

God's Will

Finding Guidance
for Everyday Decisions



J. I. PACKER

Bestselling Author of *Knowing God*

CAROLYN NYSTROM

God's Will

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for Everyday Decisions

J. I. Packer and
Carolyn Nystrom



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Previously published under the title *Guard Us, Guide Us*
ISBN 978-0-8010-1441-3

Printed in the United States of America

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the original edition as follows:
Packer, J. I. (James Innell).

Guard us, guide us : divine leading in life's decisions / J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom.

p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-8010-1303-4

1. Decision making—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Providence and government of God—Christianity. I. Nystrom, Carolyn. II. Title.

BV4509.5.P325 2008
248.4—dc22

2007039885

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12 13 14 15 16 17 18 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, *God's Will*

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Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
 O'er the world's tempestuous sea;
Guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
 For we have no help but thee;
Yet possessing every blessing
 If our God our Father be.
Savior, breathe forgiveness o'er us;
 All our weakness thou doest know;
Thou didst tread this earth before us,
 Thou didst feel its keenest woe;
Lone and dreary, faint and weary,
 Through the desert thou didst go.
Spirit of our God, descending,
 Fill our hearts with heavenly joy;
Love with every passion blending,
 Pleasure that can never cloy;
Thus provided, pardoned, guided,
 Nothing can our peace destroy.

James Edmeston (1791–1867)

Prologue

The Taste of Fear

Fear of imminent bodily harm has an unpleasant flavor in the most literal sense. Bile rises from the stomach and plants in one's throat a sharp, bitter, metallic taste. So it was with J. I.'s American friend as he and the birthday girl drifted out to sea off the coast of Maui on a capsized catamaran with a large shark swimming quietly round and round them. So it was with his Canadian friend as she trod water in the chilly Pacific after the boat had sunk. J. I. has known the taste himself, and probably you have too; you would be a remarkable person if you have not.

Other forms of fear may not leave the same bad taste in the mouth, but metaphorically they can spoil the taste of your life. They cloud your spirit by day, they keep you awake at night, they undermine your concentration at all hours, and they make you run scared on a regular basis. Of all the modes of drivenness that human life embraces, being driven by fear is perhaps in the long run the most uncomfortable and the most damaging; it spoils your relationships by draining your capacity to live, it robs you of wisdom by keeping you looking sideways rather than straight ahead, and it is a very hard disability to overcome.

During the past century and a half, the topic of guidance from God has become a focus of just such fear in many Christian hearts. Christian people have always rejoiced in the certainty that God in his omniscient wisdom and grace is working out his plan for our lives, and that he helps us in our decision making and strengthens us to do what obedience to his revealed will requires of us. But in some quarters the exuberant, outward-looking holiness modeled by such men as John Wesley and William Wilberforce shrank into a legalistic pietism. Pietism, which means living by the belief that nothing in life matters so much as my personal relationship with God, is right and good, but legalism, which means living by the belief that the quality of my relationship with God depends on my turning in some form of correct performance, is neither. In this case, two specific things went wrong. First, the notion spread that getting and following direct guidance from God, as something above and beyond making commonsense decisions in Christian terms, was a matter of great importance in the Christian life. Second, God's plan for the Christian individual's life came to be thought of like a travel itinerary in which making planned connections is crucial and missing a connection wrecks the plan and spoils the rest of the journey. For now a second-rate plan B must be formed to replace the original ideal, but now impracticable, plan A, and this will certainly involve some measure of loss.

In consequence, fearful (fear-full) and perplexed anxiety with regard to decision making became widespread among evangelical people. Believers felt unable to make far-reaching decisions until they had received some special personal indication from God as to what they should do. Fear of making what from God's standpoint would be wrong commitments vocationally, professionally, socially, relationally, and matrimonially induced a kind of inner paralysis that resulted in good and desirable commitments not being made, because people could not bring themselves to make any commitment at all (which was, of course, an instance of decision making in itself, though it was not usually seen that way). This has not been a happy state of affairs.

