

2. The Restoration of the Soul

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's turn to Psalm number 23, and if you have one of our big Pew Bibles, visitor's Bibles, you'll find that on page 548, 540, sorry, 458, 458 in our Pew Bibles.
- I'm not seeing very clearly. You may notice I've picked a couple of very fat volumes of Calvin's commentaries to raise my Bible a little bit closer to my eyes, because one of my eyes works one way and the other one works the other way, and so I need every bit of help I can get.
- So here we go, Psalm number 23, great Psalm. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and 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. My cup overflows.
- [1 : 1 7] Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
- Amen. And may God bless these words to our hearts. Well now last week, and if you were here you'll remember this, but last week we looked at verses 1 and 2 in the 23rd Psalm, 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.
- To be under the shepherd's loving care is to be under his discipline. And we noticed also the lovely fact that those who submit to the shepherd, the Lord's rule, become increasingly contented.
- If the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. And also restful, lying down in green pastures and enjoying the stillness of the waters. Now this week I want us to look only at one verse, and that is verse 3, under this title, The Restoration of the Soul.
- So let me read verse 3 again. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- [2 : 2 9] Now it's no accident that the second sentence in verse 3 follows on the first sentence. There's a logical link between those two sentences.
- What David means is that the Lord restores my soul by leading me in paths of righteousness. The way the Lord restores my soul is by leading me into, well, it's an unknown country, really.
- A country which is not my natural habitat or your natural habitat. A country which David calls the paths of righteousness. Now my natural habitat, and I'm sure this is the case with you as well, is a country with very different paths.
- My first steps, as I look back, were taken down paths of unrighteousness and selfishness. By nature, I can assure you that I'm a gangster and a brigand. You ask my mother and she'll tell you how I started life.

How I used to fight with my sister and kill frogs and blow raspberries at respectable middle-aged ladies. I could demonstrate to you, if you wanted, how I used to blow a raspberry at a middle...

[3 : 34] I'd better not do that here, had I? You can imagine it. You were the same, weren't you? Now, what I want us to look at, seriously, at the content of verse 3 now, is under three headings.

First, the shepherd's work is to restore our souls. He restores my soul. Now, the me, or the I, in this context, of course, is a sheep in his flock.

So this is not a promise of soul restoration to anybody or everybody. It's an assurance given to those who can truly say, the Lord is my shepherd. So 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 the loving rule and discipline of the shepherd. In other words, we have to be Christians. But once we are, we can expect our shepherd to begin his work of soul restoration.

Now, inevitably, we ask, what is the soul? And I think the answer is, the soul is me as I really am. It's my inner being, with all its ins and outs and complexities and quirks, all my fears and longings and hopes.

[4 : 45] Me as I am with my peculiar, particular personal history, my own thoughts and emotions. So the soul is the essence of our individual life. And the implication of verse 2 is that my soul is in ruins.

Why else should it need to be restored? You don't restore something which is in good order. To give a parallel, this building, as most of you will know, has had a major facelift in the last year or so.

But the refurbishment of this building has not just been an external thing in terms of creating new features and paints and all that sort of thing. There's had to be a lot of internal restoration too.

And when the contractors were working on the building a year or two back and they were peeling off all the old plaster work and so on, they discovered that there was major damage and disintegration in the very structure of the building.

Most of it there towards the back of the building. And parts of this building would literally have collapsed in a few more years if major reconstruction work had not been done on the old beams and timbers and supporting structures.

[5 : 52] Now in a similar way, the Bible teaches us that the human soul, that complex web of characteristics that makes up our inner being, is damaged to the point of ruination.

And the fundamental element in that ruination, of course the Bible calls it sin, but it's this, that by nature we have substituted ourselves for God. The way that 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 centre of our joys and affections and that serving him should be the thing that drives our life, our great natural desire. That's why the first 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 aren't like that because 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, using a Latin phrase, described man as by nature incurvatus in se, which means curved in or turned in upon himself.

[7 : 05] It's a powerful description. John Wesley, preaching on original sin, said this, Most men talk of loving God and perhaps imagine they do.

At least, few will acknowledge they do not love him. But the fact is too plain to be denied. No man loves God by nature any more than he does of 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. Surely Wesley is right. Our inclination, always by nature, is to serve ourselves.

In fact, so much so, we've developed a whole vocabulary of self-serving words. We speak of self-gratification, self-seeking, self-pleasing, self-indulgence, self-assertion, self-affirmation, self-promotion, self-glorification.

[8 : 09] You name it, we self it. So the paths that we naturally walk in are paths of self-centeredness. The paths of righteousness, characterized by delight in God, they are foreign territory to us.

The familiar paths to us are the paths of self-serving. Now friends, let me ask, are you familiar with this ruination of the soul as it is by nature?

