

If you read our devotional for the last two months, you will remember that we have been exploring the 23rd Psalm from the perspective of true shepherds. David, who wrote the Psalm, was himself a good shepherd and the son of a good shepherd. Phillip W. Keller who authored the book I reference entitled *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, was also a good shepherd. And of course, Jesus Himself is and always will be The Good Shepherd who we can trust with our lives. You can read the previous months devotionals on the Cattle for Christ website: www.cattleforchrist.com.

Vs 4b: "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." In Biblical times and today in most third world countries, when the shepherd is out in the field with his sheep, he carries only the bare essentials. There are no pick-ups or ATVs--so he carries with him only what he has to have; his rod, his staff, some medical supplies for the sheep and some food and water for himself.

The rod the psalmist referred to was a knobby hardwood club type device, custom made by the shepherd to fit his size and strength. This rod was actually an extension of his own right arm and he used it as his primary weapon of defense for his sheep and for himself. The shepherd would spend much time practicing throwing his rod until he could hit his target with pinpoint accuracy and with just enough force to accomplish his purpose--whether it be to kill or injure a predator or to discipline a wayward sheep.

The rod is a symbol of the shepherd's strength, power, security and authority. The Word of God serves as the rod of God today. To quote Keller:

"The rod speaks, therefore, of the spoken Word, the expressed intent, the extended activity of God's mind and will in dealing with man. It implies the authority of divinity. It carries with it the convicting power and irrefutable impact of 'thus saith the Lord.'

Just as for the sheep of David's day, there was comfort and consolation in seeing the rod in the shepherd's skillful hand, so in our day there is great assurance in our own hearts as we contemplate the power, veracity and potent authority vested in God's Word. For, in fact, the Scriptures are His rod. They are the extension of His mind and will and intentions to mortal man."

The rod also served to discipline wayward sheep that would wander off or get too close to poisonous weeds, or any other type of danger. The watchful shepherd would hurl his rod and send the wayward sheep running back to the flock. So it is with Scripture--if we read it and obey it, the Holy Spirit and the Living Word of God will keep us from sin, will mold and shape our conscious and purify our hearts and minds, and will lead us to repentance allowing us to walk in righteousness.

The staff on the other hand, (the long slender stick with the crooked end) looks very different and serves a very different purpose from the rod. Instead of being a symbol of power and authority, the staff is a symbol and tool of comfort, compassion, and the physical presence of the shepherd. Just as the rod symbolizes the living Word of God, so the staff represents the Holy Spirit living in us.

The shepherd uses his staff for a variety of purposes, but three are most significant in caring for his sheep. First, he uses his staff to draw his sheep into close intimate relationship with one another. This is especially important with newborn lambs that may get separated from their mothers. To keep the odor of his own hands off of them which may cause the mothers to reject them, the shepherd will gently lift the lamb with his staff and place it beside its real mother. Without the help of the shepherd and the proper use of his staff, many of these new lambs would never attach to or nurse their mothers and would surely die.

The same is true with Christians. Only when we submit to the filling and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to be the Lord and master of our lives, are we able to intimately love one another with the love of Christ or function in unity as one body in obedience to His will and His ways.

The second primary use of the staff is to draw his sheep (young and old alike) close to himself for a close, intimate examination and to develop a personal relationship with each of them. In His presence, we see Him as He is, we see ourselves as we are (totally dependent on Him and completely unworthy of His love and sacrificial care), we get to know and experience His love, His heart, and His touch. During these intimate times with Him we learn to listen and respond to His voice because we see how much He loves us. His love is so real and His presence so sweet, that we love Him in return. During these special times, I realize and find great comfort in the fact that I am His and He is mine--I am God's child and He is my Father! Because He loves us as individuals, the Good Shepherd uses His staff, the Great Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to draw us into close intimate relationship with one another and to Himself.

The third primary use of the staff is to guide his sheep along a new path, through a gate, or along a dangerous or difficult route. He doesn't beat the sheep with the staff, rather he gently uses it to put pressure on the animal's side to guide it along the path the shepherd wants it to take. This use of the staff

as a guide, reassures the sheep that it is on the correct route and it comforts the sheep to know that it is in the presence and care of the same shepherd who has so often drawn it close to himself and loved it. Again, Keller says it best:

“In our walk with God we are told explicitly by Christ Himself that it would be His Spirit who would be sent to guide us and to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). This same gracious Spirit takes the truth of God, the Word of God, and makes it plain to our hearts and minds and spiritual understanding. It is He who gently, tenderly, but persistently says to us, ‘This is the way--walk in it.’ And as we comply and cooperate with His gentle promptings a sense of safety, comfort and well-being envelopes us.”

I don't know about you, but I am so grateful that I belong to and come under the care of The Good Shepherd. But, I guess the only real and practical measure of our appreciation for His goodness and mercy to us, is the extent to which we show that same goodness and mercy to others! I hope you will read Keller's book. It is truly a classic that you will want to keep and read more than once.