Psalm 23:3 *Walking With The Shepherd: He Guides Me*

***The Shepherd Psalm***This week we are going to continue our series on Psalm 23.

Each week we have been reading the Psalm together, so I invite you to **do that with me now:**

**1**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
**2**    He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
**3**    he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.
**4**Even though I walk
    through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
    for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
    they comfort me.

**5**You prepare a table before me
    in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
    my cup overflows.
**6**Surely your goodness and love will follow me
    all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
    forever.

There are 6 verses in Psalm 23, and so we are going to have 6 sermons. One for every verse. And today, **we are on verse 3.** Specifically, the part of the verse that says:

He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.

***Discovering God’s Will For Me***
It’s probably the question that pastors get asked the most often: “How do I know God’s will for my life?” How do I know what God wants me to do?

It doesn’t always get asked in that exact form. Usually it’s presented more as a binary choice: should I get married or stay single? Should I move to the city or stay in my small town? Should I pursue a career in ministry, or should I get a job in the secular world? Where should I go to school? Who should I marry? Should I retire early or keep working? Should we have a child? Should we have another? And so on, and so on.

How do we know God’s will for our lives? How do we know what path He wants us to take? When we become Christians we commit ourselves to living for God and following Him. But that always begs a question, doesn’t it? How do I know where God wants me to go?

And if you’ve been a Christian for long, or if you’ve hung around the church and church people, you’ve probably heard people talk about God telling them to do this or that. Sometimes people will say: “God led me to do this…” or “God really opened a door for me and so I knew that’s what He wanted me to do…” or “I asked God what to do, and this is what He told me…”

If you’re like me, you may be wondering, what does that look like? Did God speak directly to those people? I, for one, have never heard God’s direct, audible voice. And frankly, if I thought I did hear God speaking directly to me, I think it would freak me out more than a little bit. I’m not saying that it can’t happen—God can do whatever He wants—but I would say it is pretty rare. Even in the Bible, the percentage of people who heard the direct voice of God seems very small. And I would guess it is a comparably small percentage of people who hear God today.

But if that’s the case, then what does Psalm 23:3 mean? What does it look like for God to guide us?

We believe that God is intimately interested in our lives. We believe that God is paying attention and that, in fact, there is a path He wants us to take. When we have decisions to make in our lives, we believe that God cares about those decisions. So what does that look like? How do we know God’s will for our lives? If we aren’t likely to hear an audible voice, then what does it mean for God to guide us?

I’ve got four observations on discovering the will of God, based on Psalm 23:3. Here are four things for us to keep in mind when we asking what God wants us to do.

***A Helpful Smile***First, **the shepherd guides, He doesn’t send a map.**  God walks with us on the journey, but He rarely tells us the plan in advance.

This is tough, isn’t it? Sometimes, when we have a big choice in front of us, we just wish God would tell us the plan.

Today is high school graduation. Commencement is this afternoon. If you are a graduating senior, this is a point in your life where it just seems like it would be so awesome to know the plan. Like, wouldn’t it be cool if, as soon as you get home from commencement, there would be a FedEx package waiting for you at home, and it was from God, and you open it up, and inside is this big road map for your life? This seems like it would be the perfect moment for God to tell you: “Here’s the path. Here’s where you are going to go to school. Here’s what you are going to major in. Here’s the person you are going to marry. Here’s the job you are going to take. Here’s where you are going to live. Here’s the number of kids you are going to have. Here’s the church you are going to be a part of...” Sometimes we think that would make things so much simpler, if God would just send a map. Let us know all the big decisions in advance.

But that’s not what God promises. That’s not how life works. Look again at **Psalm 23:3:**

He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.

He guides me. He doesn’t send a map. He guides.

The image, of course, is that of a shepherd. The shepherd guides his sheep. He walks ahead of them, he scouts the path, he stays close to them. But what he doesn’t do is send the sheep directions. He doesn’t say: “O.K. flock, here’s the plan: today we’re going down to the green pastures over by the old oak tree. What you’re going to do is go two hills over, and then hang a right at the broken stone fence. If you get to old man Williams’ barn, you’ve gone too far. You gotta go back to that fence and go right, and then go through the juniper bushes until you reach the creek…” Think about it… a shepherd who just gave directions and then left the sheep on their own wouldn’t be a good shepherd. And sheep in that scenario are not likely to fare all that well.

