

THE SHEPHERD'S TRAIL MARKERS

How the Shepherd guides His own (Part 1)

Psalm 23: ¹ *The Lord is my shepherd;* ² *He leads me;* ³ *He guides me;* ⁴ *He is with me;* **John 10:** ¹⁴ *"I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me;* ²⁷ *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*

I've had the opportunity to hike in several areas of western North Carolina and view beautiful waterfalls. Most of the trails are well marked with blazes which are very helpful in guiding you to your destinations. However, in the remote Panthertown Valley Wilderness Area, which comprises over 6,700 acres and is the home of twelve named waterfalls and over thirty named but unmarked trails, one can hike for hours without seeing a single waterfall. On those hikes you really need **trail markers** so you don't embark on a trail that leads you in a direction you don't want to go. When that happens, you play the "if only" game. If only I had a trail map to show me the way. If only I could reach the forest ranger on my cell phone. If only there were some experienced hikers nearby to give me directions. If only the trails that don't lead to the waterfalls were blocked off. If only there was an eagle, a red-tailed hawk, or maybe even an angel to fly just above me to guide me to my destination. Fortunately, in our journey through this life, our Great Shepherd has provided **trail markers** to guide us in making decisions.

If we are living our lives in submission to the will of God, focused on what He wants us to be, and in obedience to His will, we can be certain that He will hear and respond to our requests for guidance. He is pleased to respond because He wants us to know and be in the center of His will. The **trail markers** He provides may be His Word, the inner promptings of His Spirit as a result of prayer, godly counsel, circumstances, and possibly supernatural guidance from angels, dreams, or visions.

However, before we seek His guidance, we should ask the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts and point out anything that might interfere with our communication (*Psalm 66:18-19*). If He brings something to our mind (*Jeremiah 17:10*), we should ask Him to create in us a clean heart (*Psalm 51:10*). Sin in our heart blocks the communication channel, but cleansing allows the guidance process to take place (*Psalm 139:23-24*).

**Nothing between my soul and my Savior
so that His blessed voice I may hear.
Nothing preventing the least of His favor;
Keep the way clean! Let nothing between.**

Once there is a clean, pure, and clear channel of communication, God will provide **trail markers** to guide us. This month we will look at two of five **trail markers** God uses to give us direction:

(1) God may use the *trail marker* of His Written Word, when we meditate on it and ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten us as to the path we should take.

Immerse yourself in His Word, saturate your mind with it and commit it to memory. God's Word is the "sword of the Spirit" (*Ephesians 6:17*), and the Spirit will use it to speak to our hearts. He will bring specific Scriptures to mind when we need them most (*John 14:26*). God blesses decisions that line up with His Word (*Proverbs 4:11*), accomplish His purpose (*Philippians 2:13*), depend on His strength (*Philippians 4:13*), reflect His character (*Colossians 3:10*), promote justice, kindness and humility (*Micah 6:8*), and bring glory to His name (*1 Corinthians 10:31*). When we follow the teachings of God's Word, He will guide our path and provide knowledge to make wise decisions (*Psalm 119:105*).

(2) God may use the *trail marker* of prayer, when we wait on the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit in response to our requests.

God loves it when we come to Him in prayer (*Matthew 7:7-11*). Our trust increases, our faith grows, and Satan's grip is broken. The Apostle Paul encourages us to pray in all situations (*1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*), so we should certainly pray for God's guidance in times of decision

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making. As we pray, we should ask God for wisdom. Proverbs 9:10 says, ***“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”*** Psalm 14:2 says, ***“The Lord looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if anyone is truly wise, if anyone seeks God.”*** He promises to give us wisdom if we ask for it in faith. ***“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”*** (James 1:5-7).

Once we ask the Lord for guidance, we should wait for the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Patience is important as we wait on God (*Hebrews 6:15*). In our minds we may make plans to follow a certain path, but it is the Lord who will direct our steps (*Proverbs 16:9*).

I'm afraid that far too often, we do not take time to quiet our hearts and focus our minds on Him so that we can receive the inner promptings of His Spirit. We can become so occupied by all the sounds, words, and other voices of the world around us that they distract our attention, dominate our thought patterns, and cause us to focus on less important things. It's a noisy world out there! Our TVs or radios often occupy the time we are home. Programmed music accompanies every item that goes into our carts at grocery stores, every morsel of food that goes into our mouths at restaurants, and every moment we sit in doctor's waiting rooms or auto service centers. We hear advertising messages at the gas pumps when we fill up our gas tanks and we seem to welcome the self-inflicted noise from our cell phones and MP3 players.

When was the last time you experienced real silence? Are you willing to sit in silence and wait for your Shepherd to respond to your request (Psalm 37:7a)?

David wrote in Psalm 40:1, ***“I waited patiently for the Lord and He turned to me and heard my cry.”*** Jesus told the people in Luke 18:1 that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He may want to do a work in your heart before you step out in faith on the path He has for you.

He will respond. Will you wait attentively for His gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:11-13)?

Next month we will consider three additional ***trail markers*** that our Shepherd may use to guide us. In addition, we will consider situations when ***none*** of the ***trail markers*** seem to provide clear direction and also when ***all*** the choices seem to be good ones.

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