The irony of the situation was that teachers (there once were many of them) who warned against sentencing oneself to the second-rateness of a plan B through not asking God's guidance diligently enough and so failing to make the right decision, were trying to ensure that Christians would face up to Christ's call to embrace costly, self-denying service of others for his sake. At one time it was almost axiomatic among evangelicals that all who aimed to be first-class Christians should become either missionaries overseas or ministers/ministers' wives or medical personnel (doctors or nurses) or masters/mistresses in schools. All other walks of life, however legitimate, were viewed as second-class by comparison with these. So young Christians were urged to seek personal guidance into one or other of the favored four, rather than into any more lucrative line of work.

None of this, to be sure, was wholly wrong. These four forms of service do in fact ordinarily offer more opportunities for doing good and bringing immediate benefit to people than do many other trades and professions; so they should be seen as privileged, and young people should be encouraged to aspire to one of them on this account. But the idea that they set you in a higher plane spiritually is a new form of the medieval superstition that God sees the professionally religious as a cut above everyone else. And the idea that you would need a special sign from God, over and above interest, aptitude, and the estimate of your fitness by others, to warrant your committing yourself to serve in one of these fields, or in any other employment for that matter, is superstition too.

But believers still feel anxious about guidance and find decision making spiritually uneasy and problematical. Fear, it seems, is still here. It is to try to help in this area of tense sensitivity that the present book has been written.

Fear-full Saints

One last preliminary point. Ministering over the years has shown us that the redeemed community includes two sorts of people,

as does also the wider world: those who run silly and those who run scared. In terms of the ancient doctrine of the four temperaments, those who run silly tend to be the sanguine and the choleric, while those who run scared tend to be the phlegmatic and the melancholy. In modern language, we would label the two types the impulsives and the depressives. The impulsives are not thoughtful enough in the service of God, being too hasty and superficial and happy-go-lucky to reach wisdom's full seriousness, while the depressives, feeling that things are against them, are not sufficiently trustful of God to enjoy wisdom's full stability. The pervasive fear of being somehow wrong-footed and let down is always with them, and weakens their spiritual life more than they are aware. In terms of the classic cardinal virtues, the first type lacks prudence, the second type lacks courage, and both make mistakes about God's guidance to them by reason of their own particular weakness. We have written this book in hope of helping both sorts of believers. The reason why our expositions swing as widely as they do is our desire for maximum usefulness. It is our prayer that everyone who reads this book will gain from it. God grant it! Amen.

J. I. Packer
Carolyn Nystrom

1

The Shepherd and His Sheep

Be thou our guardian and our guide,
and hear us when we call;
Let not our slippery footsteps slide,
and hold us lest we fall.

Isaac Williams (1802–65)

We begin by pursuing the point that our prologue has just made.

Guidance is a word, as we saw, that for many Christian people evokes both fascination and fear. The fascination is felt because Christians do in fact want to be divinely guided and know that there are many places in the Bible where guidance is promised to faithful believers. The fear arises because they suspect that it is hard to get guidance right, and they anticipate disaster should they get it wrong. They know of cases where guidance has been claimed for crazy and ruinous conduct, and this knowledge keeps fear very much alive. The fascination and the fear are fed by a nagging sense of uncertainty regarding God's ways in guidance and of his elusiveness in fulfilling the promises he has made about it. As it is said of some people that you never know where you are

with them, so some believers come to feel about God because of what they or their friends experienced when they sought God's guidance at a difficult time in their lives. When they thought they were following clear guidance or when they felt requested guidance had not been given, trouble came, things went wrong, hopes were dashed, and their sincerity in seeking to be guided seemed to go for nothing. This has left them bewildered and sore, as if they had been let down. It is bad for believers to live with such feelings, and it dishonors God when they do. Part of the purpose of the present book is to give help at this point.

