

July 5/6, 2025

## **Follow the Leader**

### *Everything We Need Series*

**Psalm 23:3b**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Several years ago, we were having a problem with a critter in the barn. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but I didn't want it in there. So I borrowed a live trap and put some bait in it. The next morning I came out and I could tell the live trap was sprung. So I'm like, "Ah ha! I gotcha!" Well, it was the neighbor's cat, (*laughter*) and because it was a live trap, it wasn't hurt. But it really didn't want to be in there anymore, so I opened it up and I released it. The cat leaves. I was pretty sure that wasn't the critter I was after, so I reset the trap. The next morning: the neighbor's cat. Three mornings in a row! I had thought, the first time, that certainly the cat would realize it's a trap and not go back in it again. Three mornings in a row! So I gave up and gave the trap back. I don't know what the critter was. I had to conclude, apparently that cat is not too bright. (*laughter*) Thankfully, we, as people, would never act like that...would we? Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 23, as we continue to work our way through the 23rd Psalm this summer.

**The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside quiet waters.  
He restores my soul;**

Last week, Ryan told us that the phrase, "He restores my soul" could better be translated, "He brings me back." The sheep is lost and has no chance of survival in the wilderness alone. So, the Good Shepherd goes looking, finds the sheep, and with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, puts the sheep on His shoulders and brings it back safely to the flock. It's a beautiful picture of the kindness and the compassion and the forgiveness and the love of God. But it does raise a question now that the sheep is back in the flock. Now what? You would think, after that experience, the sheep would never wander away again. But of course, over the years, the Good Shepherd goes, finds the lost sheep in the middle of their mess, brings them back, and for a while they seem content to stay with the flock. But eventually they wander away and get into a mess again.

All of us have gone astray. Isaiah says, ***All we like sheep have gone astray.*** The Good Shepherd has gone out, and He's found us, and with kindness, compassion and forgiveness, He's brought us back. But now what? I doubt there's anyone in the room this morning that would say they want to wander away and make a mess of their life. It's not what we want. You wouldn't be here if that's what you want. So, how do we make sure that doesn't happen?

It's actually quite simple. It reminds me of a game we used to play as children: Just follow the leader...**Follow the leader!** He guides me to the paths of righteousness. It could easily be translated, "He leads me down the right path." This isn't really that complicated. Just follow the leader; He leads me down the right path.

Ryan mentioned last week that in these ancient Near East wilderness areas, there were the faintest of paths. Because the ground is so hard, they really weren't obvious, so it was just a maze of paths in the wilderness. Some of them led to the edge of a cliff. Some of them led to dangerous dead ends, and only the shepherd knew the right path to travel. So the sheep knew, "Just follow the leader."

So why do we wander away? Well, there could be several reasons for that. The Proverbs talk about one reason in chapter 26, verse 11. The proverb says:

**Like a dog that returns to its vomit  
Is a fool who repeats his folly.**

It's a rather crude proverb. It's supposed to be crude. We find ourselves asking the question, "Why would a dog do that? That's so gross!" The answer, "Because that's what dogs do. It's the dog's nature." That's the point; that's what fools do. They wander away and they return to their folly. Peter picks up that proverb and adds more discussion to it. In 2 Peter, chapter 2, we don't have time to look at a lot of the details, but I do want to make a couple of comments. So in 2 Peter, chapter 2, Peter is talking about false teachers. He's talking about false prophets. He's talking about those voices that lead us away from the flock and down the wrong path. In verse 17, he describes them this way,

**These are springs without water...**

It's a very vivid description in the ancient world, where water was of such value. Imagine being in the wilderness. You fear you're going to die of thirst, and along comes someone that says, "I know where there's a spring. Just follow me." So in desperation, you follow, and what you find is a spring with no water. It's an empty promise. Peter goes on to say that these are people who, themselves, live in bondage. They have no skill in life. They don't know how to live life; they're a mess. But they do not hesitate in telling everyone else how to live their lives. But, at the end of the day, they have nothing to offer. They're just springs without water. But then Peter goes on to say we're exposed to a better way of living. We become aware of Jesus and God and the gospel and what God has done. But eventually, inexplicably, we just wander away from the flock again and make a mess of our lives. What Peter says is that the second time is worse than the first, because the first time we didn't know any better. We didn't know there was a better way. That's just what fools do; they return to their folly. But having been exposed to a better way, why would you return to a spring when you know there's no water there? Then he gets to our proverb: verse 22:

**It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.”**

What Peter is saying is this. Some people in their desperation, in their mess, determine they need help from God. “Maybe what I need is a little God in my life.” So what they pursue is religion. “I need some religion. I need God. I need some help.” So they’re going to add some religion. They’re going to add God, so they become aware of some of these truths. But at the end of the day, they’ve never really experienced transformation. They’ve never really surrendered. They’ve never really entered into a personal relationship with Jesus. They haven’t been born again. They haven’t been changed into a new creature in Christ. The thinking is, “I just need a little God; I just need a little religion.” Maybe that’s where some of you find yourselves this morning. Something’s happened; it’s made a mess of your life. It could be a relational mess...an addiction...the doctor said, “Cancer”. Whatever it is, your thinking is, “Maybe I need a little God. Maybe I need to go to church a little more often. Maybe if I do that, God can fix this.” I just need to be honest with you this morning. That will not work, because nothing inside has changed. And if nothing inside has changed, you’re eventually just going to go back to the same messy ways. You’re just going to wander away. It isn’t enough just to add some God and add some religion and think that’s going to fix things.

Jesus talked about that in John, chapter 10, where Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd. He is the fulfillment of Psalm 23. And what Jesus says is, “***I know My sheep and My sheep know me.***” This is a personal relationship. They know My voice; they hear My voice. I lead them and they follow Me. The psalm does not say, “The Lord is “a” shepherd.” It says, “The Lord is “*my*” shepherd.” It’s not religion. It’s not adding God to your life. It’s transformation. It’s new life in Christ. It’s a personal relationship with the Good Shepherd that changes everything. It’s John chapter 10, where Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd, where He also utters those famous words, “***I have come to give life abundantly.***” He wants His sheep to flourish. That’s who He is as the Good Shepherd. A few chapters later, Jesus says, “Hey, I’m the way. I’m the path.” This isn’t all that complicated. Follow the Leader, because it’s the Good Shepherd that knows the right path. So if that’s true, why don’t we follow? Why are we prone to wander? I understand it can get confusing. This is a confusing culture. There are lots of paths.

I’ve mentioned before, years ago Patty and I took a missions trip to Guyana. We flew from Georgetown up to the very north. In the jungle there’s a little village called Lethem, crossed the river into Brazil, were there for several days, and crossed back. When we crossed back, we were staying with a host family in a little hut house in this village. There were lots of these little huts and houses and paths that zigzagged everywhere through the jungle. That morning we got up, and the host suggested that I take my bags up to the airport early, the airport being a dirt strip with an old shack. He said, “Why don’t you get them up there and get them checked in.” It sounds like a good idea, but the only mode of transportation was a bicycle. So I have two big bags. One is Patty’s; and one is mine. I get them on the bicycle, and of course it’s pouring rain. So as I leave the hut, he says to me, “See that tower with the blinking light? Just go to the tower. That’s the airport.” So I’m zigzagging through these paths, and it’s just a maze, but I can see the tower, and I finally make it

to the airport, drop off the bags...but...I hadn't considered one problem. As soon as I turned around, there's no blinking tower at the hut of the host, and there are endless paths into the jungle. I'm like, "I don't know which path I came out on." It's just a zig-zaggy maze of paths. What should have taken ten minutes, took an hour and a half. Three times I went back to the airport, because I could see the tower, and started over again. There was a point in my journey where I thought, "I think this is my new home. *(laughter)* You know, I don't know, maybe Patty will miss me or not, but welcome to Guyana." Imagine how different that would have been had the host been with me. The host knows the right path. It's not complicated. Just follow the leader. There's a proverb that says, "***There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end is destruction.***" Imagine if I'm following the host, and halfway I determine, "I don't think he knows where he's going. I know the right way, and I'll go my own way." That would be pure foolishness. This isn't complicated. **Just follow the leader.**

So one of the questions we have to wrestle with is, "Why wouldn't we follow the Leader?" Do we think He's not good? Do we think we can't trust Him? Do we think He doesn't know the way? Do we think He doesn't know what He's talking about? What would cause us to wander off the path? What is it that we believe about the Good Shepherd that causes us to not follow? Maybe we have a really messed up view of God. Maybe we just think God is restrictive, that God isn't very loving, or caring, or He can't be trusted. There must be some reason why I'm not willing to follow the Good Shepherd. The psalm says,

