

Following the King

Psalm 23

Following the Good Shepherd

Introduction

I don't know if you've seen people driving around in their cars with that nifty little gadget sitting on the dash. You might have seen them. It's called a "GPS", which stands for "Global Positioning System". If you don't know what I'm talking about, it's basically a little TV that sits on their dash; and through the magic of technology, a satellite tells the driver where they are, and where they need to go.

But I remember a story in the Sydney Morning Herald a few months back, which warned motorists to not trust their car's GPS systems. It told the story of a Norwegian couple who were looking for a particular bottleshop in Rio de Janeiro. Thinking the GPS was taking them there, they ended up driving, and driving.....into a slum area which is controlled by a dangerous gang. Unable to locate the bottleshop, they pulled up next to tattooed pedestrian wearing a bandanna, and wound down the window to ask for directions. Little did they know that the Norwegian word for "bottleshop" is similar to Portuguese for "**are you a girl?**". They soon drove off – one of them sporting a bullet in his left shoulder. So much for technology.

There's something that worries us about getting **lost** – that it doesn't just waste time and frustrate us, but we can sometimes end up in **real danger** - if we're in the wrong place at the wrong time. We want to know the way to go, so we know where we'll end up. Every year countless thousands of GPS systems are bought by Aussies, so they can find their way around; Yet very few Aussies (it seems to me) give any deep thought to where their **life** is going. Have you ever thought about that?

Where's your life going? What is your life FOR? I'm not talking about your financial future, or the career or the family plans. But about a much deeper level: Personally. Spiritually.

Where is your life going? And how do you intend to get there?

As we think about that, we turn to Psalm 23 - an ancient Israelite song. There's good reason to believe that King David wrote this Psalm. He lived around 1000 years before Jesus. And this song is basically a heartfelt expression of David's confidence in who God is, and what he does.

A song of King David, trusting in the LORD [vv. 1-3](#)

As we look at it, the first thing we notice is that David starts to express his trust in God, using imagery that he knew well. Before he became King, David was a shepherd. And so he uses a familiar theme as the vehicle for his song. David knew that it was a shepherd's role to care for the sheep and to protect them.

And the sheep normally stay close to the shepherd for that very reason. All they truly need is to be found where the shepherd is. And to stray away from the shepherd is to head into dangerous territory.

From verse 1 David tells us what satisfies him. And keeps his life on track. He says,

The LORD is **my** shepherd, I shall not be in want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul.

This is a picture of a sheep, content that the shepherd provides **abundantly** all that the sheep truly needs. The words “I shall not be in want” more plainly mean, “I have everything I need”. With the LORD as my shepherd. The one who guides me I have everything I truly need. He cares for me. He restores my soul – he refreshes the deepest part of me. Like nothing else can. And, like a shepherd, he **guides** me through life.

But you have to remember who David was to appreciate what he’s saying here. David was a **King**. Which means he was loaded. He had GOLD. MONEY. FAME. POWER. But he knows what matters **most**. He says **God** is my shepherd. And because of that I have everything I need.

God **guides** David. It’s very **real**. But when it comes to God guiding and leading David through life, he’s not talking about hearing mystical voices. It doesn’t mean that God tells him what kind of breakfast cereal to eat, and what colour socks to wear. David actually **tells** us about God’s guidance. He says there in verse 3,

He guides me in paths of righteousness,

Where does David’s shepherd ultimately take him? In the paths of **righteousness**. God takes him on a journey of living for him...of living **devoted** to God in every part of life. Living **for God**, and living according to **his Word** is the path laid out for God’s people. And it’s a **good** path. In one of the other Psalms, the writer says to God,

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. (119:105)

David says here “he leads me in the paths of righteousness”. And God’s Word is the **light** on the path. God doesn’t want you to waste your life, which means listening to his **Word**. Learning what the Bible says, the maker’s manual - and seeking to live it out: living according to his Word, and not your own personal preference.

