

THE SHEPHERD
A study of the 23rd Psalm
Part 4
“The Valley of the Shadow”

Psalms 23

1 The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.

4 Yea, 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.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Okay, this time we’re going to look at easily the most quoted verse from the 23rd Psalm:

23:4 “Yea, 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.”

Hardly a funeral goes by without the minister quoting this famous verse. It immediately brings comfort and assurance that no matter how dark our circumstances may be, the shepherd is with us!

So let's begin with the first half of verse 4:

23:4a "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You *are* with me;"

In real shepherding of real sheep, this verse marks the time when the shepherd will lead his sheep up into the mountain meadows for the summer months. Most good shepherds will lead their flocks to these distant ranges where the grass is green and rich.

This often entailed long "drives" where the sheep move along slowly, feeding as they go, gradually working their way up the mountains behind the receding snow.

With the approach of autumn, early snow settles on the highest ridges, relentlessly forcing the flock to withdraw back down to lower elevations. Finally, toward the end of the year as fall passes, the sheep are driven home to the ranch headquarters where they will spend the winter.

It is THIS segment of the yearly operations that is described in the second half of Psalm 23. During this time the flock is entirely alone with the shepherd. They are in intimate contact with him and are under his personal attention day and night.

As the shepherd leads the sheep back down the mountain he encounters valleys. Every mountain has its valleys. On the way up the best route is through the valleys. And likewise on the way down.

Any sheepman knows this. He leads his flock gently but persistently up the paths that wind through the dark valleys. Notice how the psalmist says "though I walk through the valley." It does not say I die there, or stop there, or live there. It says I pass *through* it.

The Christian passes through many kinds of valleys. The valley of disappointment, discouragement, dilemmas, dark days. But trials and temptations need not be dead end streets. Every valley should be answered with, "This too shall pass. I'm only passing through!"

It's comforting to note that it is only because the sun is shining down that a shadow is created! When the Christian passes through shadows in a valley, it's a reminder that the "Son" is shining through it all!

In every valley, our Good Shepherd takes our hand and says, *Follow me. Let's go through this together.* There are times when we say, "Lord, this is one step away from being more than I can bear." Yet here is when we can remind ourselves that:

"Nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ro. 8:38-39), we know that the Lord of our valleys will see us through.

There are great advantages to the valleys—both for real sheep and also for God's children.

First, the shepherd knows that it is in the valleys where the best water is found. Refreshing water flows in rivers, streams, and deep ravines. Sheep have been known to literally run to the edges of the streams to quench their burning thirst after a long drive in summer months.

Likewise it is often the case that the Christian finds refreshment from God Himself on a level they've not known before. When we walk with Him through some very deep

troubles, we discover He alone can provide sources of refreshment, just as He provided water from the rock for His children in the wilderness!

And on top of this, it is as we walk through valleys that God prepares us to minister to others who are in the same predicament. Just as water can only flow in a ditch or channel or valley—so in the Christian’s life, the life of God can only flow in blessing through the valleys that have been carved and cut into our own lives by trying experiences.

A second positive to valley experiences is that valleys provide the richest feed and best forage for the sheep. Generally the choicest meadows are in these valleys along the stream banks.

Likewise, it is in our own valley experiences where we find the richest times in God’s word, and in His gracious Presence. As we seek His face in troubled times, the Spirit of God opens the Scriptures to us with lifelong, meaningful revelations of the nature of God, His ways, and His will for us.

I can tell you as a pastor of many years that much of what I preach from week to week flows from the wellspring of what the Spirit of God taught me in my valley experiences—of which there have been many! It was my valley experiences that drove me into the Word and prayer like nothing else.

In the valleys I became convinced that the Bible was every bit His word. I emerged with firm confidence in His sovereignty over all things, including me. I learned to wait on Him in the valley, and became better acquainted with the Bible characters whose testimonies lifted and encouraged me.

