

The Great Shepherd's Rod and Staff

*“Thy rod and thy
staff they
comfort me.”
—Psalm 23:4*

IN THE FOURTH AND FIFTH

verses of the 23rd Psalm, David expresses a more intimate relationship with the divine Shepherd of Israel than is apparent in the opening verses of this beautiful song of praise to the Lord. In the first three verses, the psalmist speaks in the third person concerning God's loving care and guidance. In verses four and five, however, David speaks to the Lord directly. Thus the psalm changes from a testimony to a prayer. At first David was content to testify that the Lord was his shepherd, who led him beside still waters and caused him to lie down in green pastures. He was a shepherd, moreover, who was willing and abundantly able to restore his soul, and to lead him in paths of righteousness, even through the valley of the shadow of death—a wonderful shepherd indeed!

Seemingly, as David thus gave expression to these great truths concerning his God, the thought of the

shepherd's loving care gave him a sense of nearness that impelled him to pour out his personal prayer to the Lord rather than merely to write about him. Thus he continues, "Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." (vs. 4) Happy are we, for whom this psalm was especially written, if we, too, can see in our Great Shepherd's "rod" and "staff" evidences of his special presence and his nearness to us. In joy we can go to him in prayer, just as David did, thanking him for the wonderful manner in which he is supplying all our needs.

In David's prayer to God he indicates that both the rod and the staff are sources of comfort. In ancient times a shepherd carried these two pieces of equipment. He used the rod, or crook, to guide the sheep while leading them through narrow and dangerous passes, and to gently bring them back to the flock if they strayed. The staff he used to assist in driving off wild animals which might attack the flock. The staff was also used by the shepherd as a walking stick, or support, as he journeyed over long distances and often rugged terrain with his flock.

THE ROD OF THE LORD

The Hebrew word translated "rod" is used symbolically to denote authority, as well as an implement used to guide and correct. This is illustrated in a natural way by the use of a rod to keep the sheep in the right way, and to protect them from the danger of not holding to the path along which the shepherd leads. Thus, sometimes the sheep are guided back into the right way by the shepherd's hooking the crook of the rod around their necks and gently lifting them back to the path, and sometimes around the

hind legs to steer them aright. No hurt is brought to the sheep by these gentle, but at times necessary, actions of a loving shepherd.

Transferring the lesson of this symbol to the Christian life we see in it a beautiful illustration of the chastenings of the Lord. These, the apostle assures us, are a special evidence of God's love: "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth." (Heb. 12:6) We are not to think of these chastenings as punishments which the Great Shepherd administers because he is angry with us. The Greek word translated "chasteneth" means to train, instruct or teach. Thus, for the Christian, these experiences are designed to train and instruct us to walk in the right way. It is because the Lord loves us that he uses such measures to keep us close to him. Indeed, in the symbol, the rod was used by the shepherd to keep the sheep close to him, and in the path of safety.

It certainly would have been uncomfortable for a sheep to feel the crook of the shepherd's rod hooked around its neck. It would, in fact, seem unyielding and severe, and the sheep would have no choice as to the direction in which it walked. Such treatment of the sheep might seem harsh, if not for the fact that the faithful shepherd knew that grave dangers would likely befall the sheep if they were allowed to stray. When David put himself in the position of the sheep, and knowing the viewpoint of the shepherd—having served faithfully as one—he realized that what seemed an unyielding attitude on the part of God was in reality an evidence of his love. God loved David and would not permit him to continue in a straying path. David knew this, and explained in another place, "Before I was afflicted I went astray."—Ps. 119:67

Sometimes the chastening, or training, which we receive from the Lord comes upon us in the form of afflictions. In such experiences we might get the discouraging thought that the Great Shepherd is angry with us and is administering punishment. However, what we might at first view as a frowning providence is, in reality, the smiling face of his love. The experience comes because of the shepherd's loving care, and it is designed by him to train us to walk more circumspectly, that we might abide safely within the bounds of the way in which he is leading us day by day.

