

Ruts of Righteousness

The Song, Part 2

Psalm 23:3-4

Several years ago I was sitting on the porch of a medical clinic in Togo, West Africa as the dusk of evening began to settle around us.

Seated next to me was a member of a different mission team that had also traveled to spend a couple of weeks helping around the mission station and clinic. I hadn't seen him for years, but had known him while I was a young seminary student in years past.

As we talked of our lives – both past and present – he made a statement that, to this day, I have often thought of – a statement both convicting and encouraging.

He said, “You know, Stephen, I’ve been challenged by the fact that God doesn’t refer to us as His cattle . . . but as His sheep. Cattle are driven . . . sheep are most often led.” And then he said, “I’m trying to make a shift in my Christian walk from being driven . . . to being led.”

Trouble is, being led only works if the believer is willing to follow the Shepherd.

And you’re barely into David’s introduction and exaltation of his amazing, caring, personal Shepherd, the true and living Lord when he mentions the fact that he wasn’t always willing to follow Him.

In *Psalm 23 and verse 3*, which is where we want to pick our study back up, David, writes this phrase that can only be understood correctly within the context of a wayward sheep.

David writes, *He – Yahweh – restores my soul.*

The Hebrew verb to *restore* has the idea of repairing or turning – as in, turning back; causing one to be returned.¹

David is referring to the danger of sheep that are need of turning and returning to their feet.

He’s literally referring to sheep that have become cast; often translated in the Psalms as being cast down.

A cast sheep is actually an Old English term to translate what David is referring to here – it’s an Old English shepherd’s term for a sheep that has turned over on its back and can’t get back up on its feet again.ⁱⁱ

Phillip Keller, a former shepherd, writes, Here’s how it happens; a heavy or long fleeced sheep will lie down comfortably in some little hollow or depression in the ground. It may roll on its side slightly to stretch out or relax. Suddenly the center of gravity in the body shifts so that it turns on its back far enough that the feet no longer touch the ground. It may feel a sense of panic and start to paw [the air] which only makes things worse. It rolls over even further and now it is impossible for the sheep to regain its footing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Keller goes on to describe that sheep are like many insects – all they can do is wiggle their legs in the air.

The problem for sheep though is that gasses will begin to build up in the rumen – I had to look that up – the rumen is a compartment of the stomach – a fore-stomach, actually, in sheep and other ruminating animals – where partially digested foods effectively ferment in acid as they break down in the process of digestion.

That’s a long way of saying, this is not good!

So here they are, flat on their backs, waving their helpless legs and feet in the air, unable to turn back over and feeling worse and worse as time goes on.

In fact, Keller added – if the weather is hot and sunny [the process will accelerate and], a cast sheep can die in just a few hours.^{iv}

Even sooner, for that matter, because hungry wild animals are always on the lookout; shepherds will take note of circling buzzards or vultures – they may be signaling the fact that a sheep is cast . . . its stuck . . . its helpless . . . it can't regain its footing.

For the sheep there is only one solution – the shepherd.

Isn't it wonderful to be reminded that we have a personal, omniscient Shepherd who knows exactly when and where you need to be restored?

The truth is, sheep are always getting stuck . . . getting into trouble.

Timothy Laniak writes in his journal of experiences as he worked with Middle Eastern shepherds, Even the hardy mountain breed . . . push their heads through fences and get cut or stuck; they climb trees to pick at foliage and get hung up by their horns or their legs; they fall down banks, get bitten by snakes and stung by wasps. They tumble into ponds and gorge themselves on fallen ash leaves, roll on the backs and swell up like balloons . . . listen to this . . . but every affliction they face can be countered by a good shepherd.^v

Listen, it makes all the difference in the world who your shepherds is . . . David is effectively saying, "I happen to have the Lord as my shepherd – and He is ever ready and available, time after time again, when I've gotten into trouble or I've gotten stuck or entangled . . . and stand me back up on my feet."