Have you looked within? Have you, so to speak, peeled back the wallpaper and the plaster work and seen the rotten beams and girders underneath? The natural state of men and women is a state of decay.

Jesus makes exactly this point in Mark chapter 7. He says, from within, 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, he says, come from within. Now that's why our souls need to be restored. And the restoration of the soul is such a big thing that it can't be achieved just by a lick of paint or a wash down.

[9 : 30] It involves a fundamental rebuilding of the inner person. And notice from verse 3 that it's not something that you and I can do. The verse does not say, summon up your moral courage, pull yourself up by your bootstraps and set about the restoration of your soul, you wimp.

It's not that. It doesn't appeal to anything we can do. It says something much more glorious. It says, he restores my soul. Now friends, this is what the Lord does.

He does many things, but this is one of the great things that he does. It's his work and he delights to do it. He takes the decayed, collapsing fabric of our lives and he restores it.

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

And he will take the fierceness of our attitudes towards other people out of our hearts too and teach us to love others and to care for them. He patiently, as it were, chisels away at our pride and vanity and one-upmanship, our sense of superiority over other people, and he replaces these things with a gladness that other people should do well.

[10 : 49] He chips away over the years at those grubby and shameful things, misplaced sexual desire and the love of money. He's rather like the restorer of fine paintings.

He takes the dirt-encrusted and damaged thing and patiently works away at it until its original beauty begins to shine through. Now, this restoration is 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 by no means.

but it is a real progressive, wonderful thing. The Lord is in the business of restoring souls. So if you're a sheep in his flock, if you're a Christian man or woman, the Lord is even now at this moment at work on your soul to take forward that restoration, 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's 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.

So there's the first thing. The shepherd's work is to restore our souls. Now, second, the shepherd's method is to lead us in paths of righteousness.

[12 : 16] This is how he goes about the soul restoration project. Now, David's language here is vivid and pictorial and rustic, rural. We're out in the hills here. We're in sheep and shepherd territory.

And the Middle Eastern way of shepherding sheep was that the shepherd would lead them. I think they still do it like that out in the Middle East. He leads and they follow. Of course, we do it differently in this country.

We round up our sheep with border collies and then we load them onto a trailer behind a tractor and we drive them around and move them that way. But not so with David. David knows the ways of the Middle Eastern shepherd because he had been a shepherd himself as a young man and he'd often had this task of leading his sheep out into the country.

He knew the right paths in which to lead them. Only a foolish shepherd would lead his sheep astray. Now, in verse 2, David takes the idea of right paths and he extends it.

He adds a moral quality. These are not merely right or appropriate paths. These are righteous paths, paths of righteousness. If David was only interested in right paths, we might think that belonging to the Lord's flock was only about having an enjoyable and comfortable life.

[13 : 31] So that, for example, a person might say, the Lord showed me the right paths to a secure job and a decent income, a nice person to marry, a pleasant house to live in.

He's led me in the right paths and I'm very comfortable. No, it's not that. It's something altogether more bracing. These are paths of righteousness. This is how to live rightly in the sight of God even if there is no decent job to have and no decent income to come in, even if a person doesn't have a comfortable home and has never found a comforting marriage partner.

I want to give just two examples of the paths of righteousness that the Lord leads his people in. First, he will lead us in paths of suffering.

Now, not all Christians suffer to an equal degree, some much more than others, but all Christians learn to accept a measure of suffering as part of the normal Christian life.

And Christian people suffer because the Bible Gospel so deeply challenges the standards of the world around us. So our friends and relatives and colleagues at work who are not Christians will regard us as odd.

[14 : 43] They may well 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 very hurtful, painful. In some countries, of course, to be a Christian and to belong openly to the Lord's Church will invite persecution and real oppression leading to Christians being treated as second- or third-class citizens, being deprived of their jobs and possessions, even their freedom, their lives.

In a number of countries today, church buildings are burnt down and the houses of Christians and Christian pastors are attacked. Christian people are being murdered. It has always been like that.

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

And he says several times in his letters, imitate me as I imitate Christ. So the path of suffering is one of the paths of righteousness and our shepherd will lead us along that path.

Then secondly, he will lead us in paths of sexual purity and chastity. This needs particularly to be emphasised these days. The Bible upholds marriage and teaches us that in a wonderful way human marriage reflects the very way in which Christ loves the church as the church's bridegroom and is committed to her with an indissoluble bond.

[16 : 13] Therefore, Christian people, both single Christians and married Christians, are committed to a view of sexuality which deeply respects marriage as the only proper place in which sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed.

Now, that is a path of righteousness. It's not an easy path to follow in today's world because eroticism and sexuality is pressed upon us from every quarter as we know.

All around us, there are forces at work which undermine marriage. Many voices protest against the Bible's teaching and dismiss it even with scorn as repressive and they want to promote alternative arrangements.

cohabitation outwith marriage, same-sex partnerships, even promiscuity as though the lifestyle of a James Bond could possibly bring happiness. But the truth is that these alternative arrangements are dismantling the very fabric of our society.

