

40. Psalm 23:4b

“The Great Shepherd” Pt.8

(7-19-26)

Psalm 23:4 (NKJV)

⁴ ...Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

Remember that this is tied to David’s previous statement, “**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me...**”

As the sheep made their way up the mountain through dark, dangerous valleys, they were comforted by the Shepherd’s **rod** and **staff**.

When the shepherd began to lead his sheep up the mountain toward the higher elevations where there would be fresh mountain springs and pastures during the hot days of summer—he traveled light carrying with him a minimum of equipment.

But two essential pieces of equipment for the Middle Eastern shepherd were the **rod** and **staff**.

The rod was a club, 12 or 13 inches long made from a young sapling hardwood which was dug up from the ground and then carved and whittled down with great care and patience.

The base of the sapling where the trunk joined the roots was shaped into a smooth rounded head.

The sapling trunk itself was shaped by the shepherd into a handle that fit perfectly in his hand.

After completing it, the shepherd (who was usually a boy) would then spend hours practicing with it, getting used to it, and learning how to throw it with amazing accuracy and speed.

Phillip Keller, in his book *“A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23”* commented on this, he said—
“The rod became an extension of the shepherd’s right arm and stood as a symbol of his strength. It became his main weapon of defense for both himself and his sheep. And it also became the instrument that he used to discipline (not beat) and correct any wayward sheep that insisted on wandering away. And David in likening himself to a sheep asserts that his shepherd’s rod was a continual source of comfort to him and carried with it (in Scripture) the idea of power, authority, protection and judgment.”

When God called Moses from being a shepherd in the backside of the desert and sent him to deliver Israel out of Egyptian slavery—it was the rod that was used to demonstrate to Pharaoh the power and authority that God had given to Moses.

It was always through Moses’ rod that miracles were performed to not only convince Pharaoh of Moses’ divine commission—but also to reassure and comfort the children of Israel as well.

Therefore, the rod, spiritually speaking, as it relates to our Shepherd Jesus Christ is a symbol of the Word.

The Word of God carries with it the idea of authority and power—*“For the Word of God is living and powerful...”* (Heb. 4:12)

The same Word that He used to speak the universe into existence He has given to us in the pages of Scripture!

The psalmist said, *“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.”* (Psalm 33:6)

The Bible says of Jesus that not only did He create all things by the Word of His power—He is holding all the atoms in the universe together by that same powerful Word! (Col. 1:17)

Psalms 19:7 says that the Law of the Lord (the Word of God) is perfect converting the soul which means it can penetrate the hardest heart of a man or woman and bring them to repentance and salvation:

Jeremiah 23:29 (NKJV)

²⁹ “*Is* not My word like a fire?” says the Lord, “And like a hammer *that* breaks the rock in pieces?”

Hebrews 4:12 (NKJV)

¹² For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The Word of God is a great source of comfort to us when we find ourselves going through dark valleys (sorrow, pain, loss, sickness, a financial crisis etc.).

As we said last week, so often a severe trial can be so dark that we don’t know where to go or what to do—it’s then that the Word can offer us comfort as we cling to God’s great and precious promises. (2Peter 1:4)

As we cling to God’s Word by faith (in reality we’re actually clinging to God Himself)—the Word can be an incredible source of comfort, not to mention a guide that can lead us through the darkness of any storm—but only if we trust it!

(Mention Hal Lindsey’s book “Combat Faith” (1986) flying by instruments through a storm)

We’re living in a day in which many strange philosophies and evil ideologies fill our nation and are being embraced by more and more people.

These are nothing more than ‘*doctrines of demons*’ the Bible prophesied would characterize the Last Days (1Tim. 4:1).

Many whose eyes are blinded to the truth of God are claiming to be spiritual ‘guides’ to the blind—acting as spiritual ‘traffic cops’ as they wave people down the Broadway to hell.

Jesus said of them, “*They are blind leaders of the blind who will lead themselves and those that put their trust in them over a cliff.*”

What a comfort to know that as a child of God I can turn to the Word of God and know what the truth is and allow it to light my path and direct my life in the way of truth—

Psalm 119:105 (NKJV)

¹⁰⁵ Your word *is* a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Psalm 119:165 (NKJV)

¹⁶⁵ Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble.

John 16:1 (NKJV)

¹ “These things I have spoken to you [God’s truth], that you should not be made to stumble.

You see if the shepherd saw a sheep wandering away on its own or approaching poisonous weeds or a serpent or getting too close to a cliff—he would send the rod flying so that it landed just in front of the sheep sending it scurrying back to the flock.

If you want to stay on the *right* path with God, away from dangerous situations that could lead to disaster—then stay in the Word:

Ephesians 5:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ See then that you walk circumspectly [according to God’s Word], not as fools but as wise...