In fact, Galatians chapter 6 actually informs us that we join in the shepherding role of the Savior and we actually act as the hands and eyes and heart of the Lord – for when we see another believer who has become entangled in sin, Paul writes, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness.

Here's where we don't understand the Lord.

We have the idea that when a Christian falls down . . . when they get stuck in a hollow or valley or trap – that God gets frustrated, disgusted and fed-up . . . that's 8 times this week I've had to come and pull you out and set you back up on your feet!

That isn't the heart of our Shepherd.

He's constantly on the lookout . . . ready and willing to go and search for the cast sheep.

Think about it – have you ever gone to Christ and confessed some sinful act or attitude and found he'd locked you out and you had to talk him into even listening?

Has any believer ever gotten a cold shoulder from Jesus Christ?

Not on your life.

He, the Good Shepherd, is effectively on the lookout for cast sheep and He wants us to be on the lookout with Him.

And David says here – I know what it's like being a cast sheep – but my Lord – my Shepherd – puts me back on my feet.

Notice the next phrase in *verse 3. He leads me in paths or righteousness for His name sake.*

He leads me in paths – that Hebrew word can be literally translated "wagon tacks".^{vi}

Even more literally "ruts".

One author paraphrased this to read, "He leads me in the ruts of righteousness."^{vii}

The truth is, we're always either traveling in a rut or creating a new rut – our lives are made up of patterns and habits; the question is, are they righteous ruts – simply put, are they ruts of rightness with God?

Part of the problem with sheep is that they follow each other just as quickly as they follow the shepherd.

One former shepherd wrote, "It happened on a July day in 2005; first one sheep jumped to its death; then another and another, and then dozens more. Having left their herds to graze while they ate their breakfast, stunned Turkish shepherds now watched as nearly 1,500 sheep leapt off the same cliff; the first 450 animals died. [The others survived only because they landed on the sheep below.] The tragedy happened plainly because the sheep were allowed to wander onto a wrong trail. Unaware of what lay ahead, each one simply followed the next, over the cliff."^{viii}

In shepherding terminology, the problem is stated this way; when one sheep picks up a trail, others simply follow the tail of the sheep in front of them.

We get the expression, "tailing somebody" from this context.

Now, in the fields of Bethlehem where David tended his sheep there were any number of paths – even in modern times, one shepherd I read said that

all the shepherds in his region knew which cart path/rut belonged to which shepherd.

In other words, they didn't all lead to the same place.

And alert shepherds always made sure their sheep were literally walking in the right rut.

David writes, you can always identify the path of the Lord – it's a path marked by patterns and habits of righteousness – rightness with God.

I can remember my youngest daughter challenging me as we traveled down the cart path, so to speak. She was around 6 years of age and she had joined me in running an errand. We're racing there on the Cary Highway – um, the Cary Parkway. Same difference.

All of sudden she pipes up and says, "Uh, Daddy, you're almost going 60." I should have never taught her how to read the speedometer. There was this long silence. And then she piped up and said, "Daddy, the speed limit is 45 – seriously – why did I ever teach her how to read speed limit signs. Then she asked me, "Will a policeman stop us?"

Have you been talking to your mother?

I didn't say that . . . what I did say was, "No, honey . . . 45 is, um, sort of like a guideline."

I didn't say that either . . . I just slowed down.

One of the reasons we've been given the Holy Spirit is so that He can do internally what my daughter did externally.

It's that still small voice that effectively says, "You're not in a righteous rut . . . this is not a habit that promotes rightness with God. And just because everybody else around you is doing the same thing, don't tail them . . . you have no idea what that cliff is like just down the path ahead."

What about the habits of reading scripture; meditating on the truth of God's word; praying; giving; serving; seeking out the wisdom of others who've been walking the righteous path longer than you have.

To this day we tell each other to "stay on track". That's a shepherding term that resonates with the implied advice of David in this Psalm . . . make sure you're walking in the right rut.

Make sure you're following the Shepherd.

Especially because of the fact that even when you're following the Shepherds, your path often becomes overcast with shadows.