Guidance through History

The first thing to say is that this syndrome of troubled and hurting perplexity about guidance is a relatively recent arrival among evangelical Christian people. It is the fruit of a particular belief about God that blossomed in the world of pietistic experientialism in mid-nineteenth-century America that followed two generations of Wesleyan mission work and the Second Great Awakening. The belief was that immediate guidance from God in the form of voicelike thoughts and strongly inclined imaginings and inner urges was regularly given to Bible-believers who really needed it and humbly sought it. To be sure, voices and visions of this kind had been claimed as guidance by some on the margins of seventeenth-century Puritanism, but mainline Puritans had dismissed them as "enthusiasm" in the bad sense—that is, fanaticism. Now, however, against the background of sustained emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the individual, this conception of God supernaturally telling people what to do came to be thought of as guidance at its clearest and best and as an experience that all zealous believers might hope to know sooner or later.

Two twentieth-century developments reinforced this notion. The first was the teaching of Frank Buchman and his colleagues in the personal spiritual renewal movement between the two world wars that was called the Oxford Group. Buchman taught that

one should set aside time daily (ideally, half an hour or more) to listen to what God had to say to one's conscience about living out Christ's four absolutes: honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. The phrase "quiet time" came to birth as Buchman's label for this exercise. The practice of a daily quiet time with God for prayer, meditation, reading Scripture, and self-examination that leads to confession and renewed commitment to holy living, though not directly mandated in Scripture, has become a vital spiritual discipline for Christians generally. Its lifelong practice has led them to become spiritually mature men and women, able servants in God's kingdom. By contrast, neglect of these quiet time exercises of heart makes for flat, dry, stunted, barren Christian living. But a regular "quiet time" should not be seen as a magic formula for receiving personal guidance from God.

The second development was the spread of Pentecostalism with its claim that all the giftings and dimensions of New Testament Christian experience were now being restored to the church, words of direct guidance among them. The worldwide charismatic movement of the last third of the twentieth century embraced much of this, including expectation that words of guidance for particular persons would from time to time be given to other Christians as messages for them to deliver, often publicly, as when Agabus told Paul publicly what the Holy Spirit was saying about how his trek to Jerusalem would end (Acts 21:10–14). Note that Paul did not treat Agabus's message as guidance not to go to Jerusalem, but instead said a firm no to his friends when they urged him to change his plans. When Luke tells us that his friends finally gave up trying to persuade him, saying, "Let the will of the Lord be done," he means us to understand that they had come to see Paul's resolve to go ahead and suffer as God's authentic guidance to him (compare Acts 20:22–23). God-given warnings of trouble to come are not necessarily admonitions to take avoiding action; they may rather be tests of our sincerity, requiring of us continued obedience with eyes wide open to the consequences. In John 21:18–19, we watch Christ test Peter in this way. More later on that subject.

Now we see how it has come about that many in our Western Christian world take the true essence and definition of guidance to be God somehow telling us, in words or as if in words internally in the mind, or else by prophetic messages duly delivered, what we should do: we can embrace ends to which we must now seek means (example: Paul's company taking ship for Greece, Acts 16:9–12); or make specific moves in a situation where God's end is not yet clear (examples: Paul's company stopped from evangelizing as planned in the provinces of Asia, Mysia, and Bithynia, Acts 16:6–8; Philip led into the desert to meet the Ethiopian, 8:26–29); or take specific steps as means to a specific foretold result (examples: directions for safety given to and through Paul in the storm, Acts 27:22–26, 31, 34; Jesus instructing Peter about the fish and the coin, Matt. 17:27). We see too how guidance comes to be thought of as a potential disaster area, where a mistake or a misstep can deprive us forever of God's best. We can see how anxious uncertainty about guidance becomes a sore spot, often made sorer by dramatic tales from pulpits, platforms, and printed sources, telling how guidance was given and followed in particular cases with marvelous results. It is into this world of wonderment and worry that we now speak.

And what have we to say? Negatively, that a good deal of what we have sketched out is badly wrong. Positively, that God's guidance is one aspect of his covenant care. Let us explain.

