

OVERFLOW: PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

By Andrew Wilson
April 29, 2018

James 1:27; 2:14-17; 3:13, 17-18
Psalm 23

The Lord “guides [us] in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3). He has done that for this church family as we have responded to his call to stand with those who are poor, sick, lonely, incarcerated, mistreated or pushed aside. He’s doing it today as we try to figure out how to build an orphanage in Baja, California.

We’ve been working on that project since 2010. That was the year of this congregation’s 125th anniversary. We decided the Lord was calling us to celebrate our landmark birthday by turning outward, and by doing something that would make a long-term difference for some of the poorest people in our region. As most of you know, we’re still in the early stages of building Casa de Los Angeles, so the best part of the story – the part about the 38 kids who will form the Casa family – hasn’t been written yet. But the Lord has already done amazing things, so there’s plenty to talk about and celebrate.

It all started when LCPC member, Lucia Iriks, walked into the church and told me she was giving us land in Rosarito, just south of Tijuana. “We were planning to retire there, but Pete and I have changed our minds,” she told me. “We’re staying here and we want the church to have the land. All I ask is that you do something with it that will glorify God.”

Our initial thought was to build a church, but Jim Sedgwick and I went on a scouting mission and discovered that the lot was located 5 miles out of town, in a sparsely-populated neighborhood. Not a promising location for a church. Leaders from local churches told us of the dire need for more orphanages. We prayed. We talked with the session and other leaders. And God gave us a vision for the Casa.

The orphanage story sheds light on today’s featured verse from Psalm 23: “He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” I’ll have more to say about the Casa in a minute – and I’ll show you some photos. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s look closely at the three phrases that make up that beloved verse.

The Lord “guides me,” David declares.

He doesn’t force me. He doesn’t manipulate me or pressure me. He gently points the way that leads to abundant life. That’s what makes our life’s journey so wonderful and at the same time so difficult. Our Shepherd loves us and wants the very best for us, but let’s face it: the paths he leads us down often don’t seem very promising. He knows the ones we should take, but there are lots of alternatives. And along every alternative path there are multiple forks leading to the right or to the left.

How should we decide which paths to travel, and which forks to follow? Most of us base our decisions on what we see directly in front of us. Which path seems most the attractive? Which one looks the easiest? Which one seems the most likely to offer the greatest rewards?

One problem with that strategy is that what we see right in front of us doesn't tell us very much about what actually lies around the bend. Some paths that start well peter out. Some quickly become steep and treacherous. Some lead you into a wilderness filled with venomous snakes and carnivorous beasts.

But there's another problem, one that's bigger still. When we're fixated on the path just ahead, just trying to stay out of trouble, we never develop a wider vision for our life. We never get a clear sense of who we are, and what we might be capable of.

The Lord wants us to stop playing it safe. He wants us to trust him. He wants us to learn, by stepping out in faith, day after day, that his way is the best one for us even if we don't like the particular stretch we happen to be passing through. Only he can see the full length of every path. Only by following him can we learn our true purpose, and realize our full potential.

There's another advantage to trusting God and following his lead. When the going gets rough – when you move out of the green pastures and the quiet, still waters and into the Valley of the Shadow of Death – you know you have an advocate. The one who guided you into that valley is a faithful shepherd. He's not going to leave you there. He's going to lead you, provide for you and defend you until you find your way to the other side.

The Lord “guides me in paths of righteousness,” David proclaims.

What are paths of righteousness? They're ways of living that affirm God's plans and purposes. They're decisions we make that are motivated by love. They're actions we take to advance God's agenda. Yes, like building an orphanage – we'll get to that in a few minutes.

It begins with the realization that selfishness breeds misery and discontent. Jesus tells us that if we want to be saved we have to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him. What he's means is that we need to stop focusing all of our attention and energy on achieving personal fulfillment. We should instead turn outward so that the driving passion of our lives becomes doing good, making the world a better place. That's how we honor the Lord. That's how we gain inner peace and contentment. That's what it means to walk the paths of righteousness.

It's important to understand what Jesus is not saying. He's not telling us to lead lives of complete selflessness. We all have many needs, some of them physical and economic, and some of them emotional and spiritual. And we need to do what we can to see that those needs are met. People who don't take care of themselves are incapable of taking care of others. Worse than that, they become a burden to society, starting with the people closest to them. And that's not what God wants for us.

God created us to make a difference. He helps us to fulfill that purpose by guiding us in paths of righteousness. He opens opportunities for us to create things that are precious and good. He connects us with people who share the same love for God. And in community with them, the work we do is blessed, and the good we do is magnified.