There’s only 2 key ways to live life. Either **you** are in the driver’s seat... or **God** is. Either **you** have the final say; and decide what’s important; what to value; what to do. **OR**. You seek to live the kind of life that says **God** has the final say, in what’s important; and what you should value.

And the whole Bible is about this choice. About how human beings say to God “thanks. But no thanks. We’ll take it from here.” We think that we can live without him. But the problem with that is, nothing quite satisfies our deepest needs like God does. There’s no **substitute** for the eternal, transcendent God. Yet we try. And you can see it every day in our society. We set about living the kind of life that **we** want...that makes us **feel good**. Yet it doesn’t take long. For that **hunger** to set in.

That we need something **more**. That’s why Aussies spend billions each year on cars and electronic gadgets. We need something to impress us...and make us feel something. Yet it doesn’t take long, and the new ipod or the new car, doesn’t quite impress us the way it used to. And so we need more money for more things. And we need to be entertained all the time...otherwise we’ll even get bored. And many people in our culture every week will go to the pub, or the club. And drink themselves half to death. Just to feel good. Just to feel **something**.

The kind of life where you only live for **you** doesn't fill you up. It **doesn't** satisfy. Only **GOD** does. And that's what King David knows. And in a sense that's what Psalm 23 is about. A song written by a **rich** man. Who was **rich** because he chose the right kind of life. With God in the driver's seat.

Notice David isn't embarrassed about following God, and about walking the paths of righteousness – because he knows that if that's where the Shepherd wants him to go, it must be the best way. That must be the best way to live life. So as the Lord guides David down the paths of righteous living, he knows that he has in his relationship with God, what he most truly needs in life.

[vv. 4-5](#)

If all the talk about green grass and quiet waters sounds a bit too cute and nice to reflect reality; we read on and find out that David doesn't have his head in the clouds. David knows that life isn't all about green grass and quiet waters. It's not always easy. Or pleasant.

See, David knows that for a shepherd to lead the sheep to water, you may need to take them to a stream at the bottom of the valley. Which is sometimes the only place to find water. And valleys are dangerous places for sheep. David says, verse 4

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are
with me;

God doesn't promise that you won't walk through the darkest times of life. He doesn't always spare us from times of trouble or sadness in this sinful world.

BUT he **does** promise to be with his sheep in the valley. David says, "I will fear no evil – for **you** are with me."

The next verse can catch us by surprise a bit, because David moves from the imagery of God as shepherd, to a different image. To that of God, being a host. He says...verse 5,

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

If you read about the life of King David in the Old Testament, you'll know that he had his enemies. He was the one who took on Goliath. He survived a number of attempts to take his life. As King of Israel, he knew all too well the threat of the enemies around him. Yet he knew that **God** had given him his place as King. In the presence of opposition, God chose David and set him apart for his own purposes. In the presence of his enemies.

So we can see that Psalm 23 isn't all green grass and quiet waters. But very much a song of confidence in the God whom David follows. Both in the good times, **and the hard times**; In the **peaceful** times, and in the **dark valleys**. So David can trust that God's got him covered, and get on with living for him - walking the paths of righteous living.

Verse 6

The final verse really ends the Psalm well; with a big statement.

It's a statement that, at the end of his life, and for all time. David will be with his God. In both life and death, the sheep will be where the shepherd is. Verse 6,

⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

It's the knowledge of **God's** goodness and love, that will help you through all the days of **your** life. Not the idea that somehow everything's going to be picnic because you're a Christian, but knowing the goodness and love of God follows **you**.

So, trusting and following God has a lifelong impact, that continues into eternity.

- - Israel, brought up from Egypt

Y'know I reckon there's something a bit weird about singing a song that someone else wrote, if it doesn't ring true for you. For example, I don't mind that song "We are the Champions", which was sung by the band Queen. I've been known to burst out in chorus on the odd occasion, singing as loudly as possible. Yet from time to time, it's occurred to me that I've never actually been a champion at anything! Except maybe when I'm playing table tennis with the kids. I like the song, but I'm **not** a Champion. So it's not a song that can I really connect with I suppose.

