

Fear Not – He Guides You Along Right Paths

Reflections on Psalm 23: Part 2 (vv.3-4)

By Barry Wilkins

He refreshes [restores] my soul.

The word for 'restore' is very frequent in the OT; the same word is used for 'return' and 'repent', for example [Ruth 1:8-9](#) and [Psalm 116:7](#) which we saw last week. David was, no doubt, mindful of his need to repent and return to God when he strayed from the right path in his life. And we also need to trust in God's loving kindness to us when we turn to him from our waywardness, as sheep trust and answer to their shepherd.



The Hebrews did not have a concept of soul, unlike Western culture which has inherited the Greek notion of soul as a component of the person, distinct from body and mind. The Hebrew word here, albeit often translated as 'soul', occurs hundreds of times in the bible and denotes a complete person under God ([Genesis 2:7](#), '... the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being' [NIV, Hebrew living person, ESV living creature, KJV and some modern versions living soul] and [Psalm 116:7](#), 'Return to your rest, my **soul**, for the LORD has been good to you.'). Restoration, therefore, applies to the whole being, 'all that I am before God'. It is a restoration of the psalmist's whole relationship with his God. God's rest is again a continuous reality, rather than a one-off single event.

He guides me along the right paths [paths of righteousness] for his name's sake [on account of His Name].

The picture language of the psalm continues here. The shepherd leads his sheep along paths that are walkable (the sheep shall not stumble) and right (they lead to fresh pasture, water and rest). The Hebrew word righteous here means right or correct. King David, who knows his situation before God, and his relationship with God, desires to be walking morally right paths.

For His Name's sake; we had a similar phrase in Daniel's prayer in [Daniel 9:19](#), 'For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.' For God's sake does not mean for God's benefit, and certainly should not be used as an expletive. Rather it means 'because it is in accordance with His Name', 'it is because that is what He does'. God's OT name Yahweh means the God who saves and delivers. God is dependable; He is true to His character.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley ¹ [NIV; ESV and Hebrew, *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.*** We notice here that David has changed the pronoun from 'he' to 'you', and the relationship with God is now personal (he is 'with me'). The darker the valley, the closer God is in David's experience, and so with us. Predators lurk in the deepest valley, but the sheep needs not fear because the shepherd is close by, protecting and leading. It is worth noting that the path through a dark valley is still a 'right path', the shepherd guiding and protecting as always. The rod is probably an offensive weapon against lions and bears; the staff defensive and guiding. Comfort is not just a soothing experience. The word is very common and is directly related to the Hebrew word for 'rest' in v.2 (*still waters, waters of rest*). It is a whole-person experience, vividly represented by the sheep-shepherd analogy.

¹ The Hebrew word is a composite of *shadow* and *death*. It is used in other psalms (e.g. [Psalm 44:19](#), '... you ... covered us with the *shadow of death* (ESV)' and in Job where it means more like deep darkness, Job, e.g. [Job 12:22](#) 'He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings *utter darkness* into the light.', and the major prophets, e.g. [Isaiah 9:2](#), '... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of *deep darkness* a light has dawned.' NIV always avoids *shadow of death*.