It is said that when a shepherd in olden times was leading his flock through dangerous mountain passes, he frequently looked back to his flock. If he noticed one of the sheep going too near the edge of the precipice, he would gently draw it toward the other sheep and away from danger by applying the crook to its hind legs. Possibly David had this in mind when he wrote, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand."—Ps. 37:23,24

David fell into iniquity on more than one occasion, but God did not permit him to be utterly cast down. Probably David knew of the wonderful promise the Lord made concerning him, as recorded in II Samuel 7:14,15, which reads, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart away from him." How wonderfully this was fulfilled in the case of David. When he did wrong God's chastening rod was not withheld, but it was used in mercy, and with the object of

instructing and keeping him in the “paths of righteousness.”—Ps. 23:3

David was chastened with the “rod of men.” This might indicate that God used human agencies of one kind and another to keep him from going too far astray. It also indicates that God considered the shepherd’s rod a fitting symbol of the experiences which he permits to come to his people in order that they might be properly trained to walk in the way which he outlines for them. In the case of the Christian, as the apostle points out, “No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward,” Paul adds, “it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”—Heb. 12:11

THE SHEPHERD’S STAFF

The shepherd’s staff, as we have noted, was used to help him protect the sheep by warding off attacking animals, and as a support, or walking stick. The “staff” of the Great Shepherd assists us in both these respects. The enemies of the Christian do not attack in a physical sense, but the assaults are against our faith. This is the reason we can resist these enemies only by being “stedfast in the faith.” (I Pet. 5:9) Furthermore, we cannot resist our adversaries alone, apart from the help and wisdom given us by the Lord. It is his staff, not anything of our own, that wards off the attackers and supports us in our walk of faith.

If we are to be protected by the staff of the Great Shepherd, it is essential that we remain very close to him. By so doing, we will be comforted by that staff. The attacks of our enemies, being along

spiritual lines, are to be deflected not by carnal weapons, but by the Word of God. In reality, God's Word as found in the Scriptures is the staff which is provided to sustain and protect us, as well as to be our support throughout our walk in the way of righteousness. As God's Word is symbolized by the "green pastures" and "still waters" of the psalm, so it is also shown by the staff of the shepherd. We can rest assured that we will be victorious over all our enemies as long as we use the means which the Lord provides for our protection.

When thinking of the staff as the Word of God, it is necessary to depart from the strict interpretation of the symbol in order to appreciate the full value of the lesson. Actually, a sheep never takes the staff from the shepherd's hand to use it for his own protection, but the Christian thus uses the Word of God. Our Great Shepherd provides the staff for us, but it is essential that we use it to combat our enemies, and to lean upon in our weakness.

We usually think of our enemies as the world, the flesh, and the devil, and we are to use God's Word in combating all of these. However, there are other enemies of the Christian. We may be attacked by temptation, discouragement, pride, weariness and other foes, both internal and external. Against all of these the Word of God is the only sure protection.

When Jesus was attacked by temptations instigated by the Adversary, the Scriptures were his sure defense. "It is written," was the Master's reply to every subtle suggestion made to him. (Matt. 4:1-11) So it should be with us. Whether we are tempted to depart from the narrow way, or to believe a false

doctrine, the enemy can always be beaten off by a “thus saith the Lord.” This is a supporting staff that never fails, but we must call upon it and use it.

Discouragement may threaten us. Here also, let us rely upon the Word of God. “For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” (Heb. 13:5) Upon this blessed promise we can lean and find assurance of strength to sustain us until we reach the end of the way. Again, we turn to the Bible and find it saying to us, as Moses said of the tribe of Asher, “As thy days, so shall thy strength be.” (Deut. 33:25) With these and many similar promises to reassure us, we can fight off discouragement and take our places among those who are following the Great Shepherd victoriously and in safety.

Pride, a dangerous enemy of the Lord’s sheep, may be lurking near our hearts, seeking an opportunity to strike us down or to lure us away from the “paths of righteousness.” Likewise, the Word of God may be used to protect us. In it we are warned not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. (Rom. 12:3) We are also admonished to humble ourselves “under the mighty hand of God.” (I Pet. 5:6) “Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD,” the Bible tells us, and “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.” (Prov. 16:5,18) These are but samples of the many passages of God’s Word which may be brought into action when we note the first symptoms of pride—the first suggestions that come to us that we are superior in various ways to our brethren.

“Let us not be weary in well doing,” writes Paul, “for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”

(Gal. 6:9) How this text should help us to fight off the enemy of weariness as we walk in the narrow way. “In due season,” says Paul. How essential that we recognize God’s due time. To do this means to wait on him, and to recognize that our times are in his hands. (Ps. 31:15) They that wait on the Lord, we are assured, “shall renew their strength; ... they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”—Isa. 40:31

As our minds dwell upon all these precious and reassuring promises, we feel much as David did when, instead of merely testifying of the Lord, he poured out his heart in praise to him, saying, “Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” Through his Word God does indeed make his presence with us a glorious reality. We know that he is near, and that by claiming the precious promises of the Scriptures we are strengthened in the conviction that no evil will befall us. Even in our unintentional waywardness, his rod of instruction and training will turn us back into the right way because the Great Shepherd loves us.