So how does that work with Psalm 23? David wrote it. But why would the Israelites put this Psalm in their songbook – and sing it at their festivals? If it's a song about **David**?

I think the answer is that the Psalm hints at how God saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land. God had promised them long ago that he would rescue his people and bring them to a land where they could dwell with him. And the way that God did that was like a shepherd, bringing his sheep out of trouble. Psalm 78 says,

But he brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the desert. (Ps. 78:52)

So in a way, Psalm 23 became a **national** song...a song that any Israelite who trusted and followed God could take up and read. Because it made sense for the average Israelite to say "the LORD is my Shepherd", because that's what he was. And the Israelites knew too well that God had given them the land "in the presence of their enemies" around them. And when the big temple was built, it meant a lot to say "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever".

So this song isn't just the experience of one person, but a reflection of the experience of God's Old Testament people. Of how God led them out of slavery into the blessing of the Land which he had promised. God was their shepherd, and if they trusted and followed him, that's all they'd need.

But, if you're familiar with what happens years after David's dies, you'll know that the Israelites **stopped** trusting and following God. They were sheep who didn't follow the shepherd any more. And that's where it all went downhill for them. The prophet Isaiah came along and said "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way". As a result of Israel's rebellion against God, their temple was destroyed, and they were taken into captivity.

With the sheep scattered, it seemed like the shepherd of God's people had packed up and gone home.

- **God's people, following the good shepherd [795]**

A 1000 years after David, a Jewish man was heard, teaching these words...recorded in the Gospel of John. He said...

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-- and I lay down my life for the sheep.
(John 10:14-15)

Jesus was a descendent of King David. Jesus was a King who came like a shepherd. To call out to his sheep who'd gone astray. And not just the Jews, but that call would go out to all people. And it's that call that you're hearing today. That **Jesus** is the only one worthy of being followed. And his love for the sheep is so **great**, he came to lay down his life for them. To save them from the consequences of their sin. And give them eternal life.

In that case, we can see that Jesus is like the shepherd of Psalm 23, who seeks to guide us through life. Down paths of righteousness. And **he's** the one who'll meet our deepest needs. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said those famous words...

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls. (Matt. 11:28-29)

Jesus wants us to follow him, down paths of righteous living. Of living for **him**, and **his** priorities. As we follow him, we'll find rest for our souls. Something **real** we can't find anywhere else. He came that we might know the truth, and have peace... ..and follow our shepherd down paths of living for him.

If we trust and follow Jesus, it'll have a lasting impact on our lives. And even when this life is through, we'll still be where the shepherd is.

Again, back in the Gospel of John, Jesus said,

" My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.
(John 10:27-28)

Because of Jesus – because we trust him – we have forgiveness, and eternal life... . God's goodness and love **will** be with us **forever**. And no one can snatch us from the hand of the Lord Jesus.

Who/what do you follow?

We started by thinking about the big picture of our lives. What's shaping us, and guiding us through this life? What do we **need the most in life** in order to live life the way it was meant to be lived? So we don't waste it.

Psalms 23 reminds us, that we need a **shepherd**. We shouldn't do life with US in the driver's seat. We need God's help to get through. To give us rest. To restore us. To guide us with his Word, as we walk down the paths of righteous living. We need a shepherd to **follow**, so that he'll be with us in the dark valleys of life.

But what about **you**? Who or what do **you** follow? Everyone in this world – whether you're an atheist or a Hindu or whatever - will make something their *ultimate concern*. Everyone has something they value *above other things*. What's the central, guiding thing in **your** life? Money? Family? Sport? Music? Food?

As 2009 marches on – I want to encourage you to make sure that you're following the Good Shepherd.... who offers you rest..... and peace, as you follow him down the right paths. Jesus doesn't want to be on the sidelines of your life. He doesn't want to be your hobby.

If you put your trust in Lord Jesus, and strive to follow him with all your heart, you'll be able to say, just like David did,

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want . . .
I will fear no evil, for he is with me . . .
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The question this morning is.. .

Who or what are you *really* following?

Let's pray . . .