in our everyday lives. For example, one right path is facing the truth that I desperately need God’s forgiveness. But it also involves knowing how to ask for and receive forgiveness from God not just once but continually throughout my life. Another example of a right path is learning how to treat other people in ways that please God - not just in theory, but, more importantly, in practice. Right paths always lead to God, never away from Him. Right paths always lead me toward life, never ruin, spiritually speaking. But let’s be careful. Right paths aren’t always easy or comfortable. No, sometimes the right paths our good shepherd, Jesus, leads us through are very hard and difficult. Why is that? The purpose of those paths might be to develop a greater trust in our good Shepherd, Jesus, or to help us get rid of attitudes and behavior that aren’t pleasing to God and are self-destructive.

Now, right there is something to remember about guidance, about being led by this good Shepherd, Jesus. Whenever we think about God’s guidance or direction – those “right paths” - we usually think about major life decisions. Should we go to college? Should we get married? If so, should it be to this person? Should I take the job being offered to me? Of course, we can and often do receive God’s direction for those important decisions. But being guided by the good Shepherd, being led onto the “right paths,” is more about who and what we are (my character) rather than where we are and what we should do (my decisions). The Bible will never tell you to marry Tom or Suzie. It will never tell you to move to California to take the job being offered. It does tell you, however, to be thankful in all things. It does tell you to seek to please Jesus, first and foremost, whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do. “Right paths” are more about living the right kind of life before God and the formation of a mature, godly character. Here’s a second simple truth.

MY SHEPHERD DESERVES MY TRUST AND OBEDIENCE.

“He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name,” (NLT) or “He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.” (NIV) A sheep with half a brain learns to trust and obey its shepherd – especially if it has a good shepherd. It realizes the shepherd has its best interests at heart. From what I understand, most sheep look forward to moving to a fresh pasture. They enjoy being led and guided onto new

ground, and they're happy to follow their shepherd. Following their shepherd leads to the best life available. But some sheep still have to learn the hard way.

About ten years ago, shepherds in Yorkshire, England, found they had a group of sheep to care for that were not only stubbornly prone to stray, but also crafty. They'd installed one of those metal, hoof-proof grids that's built into the ground around the sheep's territory. The animals can't walk over the grid, which is eight feet wide. This usually works well in keeping sheep in the protection of the pen. But one of the sheep figured out a way to transgress the boundaries: it laid down and rolled over the grid. The other sheep in the herd followed the example of the stray leader, and soon the sheep had spread out over the countryside and found their way into neighborhood gardens, where they ate the food and flowers of local residents. The shepherds eventually gathered up the troublesome sheep and returned them to their pen. But again they escaped and got into trouble. And again. While it might have seemed like an exciting adventure to those sheep, it actually put them in harm's way. Several sheep wandered onto nearby roads where cars had to dodge them. Others were accosted by local residents' dogs.

Do you have to learn the hard way? We can be a lot like those sheep just described. We can be reluctant to follow Jesus and be led by the Holy Spirit. We can be convinced we're really better off doing life our own way. We can believe the boundaries God puts around our lives are His way of being mean rather than His way of being kind. We can doubt that He offers us the best life available. We can be content to believe certain things to be true about Jesus intellectually – He's God, He's loving and good, He died on the cross, He rose again - but just never get around to following Him. Following Jesus means surrendering control of my everyday life to Him and obeying Him. What does that look like? Here are some more of those "right paths." Instead of putting myself first, I put Jesus first and others before myself. Instead of following the crowd because I want to belong and be accepted, I follow Jesus alone if necessary. Instead of needing to be in charge, I'm content to be a servant. Instead of having a sense of entitlement, I accept every circumstance in my life – even the hard ones - with gratitude. Instead of being the master of my own life, I'm willing to be led by Jesus at all times. The old hymn had it right, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Back in 2002, Nancy Guthrie wrote a book about the brief life of her daughter, Hope. She entitled the book "Holding on to Hope." She and her husband had Hope for 199 days. They loved her. They enjoyed her deeply and shared her with everyone they could. They held her during seizures. Then they let her go. The day after they buried Hope, Nancy's husband said to her, "You know, I think we expected our faith to make this hurt less, but it doesn't." Nancy says their faith gave them an incredible amount of strength and encouragement while they had Hope, and they were comforted by the knowledge that she's in Heaven. Their faith keeps them from being swallowed by despair. But Nancy doesn't think it makes their loss hurt any less. Early in that difficult journey, Nancy said to God, "Okay, if I have to go through this, then give me everything. Teach me everything you want to teach me through this. Don't let this incredible pain be wasted in my life!" Nancy learned God allows good and bad into our lives and we

can trust Him with both. Trusting God when the miracle doesn't come, trusting God when the urgent prayer gets no answer, trusting God when there is only darkness – that may well be the kind of faith God values most of all. Nancy believes the purpose of Hope's short life – 199 days – as well as her own life was and is to glorify God.