“THEY COMFORT ME”

How wonderfully true it is that the rod and staff are sources of comfort to us. David wrote, “Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope. This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me.” (Ps. 119:49,50) Indeed, it is the Word of the Lord that comforts all of his people in their times of need. The Great Shepherd may permit us to have disciplinary experiences in the event the instructions of his Word are not fully heeded, but these are allowed because of God’s great *(Continued on page 36)*

(Continued from page 31) love for us. In this knowledge we should truly find comfort.

The Word of God is sufficient for all our needs if we apply ourselves to its study and practice. Paul wrote, "Every scripture inspired of God is ... profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." (II Tim. 3:16,17, *American Standard Version*) What a wonderful rod and staff the Lord has provided. How comforting to realize that all we need to guide, warn, and strengthen us in the "narrow way" is abundantly supplied in his Word!

The entire Bible serves to keep the sheep of the present age in the pathway of righteousness, hence the Old Testament is also a source of comfort. Paul wrote, "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." (Rom. 15:4) One of the particular "things" alluded to by the apostle as having been written for our comfort are the prophecies concerning the reproaches of Christ. Jesus might have avoided these reproaches had he been governed by selfish considerations, but he sought not to please himself. It is a comfort for us to realize that we have the privilege of sharing in these reproaches of Christ, and that if we endure them faithfully, we will receive a crown of life which fadeth not away.—Ps. 69:9; Rom. 15:3; Heb. 13:12,13; I Pet. 4:14

Every part of the Word of God is a comfort to the Christian. As we look about us in the "valley of the shadow of death" we would be dismayed and discouraged if we did not have an understanding of why

this “valley” is permitted. Indeed, we have the scriptural assurance that in God’s due time its mists of darkness will be dispelled by the healing rays of the rising “Sun of righteousness.” (Mal. 4:2) We see much in the world around us that is wrong, and we would be tempted to try, in our imperfect way, to right these wrongs, if we did not know from the Bible that this is not the plan of God for us at the present time. Instead of focusing on such efforts now, the Great Shepherd urges us to remain in the narrow way of sacrifice. Thus, we may be prepared to share with Christ Jesus in the glorious work of actually restoring the world to perfection of body and mind, and to give all the willing and obedient the joys of everlasting life. What a comfort it is to realize that this is God’s way, hence the only right course to follow.

When the cares of life, with its sorrows and hardships, tend to discourage us, how comforting it is to be reassured of the Great Shepherd’s love, as so beautifully set forth in the rod and staff of his Word. We hear him speaking tenderly to us that he will never leave nor forsake us, and, feeling the strength of that promise, our courage is renewed and our hearts are comforted. We know that he who gave his “only begotten Son” will surely fulfill all his precious promises. Trusting in him to do so, let us redouble our efforts to follow his direction as he leads us in paths of righteousness.

At times the way may seem unduly long and arduous. There are many hills to climb, many obstacles to surmount, and we may be longing for rest. However, we are reminded by the Scriptures that the Great Shepherd’s plan is that we be faithful even unto death. (Rev. 2:10) Only by following his leading

all the way to the end of our earthly walk may we hope to be with God and his dear Son, the “Lamb,” on “mount Sion.” (Heb. 12:22-24; Rev. 14:1) This is a glorious hope set before us. When we contemplate it, our hearts are filled with joy, and it is this joy that enables us to continue on in the way of sacrifice.

We should appreciate the rod and staff of the Lord now more than ever before. Although we have the blessed assurances as well as the many evidences of his guiding hand in our lives, we are living in a day when the enemies of God and of his Word are ever desirous of attacking his sheep from every direction. Only those who are fully protected by the truths and precious promises of the Scriptures will be able to stand against the “desires of the flesh,” the “wiles of the devil,” and the “spirit of the world.” (Eph. 2:3; 6:11; I Cor. 2:12) If through complacency, pride, self-will or confidence in the arm of flesh, we do not look to the Great Shepherd for help, we will surely be overcome by our adversaries.

However, comforted by the rod and staff we are refreshed, our strength is renewed and we continue on, rejoicing in the assurance that our God will keep us from falling. He may permit affliction, but if we are properly exercised thereby, we are drawn closer to him and can discern the pattern of his guiding hand more clearly. As we hear his voice through the Word, and discern his leading through our experiences, our hearts leap for joy as we realize the great privilege of praising the Great Shepherd. Let us, therefore, be submissive to the loving guidance of God’s rod and staff, and daily “follow the Lamb,” his beloved son, “whithersoever he goeth.”—Rev. 14:4

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