To clear the ground, we would begin by stating our recognition that God on occasion in Bible times communicated with some people in the manner described above, and that he has not said he will never do so again, and that some at least of the glowing stories about guidance of this kind that are told can hardly be doubted. Some see reason to deny that God ever did, or will, communicate this way now that the canon of Scripture is complete, but that view seems to us to go beyond what is written and to fly in the face of credible testimony. It is not for us to place restrictions on God that he has not placed on himself! Certainly, no messages from God of the kind we are discussing could be regarded as canonical in the sense of carrying

authority for universal faith and life in the way that Scripture does, and as we noted above, Scripture shows us, from the case of Paul and Agabus, that fresh information from God about the future is not always meant to change our convictions about what we should be doing in the present. This, however, is not to deny that “private revelations,” as the Puritans used to call them, ever take place nowadays. On that question we keep an open mind. Though we know that self-deception here is very easy, we would not short-circuit claims to have received words from God; we would instead test them, as objectively and open mindedly as we can, in light of the teaching of Scripture itself. Scripture teaches that principle of testing in such passages as Deuteronomy 18:21–22 where God’s people are told to listen to supposed prophets with discernment: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.” Similarly Paul instructs the church at Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21, “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good.”

Covenant Context

But now, the things we want to say against this background are, first, that personal messages from heaven are not and never were God’s usual way of leading and guiding, and, second, that even should such words appear as part of the story, God’s work and ministry as our guide always involves far more. On the first point, we contend that God’s regular way of showing us what he calls us to is by appropriate application of the once-for-all revealed truths of the Bible. On the second point, we hold that God’s guiding of us is, as we said above, one aspect of his active covenant care of us, and as such has much more to it than simply telling us what to do and then, so to speak, standing back to see what we make of his instructions.

Let us be clear about God's covenant with believers, the covenant of grace as theologians call it, which is the context and frame of all God's guiding action. *Covenant* is the biblical word for the all-inclusive mutual commitment of God to us and us to him. It is not a negotiated partnership between equals but a relationship imposed through God's initiative. It is rightly termed a covenant of grace because God's undeserved kindness is at the heart of it. The change of arrangements for maintaining covenant fellowship when Christ's mediation as priest and sacrifice superseded the typical setup that was previously in place did not change the nature of the relationship itself. That is portrayed in Scripture as a *royal* covenant, comparable to the ruler-subject bond created in the ancient world by suzerainty treaties; also as a *marriage* covenant, a husband-and-wife commitment, in which each party pledges all that they are and have to the other and promises to serve the other in love; also as a *family* covenant, a parent-and-child relationship, an unchangeable bond of parental care binding the parents and their children together; and also, in an image that illustrates all three of these analogies, as a *shepherd-and-sheep* reality, involving affection, protection, leadership, and provision—in short, everything the shepherd can devise that makes for the welfare of his flock. The often-repeated biblical formula, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people," sometimes called the slogan of the covenant, is to be expounded in terms of all these relationships side by side, just as light is to be explained in terms of all the colors of the spectrum together. Our knowledge and experience of the reality of God's grace, including his guidance, is in truth covenantal throughout.

Look, now, in more detail at the picture of God as shepherd and believers as the Lord's sheep—including Christ's depiction of himself in John 10 as the Good Shepherd. The image here is of the owner of the flock shepherding his sheep himself, looking after them and caring for them in every way not only because they are his livelihood and so need to be kept safe, well fed, and healthy, but also because their very silliness and helpless dependence on him generate a strong sense of affectionate responsibility toward

them. I (J. I.) know this firsthand, having watched it over many years in my friend John, a sheep farmer in Wales, and the same patient commitment to each sheep's well-being shines through the sweet and simple book by Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*.¹ Keller ran sheep ranches in British Columbia for eight years, and wrote his book directly out of that experience. There is no reason to think that the empathetic bond that develops between owner-shepherds and their sheep was any different in the biblical world from what we see it to be today, nor is there any reason to think that the basic techniques of shepherding are different now from what they once were. All the evidence, in fact, points the other way.