Do you really trust Jesus, your good Shepherd? Does He deserve your trust and obedience regardless? Remember He doesn't give you some kind of spiritual GPS unit that provides beautiful, full color directions for your life today or tomorrow. He doesn't even give you a nice roadmap to follow. Not even a lousy compass! Jesus doesn't tell you, "Go!" but instead, "Come! Follow Me!" He's always out in front, leading and showing the way like a shepherd. Jesus gives us Himself and asks us to follow Him – just one step at a time. He tells us what we need to know sometimes only when we need to know it and not before. Trust and obey Jesus even when life gets hard and difficult? Especially then! Corrie ten Boom, who survived a Nazi death camp and went on to become a beloved speaker for Jesus all over the world, put it like this, "When the train goes through a tunnel and the world gets dark, do you jump out? Of course not. You sit still and trust the engineer to get you through." Trust the good Shepherd. Surrender to the Leader. Submit to His guidance. After all, the Bible says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take." (Prov. 3:5-6 NLT) If you've got half a brain, you'll do it. You've got a good Shepherd – the best One ever. Here's a final simple truth for your reflection.

MY SHEPHERD IS MOTIVATED BY HIS OWN REPUTATION.

"He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name," (NLT) or "He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake." (NIV) David knew something about shepherds that might not seem obvious to us. They highly valued their own reputation. Think about it. If a shepherd took his flock of sheep into the wilderness and they all died, he would be disgraced. Who would ever trust him as a shepherd ever again? The Bible tells us that God cares deeply about His reputation. He is very jealous for His Name. In everything that God does, His own reputation is at stake. That's why in another psalm he wrote, David said, "Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me." (Ps. 31:3 NLT) God refuses to let Himself down. OK, so why is that good news for us – His sheep?

You can be quite sure as one of His sheep, you will receive the best possible care. You can be quite sure that your personal salvation on the basis of your faith in Jesus' shed blood at the cross and in His risen life at the empty tomb is rock solid. You can be quite sure your welfare in this life – even in the midst of many trials and tribulations – is absolutely secure. You can be quite sure that an eternal destiny after death is provided to you without question. Why? Because of who you are? Because of something you did? Because of your abilities? No, but instead because of who God is. For His Name's sake. For the honor of His Name. For His own glory and praise. God will not let Himself down. That's actually wonderful news for you and me. Jesus has proven to be the good Shepherd based on who He is not on who we are. He has revealed to

everyone who He really is – a good Shepherd, no, the very best Shepherd who can be trusted at all times to lead all of His sheep safely home with grace and mercy.

New York City pastor and author, Tim Keller, once said that way back in 1970 a Sunday school teacher changed his life with a simple illustration. The teacher said, "Let's assume the distance between the earth and the sun (92 million miles) was reduced to the thickness of this sheet of paper. If that's the case, then the distance between the earth and the nearest star would be a stack of papers 70 feet high. And the diameter of the galaxy would be a stack of papers 310 miles high." Then Keller's teacher added, "The galaxy is just a speck of dust in the universe, yet Jesus holds the universe together by the word of his power." Finally, the teacher asked her students, "Now, is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your assistant?"

Do you understand the greatness of your Shepherd? No, none of us begin to understand it. How amazing is it that Jesus is willing to be the Shepherd of your life and mine! He wants to provide for us. He wants to restore us. He wants to guide us. Is it that hard to believe that He already knows what's best for your life and mine? Probably not. It's just hard to trust and obey, isn't it? We just need to reflect more on the greatness of this good Shepherd, Jesus. This is not the kind of person you ask into your life to be your assistant while you go on being the real shepherd of your own life. He deserves to be both trusted and obeyed. He deserves to be followed because He is motivated by the greatness of His own reputation. He will not lead you or me astray. He will bring us safely home. The Lord, our Shepherd. "He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake." (NIV)