The Greek word translated *circumspectly* carries with it the idea of “*precision and accuracy*”—but also has the idea of *looking, examining, and investigating* something with great care.

But this Greek word further includes with it the idea of *alertness*—as one author put it: “*As believers walk through the spiritual mine field of the world, they are to be constantly alert to every danger that Satan puts in their way*”.

Psalm 119:109–111 (NLT)

¹⁰⁹ My life constantly hangs in the balance, but I will not stop obeying your instructions. ¹¹⁰ The wicked have set their traps for me, but I will not turn from your commandments. ¹¹¹ Your laws are my treasure; they are my heart’s delight.

So often, the Word of God in the hands of a skillful shepherd (pastor or any other Spirit-filled Christian) can be the thing that causes a wayward brother or sister in Christ to turn around and rejoin the flock—just make sure you always speak the truth in love!

Another interesting use for the rod in the shepherd's hand was to examine the sheep every night before they entered the 'sheepfold.'

Let me stop for a minute and explain the idea behind 'sheepfolds.'

One Jewish historian explains that Jewish shepherds kept their sheep in two kinds of sheepfolds throughout the year depending on the season (winter or summer)—

“During the rainy season (winter and early spring) when there was an abundance of green grass around the village—the shepherds would use the sheepfold in town.

In Israel there was in each village located somewhere near the middle of town a common or communal sheepfold.

This sheepfold was a large walled-in area made up of stone walls that were roughly 6 to 8 feet high, having no roof and only one door.

In the evening, all the shepherds in the village who had their sheep grazing in the surrounding fields and hillsides—would lead their sheep into this communal sheepfold.

There was a man who was hired to care for the sheepfold during the night—he was called the porter or doorkeeper.

The shepherds would lead each of their flocks into this one sheepfold—and then go home for the night.

The doorkeeper's responsibility was to shut the door and guard the sheepfold against animals or robbers getting in by climbing over the walls.

In the morning, each shepherd would stand by the door of the sheepfold (the doorkeeper knew the shepherds and would only open the door to them), and the shepherd would call his own sheep by name (he had a name for each of them).

And even though several flocks had mixed together in the common sheepfold during the night—it didn't matter because they each knew their shepherd's voice and recognized their name when he spoke it.

And upon hearing him call their name—they followed him (and only him) out of the sheepfold.

If a stranger called the sheep, they would either not respond or run away.

As we said, the communal sheepfold in town had a door and a doorkeeper that guarded it from thieves and robbers during winter and early spring.

However, when the weather started to get warm and then hot—the shepherd had to lead his flock farther and farther away from town during the late spring through early fall looking for pasture (grass for the sheep to eat).

At one point, the shepherd would lead his flock too far away from the village and the common sheepfold to go back at night.

During those times, he would have to make a small, temporary sheepfold out of rocks, branches or brush (tumbleweeds)—with a single entrance or opening.

The shepherd would only make the opening wide enough for one sheep to enter at a time—that was purposeful on his part.

You see, the shepherd would stand next to the entrance of the sheepfold with his rod in his hand, holding it in front of the opening, so low that the sheep couldn't pass under it.

And as each sheep stood before the entrance to this makeshift sheepfold, the shepherd would carefully examine the sheep from front to back, and from head to hoof to make sure each sheep was free of burrs, cuts or any other injuries that he would have to address.

After the sheep passed inspection—the shepherd would raise his rod and allow the sheep to enter the sheepfold—one at a time.

He would do this for every one of his sheep.

*And then, after the last sheep had been examined and was safely inside the sheepfold—he, the shepherd, would lay across the opening and literally become the **“door of the sheep [sheepfold]”** (John 10:7).*

That way, no sheep could exit, and no wolf could enter without stepping on the shepherd and waking him up.

*“Thus, in referring to Himself as the **“Door”**, Jesus was saying, “I’m the Shepherd on duty. I’m the One whose job it is to guard the flock.”*

“All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them” (John 10:8)

In saying this, the Lord wasn't including Israel's true spiritual leaders (such as Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and many others)—but rather He was referring to Israel's false shepherds—her wicked kings, corrupt priests, false prophets, and pseudo-messiahs.

However, the true sheep did not hear them; they did not heed them and were not led astray by them—because they were God’s true sheep (John 10:27).

Of course, Jesus led the lost sheep of the house of Israel out of the sheepfold of Judaism (those that responded to His voice—i.e. His message, the gospel) into to the green pastures of the new covenant.”