There are dangers along the 'paths of righteousness'. One is the trap of comparing yourself with others. Sometimes we think, "Look at all this fruit I've grown – look how much more I've done for God than the people around me! The Lord must really be happy with me." Other times we think, "I've been working and working and I have so little to show for it. And look at that fruit those others have produced! How can God love me when I've done so little?"

The way out of this deadly trap is to stay on the path and stick to your work. Don't get a big head when things go well. Remember that it's God who enables you to do good. And don't despair when things are hard and you don't see results. Remember that much of the good you do may not be visible during your earthly life. Besides that, you have a job to do in God's world that's completely unique. No other person can stand in for you. So resist the temptation to belittle yourself and disparage your work. Christ's hand can be found in any work that does good in God's world.

Corrie ten Boom worked for a time in her father's workshop. It was there that she learned that even mundane tasks become sacred when they're done in order to advance God's agenda. Reflecting on that chapter of her life, she wrote:

I experienced the miracle that the highest potential of God's love and power is available to us in the trivial things of everyday life.

Psalm 23 is about walking with the Lord, our Shepherd, in peace. As I've said, the paths of righteousness may take us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. But the crucial point is that when we're following the Lord, we can be confident that his path will be filled with blessings.

Jesus said something similar in Matthew, chapter 11:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon me and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

- Matthew 11:28-29

The image that Jesus uses, that of the yoke, helps us see how Jesus lightens our burdens. He doesn't do it by doing our work for us and relieving us of all responsibility. And he doesn't do it by helping us along whatever path we may choose for ourselves. He lightens our burdens by inviting us to pull his load with him. His load is to bring the reign of God into our daily life. Of course you and I don't have what it takes to pull that load on our own. But yoked with him, the work seems easy.

Contrary to what most of us would assume, two yoked oxen can pull a plow a lot more than twice as fast as one ox. That means that compared to a single ox, a pair of oxen are more than twice as efficient in the work they can do. It also means that the burden that's born by a single ox will be reduced by much more than half if the beast is yoked with another.

All of this underscores Jesus' point. When we're yoked with him, our burdens seem light. That's all the more true when we remember that Jesus is the lead ox, and that he's not only stronger than we are, he's fully capable of pulling the whole load when our strength has run out.

Why does the Lord need our help? Can't he bring God's reign to earth by himself? That question is above our pay grade. What we know for sure is that the Lord doesn't *want* to work alone. He *enjoys* our company. He *takes delight* in partnering with us. And the work he gives us is more purposeful and productive than anything we might get involved in apart from him.

The Lord guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

David is pointing here to three truths about God and our relationship to him. He's reminding us, first, that the work we do as we walk the paths of righteousness is *God's* work. It's done by his strength, and for his glory.

This point can be confusing, so let's be clear about what David is not saying. He's not saying that our part in God's work is unimportant. God has designed creation so that we get to participate in his creative acts. That's in part what it means to be created in God's image. As Genesis reveals to us, God created us to be stewards of creation. He empowers us to act as he does in bringing order out of chaos, and in helping all his creatures to thrive. More than that, as we've just seen, the Lord Jesus invites us to be yoked with him in the work of kingdom-building.

So David isn't minimizing our contribution to God's good work. Rather, he's clarifying where we stand in relation to God. We live and breathe under his mercy. And any good that we do is a work of his grace.

David is reminding us, secondly, that when we walk in paths of righteousness we travel under God's banner. That means that we bear God's name – we act as God's representatives. And people are watching.

Jesus tells his disciples they will be representing him wherever they go. In Luke chapter 10, for example, he sends out 72 followers in pairs. They are to heal the sick and tell people, "The kingdom of God is near." Just before they depart, he declares, "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10: 16).

Paul conveys the same message to the very first Christians. He tells the Corinthians, God "has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

I've got an LCPC bumper sticker on my car. When I act like a jerk when I'm driving, I think about that sticker. I pray that the person behind me thinks I work for La Canada Presbyterian Church. As Jesus followers, we've all been marked for eternity with Christ's name. So instead of acting like jerks, we should do all the good we can, and give all the glory to God. Jesus makes the point with greater eloquence: "Let your light shine before [others], that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

There's a deeper layer of meaning in David's words, but this third truth about our relationship with God can only be understood in the light of Jesus' teachings. Jesus tells his followers that he appears sometimes where he's least expected. When we see someone begging in the Walmart parking lot, we see him. When we see an orphan or a widow struggling just to survive, we see him. When we see someone in a Facebook posting who has been brutalized by the police, we see him. When we see an old person that has been cast aside by his family, we see him. When we see someone sick and in need of care, we see him. When we visit someone in prison, regardless of what the person might have done to get there, we visit *him* – we visit the Lord Jesus.