It should also be noted that it is in the valleys where predators are near, and fierce storms can break out suddenly. And this is where the shepherd steps up to show himself the protector of the sheep. They witness him confronting the predators, and leading them to shelter in the storm. In short, they learn to trust the shepherd in the valley like nowhere else!

Now we come to the second part of verse 4:

23:4b "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

In the Middle East in Bible times when a shepherd had led his sheep into the high country, he carried with him a rod and a staff. The rod was whittled from a young sapling to perfectly fit the shepherd's hand. After whittling it, he would spend hours learning how to throw it with great speed and accuracy.

The rod became an extension of the owner's own right arm. It symbolized his strength, power, and authority in any serious

situation. Not only did he use it to ward off predators, but also as a disciplinary tool with his sheep when they wandered away.

For Christians today, our Great Shepherd's rod is the Word of God. Through His mighty Word, the enemy is sent running. Our good Shepherd hurls His Word at Satan when he attacks the sheep, and it is through His Word that the enemy is defeated. And we too utilize that mighty rod to send the enemy packing with a firm "It is written!"

And secondly, the shepherd also uses the rod for disciplining his sheep. When the sheep wander, the shepherd will hurl the rod with great accuracy to send the sheep scurrying back to the fold. If the shepherd sees the sheep approaching poisonous weeds, or getting too close to danger of one kind or another, the rod will come whistling through the air in a firm, loving rebuke.

And how often can we all say that, in times of our own personal wandering away from our Shepherd, the Word of God comes whistling into our mind to remind us of God's truth! This is why it has so often been said of the Bible, "This book will keep you from sin!" I like to say, "Either sin will keep you from this book, or this book will keep you from sin!"

In times of wandering, the Word of God is sent by the Shepherd into our hearts with surprising suddenness to correct and reprove us. As Paul wrote to Timothy:

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right” (2 Tim. 3:16).

A third use of the rod was for the shepherd to examine the sheep. The skilled shepherd would take his rod and part the sheep’s wool to determine the condition of the skin and health of the body.

Before setting off on a long journey, as each animal would come out of the corral and through the gate, it was stopped by the shepherd’s outstretched rod. He opened the fleece with the rod and ran his skillful hands over the body, feeling for any signs of trouble.

Likewise, each time we open God’s word, our Good Shepherd searches us to expose any flaws or dangers in our spiritual life. As David wrote, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts: and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23,24).

The wise Christian will take advantage of this process by daily spending time in the Word of God and prayer. This kind of daily inspection will keep us from the devil's tactics and from the slow creep of sin into our lives.

David says, "Thy rod....comforts me." Indeed it does!

Then finally there is the staff. David wrote, "Thy staff....comforts me."

Nothing identifies the shepherd as a shepherd more than the staff. While the rod is a symbol of power, authority, and discipline, the staff symbolizes the shepherd's kindness, long suffering, and comfort. While the rod symbolizes God's word, the staff symbolizes God's Spirit!

We all know what the staff looks like. It is a long, slender stick with a crook or hook on one end. It serves 3 key purposes in sheep management.

First, it is used by the shepherd to gather the sheep to himself. The shepherd will use his staff to gently lift a newborn lamb and bring it to himself. In the same way, our Good Shepherd's staff—the Holy Spirit—draws us to the Shepherd and places us in his hands the moment we are saved.

Second, the staff is used for guiding sheep. As the shepherd leads them along a narrow trail or onto a new path, he reaches out to the sheep with the tip of the staff and gently applies pressure to the sheep's side, guiding it along the way the shepherd wants it to go.

Likewise, in our walk with God we are told explicitly by Jesus himself that it would be His Spirit Who would be sent to guide and lead us into all truth (John 16:13). How many times in our every day life do we sense the Good Shepherd's staff—His Holy Spirit—gently nudging us as if to say, "This is the way—walk in it."

It is His Spirit who walks quietly within and beside us to make our Shepherd real and personal and intimate. Through Him I am "in touch" with Christ. Thank God for the rod that corrects us and the staff that guides us!

Truly His rod and His staff comfort me!