Phillip Keller says much the same thing but adds a few important details—

“Because of their long wool it is not always easy to see bruises, cuts, wounds, or ticks on the sheep. But a good shepherd in caring for his sheep will lead the flock to the opening of the sheep fold at night and will stop each sheep with his outstretched rod and carefully examine the sheep. He opens the fleece with the rod as well as running his hand over its body feeling for any sign of trouble, and if they’re okay—he would then lift the rod allowing them to pass under it and enter the sheepfold. But it’s the shepherd’s rod that he uses to pull back the wool in search of hidden problems.”

I believe this is what David meant in Psalm 139:23-24 when he said,

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you and lead me along the path of everlasting life.”

If we allow it, if we’ll submit to it—God by His Word will “search us”—the goal of which is to sanctify us (a word that means to draw us farther and farther away from the world and closer and closer to Him)—a process that continues for the rest of our lives.

“Wool” in the Bible relates spiritually to what is unclean which includes ‘the flesh’ (God forbid His priests from wearing wool when they served Him) and God will use the Word to ‘pull back’ areas of the flesh to show us the root of the problem—which is most of the time pride, selfishness, stubbornness to the will of God, and self-dependance.

As we submit to this process and adjust our thinking and actions accordingly we undergo the process of sanctification which is the whole goal of our Christianity (2Cor. 3:18).

It’s the Word of God that can reprogram our thinking which will in turn affect our living—

Romans 12:2 (NLT)

² Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. [Mention spiritual warfare]

Finally, the shepherd's rod was an instrument of protection for both himself and his sheep, used as both a defense and a deterrent against anything that would attack.

The shepherd would use his rod to drive off predators like coyotes, wolves, lions, bears and wild dogs.

He would also use it to beat the brush, scarring snakes away that might bite the sheep as they were feeding.

In fact, it was the rod of God's Word that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, used in His encounter with that '*serpent of old*'—Satan, to 'beat' him back during his temptation in the wilderness. (Matt. 4)

Three times Satan 'thrust' at the Lord Jesus with three different temptations and three times the Lord countered with the Word of God by saying "*It is written*".

Satan knows that a Christian who has a firm handle on God's Word is a victorious Christian—which is why he constantly tries to 'knock' the Sword of the Spirit (the Word of God) out of a Christian's hand:

In the Christian classic, *Pilgrims Progress* (written by John Bunyan), there is a scene in which a terrible allegorical battle is portrayed between Apollyon (Satan) and Christian:

"Then Apollyon seeing his opportunity began to close in on Christian and wrestling with him, gave him a dreadful fall and Christian's sword flew out of his hand. Then said Apollyon, 'I am sure of you now.' And with that he had almost pressed him to death, so that Christian began to despair of life. But as God would have it, while Apollyon was preparing to take his last blow, thereby making an end of this good man, Christian nimbly reached out his hand and caught his sword saying, 'Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy, when I fall I shall arise,' and with that gave him a deadly thrust, which made him back away like someone who had received a mortal wound. When Christian saw this, he went at him again saying, 'Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.' And with that Apollyon spread his dragon wings and sped away, so that Christian saw him no more for a time."

John Bunyan knew that a Christian whose sword has been separated from them is easy prey for the enemy.

One pastor said,

“Are you wearing your Bibles out? I hope so. You must be in the Word consistently and continuously. You cannot grow unless you’re taking in consistent Bible teaching and Bible study. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Your faith grows stronger as you take in the nutrients and spiritual calories of the meat of the Word.”

Again, the Word of God is our protection against the enemy of our souls.

When Satan attacks you with doubt, discouragement, fear, and temptation—you must counter with the Word!

But remember, just as the rod of the shepherd was worked with until it fit so perfectly in his hand that it literally became ‘one with him’—so must the Word of God be in our lives if we want to be mighty men and women of God!

2 Samuel 23:9-10 (NKJV)

⁹ And after him *was* Eleazar the son of Dodo, the Ahohite, *one* of the three mighty men with David when they defied the Philistines *who* were gathered there for battle, and the men of Israel had retreated. ¹⁰ He arose and attacked the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand stuck to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to plunder.

Eleazar held on to the sword so tightly in battle that his hand became “molded” to it—in other words, it literally became an extension of him!

To be a mighty man or woman of God you must be a person whose hand sticks (the Hebrew is “glued”) to the sword until it becomes a part of you.

It’s interesting that Eleazar’s name means, “*God is my helper*” and in John 14 Jesus called the Holy Spirit “*the Helper*.”

It's also interesting that *Eleazar* and the *sword* are connected in 2Samuel 23:10—even as Paul called the Word of God the “Sword of the Spirit” in Ephesians 6.

The Holy Spirit is telling us thru this that you can't be a mighty man or woman of God if the Word of God isn't literally a part of you!

