

The Restoration of the Soul

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[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon, friends, and a warm welcome to our Wednesday Bible Talk this Wednesday lunchtime. Well, let's open our Bibles at Psalm 23, and we're continuing to look at this great and familiar psalm today.

I'll read the whole of the psalm, but I want to speak today only on the third verse. Psalm 23, then, David writes this. David, with all his experience of shepherding both bleating sheep, but also shepherding the people of Israel as their king in later years.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil.

[1 : 14] My cup overflows. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Well, let's bow our heads for some moments of prayer now. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for these words.

And the reminder that by nature we walk in darkness, and therefore we need to have a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

We confess to you again our sinful hearts and our nature, which from birth and from our earliest years was a nature that was set against you, in rebellion against you.

And yet you have had mercy upon so many who now belong to you, so many whose hearts you have changed. You have brought us to the feet of Christ.

[2 : 22] You have brought us indeed to the feet of the cross, to the foot of the cross, so that we should look up at him and know that in going to the cross, he was bearing the penalty, the righteous penalty for our sins, for our rebellion.

And as we think of him and the way that his death and resurrection have changed the course of history, and indeed have changed the course of our own lives, we say again to you, thank you so much for having mercy upon us, for not leaving us in a place where there is no lamp for our feet and no light for our path.

But indeed you have brought us to him, who is the light of the world, the one who has promised, he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

So our prayer today, dear Father, as we spend this quiet moment in the middle of the week here, is that you will draw alongside us again, that you will comfort us, and show us again your mercy and grace and kindness and love, and that you will stir up our hearts to put our trust in you afresh, to reaffirm our confidence in you and in your words.

So be with us, we pray, and give us understanding and hearts that are ready to love you and to serve you. And we ask it all in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[3 : 49] Well, last week, friends, as you may remember, we looked at verses 1 and 2 in Psalm 23, and we noticed there that the task of the shepherd is not only to care tenderly and lovingly for his sheep, but also to rule them and to discipline them. That's what the shepherd does.

And we noticed the lovely fact that those who submit to the shepherd's rule, the Lord's loving rule, become increasingly contented. I shall not want. There's contentment there.

And also restful, lying down in green pastures and enjoying the stillness of the waters. Now, this week, I want to take simply verse 3, just the one verse, under the title, The Restoration of the Soul.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. And I think it is no accident that the second half of that verse, the second sentence in the verse, follows the first. There's a logical link between the two sentences. What David means is that the Lord restores my soul by leading me in paths of righteousness.

[5 : 05] The way the Lord restores my soul is by leading me into, well, into a country which is not my native country at all, a country that's not natural to me, a country which he calls the paths of righteousness.

Now, my natural habitat would be a very different kind of country, a country of different pathways. My first steps were taken down paths of selfishness. By nature, I'm a gangster and a brigand, and I guess you are as well.

I used to fight with my sister. I used to kill frogs when I was a youngster. I used to blow raspberries at respectable middle-aged ladies. And worse.

Now, we all start life in that kind of way, don't we? But seriously, I want to look now at the content of verse 3 under three headings. Three headings. First, the shepherd's work is to restore our souls. It's what the shepherd does. He restores my soul. Now, I, in this context, of course, am a sheep in his flock. This is not a promise of soul restoration to anybody, to everybody.

[6 : 16] It's an assurance given to those who are in the Lord's flock, those who can say, the Lord is my shepherd. We have to be in his flock before we can begin to experience the restoration of our souls.

We have to be gladly acknowledging that we submit to his loving rule and discipline. In other words, we have to be Christians. But once we are, once we have repented and put our trust in Christ, we can expect our shepherd to begin this great work of soul restoration.

Now, what is the soul? The soul is me as I really am, my inner being, with all its ins and outs and quirks and idiosyncrasies, all my fears and longings and hopes.

Me, if you like, with my own personal peculiar history, my thoughts and my emotions. We all of us have a personal peculiar history, and our soul is tied up with that.

It's the essence of our individual life. And the implication of verse 2, sorry, verse 3, is that my soul is in ruins. Because why else should it need to be restored?

[7 : 27] You don't have to restore something which is in good order. Two or three years ago, as you probably know, the Cornhill Course bought the building next door, McCormick's Music Shop.