Does Jesus mean that he has somehow taken over the body of the woman living down the block who has cancer, and who keeps asking for rides to her chemo sessions? Not exactly. Jesus is really revealing two truths about God and our neighbor.

First, he's saying that, in God's eyes, the woman represents Jesus to us. She represents Jesus to us in the same way that *we* represent Jesus to *others*.

Second, Jesus saying that, in God's eyes, our response to the woman and to him – to Jesus – are one and the same. If we ignore her, we ignore Jesus. And if we give decide to help her (even though it's inconvenient for us), we help him.

I must remember, as I walk the paths of righteousness, that the hurting people I meet along the way are precious to God. He places them in my path so I'll help them, but also so I can draw ever closer to his Son, whose face is revealed in their faces. Because when I choose to love, and to express my love in concrete acts that promote the good of God's beloved, I'm acting for his name sake. I'm serving my Lord Christ.

There've been many times over the past 8 years when I've wondered what I was doing in Rosarito. Over the past two years, in particular, we've made a lot of progress on the orphanage project. But I have to confess, there were many times during our 8 year journey when I've wondered what the heck I was doing in Rosarito. We've faced many obstacles and disappointments. But here's the most important thing I want to tell you. Every time I was tempted to throw in the towel, God did something to encourage me and let me know I should stick to the path.

About 7 years ago I realized we needed guidance from leaders in Mexico so I invited everyone I knew who had any influence in the church to a breakfast at the Rosarito Beach Hotel. There were about 15 of us at the table, and everyone was having a very jolly time telling me about church life in Baja. But after 90 minutes I realized I wasn't getting what I needed. I wasn't making the connections that would help me find contractors or open doors with the city government.

As people were standing up to leave, the woman seated to my left spoke for the first time. She was the only one I didn't know. Alejandra had been dragged along by one of the invited guests from Baja Christian Ministries. She said to me in nearly perfect English: "Excuse me, but are you trying to start an orphanage? Because I know how to do that. I've helped lots of people start nonprofits here. I know people in the city who can help you. Do you have time today? I can take you today to talk to them."

And it was because of Alejandra and her dozens of contacts that we were able to establish Casa de Los Angeles as a civil association – an legitimate nonprofit – in Baja.

About 5 years ago I woke up in my hotel room in Rosarito feeling weighed down by many problems – problems that I really had no idea how to solve. I turned on my phone and tablet and tried to call all the people who I thought might help me. I couldn't make contact. The phone lines weren't working. Or people weren't answering. I said to God, out loud, "Lord, if you really want to build an orphanage, you've got to do something big, because I'm all out of good ideas." And with that, I headed off for an early lunch at Tacos Manuel. My plan was to eat and head home.

Not a minute after I sat down in the empty restaurant, a group of about 10 people, mostly Gringos, sat down at the table next to me. They were all missionaries with the Youth With A Mission station in Tijuana. Like all YWAMers, they were noisy, sassy and filled with the Spirit. They invited me to join them and by the end of our lunch they had provided me with exactly the contacts I needed to get the ball moving again.

I could tell you a lot of other stories like that, but we're running out of time and I want to show you some pictures. Here's what God has shown me again and again in Rosarito.

- He has shown me that he loves the poor, especially orphaned children, and he wants us to use the astonishing riches that he has entrusted to us to help them.
- He has shown me that if we truly want to make a difference, we have to step out in faith on an unfamiliar path.
- And he has shown me, by his concrete actions that he wants us to succeed, and that in his strength, we *will* succeed.

Lord, thank you for being our Shepherd. You have proven your faithfulness to us again and again, but we don't trust you as we should. Help us to overcome our fear of a future we can't control. You've created us

to do all the good we can, and help those who can't help themselves. Turn our hearts outward so we can escape the prison of our selfishness, and lean into your plan, and discover the joy of walking with you.

Lord, thank you for leading us down paths of righteousness. Tune our hearts to your heart so we won't miss your signals and signposts. Pour out your blessings on Casa de Los Angeles. Enlarge the network of partner churches we can meet the great need in Baja with an abundance of your grace. Strengthen all our efforts to encourage the lost and the lonely, those who are sick and those who have been abused. Open our eyes, Lord Jesus, so we can see you in them.

Here and now, gracious God, we rededicate our lives to you. We rededicate this church to your service. Break our hearts with the things that break your heart – give us joy in the things that bring you joy. In all that we do, even in the smallest details of our lives, may we bring you honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.