But understand the shepherd didn't become proficient with the rod by *just* shaping it perfectly to his hand—he then practiced with it until he mastered it and became extremely skilled and accurate with it.

And so too must the Word of God be in the hands of a Christian—so that when Satan attacks from within or from without through inward temptations and outward attacks from false teachers, atheists, and skeptics—you can counter with the Word.

But listen, David didn't leave it there, he went on to say, “**Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**”

When we consider the shepherd's staff, we need to understand that no other piece of equipment he carried with him identified him more as a shepherd than did the staff.

In fact, no one in any other profession carries or uses a shepherd's staff—it is uniquely an instrument used for the care and management of sheep—shaped and adapted especially for sheep.

The shepherd's staff is normally a long slender stick with a crook (‘hook’) on one end.

If the *rod* conveys the concept of authority, power, and protection—the *staff* is essentially symbolic of the *concern* and *compassion* that a shepherd has for his sheep.

And so, with that in mind it's safe to say that no other word better describes the purpose of the staff toward the sheep than that of '**comfort.**'

Just as the **rod** is emblematic of the Word of God the **staff** is symbolic of the Holy Spirit—Whom Jesus referred to as the "*Helper*" in John 14, but that Greek word can also be translated 'Comforter'

There are 3 areas in the care of the sheep in which the staff plays a significant role—all of which relate to the Holy Spirit's role in our lives as believers.

The first is that the shepherd will use his staff in drawing the sheep together into an intimate relationship with one another (sheep are prone to wander but the shepherd wants to keep the flock together).

Phillip Keller—

"The shepherd will use his staff to gently lift a newborn lamb and bring it to its mother if they become separated. He does this because he doesn't want the ewe to reject her lamb because it bears the odor of his hands. But also in the same way, the shepherd will use his staff to reach out and catch individual sheep (young or old) and bring them close to himself. The staff is very useful in this way for the shy and timid sheep that normally tend to stay at a distance from the shepherd. In a similar way in the Christian life, we find the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, drawing us together into a close, loving, personal fellowship with one another. But it's also the Holy Spirit who draws us closer to Jesus as we yield to Him."

He went on to say that the staff was also used to pull wandering sheep back onto the path.

Just as the Holy Spirit will attempt to pull wayward Christians back onto the path that God wants to lead them on when they have wandered away.

I think that most Christians have experienced this when they've kind of wandered from a close walk with the Lord and at one point, they suddenly feel a '*pulling and tugging*' on their heart to get back to the Lord, back to walking with Him on the right path.

In other words, back to church, back to Bible study, back to your morning devotions—etc.!

That was the *staff* (the conviction) of the Holy Spirit pulling you back to Him!

At other times the shepherd would use his staff to gently guide his sheep onto a new path or through some gate or along a dangerous route by laying the tip of the staff gently against the side of the sheep and by applying pressure he guided the sheep in the direction he wanted it to go.

In our walk with the Lord, we are told by Jesus Himself in John's gospel that He was sending us the Holy Spirit to guide us—as Jesus promised, “*When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth*” (John 16:13).

It is the Spirit of God Who gently but persistently says to us—“*This is the way, walk in it.*” (Isa. 30:21).

As we yield and obey, He then guides us along the paths of life which brings us great comfort to know He is with us and leading us in the way we should go.

However, the more obstinate we are the more pressure He applies to try to guide us in the right paths for our lives—(“*Woe to the person who wrestles with their Maker*”—Comment).

Maybe you've sensed His presence alongside you in difficult situations, guiding you, holding you up which is why the Holy Spirit is referred to as the “Comforter” in the NT (Parakletos) which means, “*One who comes alongside to help.*”

Keller offers one more insight into this subject—

“Being stubborn creatures, sheep often get themselves into the most precarious dilemmas. It's not uncommon for sheep greedy for one more mouthful of green grass to climb down steep cliffs where they could slip and fall or push their way into bramble bushes looking for green grass where the thorns become so hooked in their wool that they become hopelessly entangled and stuck where only the shepherd's staff could pull them to safety or free them from their entanglements. Likewise, with us, many of the jams we get ourselves into is the result of our own stubbornness in thinking we know what's best for our lives as we go looking for 'green grass' in life on our own but wind up in trouble, stuck in some situation that we can't pull ourselves free

from. That's when our loving Shepherd comes to us if we'll repent and tenderly lifts us out of the difficulty with the 'Staff' of His Holy Spirit."

So, the **Rod** speaks of the Word of God—and the **STAFF** speaks of the Spirit of God.

Both are a great source of comfort to the Christian when you find yourself walking through a valley of darkness—as David (once a shepherd) said,

“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!”