Right Paths

The task of this initial chapter is to establish a perspective and lay a foundation for all that is to come, and Keller's title takes us straight to our chosen way of doing this. We propose now to expound Psalm 23 in a way that will show it to be a biblical classic on guidance, countering all the anxiety we may feel on the subject with all the assurance and reassurance which in that case we need. "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (v. 3). We shall try to bring out the full force of this statement. But to do that we must see it in its place in the psalm as a whole; and that means remembering that the Psalter is a God-given songbook, the lyrics of which are poetry written in the Hebrew manner; and that means we must be ready both for sudden switches from one thought and image to another and for what we may call secondary imagery, the use of a new image to illustrate and develop the further meaning of an image already present in the text. This very Eastern procedure may at first stumble our prosaic Western minds; we have to learn that good biblical interpretation involves discerning and luxuriating in the imagery as well as distilling the logic of each passage. Biblical communication regularly engages both our logic and

our imagination. We shall try to bear this in mind as we dig into the psalm.

The first four verses sustain the picture of the psalmist (David) as the sheep and the Lord as the shepherd, walking ahead to guard and guide, as ancient shepherds did.

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.

The shepherd provides a quiet and safe place to eat, drink, and rest, and to find inward refreshment and renewing of contentment. Also, he protects his sheep from real harm and danger, however threatening the terrain through which they have to pass. And now, following this, the quite different image of VIP treatment at a banquet is superimposed, to amplify the picture already given of the sheep having all the food, drink, and sense of security that their well-being requires.

You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 You anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.

Banquets in Bible times were occasions for friendly fellowship and relaxed enjoyment. Here David speaks of God the faithful shepherd doubling as God the generous host, bestowing these blessings on one whom he treats as an honored guest. The oil on

the head no doubt refers to the blob of a sweet-smelling olive oil compound that a good host would dab on all his guests' foreheads as they arrived, so as to mask body odors (this was before the days of showers) and to make their faces shine while producing what we may call the cologne effect ("fragrance for men"). In light of what Keller tells us, however,² it is natural to guess that what suggested this detail to David's mind was the recurring need throughout each summer for the shepherd to apply to the sheep's heads the traditional Palestinian mixture of olive oil, sulfur, and spices that was designed to relieve the itching caused by nose flies and other such pests, and to stop the spread of scab when the sheep rubbed heads, as it is the way of sheep to do. The detail of enemies' presence was likely suggested by David's memories of predators (lions, bears, and wolves) spying on and stalking him and the sheep as they moved around in the wild. In any case, the picture of David happily banqueting with his enemies close and watching, but unable to interfere, carries the thought of perfect protection bringing perfect peace, which is the thought David means to express.

"It takes one to know one," we say. Sheepfarmer Keller discerns that David, who began as a professional shepherd in his father Jesse's service, builds up his account of God the shepherd out of his own experience of a full season's work on the job—from the time he led the sheep out of the fold to the Judean hills in the spring to the time he brought them back in the fall. Our appreciation of God's pastoral care is enlarged and deepened by what he tells us, nonshepherds that we are. For instance, we learn that sheep simply refuse to lie down (v. 2) until they are quite free from fear, from disturbance by troublemakers in the flock, from active harassment by flies and parasites, and from hunger and thirst; so the shepherd must be willing to work in order to shield them from these things when resting-time comes.³ We learn of the planning and preparing that must be done so the shepherd can always lead his sheep along paths that bring them to good grazing in green pastures and to places where still waters provide good drinking.⁴ Knowing something of Palestine's climate, geography, and sheep-farming heritage, Keller is able to help us imagine how David would lead the family flock

uphill in the spring to high meadows and then, as winter approached, take them downhill through dark ravines where predators prowled, back to the family fold (v. 4).⁵ He explains to us also about the shepherd's rod (club) and staff (stick with a hook-shaped crook at one end), and how they would be used to service and protect the flock.⁶ Readers end Keller's book wiser both about shepherding and about the patient, painstaking quality of God's love.

