

***Summit on Nurture and Retention: Discipling, Retaining & Reclaiming  
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**A Metaphor for Discipleship—Psalm 23**

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I would like to describe a metaphor for the journey of discipleship that has been helpful as I have thought about the processes God uses to mature us to be more like Him. It comes from a surprisingly familiar place, yet I stumbled across it by accident.

**An unexpected journey**

A friend called my mobile phone with some bitter news. Hurrying back to my room, I closed the door and leaned back against it. As the news sank in, I slid onto the floor. My earlier fears had been confirmed. Someone I thought was a friend and a support in my work was spreading some very unpleasant gossip about me. What he was saying was not just unkind, it was intentionally poisonous. It hurt me so much I hardly knew how to think. I just sat there and sobbed. How could someone could say such things—someone who I thought was a friend?

After some time, I pulled my Bible off my bed and opened it. Trying to focus through the tears, my eyes finally fixed on some familiar words, “He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” (Psalm 23:3-4)

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”. Yes, it certainly felt like that. But suddenly my eyes jumped back to the previous text, “He guides me in paths of righteousness...” My eyes widened quickly. Could it be that this path of righteousness actually passes through the valley of the shadow of death? Could going through the valley of the shadow of death also be, “for his name's sake”? I stared, frowning at the text. As I thought, I slowly began to see Psalm 23 in a totally new light.

Psalm 23 is a journey with four important destinations connected by the path of righteousness—the path of discipleship. Firstly, there is an area of green grass and quiet waters which provide refreshment. Further along the path is second location—the valley of the shadow of death. Thirdly, the path skirts a table full of all sorts of good things for me, yet is surrounded by my enemies. The path of righteousness ends at the fourth location—the destination of discipleship—the house of the Lord.

**Some brief observations on the journey of discipleship**

**1. No matter how unprepared and weak I might feel on our journey of discipleship, the Shepherd promises to provide everything I need.** *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 (verses 1-2).*

I remember reading that verse one day and blurting out loud back to God, somewhat agitated, “But I do want – I *do* want!”

Here is our first challenge for the journey: if we are to travel without complaining against the Shepherd, we have to accept the fact that our expectations of the journey will start out very different from those of the Shepherd. The first obstacle we are faced with is learning to relinquish our escalating demands, expectations and ambitions for ourselves, and learning to accept that what God provides is all, and everything, that we need.

**2. No matter how bewildering or confusing our journey might be, walking the Shepherd's paths will always accomplish the Shepherd's purposes for our lives.** *"He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."* (Verse 3)

Notice how these paths are all called "paths of righteousness" (NIV) or "right paths" (NRSV). But why are they called right or righteous paths?

Firstly, they are right paths because they lead to the right place, the Shepherd's home.

Secondly, they are right paths because they keep us on a journey in the company of the right person, the Shepherd.

Thirdly, they are right paths because they shape us into the right people. Notice how we travel the paths of righteousness "for his name's sake" (verse 3). "For his name's sake" means for the honour and glory of the Shepherd.

But exactly how is the Shepherd honoured and glorified? We don't honour him simply by surviving long enough to get to his house without giving up. To become the right people is to live out the purposes of the Shepherd. As we shall increasingly see, we honour the Shepherd most by reflecting his character, and the strange truth is that the Shepherd accomplishes this in us most as he permits us to suffer.

This last point is further expanded in the next point.

**3. No matter how frightening our journey might be, the darkness is not a place to be feared for it is a place that the Shepherd uses to mature us to be more like him.** *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."* (Verse 4)

When we cannot see the Shepherd because the darkness is so thick, Satan will tempt us to believe that God has abandoned us or we have taken the wrong route. The reality is the opposite, as Elisabeth Elliot explains, "A lamb who found himself in the valley of the shadow of death might conclude that he had been falsely led. It was needful for him to traverse that darkness in order to learn not to fear. The shepherd is still with him." (Elisabeth Elliot, *Quest For Love*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1996), 218.)

Indeed, in the darkness as our enemies endeavour to spring a surprise attack, we suddenly glimpse flashes of our Shepherd at work, beating back our enemies with his rod. And as we sometimes wander off blindly by ourselves and find ourselves so terribly alone and frightened by the sounds in the dark and what we imagine to be there, we feel the unexpected, and sometimes painful, grip of a shepherd's staff, hauling us back to safety.

In these dark valleys, perhaps more than any other places, we experience the salvation of the Shepherd and thus we develop confidence in his care.

**4. No matter how easy we think our journey should be, the Shepherd may regularly allow our enemies to surround us in order for us to gain a deeper understanding of his love for us.** *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."* (Verse 5)

"What would you be thinking", I asked the children at church, "If you had a table with everything you could possibly want on it, but your enemies were standing by?"

"I think my enemies would want to steal it all!" chipped in one little boy. He was right! How many times are we concerned that our enemies are going to steal our happiness, our jobs, or destroy God's purposes for us? That is one of the lessons of the table. God places it even under the noses of our enemies and then we begin to realise that there is nothing they can do to take away what God has promised us.

When we see how abundant God's blessings are for us, and how nothing and no-one can prevent us from receiving them, we are filled with a renewed wonder and thankfulness at the goodness of our Father. For we can then declare with the Psalmist, "I will exalt you, O Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me." (Psalm 30:1).

**5. No matter how lonely our journey might appear to be, the Shepherd is always present.** *"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (Verse 6)*

Both goodness and love are attributes of God. So to be followed by goodness and love, is to be followed by God himself. As David assures us here, goodness and love is following him every single day. Goodness and love are following David through the fields of green grass, but goodness and love are also following him right into the dark valleys. Whether or not the Shepherd has led him into the darkness or whether David has charged off on his own, goodness and love is still behind him. And when David is mocked by his enemies, goodness and love are providing his every need.

Goodness and love never leaves him. The Shepherd, Emmanuel, will be with him, even to the very end of the world.

### **The motivation for discipleship**

The journey of discipleship with the Shepherd ends at the Shepherd's house. But I have some questions. Why does David want to travel this path in the first place? What is his motivation, particularly when the path holds so many difficulties? In the context of discipleship, why does David persevere while others give up and try other paths?

Psalm 27:4 explains what challenges the sheep to keep going to the house of the Lord and not quit, *"One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple."* David's deepest desire—which motivates his whole journey—is to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.

I would suggest that the greatest thing I have to grasp and enjoy in this life, is a love for the beauty of the Lord. This is what roots me to the journey of discipleship. But I also believe that as we are able to nurture this desire in others, we will be able to gather an increasingly large band of travellers, each with a steely determination to make it to the Shepherd's front door.

Father,

Thank you that I do not walk the journey of discipleship alone.

Thank you that are with me, in the dark as well as in the light.

Thank you also that the path I tread is for your glory.

May the contemplation of your beauty drive me ever onwards.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.