Notice the next verse – **verse 4. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .***

Would you notice that David does not write, "Even ***if*** I walk through . . ." no, no, no "***Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.***"

Why?

For You are with me.

Would you also circle the shift in David's pronouns from He, to You. So far it's been;

He makes me lie down;

He leads me beside still waters;

He restores me soul;

He leads me . . . but now it's ***You*** are with me.

David speaks with the intimacy of fellowship – ***You are with me.***

Isn't it true that you are never more conscious – never more grateful for the personal presence of God as when you pass through the valley?^{ix}

And keep in mind you can't have a shadow without a source of light. And this is the presence of the Lord who is the light (***John 3:19***).

And notice, David didn't write here, "Even though I walk through the valley of death." He wrote, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

The shadow of a wolf or lion can't bite you; the shadow of a bear can't destroy you; the shadow of death can't grip you.

Death is a mere shadow.

I love the illustration provided by the late Donald Barnhouse who pastored for many years in the Philadelphia area. While pastoring, he experienced the sudden death of his wife. They had two small children at the time. They were on their way to the graveside after the funeral when their car pulled up at a stoplight. In the lane next to them a big 18-wheeler pulled up, blocking the light of the sun. When he pulled away, he realized the Lord had just given him an illustration to comfort his children. He said, "Children, back there at that stoplight, did you notice how that big truck pulled up next to us, creating a shadow over us? They said, "Yes, sir we noticed." "Well, children, did that shadow hurt us? Did it hold us back?" They said, "Oh no, Daddy, a shadow can't do that to us." And he said, "Kids, the Bible says that we walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . death didn't hurt your mother and it hasn't held her back either; she's now in heaven."

To be absent from the body, Paul wrote for the believer, is to be immediately in the presence of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

The grip of death is no more powerful than a shadow.

This valley of the shadow of death then, isn't a dead end . . . it's a highway.

And is it ever busy. More than 6,000 people somewhere in the world will have died while we were in this worship service. A little more than 150,000 people will have died today; somewhere around 55million people on average are going to die this year!

Listen, the valley of the shadow of death is more like an *interstate* highway and at any given moment it looks like rush hour.

I'm often reminded of the fact that:
we are not in the land of the **living**
heading for the land of the dying;
we are in the land of the dying,
heading for the land of the living!

And would you notice that David does not write, "Even though I stop in the valley . . ." no, he's moving through it.

In fact, let me challenge the typical understanding of this verse; David doesn't actually say he's going to die there either.^x

Did you notice that? He doesn't write, "Even though I'm going to die in the valley of the shadow of death." David says, "I'm walking through it!"

The word he uses for the "shadow of death" can be translated as a compound noun to read, deep shadows.^{xi}

Another Old Testament scholar renders it, "deadly darkness."^{xii}

David can certainly be including the fearful context of dying, but since he refers to actually walking through this place of deadly shadows, he's more than likely referring to a repeated event in the lives of sheep – something all too common . . . and dangerous.

Sheep find rich pasture and plenty of water in valleys. But valleys are places of grave danger. Wild animals live down there; [they want the water too]; they lurk in the broken canyon walls; furthermore, sudden storms can send flash floods raging along the valley floor.^{xiii}

And since the sun doesn't shine as well into the valley, there really are shadows which spell danger.

But keep in mind; the sheep get into the valley because they are led there, by the Shepherd.

Even valleys happen to be the will of the Shepherd.

And David says, "I'm not afraid . . . because – and only because – I am confident and conscious of the presence of Yahweh – my personal Shepherd.

Job entered a dark valley, didn't he? And from the midst of it he uses this same word David uses; Job says, "**God uncovers the deep out of darkness and brings deep darkness – same word – to light.**" *Job 12:22*

As Isaiah prophecies of the coming Messiah, he uses the same word as well – **Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness – deep shadows – on them has light appeared (Isaiah 9:2).**

This is the light of the presence of the Shepherd.