"My cup overflows," says David (v. 5). This is a picture of abundance. So much wine is provided that those who fill the guests' cups can afford to be prodigal, pouring it out up to the brim and then adding a little more. God's goodness (generosity, that is, according to the constant Old Testament nuance that the word carries) is such that the streams of his gracious giving never cease to flow to the guests at his banquet, who are both his family and his flock—his children, who are also his sheep. Verse 6 reads:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

So now the guest at the banquet, silly sheep that he or she is, is to be a permanent resident in the home where the banquet took place, where the host-owner-shepherd himself lives. God's hospitality to his servant in the place of his own presence is unending.

It would be hard to imagine a more reassuring, heartwarming sequence of images than this. Small wonder that Psalm 23 has always been a favorite of Christian people, that it is constantly used at Christian sickbeds, deathbeds, and funerals, and that it exists in several versions in a whole series of Christian hymn books. Perhaps the finest of all the versions (and the least well known) is this, by Isaac Watts:

My Shepherd will supply my need,
Jehovah is his name;
In pastures green he makes me feed,
Beside the living stream.

He brings my wand'ring spirit back
When I forsake his ways;
And leads me for his mercy's sake
in paths of truth and grace.

When I walk through the shades of death,
Thy presence is my stay;
A word of thy supporting breath
Drives all my fears away.
Thy hand in sight of all my foes
Doth still my table spread;
My cup with blessings overflows,
Thine oil anoints my head.

The sure provisions of my God
attend me all my days.
O may thy house be mine abode,
and all my work be praise!
There would I find a settled rest,
While others go and come,
No more a stranger or a guest
But like a child at home.

Substantively and canonically, the Bible is a unity, and the Old Testament, which lays conceptual foundations for all that is to come, should be interpreted by the light of its New Testament fulfillment. How then do we achieve a fully Christian understanding of Psalm 23, as we, with Phillip Keller, Isaac Watts, and countless others have already begun to attempt? What are the rules for doing this?

Theological Framework

First, the psalm must be set in an explicitly Trinitarian frame, and the work of God being celebrated must be seen as the joint operation of the Father who cares supremely for his family, the Son who identifies himself as the Good (*kalos*) Shepherd of his

sheep (*kalos* meaning gloriously beautiful as well as functionally excellent), and the Holy Spirit who directly generates faith, peace, joy, and praise in believing hearts.

Second, the psalm must be set in an explicitly covenantal context, so as to be seen as a realizing of the truth that the one-and-only three-in-one is now and forever *our* and therefore *my* God, and that I among the rest am *his* through all eternity.

Third, the psalm must be set in an explicitly soteriological, that is, salvation-centered frame, so as to be read as witness to aspects of what God does to rescue us who believe from the guilt and enslaving downdrag of sin, and to prepare us for heaven, where we shall be at home with the Lord in joy unbroken by unfulfilled desires or unhallowed dreams or lapses into unlove.

Fourth, the psalm must be viewed, as we have already started to view it, in terms of the human realities of shepherding. As we noted, godly young David became a professional shepherd, an expert in sheepkeeping strategy, before he became anything else, and the interpreter therefore must catch up cognitively with David's expertise in this in order to grasp the full implications of the imagery he develops in his poem.

With these rules in our mind, let us look through the psalm again. Look first at the *relationship* within which God guides. In verse 1 the psalmist, picturing himself as a sheep, a silly, stubborn, needy, dependent, vulnerable creature, unable to look after himself properly, makes two statements. The first declares, in a tone of evident gladness, that he is in fact under the personal care of the divine shepherd, Yahweh (Jehovah, as our forebears used to render the name), the sovereign God of creation, providence, and grace. A shepherd is essentially a caregiver as we have seen, and because sheep get into all sorts of scrapes, pick up all sorts of infections, and are unable to defend themselves against attack, being shepherd to a flock of sheep in ancient unfenced Palestine was no light work. The shepherd needed to be with the sheep all day, every day. He had to inspect them regularly to make sure they remained in good condition. He had to be ready to defend them against predators from the wild. He had to inspect the terrain