Let me put it like this: when I go into a store I have a pretty good way to find out if the employees in that store are committed to good customer service. If I go up to an employee and I ask: “Excuse me, could you tell me where the plungers are?” (Don’t ask, I have my reasons…) If the employee says: “Oh sure, they’re over in plumbing. You just go over past housewares and hang a left, and then you walk to the end of the aisle and take another left and then they should be right there on the right side, three shelves up.” That’s honestly, not all that helpful to me. I’m pretty sure I’m going to get lost, and I’ll have to find another employee before I find what I’m looking for. I don’t think that’s very good customer service.

But if I go up to an employee and ask the same question, and the employee says: “Oh sure, I know exactly where the plungers are, I’ll take you there” and then that employee drops whatever he or she is doing and walks me where I need to be, that’s good customer service. That employee is serving as a guide, and it’s so much better than a map. It’s so much better to have someone walking with you than to simply have a set of instructions.

And that’s what God is promising us in Psalm 23. He’s not going to FedEx us a road map for the rest of our lives, or even for the next year, but He is going to walk with us. He’s going to guide us.

Jesus touches on this in John 10. John 10 is sort of the New Testament equivalent of Psalm 23. John 10 is where Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd.” And he talks about how the shepherds in a village would keep all of their sheep in a collective pen overnight. And then, in the morning, each shepherd would go to lead out their own flock. **Here’s how Jesus puts it:**

**2**The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.**3**The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4**When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

The sheep follow their shepherd because they know his voice.

If Jesus is going to guide you, then you need to learn to know His voice. You need to get to know Him. You need to be familiar with what He wants and what matters to Him.

Now, again, I’m not saying that you are going to hear God’s audible voice. This is more about knowing Jesus so well that you know the answer He’s going to give even before you ask.

Think about how, as a kid, you used to make a project out of studying your parents. We all did this, right? Our friends would come up with some crazy idea or plan and they’d say: “Go ask your folks…” And we’d be like: “No man, they’d never go for that…” Or there’d be something you really wanted to do, and you’d think: “I’ll ask Mom, she’ll be cool with it. But it’s gotta be Mom first, ‘cause Dad would say ‘No’.” You know what I’m talking about, right? Every kid makes a project out of studying their folks. They know before they even ask what Mom and Dad are going to think.

Well, that’s part of allowing Jesus to guide us. We need to make a project out of studying Him. We need to know what’s important to Him. To this day, there are certain situations where I think, “what would my Dad do in this situation?” and I just know. He’s been gone for 10 years, but I knew him so well, I just know what he would do.

We need to get to the point where “What would Jesus do?” isn’t just a slogan on a bracelet, but it’s something that we just know because His ways and thoughts are so familiar to us that, in any given situation, we know what it is He would do. We know His voice, and we follow Him.

***Seeing God***Which leads me to my second observation: **The shepherd guides us on right paths, not wrong ones.** God is not going to guide us into anything that contradicts what He says is right and good.

Look at **Psalm 23:3** again:

He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.

There are right paths. That implies there are also wrong paths. Not every choice we make is equally valid. God has created a moral universe in which there is right and wrong; His guidance for us is never going to be towards a choice that He says is wrong.

I listened to a sermon this week by Andy Stanley on “Discovering the Will of God.” He talked about how there are three categories we need to think about when we talk about God’s will. He called them: the **providential will of God**, the **moral will of God,** and the **personal will of God.**

The providential will of God are those things that God is going to accomplish no matter what. These are God’s big plans for salvation and redemption and the defeat of evil and the establishment of His Kingdom. So things like Jesus coming into the world are part of the Providential will of God. So is His intention to have the good news of Jesus preached to every tribe and nation. These are things that are going to happen. And He might invite us to be part of it—just like He invited Mary to help bring Jesus into the world, just like He invites us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth—but we can be confident that these things will be done.

The moral will of God, then, are those things that God has commanded. These are the things that He wants us to do, the things that He says are right and wrong. The 10 commandments are part of God’s moral will for us. Ephesians 4, where Paul tells us to put on the new self and get rid of bitterness and rage and malice; the parts of the Bible where we are told to love our neighbor and to treat others the way we want to be treated; everything the Bible says about how we behave; that’s all part of God’s moral will for us.