The valley David refers to symbolizes the painful and hazardous trials of life – you really can't avoid the valley – but there's light and fellowship and confidence in the presence of the Shepherd who led you down there.

It is, after all, a place of rich pastureland and clean water. Now David relates his sense of comfort and confidence to two typical instruments used by every shepherd.

In *verse 4* he refers first to the shepherd's **rod**.

The rod was typically made from the young sapling about 2 feet tall; the natural bulb on the root end would be shaped into a smooth, rounded head of hard wood.

Shepherds would often pound stones or bits of metal into that knob to make it a fearful weapon.^{xiv}

We know that David the shepherd killed wild animals, including lions and bear with his club.

Phillip Keller writes that while in Africa, he delighted in watching the young shepherd boys spending hours practicing with their clubs – learning how to throw it at amazing speed and accuracy.^{xv}

The rod was literally considered an extension of the shepherds power and authority.

Even Kings were shown in excavated drawings with a shepherd's rod in their hand. In documents traced back to early Mesopotamia and Egypt, the rod or scepter represented not only power, but order. One document has an Assyrian King who reigned 1200 years before the birth of Christ wrote in an excavated document, "I am the true shepherd who through the justice of my scepter keeps people and communities in order."^{xvi}

Over the centuries, the shepherd's rod would eventually morph into the royal scepter.

And in *Psalm chapter 2*, David prophecies that the Messiah will one day rule the nations with a rod

– same word – only when He rules, it won't be a rod of wood, it will be rod of iron.

In other words, He will be invincible.

Another aspect of a shepherd's rod was in the personal care of the sheep. It would be easy to assume all was well by simply looking at their long wool of a sheep, but a careful shepherd actually brought his sheep under the rod, they called it.

A shepherd would use his rod to part the wool and examine his sheep to make sure they weren't troubled with wounds or skin problems and other diseases.

Even today in sheep shows, the wool of a sheep can be clipped and shaped to make it appear larger or stronger than it really is. And so the judge will take his rod and part the sheep's wool to get a realistic view.

This gives us our phrase, "trying to pull the wool over someone's eyes."

Keep this in mind when you consider the implications of Solomon's reminder that if you spare the rod, you what? Spoil the child. **Proverbs 13:24 actually says, "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him."**

In other words, if you don't examine them – if you let them pull the wool over your eyes without any concern; if you say, "Aw, they look fine to me;" if you refuse to bring order or rule to their lives – or at least attempt to – you really don't care about them.

Every parent is a shepherd and shepherding isn't easy. It's time consuming.

When the sheep came into the pen at night they passed under the rod and the careful shepherd inspected his flock to make sure they really were okay.

And you can imagine that the sheep didn't always appreciate it, right? They wanted at the food, or the sleeping arrangement. Sheep bite . . . and they can bite their shepherd.

Our problem is that we know better than the Lord. We try to pull the wool over his eyes . . . "I'm okay . . . it's nothing!"

And besides, like children, we think we know better!

I was sent an email about one mother, name Sharon who wrote, I was trying to coral my daughter Emily . . . it was bedtime. Emily was four years old – get that – only four years old – and she complained that she was not ready to go to sleep. I explained

that when she was born, God gave me the job of taking care of her, making sure she ate right, and got enough sleep at night. "Now, I'm not trying to be a mean mother," Sharon explained, "but this is the job God gave me." To which little Emily responded, "Well then, you're fired."

And we do the same to our Lord.

One man in our church sent me this email that reworked the disobedience of Adam and Eve into the context of disobedient children – rather humorously. He wrote, "When your kids are out of control remember that after creating the universe, the heavens and the earth, and all the animals the animal kingdom, God created Adam and Eve.

And the first thing he said to His children was, "Don't".

"Don't what?" Adam replied.

"Don't eat the forbidden fruit," God said.

"Forbidden fruit? We've got forbidden fruit? Hey Eve, we've got forbidden fruit."

"No way!"

"Yes way!"