They are 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 of many of our children and young people today for whom the goalposts of society have not merely been moved, they have ceased to exist.

[17 : 33] I was a teenager in the 1960s when so many of these old bindings began to be loosed and I come from a broken home myself. So I've seen some of these things at first hand.

But the Lord lovingly leads his people into the paths of righteousness and as he does so he restores the ruin of their souls and creates lives that are happy and useful and truly human.

Now the Apostle Paul in his letters uses language which is not identical to David's but it conveys very similar ideas. He writes not of the restoration of the soul but of the renewal of the mind and the putting on of the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness.

And he says this in the middle of his ethical instructions in which he's teaching Christians how to walk in the paths of righteousness. The ethical instructions of the Bible are the means by which the shepherd leads his sheep in paths of righteousness and brings this restoration to the soul.

So friends let's rejoice in all this and welcome the ethical teaching. Don't be sad as you think of these things. Don't think oh dear, dear, dear me the Christian life is so tough.

[18 : 49] Being led by the Lord seems so very difficult. Sexual chastity the possibility of persecution and other paths of righteousness that haven't even been mentioned today but there are many of them. No friends don't think like that.

The Christian life is glorious. Sexual chastity for example brings happiness and peace. And as for persecution of course to endure it would be very painful.

But Jesus says blessed are you 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 for behold your reward is great in heaven.

There is a reward a glorious recompense says the Lord. It's beyond this world it's in heaven we've got to be patient therefore but the restoration of the soul which begins in this life and is furthered by our following the shepherd along the paths of righteousness it will come to its glorious completion in the world to come.

So our shepherd's work is to restore our souls his method is to lead us in paths of righteousness and third his purpose is to bring honour to his name.

[20 : 06] There it is at the end of verse 2 he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Now don't you think it's odd and quite striking for David to end verse 2 like that?

What does he mean by it? Well he means that the glorious process whereby God takes a marred disfigured human soul and proceeds to restore it proceeds to recover its beauty and usefulness causing that soul to learn to walk in paths of righteousness this glorious process is carried out by God for the sake of the honour of his name.

In other words people will look at this process of restoration and they will say what a wonderful God there is in heaven if he has such power to transform a wrecked human life like that.

Now just let's earth this in reality in real experience. Let's say that you're a man who is converted to Christ at the age of 20. At 20 you become a sheep in his flock.

Now for those first 20 years of your life you've been a stranger to him. Your soul has been languishing in its state of decay and you've been very familiar with the paths of unrighteousness the paths of self-indulgence and self-gratification but now in the mercy of God you are brought to Christ and rescued.

[21 : 29] You become a sheep in the good shepherd's flock and then the years begin to roll on. You take your place in the Lord's church. You begin to serve your new master.

You find the nourishment that your soul needs in the pages of the Bible. You learn to drink in the scriptures and the restoration of your soul year by year decade by decade is carried forward.

And as this process goes on your old life withers and decays increasingly and the beauty of your renewed humanity is revealed. Now let's imagine that you reach the age of 60 40 years on, 40 years of the Christian life and at the age of 60 you meet an old friend, somebody that you knew at school when you were youngsters together, not a Christian and he hasn't seen you for 40 years since you were lads together and you get together with your old friend, you spend time together, you talk and you share your life stories together.

Now, he may not say this to you, but for him to look at you and see what has happened to you will make him deeply thoughtful.

He may say in his heart, I remember this man when he was a weasel, he was proud, he was self-centered, he lived only for himself and his own pleasures. What power has transformed him into this human being with all this capacity for love and generosity and service?

[22 : 56] If he's been transformed like this by Jesus Christ, what a wonderful person Jesus Christ must be. I must learn too to bow before him. I must seek this same personal restoration.

Do you see? For his name's sake, the restoration of your soul and my soul brings honour to the name of Christ and 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 honour of his own name is always his concern.

Well, friends, I must wind up in just a moment, but let me ask this as I look around. Is your soul in the hands of the restorer of souls?

Are you a sheep in the shepherd's flock? Because if these things are true of you, you are a blessed human being. You're being fundamentally remade year by year.

you're being prepared to sit at table with your glorious master in the world to come. He restores my soul. He leads me in right pathways for his name's sake.

[24 : 11] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. how we thank you, our wonderful shepherd, our gracious master, that it is your work, the work that you mercifully do to restore the souls of those who belong to you.

Have mercy upon each one of us and help us, we pray, to experience this more and more and to rejoice in it as you lead us in those bracing paths of righteousness for the sake of your name.

And we ask indeed that the lives of every one of us here may bring glory and honour to the name of the great and true and only God and of the Lord Jesus. And these things we ask for Jesus' sake.

Amen.