

# The Shepherd, the Host and the Highway Patrol

by John Piper

---

*God's sovereignty and leadership in our lives lead to a constant God consciousness, the experience of His power, and confidence in His honor and guidance.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 23:3, Psalm 25:4, Psalm 27:4, Psalm 119:18, Psalm 119:105, Psalm 139:23, Luke 7:46, Romans 8:14, Romans 12:2

**Topics:** "Gods Providence", "Spiritual Restoration"

---

## Description

John Piper delves into the profound lessons found in Psalms 23, emphasizing the shift from talking about God to talking directly to God, the assurance that God provides all that is good for His people, and the refreshing power of God's Word and creation in restoring our souls. He highlights the importance of God leading us in paths of righteousness through His Word and Spirit, transforming our minds and emotions to align with His will. Piper also explores the significance of God's actions being for His own glory, shaping our understanding of righteousness and love, and ultimately drawing us closer to Him as the fulfillment of all our longings.

---

## Transcript

### Psalm 23

Last week we drew out some lessons from the form of Psalm 23 - the fact that at verse 4 it shifts from talking about God as "He" to talking to God as "You." Then we looked at the phrase "I shall not want" and thought about what it is that God will not let His people lack: nothing that would be good for them. Then we looked at the phrase "He restores my soul" and thought together how God refreshes us by His Word of promise and Works of creation. One of the things I stressed was how personal the Psalm is: David the individual in fellowship with God. And so I tried to copy that form myself and simply talk about things I've learned and enjoyed in this psalm. That's what I want to continue with tonight.

I was 22 years old when I first saw one of the phrases in this psalm. Of course, I had read the psalm hundreds of times and seen the words. But there is seeing and then there is seeing. When I went to see Mrs. Blomgren just before her eye operation I read to her Psalm 119:18, "Deal bountifully with Thy servant that I may live and observe Thy word. Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law." One of the greatest privileges of having two good eyes is that we can read God's word. But there is

another set of eyes that have to be opened if the glory of God's word is to shine in our hearts - namely the eyes of our hearts. Well, I had not seen with the eyes of my heart the little phrase "for His name's sake" in verse 3. "He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." The idea that God might be leading me to do right for His own sake was so foreign to me until I was 22 that I would read those words with no feeling at all for what they meant.

But before we zero in on the words "for His name's sake" let's make sure we understand what it is that God does for His name's sake. "He leads me in paths of righteousness." First, we must not think that this is something so automatic we don't need to pray for it. Look at David's prayer in Psalm 25: 4,5. "Make me know Thy ways, O Lord; teach me Thy paths, lead me in Thy truth and teach me, for Thou art the God of my salvation, for Thee I wait all the day long." In Psalm 23 God has answered this prayer - God has led him in paths of righteousness.

But how does God do this? In my experience I have never seen a visible manifestation of God going before me at a fork in the road. Nor have I ever heard an audible voice that was clearly God's telling me which decisions to make. But I think David would answer the question, How does God lead? by saying, "He has revealed a lot about the paths of righteousness in His Word." Isn't this the point of Psalm 119:105: "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" and verse 9: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to Thy word." So one answer to the question, How does God lead me in paths of righteousness, is: He reveals what those paths are in His Word for us to read and obey.

But this answer is only half of what goes into God's leadership; by itself the Bible would not keep us on track. For two reasons: one is that not every decision we have to make is covered by a command in the Bible. Some paths are clearly wrong and some are clearly right, but many are not clear. We have hundreds of little and some big decisions like this every week. The other reason that the Bible alone is not adequate is that even when a specific path is commanded, it is not just the movement along that path that is important, but also the spirit in which we move, and the motivation that prompts us. A path of righteousness is a right path followed with the right attitude. But the Bible by itself will not change our attitude.

This is why David said God leads us in paths of righteousness and why Paul said in Romans 8:14 "All who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God." We must not only have revelation from outside, namely, the Bible; we must also have transformation from the inside by the Holy Spirit. The Word of God and the Spirit of God together provide the leadership we need. Paul said in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may know and approve what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." In order to walk in paths of righteousness we must become new. Otherwise we may try to follow righteousness but will only become hollow formalists--people who try to go through the external motions of righteousness but lack the joy and love and peace that energize and guide the saints. The Word and the Spirit team up to transform the mind and in that way God leads us in paths of righteousness. He gradually shapes our thinking and molds our emotions so that when there is no explicit command in the Bible to guide us, we weigh all the considerations with the wisdom and the love of God and are drawn to the path of righteousness. So I have learned to do like David: meditate on God's word day and night and pray continually for the innervating work of the Holy Spirit in my heart and mind.

Now we can ask, Why does God do all this: Why reveal His Word and send His Spirit to lead us in paths of righteousness? The answer in verse 3: "For His name's sake." A few weeks ago I was talking to one of my

really fine former students, who's in graduate school now. I told him I was preaching a three week series on the fact that God does everything for His own glory, we need to bring our lives into alignment with that goal, and it is not selfish but loving for God to act this way. His response was: Are you still talking about that? That was your theme when you came to Bethel six years ago. My answer was, "Bill, everywhere I look in Scripture I see this theme. It really is central."

But for 22 years I had been so deaf to this loud theme running through the Bible that I had never even heard the last phrase of verse 3 in Psalm 23: "For His name's sake." But then I discovered the greatest theologian our country has ever produced: Jonathan Edwards; and I read A Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World. This book, along with others, opened my eyes and ears to the most glorious theme of Scripture, which unifies all its parts--that God is absolutely sovereign and in all things is at work to display His glory for the enjoyment of His people.