"Don't eat that fruit," God repeated.

"Why not? Why can't we? Why not?" they both pouted.

"Because I said so," God said, wondering why He hadn't stopped creating after making the elephants. A few days later, God saw those children eating the forbidden fruit.

"Come here, God called; what have you done? Didn't I tell you not to eat that fruit?" God demanded.

"Yes," Adam replied.

"They why did you eat it?"

"Well" Adam said, pointing at Eve, "she made me."

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

"Did not!!"

Having had it with the two of them, God's punished them – and God's punishment was that Adam and Eve would have children of their own.

Listen, the practice of pulling the wool over someone's eyes began in the garden – and it began with fig leaves.

This is David's passionate request in **Psalm 139 when he sings, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any grievous or hurtful way in me."**

I don't want to try and pull the wool over your sovereign eyes – here's my life, my heart, my motives, my thoughts . . . play the role of Shepherd and I willingly play the role of a sheep.

David also mentions *the staff in verse 4 – Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

The staff was formed from a young sapling with one end soaked in water, heated, rubbed with oil and bent so that it hardened into the shape of a crook.

These two wooden tools were the extension of a shepherd's life.

The rod symbolized power, authority and discipline. The staff represented care, assistance and direction.

One author wrote, "The staff with its crook would be useful for pulling branches down for goats, rescuing animals trapped just out of reach, pulling sheep caught in pits, fences, bushes and crevices and mud."^{xvii}

They used their crook to lift newborn and lay them beside their mothers.^{xviii}

The staff would be used to guide the sheep and keep them on the path.

Keller wrote that he would often watch as a shepherd walked beside a sheep, gently resting his staff on their back which literally kept them in touch – as if – he wrote – they were holding hands.^{xix}

So here you go into the valley of deep, dark shadows; "Through many dangers, toils and snares, John Newton wrote, "I have already come."

By means of the power and authority and strength and discipline of the Lord – but more than that – by the caring, loving, guiding touch . . . you're

walking through the valley effectively holding hands with your Shepherd.

He doesn't say to you, "You see that dark valley down there – well, you start over there and you'll come out way down over there . . . go ahead . . . you're on your own."

No . . . let me take your hand . . . and we're going to go through this together.

No wonder David sings, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'm not afraid – why – because you are with me and your rod and your staff . . . they comfort me.

The extensions of the shepherd strength and care comfort me – His rod and His staff.

Have you ever thought about the fact that to this day we call office workers *staff*; organizations refer to their team as *staff* members; even here at the church we refer to the pastoral *staff* – we use this term to this day – why? – because we are extensions of a greater vision and direction and purpose of the organization.

In this case, the ministry of the Lord Himself in guiding and guarding the flock.

In a very real way, we all as members of a Body – a local church – we serve as *staff* members of Christ – extensions of the Lord's heart and hands in each other's lives as well.

So let's keep that in mind as we go through the deep shadows; surrounded by predators; hazardous, faith demanding steps.

But there's no need to fear . . . let's go through the valley, hand in hand with Him, and with each other.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/12/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i William Gesenius, edited by Brown, Driver & Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon (Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 998

ii Phillip Keller, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Zondervan, 1970), p. 60

iii Ibid, p. 61

iv Ibid

v Timothy Laniak, While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks (ShepherdLeader Publications, 2007), p. 65

vi Brown, Driver & Briggs, p. 722

vii Laniak, p. 201

viii Ibid

ix James Montgomery Boice, Psalms: Volume 1 (Baker Books, 1994), p. 211

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- x Keller, p. 84
- xi Peter C. Craigie, Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 19 (Word Books, 1983), p. 207
- xii Laniak, p. 170
- xiii Boice, p. 211
- xiv Charles R. Swindoll, Living Beyond the Daily Grind: Book 1 (Word Publishing, 1988), p. 76
- xv Keller, p. 93
- xvi Laniak, p. 158
- xvii Laniak, p. 95
- xviii Keller, p. 100
- xix Ibid