And then, the personal will of God is what we are talking about today. That’s the specific plans and desires God has for our individual lives. That’s the part of trying to figure out what choices God wants us to make.

And here’s the thing: God’s personal will for us is never going to contradict His providential will or His moral will. That is to say, God is never going to guide us to do something that opposes His big plans for the world or those things that He has clearly defined as right and wrong.

Or, to put it another way: **The more familiar you become with the Providential will of God, and the more obedient you become to the Moral will of God, the easier it will be for you to discover the Personal will of God for your life.**

So, if you’re married, and you start flirting with somebody online, and you are tempted to let that relationship become something it’s not supposed to be—it doesn’t work to say: “Well, that person isn’t a Christian. So God must want me to share Jesus. So if I start having an affair, that’s O.K., because I’m going to tell that person about Jesus.” That doesn’t work. God is not going to use adultery as an evangelism strategy.

Or, again, if you have access to the checkbook at work, and you start cutting yourself some checks under the table; it doesn’t make it O.K. if you grab a few envelopes in the lobby there and give extra money to the church. It is not God’s will for you to steal from your employer so that you can give more to building repairs. God’s personal will for you is not going to violate His providential or moral will.

I quoted from John 10 earlier. A few chapters on, in John 14, **Jesus says this:**

**21**Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

We’re talking about knowing God’s will for our lives. We want to see what God wants us to do. Catch the connection here between obeying God and seeing God. Jesus says: “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves…I too will love them and show myself to them.”

If you want God to guide you in the future, then make a point of obeying Him now. If you want to see Jesus more clearly in your life as you move down the path, then obey Him where you are standing. You see the connection, right? Those who keep His commands are the ones Jesus will show Himself to. Those who know God best in this life are those who have obeyed Him the most.

***What does the LORD require?***Third: **The Shepherd is more concerned about who we are on the path than the path we take.** When the path is not dishonoring to God, God cares more about our character than the specific choice we make.

Now, I need to be careful here, because I just talked about God leading down right paths. Sometimes, it is clear that there is a right and wrong. If a path contradicts God’s providential or moral will, then it is clearly wrong. And God ‘s will for us is not down a wrong path.

There are a lot of choices that we are confronted with, however, where it is not at all clear that one choice or the other contradicts God’s providential or moral will. And sometimes we put all kinds of pressure on ourselves because we feel like if we get that choice wrong, we are going to be outside of God’s will, and our lives will never recover. In that case, I’d like to suggest that we are not always limited to just one right answer. In many cases, there can be multiple paths—and God is not so concerned about which path we choose but who we are as we travel down it.

Let’s go **back to our verse:**

He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.

This is the latest translation from the New International Version of the Bible, and its not necessarily my favorite. It can imply that there is only one right path. But a lot of us have this verse memorized from the King James Version, or the older version of the NIV, **which says:**

He guides me in paths of righteousness
 for his name’s sake.

I prefer this translation, because the word translated as “righteousness” is a very significant word in the Hebrew Old Testament. It’s the word *tsadiq* and it has to do with thinking and doing the right things. It’s a description of what God wants in this world, what pleases Him, and what it means to be like Him. Less than a specific destination, righteousness is a reflection of God’s character.

And that has a ton to do with how God is guiding us, and what God wants from us. So we come to our high school graduation and we have a huge decision to make: “God, do you want me to go to this school or that one? Do you even want me to go to school? Do you want me to join the military or join the workforce?” And that decision can be almost paralyzing, because we worry that if we get it wrong, if we are outside of God’s will, then maybe we’ll have made a mistake we can never recover from.

But in fact, God might be saying to us: “You pick. Iowa State, Northwestern, UNI…you pick. The school you choose doesn’t matter to me so much as that you walk a path of righteousness when you are there. Honor me with the way that you go to school But the specific school—so long as it isn’t something immoral like—I don’t know, Montana—the specific school doesn’t matter.”

When I was in college the Campus Pastor at the church I was a part of was a guy named Ron Bartlett. Ron was great, and he had a huge influence on me at a really important time of my life. There was this group of guys and we just liked to be around Ron. We would play racquetball with him. We would go to his house and play cards. We’d play volleyball and softball. We’d have Bible studies with him.