So it is no longer surprising to me like it was back there in those early days of discovery, that right here in the middle of a psalm, world famous for the joy and comfort and refreshment it has brought to man, is the signature of the sovereign God: "For His name's sake."

What difference has this made in my life? What difference should it make? It occurred to me that all the paths of righteousness are paths of love, "Let everything be done in love," Paul says. But love means seeking the benefit of our brother or neighbor. What I found was that it is possible to speak of love toward men in such a way that God drops out of the picture. It is possible to begin to justify your life solely on the basis of how much "good" you do for men. And gradually the difference between a Christian and a humanistic ethic disappears. Not because the humanist has become God-centered but because the Christian has become man-centered.

What Psalm 23:3 did for me was to put a huge road block in the way of my tendency toward man-centeredness, my tendency to think only on an earthly level, where much good can be done for man's physical needs but where God seems strangely irrelevant. This road block was the reminder that God leads me into paths of love and He does it for His name's sake. God is the beginning and God is the end of all my righteousness. The path of righteousness has His grace as its starting point (for He leads me into it) and it has His glory as its destination (because His leading is for His name's sake). As Paul put it, "From Him, through Him, and to Him are all things, to Him be glory for ever."

So for me the road to a sentimental morality where man is the measure of all things has been blocked once and for all. The result is, first, that I live with an almost constant God consciousness. Second, the sense of the reality of the power of God in everyday life grows, I think, in direct proportion to my conviction that He is at work in everything for His own name's sake. Third, there is a great sense of confidence that arises from the conviction that God's honor is at stake in the way He is leading my life. And fourth, my prayers for my own sons' sanctification are more fervent and I think more effectual because I now have a tremendous argument with which to come to God: Make me holy, O God, for your name's sake. "Lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil" for your name's sake! Those are some of the things that have shaped me as I pondered God the Shepherd in verse 3.

Now, more briefly, notice in verse 5 God the Host. God the Host spreads a banquet for His guest, anoints his head with festive oil (cf. Luke 7:46) and keeps his cup filled to the brim. The reference to enemies may mean either that they are held at a distance and can't interfere with the guests' security or it may mean that David has just had some victory and the prisoners must now look on in regret while David and his

men celebrate.

Again we have to be careful we don't isolate this verse in the psalm and make it the norm for all of life. It is probably no accident that the psalm begins in green pasture and ends in the house of God but in the middle is the dark valley of the shadow of death. The point of verse 5 is not that life is a big party but that there are those festive times in life and that we should recognize them as gifts of God and signs of His ultimate intention for us.

Verse 6 then is a conclusion David comes to after he has passed, as it were, from the green pasture through the dark valley into the banquet hall of God. He concludes that there is every reason to believe that God's goodness and mercy will follow him all his days. But a beautiful picture is a little bit obscured in verse 6 by the English word "follow." "Follow" might mean trail behind and never quite catch up. That wouldn't be very comforting: "Surely goodness and mercy will lag behind me all my days." The Hebrew word is much more active than "follow." It almost always means pursue, often in the sense of pursue to do harm or persecute. So David has painted a picture for us a little like this: Imagine yourself driving nonchalantly down the freeway, when all of a sudden you see a red light flashing in your rear view mirror. And for some crazy reason you make the irrational decision to push the gas instead of the brake. You roar down the freeway at 100 miles per hour and try to get away from the Highway Patrol. All the times you went over the speed limit flash before your eyes. And as your sense of guilt mounts all the faults of your life start popping up out of your unconscious where they had lain just waiting to make you miserable. And all the while you remember that if you get one more ticket your license will be revoked and you won't be able to take that hard-earned vacation to Miami with your wife. But your car simply does not have the power of the Highway Patrol and he finally forces you over. You sit there trembling as he walks up to your window and says: "Got a little guilty conscience there, don't you?" Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wallet and says, "That motel you just left asked me to catch up with you and bring you your wallet you left on the counter." So you feel an utter fool and as you reach out to take it he says, "O, and there's one other thing. They had a drawing this morning for the sweepstakes you registered for at the motel last night and you won a free trip for two to Miami if you phone in your acceptance by noon today."

God is not only our Good Shepherd, nor only our lavish Host; He is also a Highway Patrolman pursuing you with goodness and mercy every day of your life and He is fast.

I am tempted to stretch out the analogy like this to cover the rest of verse 6. Just when you are breathing easy, the officer says, "You are under arrest now, you will have to come with me." So you leave your crummy little car and get in the back of his patrol car and head off, but he doesn't say where to. Soon you realize that he is not heading for the courthouse but into the country. When he turns into a magnificent estate through a huge gate and drives under two-hundred year old oak trees to a beautiful old mansion, you ask, "Where in the world are we?" And he says, "This is my place and I would like you to live with me. That is your bungalow down by the river among the willows. It's free. I'm going to go get your wife and family. Hopefully they won't try to run away, too."

"And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The problem with that story is that it focuses too much on the house and grounds. But David's great love is for the Lord Himself, not what the Lord can give. David would consider it the height of fulfillment to dwell in God's house even if it were a tenement on Chicago Avenue across from Dolly's Lounge. What counts is being with God. He says in Psalm 27:4, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple."

So the whole Psalm leads me to God Himself as the fulfillment of all my longings. And I feel myself drawn with David not so much to love the green pastures but the Good Shepherd, not so much to love the lavish banquet but the bountiful Host and not so much to love the trip to Miami or the bungalow but to love the Highway Patrolman.

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/the-shepherd-the-host-and-the-highway-patrol/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**