I expect some of you, when you were teenage rockers, bought your guitars there. Isn't that right? Anyway, you know that that shop has been there for a long time. And when we bought it and took it over, parts of it needed very extensive restoration.

Parts of it were falling down. It was like a great rabbit warren. I think we had to put in at least one, if not two, new rolled steel joists. And a lot of timber work and so on, because it was in a very bad way.

There was a big restoration job that had to be done on that building. Now, the Bible teaches us that the human soul, this complex web of characteristics which make up our inner being, the human soul is damaged by nature to the point of ruination.

And the fundamental element in that ruination is that by nature we have substituted ourselves for God.

[8 : 33] We've placed ourselves upon the throne of life. The way God has made the world and human beings is that we should love him and delight in him above all else.

That he should be the center of our joys and our affections. And that serving him should be our natural and great desire. That's why the great commandment in the law of Moses is that we should love the Lord, our God, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

But we were not like that because by nature our souls are in ruins. We've put ourselves in the place of God. We have dethroned God in order to enthrone ourselves.

Martin Luther famously described human beings, man, as by nature curved in upon himself. Curved in upon himself.

John Wesley, preaching one of his famous sermons on original sin, said this. Most men talk of loving God and perhaps imagine that they do.

[9 : 38] At least few will acknowledge they do not love him. But the fact is too plain to be denied. No one loves God by nature any more than he loves a stone or the earth he treads upon.

What we love, we delight in. But no man has naturally any delight in God. In our natural state, we cannot conceive how anyone should delight in him.

We take no pleasure in him at all. He is utterly tasteless to us. To love God? It is far above, out of our sight. We cannot naturally attain to it.

Now surely Wesley is right. Our inclination by nature is to serve ourselves. It's interesting that we've developed a whole vocabulary to express the principles of self-serving.

We speak of self-gratification, self-seeking, self-pleasing, self-indulgence, self-assertion, self-affirmation, self-promotion, self-glorification.

[10:40] You name it, we self it. The paths that we walk in are naturally paths of self-centeredness. But the paths of righteousness, characterized by delight in God, they're foreign territory to us.

The familiar paths are paths of self-serving. Now friends, let me ask, are you familiar then? Do you recognize the ruination, the natural ruination of what we are inside?

Have you looked within in this kind of way? Have you peeled back the wallpaper and the plaster work and seen the rotten beams and girders underneath? The natural state of man and woman is a state of decay.

Jesus, of course, makes exactly the same point. He says, from within, from out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, and it is they that defile a person. Now that's why our souls need to be restored. And the restoration of the soul is not achieved by a lick of paint or a wash down.

[12:01] It involves a fundamental rebuilding of the inner person. And just notice this is not something that you and I can do. The verse doesn't say, come on, summon up your moral courage, pull yourself up by your bootstraps and set about the restoration of your soul.

It doesn't say that. It says something much more glorious and lovely. It says, he restores my soul. Now, friends, this is what the Lord does.

It's his work. It's his business. And he delights to do it. He takes the decayed, collapsing fabric of our lives and he restores it.

Over time, over the years, he takes that fierce rebellion out of our hearts, our rebellion against his loving authority. And he replaces it with glad submissiveness to his leadership.

He takes the fierceness of our attitude towards other people out of our hearts and teaches us to love others and to care for them. He patiently chisels away at our natural pride and vanity and one-upmanship.

[13:11] And he replaces these things with a gladness that other people should do well. He chips away over the years at all those grubby and shameful things.

Misplaced sexual desire, the love of money, for example. He's rather like the restorer of fine paintings. He takes the dirt-encrusted, damaged thing and patiently works away at it until its original beauty begins to shine through.

Now, this restoration is, of course, a lifetime's work because the damage and the dirt are so deeply fixed into the fabric. And the process is not completed this side of the grave.

But it is a real, progressive, wonderful thing. The Lord is in the business of restoring souls that have been deeply damaged. If you are a sheep in his flock, if you are a Christian, the Lord is even now at work on your soul to take forward this restoration and to make you increasingly into an authentic human being.

It was never his intention that you and I should be left as ruined buildings. It has always been his will to restore us so that finally, in the world to come, we shall be transformed into the likeness of Jesus himself, the real human being, the authentic man.

[14:37] So there's the first thing. The shepherd's work is to restore our souls. Now, secondly, the shepherd's method, his method of doing this, is to lead us in paths of righteousness.