**He guides me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake.**

The very reputation of any shepherd is at stake in how well he cares for his sheep. The Good Shepherd needs to take care of the sheep **for His name's sake**. In John 10, when Jesus was talking about this, He talked about a hireling. A hireling is just a paid employee, doesn't really care about the sheep, is just interested in a paycheck. Jesus said, "I'm not a hireling. I'm the Good Shepherd. I care about these sheep." Now stop and think about this. God is so committed to bringing us back, to leading us to flourishing, to giving us the life that our souls long for, that it cost Him the life of His own Son. When it says, **For His name's sake**, it actually goes beyond just reputation. Names in the Bible were often descriptions. It's the idea that He isn't just a Good Shepherd, it's who He is. It's His nature. Why would the God of the universe sacrifice His own Son to be tortured and nailed to a cross in order to bring you back, in order to provide you the forgiveness of your sin, in order to show you kindness and compassion and love, and to carry you back to the flock and lead you to flourishing? Answer: Because that's who He is. That's why He does that.

If that's true, why wouldn't we follow Him? Why are we prone to wander off the path and do our own thing? You say, "Okay, okay, that makes sense. But practically speaking, like how do we do that? How does He lead us down the right path? Is it just like this mysterious thing that happens? Maybe I just follow my emotions and they'll get me there?" I'd highly recommend you don't do that. "Maybe I just need to Google it." I really recommend you don't do that. It's actually very

simple and very practical. It's the topic of conversation in the very first psalm in the Bible. Psalm 1 tells us how He guides us in the path of righteousness. Psalm 1, verse 1:

**How blessed** (It's a Hebrew word that means, how happy. How fulfilled) **is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!**

(To use Peter's language, how happy is the person that doesn't listen to the spring without water.)

**But his delight is in the law of the LORD,**

(How does He guide us in the path of righteousness? How does He practically lead us down the right path? Answer: It's right here. This is the road map to flourishing. He's given us the Book and the road map. Just read it! Listen to it! Follow Him!)

**And in His law he meditates day and night.** (\*NASB, Psalm 1:1-2)

The Hebrew word translated **meditates**, is the Hebrew *haggah*, which is an onomatopoeia, meaning it sounds like what it is. It was used to describe a lion growling over a piece of meat—growling over it, pawing it, working it over all day long—consuming it. The idea of meditation is we're gnawing on it; we're eating it; we're consuming; we're pawing over it night and day. So if that's true, if He's given us the road map to flourishing, why don't we read the Book? If you believe that's true, you answered that question by how much time you spent reading the Book this week. Is this really a roadmap to flourishing? Is this really the way He guides us down the right path? Is this the way He keeps us from wandering off and making a mess of our lives?

This is very important to understand, especially given the research of the last 10 to 20 years of Christianity in America. All of the research is saying the same thing. Western Christians are becoming biblically illiterate. It's shocking what Christians don't know is in the Book! He leads us down the right path. If you have a messed-up view of God, maybe you just see the Bible as a book of rules, a book of restrictions, so you have no real interest. But that's not who God is. He's the Good Shepherd. He's trying to lead you to the abundant life. He's trying to lead you to the flourishing your soul wants. He's so committed to this He's given you a road map to lead you down the right path.

Years ago, when I was in grad school in Southern California, I had a job as a tow-truck driver. It was a good job. Our station had the AAA license, which was a very coveted license, because it was a very lucrative license. When you got the call, you had 20 minutes to respond and be at the call. But if you got, let's say 3 calls back-to-back, you didn't have 20 minutes, then another 20 minutes, and then another 20 minutes. You had 20 minutes from the time you took the third call to be there. So it was pretty high pressure, and you couldn't make many mistakes. If you were late, your station got a demerit. If it got too many demerits, it lost its license. So essentially, if you give them a demerit, you lose your job. Here's the problem. I grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. I grew up at 24th and B. It's right down by Lincoln High. And in Lincoln Nebraska, we had a very clear concept of streets. Some of them go “this way”. Some of them go “this way”. Those going this way are numbers; these going the other way are letters. It's pretty simple to figure out. You figure

that out and you can find your way. Well, apparently no one told them in California that's a better way to do streets, because there is not a straight street anywhere! They're curvy, windy, circle-y. Nothing makes sense. You can't figure out the addresses. You're going down the street and you're trying to find it. You're about to the address, and then there's an expressway, and you can't figure out how to get across the expressway to help the people on the other side. The only chance I had was they gave us, as tow-truck drivers, what they called the T-Guide...Travel Guide. The T-guide was a thick volume that had every street, every address, every alley, every dead end. As long as I paid attention to the T-Guide, I could survive. But here's the deal. As strange as this may seem, the T-Guide did me no good just sitting on the seat next to me. It's crazy, but I had to actually pick it up, look at it, and read it for it to help me. There's no way I could have kept that job without the T-Guide.