This was a point in our lives when we were making some big decisions: picking majors and thinking about our careers. And, of course, dating. And so we’d go to Ron for all kinds of dating advice. And I remember—Ron was married to Carol—and we’d ask him: “Ron, when did you know Carol was the one?” And Ron had this answer that seemed strange. He’d say: “I knew Carol was the one when I said ‘I do.’” Ron used to tell us that he thought there were probably a whole bunch of women he could have been married to do. But once he said “I do,” then that was it. He was committed. And Carol was the only one for him.

It’s not like Ron didn’t love Carol, he was crazy about her. They had a great marriage, and it served as a model for a lot of us. But his point was that he didn’t want us to be all locked up with the idea that there was only one person in the world for us to be married to, and if we didn’t find her, then we’d never be happy. What he wanted us to see was that God wasn’t so concerned about us finding that needle in a haystack, but with us being good and faithful husbands once we made that choice. God is more concerned about who we are on the path than the specific path we take.

**Micah 6:8 says this:**

**8**He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
    And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
    and to walk humbly with your God.

God isn’t necessarily going to tell you to turn left or to turn right. He’s not going to tell you to marry this person or that person; to take this job or that one; to retire or keep working (again, assuming that none of these choices violate his providential or moral will). But what He does care about is that whatever choice we make, we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him. Paths of righteousness may lead to several destinations, but God cares about who we are as we walk those paths.

***For His Name’s Sake***And then, fourth: **The Shepherd’s will for us is bigger than just us.** God’s vision for us is higher than just what’s good for us.

Go back to the verse one more time. **Psalm 23:3:**

He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.

Why does the shepherd guide us down the right paths? Or, let’s take in more of the Psalm, why does he lead us to the green pastures and the quiet waters? Why does He restore our souls?

Sometimes we think it’s just because God wants what is best for us. The point of the Shepherd’s guidance, we think, is to help me decide what’s best for me. Sometimes I get this picture, when I read Psalm 23, of just me and Jesus. We’re in a park somewhere, having a picnic, maybe throwing a frisbee around—you know, green pastures and all that—and it’s just me and Jesus and Jesus is just being especially attentive to me. “Do you want something to drink, Russell?” “Are you comfortable enough?” “Can I make it a little warmer for you? Make it a little cooler?” Sometimes, that’s how we think it should be, just me and Jesus where Jesus is just especially attentive to my needs.

But that’s not the point. That’s not His vision for my life. It’s not just about what makes me happy.

Instead, the Shepherd is leading for His name’s sake. It’s about what is best for me, but also about what will bring Him the most glory.

God’s name is His reputation. God’s name is His renown and His fame. It’s how He is known to the rest of the world. And part of His agenda in guiding my life is towards what will bring the most glory to His name. Part of His agenda—and thus, it ought to be a part of my agenda—is to elevate His reputation in the world.

And this is good news for us. I mean, it might not strike you that way at first. You might think: “Gee, God seems kinda of like a glory hog. If it’s not about me, then it’s all about Him. That seems kind of selfish of God.”

But, you see, this is the way we should want it. Because what this is saying is that God has staked His reputation to you and me. He is going to guide us on right paths, He is vested in the direction our lives go, because it is a direct reflection on His name.

How do you judge the quality of a shepherd? Isn’t it in the quality of His sheep? At the end of the day, when we go to the Clay County Fair and they hand out the big purple ribbon for Best in Show to the best pen of sheep, that’s a reflection about the people who cared for and raised those sheep far more than it is a reflection of the sheep themselves. Nobody stops and applauds the sheep and says: “Good job caring for yourselves. Good job feed and watering yourself. Good job avoiding the predators and the thorns. Good job not getting lost.” We applaud the shepherd. We say, that’s a Good Shepherd, because He took good care of His sheep.

So when you are trying to discern God’s will for your life, pay attention to what will bring Him the most glory. It’s not just about you. It’s about His name.

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How do I know God’s will for my life? It’s a question we’ve all asked. Probably the question pastor’s get asked most often.

The good news is that God does have an interest in the path your life is taking. He is paying attention. Just keep in mind:

* He doesn’t send a map, but He does promise to walk with us along the way.
* There are wrong paths, so we need to be familiar with what God says is important.
* Who we are on the journey is just as important as where we are going.
* And, God is guiding us for the sake of His name.