This is how he restores our souls. Now, David's language here is vivid and pictorial and rustic. We're out on the hills here. We're out in the country.

It's sheep and shepherd country. And the Middle Eastern way of the shepherd dealing with his sheep was then, and I think still is, to lead them. He leads them.

That's the word used here. He leads me. He leads them and they follow him. We, of course, look after our sheep differently in this country. We round them up with border collies and then we load

them onto a trailer and off we all go.

But David knows the ways of the Middle Eastern shepherd. After all, he'd been a Middle Eastern shepherd himself as a youngster. And he'd often led a flock of sheep out into the country. And he knew the right paths in which to lead the sheep.

[15 : 40] Only a foolish shepherd would lead his sheep into a place of danger or a place where there was no fodder or no water. A good, caring shepherd would always lead his sheep in right paths.

But in verse 3 here, David takes the idea of right paths and he extends it. He also adds a moral quality to it.

These are not merely right paths. These are righteous paths. If David was only interested in right paths, we might think that belonging to the Lord's flock was only about having an enjoyable or comfortable life.

So that, for example, a person might say, the Lord showed me the right path to a secure job. The Lord showed me the right path to a decent income or a nice person to marry or a pleasant house to live in.

He led me in the right way and I'm living very comfortably now. No, it's not that. It's something altogether more bracing. These are paths of righteousness.

[16 : 44] This is how to live rightly in the sight of God. Even if there is no decent job to have or no good income. Even if the person doesn't have a comfortable home or has never found a comforting marriage partner.

Let me give just two examples of the kind of paths of righteousness that the Lord leads his people in as he restores our souls.

First, he will lead us in paths of suffering. Now, not all Christian people suffer to an equal degree. Of course not. But all Christians learn to accept a measure of suffering as part of the normal Christian life.

Christians will suffer because the Bible gospel so deeply challenges the standards of the world around us. So our friends and our relatives who are not Christians will regard us as odd.

And we shall suffer for it. They may withdraw from us. They may criticize us because we no longer go with the flow of their own way of life. And that can be a very painful thing.

[17 : 48] In some countries, of course, to be a Christian and to belong openly to the Lord's people, to the church, will invite persecution, real oppression, leading to Christians being treated as third-class citizens, being deprived of their jobs and their possessions, even their freedom, even sometimes their lives.

In a number of countries, church buildings are burnt down. The houses of Christians are attacked and torched. Christian people are murdered. Now, it's always been like that.

The Apostle Paul tells us of his many sufferings in the letters that he wrote. He didn't tell his readers about his sufferings out of self-pity, but to help his fellow Christians to be prepared for similar experiences.

And he says to all his readers, ancient and modern, imitate me. Follow my pathway as I imitate the pathway of Christ. The path of suffering is one of the paths of righteousness.

And our shepherd will lead us along that pathway, at least from time to time. Then secondly, and I mention this because it's such a contemporary issue.

[18 : 58] The Lord will lead us in paths of sexual purity and chastity. The Bible upholds marriage and teaches us that in a wonderful way, human marriage reflects the way in which Christ loves the church and is committed to her, covenanted to her with an indissoluble bond.

This means that Christian people, both single Christians and married Christians, commit ourselves to a view of sexuality which deeply respects marriage as the only proper place in which sexual relationship is to be enjoyed.

Now that is a path of righteousness. But it's not always an easy path to follow in today's world. All around us, there are forces at work which undermine marriage.

There are many voices that protest against the Bible's teaching and dismiss it, often with scorn, as being repressive. They want to promote alternative arrangements.

Cohabitation, outwith marriage, same-sex partnerships, even promiscuity, as though a James Bond lifestyle might bring happiness. But the truth is that these alternative arrangements, if I can call them that, are dismantling the very fabric of society.

[20 : 13] They're one of the main reasons for the breakdown of family life, for the increase of mental illness and depression and drug-taking, and for the unhappiness and confusion that so many children and young people experience these days, for whom the goalposts of society have not merely been shifted, they've ceased to exist.

I was a teenager back in the 1960s when so many of these old bindings began to be loosed. I came from a broken home myself, so I've seen some of these things at first hand.

But the Lord, lovingly, because he cares for his sheep, he leads his people in the paths of righteousness, and as he does so, he restores the ruin of our souls and creates lives that are happy and useful and truly human.