**He guides me in the paths of righteousness.** (\*Psalm 23:3b)

Oh, how does He do that? He's given me a T-Guide. Don't make it more complicated than it needs to be. I have a travel guide right here. (holding up the Bible) This is the map to flourishing. This is what's going to keep me from wandering away and making a mess of my life. He goes on in the psalm, and he says to those who follow the travel guide:

**He will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water,  
Which yields its fruit in its season  
And its leaf does not wither;  
And in whatever he does, he prospers.** (\*Psalm 1:3)

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Bible, and it's all about the travel guide. It's all these amazing benefits of reading the travel guide. In Psalm 119, verse 1:

**How blessed** (There's our word again...how happy, how fulfilled) **are those whose way is blameless,**  
(Oh, how do we do that?)  
**Who walk in the law of the LORD.** (...who travel the path laid out in the map.)  
**How blessed** (how happy) **are those who observe His testimonies,**  
**Who seek Him** (in other words, who follow Him) **with all *their* heart.** (Psalm 119:1-2)

Verse 9:

**How can a young man keep his way pure?** (That's a good question.)  
**By keeping it according to Your word** (Just follow the map).  
**With all my heart I have sought You;**  
**Do not let me wander from Your commandments.** (Don't let me wander off the path.)  
**Your word I have treasured in my heart,**  
**That I may not sin against You.”** (Psalm 119:9-11)

The first week of our Psalm 23 series, Mark encouraged us to work at memorizing the 23rd Psalm this summer, to learn it, to understand it, to follow it.

If you were to ask me this morning, “Can you give me directions to the state capitol?” No problem. I don't have to look on Google Maps. I don't have to look on the internet. I know where it is. I know the path; I know the street. I'd probably give you ten different ways to get there. Why? Because I know. That's the idea of *treasuring His word in my heart*. I learned the route; I learned the path. I learned the path of life, the path of flourishing. He guides me down the right path. Verse 12:

**Blessed are You, O LORD;  
Teach me your statutes  
With my lips I have told of  
All the ordinances of your mouth.** (Vs. 12-13)

It goes on in verse 97:

**O, how I love your law!** (I love your map.)  
**It's my meditation all the day.**  
**Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies.**  
(Wouldn't you like to be wiser than your enemy?)

Verse 99:

**I have more insight than all my teachers,  
For your testimonies are my meditation.  
I understand more than the aged,**  
(I think we understand just because you grow old doesn't mean you grow wise. There are 20-year-olds in this room that have more wisdom than some 80-year-olds in this room, because they follow the map.)  
**I have restrained my feet from every evil way,  
That I may keep your word.  
I have not turned aside from your ordinances,  
For You Yourself have taught me.  
How sweet are your words to my taste!  
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!  
From Your precepts, I get understanding;  
Therefore I hate every false way.  
Your word is a lamp to my feet  
And a light to my path.** (Vs. 99-105)

So, is that true, or isn't it? If it's true, why don't we read the Book? The most practical way for God to guide us down the right path is to read the Book and follow the road map. He has shown us the way. The very last verse of Psalm 119, verse 76 goes like this,

**I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, (Bring him back.)  
For I do not forget Your commandments.**

Psalms 23:3b

**He guides me to the path of righteousness.** Why would He do that?  
**For His name's sake,** (Because that's who He is.)

If, as the Good Shepherd, He has offered to lead you to the path of flourishing, to not get deceived and follow after springs with no water, but to find the life your soul longs for—the abundant life that the Good Shepherd talked about—why would we not want that? Why would we not listen to Him? Why would we not follow Him? Why would we not read His book?

**The LORD is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside quiet waters.  
He restores my soul;  
He guides me to the path of righteousness  
For His name's sake.**

May that be true of us.

*Lord, we are thankful this morning that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gave His life to bring us back and has laid out for us the road map to flourishing, to lead us down the right path if we're willing to listen and to follow. Lord, may that be true of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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