where they were to graze, to make sure no poisonous greenery grew there. He had to be equipped to relieve itching and pain caused by insects and parasites, and to supply remedies for body sores and internal discomforts. And every day he must ensure that each sheep had all the pasture and watering that she needed; which meant that he had to keep moving the flock on, lest they ruin pastureland by overgrazing it. The spiritual counterpart of all of this comes to me from God, says David—for “The LORD is my shepherd.” So forgiveness, protection, freedom from fear, inner health and strength, enjoyment of life, and much more are ours today as children of the Father, beneficiaries of Christ the Son, and sharers in a new, God-centered life imparted and sustained by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The second statement spells out the happy fact that this will go on endlessly. “I shall not want”: not now, not ever. The shepherd’s comprehensive care for me will never cease, says David. Every Christian’s hope is based on the certainty that nothing that makes for real, long-term well-being will ever be lacking in our lives. Such is the grace of our God.

In verses 2 through 4, the picture of God’s constant covenant care is filled in. Green pastures (places of sufficient and satisfying provision) are guaranteed, and security while there is guaranteed too. “He makes me lie down.” Keller has already told us that sheep will not lie down to sleep until peace and quiet reign and there is no disturbance. Failing this, Keller adds, sheep keep moving restlessly from one spot to another; they lose sleep, become irritable, lose weight, and end up comprehensively substandard. His own presence among them, engaging their attention in order to soothe down the tensions they were feeling, was, he notes, regularly the decisive factor in getting them to lie down and go to sleep.⁷ There is evidently a maternal quality in the care good shepherds give, and our minds go straight to Psalm 4:8: “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.”

In verse 3, David speaks directly of his own person to bring out the force of these images. “He restores my soul.” While the verb may have been suggested by the shepherd’s recurring task

of setting right way up sheep that have rolled involuntarily on to their backs and now cannot move and are suffering as a result (it happens today and must have happened in David's day too), the thought is evidently of hope renewed in place of despair, of confidence in God's goodness and promises renewed in face of the stunned apathy brought on by bad experiences, of love to God and man restored in times of bitter resentment, of self-control regained after surrender to an urge that craves to become a regular bad habit, and so on. And leading beside still waters, where drinking brings pleasure in the quenching of thirst and health through inner lubrication and flushing of the system, clearly signifies God leading the believer along paths of righteousness—justice and fairness, honesty and honor, integrity and fidelity—"for his name's sake"—that is, to bring to himself honor and praise that are both God's desire and his due.

In verse 4, we find David developing further the image of the shepherd and his sheep. Following the shepherd as he leads her back to the fold, each sheep sometimes walks through the dark valleys where death stalks. David makes two points relevant to us. First, *danger of loss* faces Christ's followers—loss of quiet untroubled life, loss of stable circumstances, perhaps economic loss, perhaps even loss of life itself. To follow Christ faithfully Christians must swim against the cultural stream in all sorts of ways. As we do this we find ourselves facing threats to our well-being that, if we were not Christ's servants, we would have avoided. For example, we read that the panic-struck disciples awoke Jesus, screaming as they watched the boat fill with water, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" and we remember that they were only out on the lake in the storm because Jesus had said, "Let us go over to the other side" (Mark 4:38, 35). Had they not been his followers, this moment of facing death would not have come their way. Discipleship often works like that.

Second, *deliverance from evil* is promised to Christ's followers. The sheep draws comfort (reassurance, calm, and sustaining strength) from the shepherd's use of rod and staff. David no doubt wielded his club to deal with the lions and the bears (1 Sam.