The Apostle Paul, in his letters, uses language which is not quite the same as David's, but it conveys very similar ideas. He doesn't write of the restoration of the soul.

He writes of the renewal of the mind and the putting on of the new self, created, I'm quoting here, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness.

[21 : 30] And he says this in the middle of his ethical instructions, in which he's teaching Christians how to walk in paths of righteousness. The ethical instructions of the Bible, whether from the Proverbs or the letters of Paul or the teaching of Jesus, the ethical instructions of the Bible are the means by which the shepherd leads his sheep in paths of righteousness.

So, friends, let's welcome this and let's rejoice in it. Don't be sad. Don't think, oh dear, this Christian life is rather tough. Being led by the Lord is so very difficult.

Sexual chastity, the possibility of persecution, and all those other paths of righteousness, which haven't even been mentioned yet today, but I'm aware of them. Now, don't think like that.

The Christian life is glorious. Sexual chastity brings happiness and peace. And as for persecution, well, of course, it would be very painful. But think of what Jesus says.

Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy.

[22 : 39] For behold, your reward in heaven is great. There's a reward, says Jesus, a glorious recompense. It's beyond this world. It's in heaven.

We've got to be patient. But the restoration of the soul, which begins in this life and is furthered by our following the shepherd along the paths of righteousness, that work of restoration will come to its glorious completion in the world to come.

So our shepherd's work, his business, is to restore our souls. His method of doing it is to lead us in the paths of righteousness.

And thirdly, his purpose is to bring honor to his name. There it is at the end of our verse 3. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

And don't you think it's odd and striking that David ends this verse like that? What does he mean by it? He means that the glorious process whereby God takes a marred and disfigured human soul and then proceeds to restore it, proceeds to recover its beauty and usefulness, causing that soul to learn how to walk in the paths of righteousness, this glorious process is carried out by God for the sake of the honor of his name.

[24 : 04] In other words, people look at the process and they say, what a wonderful God there is in heaven if he has such power to transform a wrecked human life like that.

Let's earth this in reality. Imagine you're a man who was converted to Christ at the age of 20. You're much older now, but imagine you were converted at the age of 20. You became a sheep in Christ's flock at that age.

So for the first 20 years of your life, you had been a stranger to the Lord. Your soul had been languishing in its state of decay. You've been very familiar up to that point with the paths of unrighteousness, paths of self-indulgence and self-centeredness.

But now, in the mercy of God, you're brought to Christ at the age of 20. You're rescued. You become a sheep in the good shepherd's flock. And the years pass and you take your place in the Lord's church.

You begin to serve your new master. You find your soul nourishment in the pages of the Bible. You learn to drink it in. And the restoration of your soul, year by year, is carried forward.

[25 : 15] Year by year, your old life withers and decays, and the beauty of your renewed humanity is being revealed. Now, just imagine, when you're 60, so 40 years have passed, you then meet an old friend that you haven't seen for 40 years.

He's not a Christian, but you and he were lads together. And because you've met up with him after all this time, you sit down together and you talk about your lives. You tell each other your life stories. Now, he may not say this to you, but for him to look at you and to see what has happened to you over all those years is going to make him deeply thoughtful. He may say in his heart, I remember this man when he was a weasel.

He was proud and self-centered and lived only for himself and his own pleasures. What power has transformed him into this sort of a human being with all this capacity for love and generosity and service?

If he has been transformed like this by Jesus Christ, what a wonderful person Jesus Christ must be. I too must learn to bow before Christ.

[26 : 27] I must seek this same personal renovation, restoration. So do you see what's happening here? The restoration of a person's soul brings honor to the name of Christ and the name of God the Father.

Now, of course, the Lord restores our souls for the sake of our own happiness, and our own joy. But the honor of his name is always his concern. Well, I must wind up in just a moment.

But let me ask this. Is your soul in the hand of the restorer? Are you a sheep in the shepherd's flock? If these things are true of you, then you are a blessed human being.

You are being fundamentally remade year by year. You are being prepared to sit at table with your glorious master in the world without end.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. That has been the tried, tested, and proven experience of countless people.

[27 : 35] Lord Jesus, indeed be everything to us, we pray. Fill our hearts and minds with you, and bless us as you continue to restore us.

We ask it for your name's sake. Amen. Amen.