17:34–37), and smaller predators too, and Keller describes how shepherds use their crook to lift newborn lambs and return them to their mother without putting human scent on them, to help sheep out of tangles with thorn bushes, to guide them along difficult and dangerous tracks, to draw them close to himself when he needs to look them over, or simply to give them a sense of their closeness to him.⁸ David would have used his crook in similar beneficent ways, evoking in his sheep a sense of safety, certainty, and enjoyment. The knowledge of being protected by Jesus, our Good Shepherd, along with his Father and his Holy Spirit, does the same in us (John 10:14–15).

Verse 5 now celebrates the joy that all believers are meant to know as we receive into our hearts, thoughts, and mentalities the full abundance of what the apostle Paul calls “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8). Pictured here as sumptuous food, drink, and hospitality banquet-style, these riches include: the knowledge of one’s forgiveness, acceptance, new birth, adoption, and abiding fellowship with God; the knowledge of being loved, rescued, renewed, and claimed by a sovereign Savior; the knowledge of a sure hope of happiness with God beyond our power at present to imagine; a glowing contentment as one basks in the reality of God’s favor; a sense of triumph and empowerment through Christ and the Spirit as one faces up to life’s problems and pressures; and, as advertisements so often say, much, much more. The reference to enemies watching as one feasts is a reminder of spiritual battles against the world, the flesh, and the devil still to come, but the knowledge that one is on the victory side as one moves forward with Jesus Christ sustains the spirit and keeps one in peace as the conflicts approach. Finding oneself to be one of a fellowship—a flock—of individuals whom the Good Shepherd is leading in the same direction is also one of the enrichments that are ours in Christ; the experience confirms over and over that in the flock of God, as indeed in all of human life, a joy shared is a joy doubled.

Verse 6 now rounds off the psalm by reminding us that divine goodness and mercy—kindness, generosity, care for us, patience

with us, and helpfulness toward us—will be our portion throughout life, and enjoyment of what we may dare to call home life with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit will be ours literally forever. The privileges, pleasures, and prospects of those who have the Lord as their shepherd are in truth more than words can tell.

Shepherd-Guided

How does all this bear on guidance? The three points that follow show us the answer. The *doctrine* of guidance appears as one of the *principles* of what Isaac Watts termed God's guardian grace, and what we have referred to as God's covenant care. "He leads me." *Lead* is the verb that here carries the promise that our God will bestow the discernment of decision and direction that we need in order to keep moving with him along the path of life. Our certainty, as believers, of God's guardian grace and covenant care should always undergird our quest for guidance.

The *ethic* of guidance appears in the *parameters* that qualify the promise. God leads "in paths of righteousness," nowhere else. God's guidance never violates the principles of uprightness and integrity, nor will he ever prompt us to irresponsible decisions and actions. He guides us, rather, to obey his Word and to choose between options by the exercise of the Christlike, God-honoring, farseeing wisdom that is modeled for us in the Bible, the wisdom that always aims at what will please God best.

The *spirituality* of guidance appears as a purpose and policy, not simply of keeping in touch with our Shepherd incidentally as we review the range of possible decisions, but of pursuing our *personal relationship* with him just as closely as we can when we have decisions to make. The Shepherd "leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake"—that is, to show his faithfulness and to be honored for it by our thanks and praise. Praising and thanking God in advance because he has promised so to lead us is often a means of coming to a clear discernment of what is the scope of his leading into present decision and action.

These are the three basic concerns that we shall explore in the following pages. Our aim, as we have said, is to put the topic of guidance back where it belongs, namely in the guardian-grace, covenant-care context in which Psalm 23 sets it. This means that we shall have no time for any version of *fortune-telling* (the appeal to arbitrary signs and humanly designed “fleeces” to tell us what to do); nor for primary reliance on something best termed “*feeling-itis*” (the appeal to strong feelings and hunches, however sudden and sustained, to tell us what to do); nor for any form of *fear* lest a guidance mistake irrevocably ruin God’s plan for our life. If the sheep strays off the path, the shepherd brings her back again. That is how guidance under God’s guardianship plays out. Like all the rest of Psalm 23, this is wonderfully good news. Let us rejoice in it as we move forward.