

“The Great Shepherd”  
Psalm 23  
A Sermon Delivered by  
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Good morning! It's great to be in the house of The Lord.

In 2005, when I was on my way to Iraq with our Marines, Oorah, we were riding in a bus in Kuwait along a busy highway. Because of security, the curtains on the bus were drawn but I was able to peek out and I actually saw a shepherd with his sheep in the median. The median was the only place that seemed to have any sort of greenery and could provide food for the sheep. I've had plenty of opportunities to speak about God being our shepherd and us being his sheep, visualizing the good shepherd in his long robe with his staff, gently guiding the sheep, but never in my wildest imagination did I ever consider until that point that in that area of the world, that scenario today is as common as Honda civics in the U.S. The first thing that went through my mind was, "Wow, check out that guy; he looks just like the picture in my first Bible!" The second thought that went through my mind was, "Good golly, I hope one of those sheep doesn't decide to wander out onto the highway where traffic is zooming past."

If just one of those sheep in the median tried to step out onto the highway, the shepherd would have guided him back with his staff. Remember in psalm 23 when the psalmist writes, "I will fear no evil, for your rod and your staff, they comfort me." He is writing as one who is being guided by the good shepherd because he knows the shepherd has his best interest in mind. He trusts him. Jesus refers to his followers in this way as recorded in John 10, when he says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me."

A shepherd must provide for totally defenseless sheep in a hostile environment. Not only must they be protected from wild animals, but they must be rescued from problems they got into but cannot get out of. For example, sheep can become entangled in thorn bushes or lost from the flock. When they waded into fast moving stream to drink, their wool can get so heavily soaked that they lose their footing, fall and drown. It is the shepherd's job to protect the sheep from attacking animals, keep them together in safe pastures, and find still shallow water so they can drink safely. Good shepherds will risk their lives for their sheep.

It is in this context - following God as shepherd - that the psalmist's words about "the darkest valley" begin to be fully understood. God does not come from somewhere else to the place where the sheep falls. The shepherd is there to help, the moment it happens. It is in this darkest valley that the shepherd most needs and uses the rod and the staff - the rod for guidance and the staff for defense.

What is the difference between a rod and a staff? The shepherd's staff or crook (Not the crook on the staff – that is an entirely different message); the shepherd's staff is a long stick with the hooked end that the shepherd used to pull sheep from pits and protect them. It represents the Lord's

protection and guidance. In contrast, the rod is connected with correction in the Bible. A well known proverb related to this is "spare the rod, spoil the child." (Proverbs 23:13)

Maybe you've heard this story of the shepherd who used his rod and broke the leg of the wandering sheep who would not stay near the shepherd. There is some debate as to whether shepherds ever actually did that, but the principle of chastening is biblical. In breaking the sheep's leg, the shepherd would have to carry the sheep everywhere he went. This would create such a bond between the two of them that when the sheep finally healed and could walk, he would never stray from the shepherd's side again. The shepherd knew how to carefully use the rod and he had the authority to use it when the sheep needed it.

Clarification: Please hear me on this - I am not advocating child or animal abuse here. This is not what this topic is about. We're talking about discipline and correction in order to protect those under authority and protection. Proverbs 3:11 says, "Do not despise the Lord's discipline and do resent his rebuke."

Just an observation based on my own experience and that of others- see if you can relate- I've met lots of people who claim to follow Christ who are fans of the staff. We all love God's protection and when he helps us out in times of trouble. We are quick to thank him when he lifts us up from the pit. But I haven't met too many who are fans of the rod. We love the blessings from God, but not so much the correction and trials which serve to make us more holy. And yet, the writer of this psalm seems to find comfort in both the rod and the staff. He says they both give him comfort when he is walking through the valley of the shadow of death. What might he be seeing that we are failing to see?

I find this failure to appreciate God's correction is one of the more common deficiencies in most people's discipleship- that is, our intentional plan to grow in faith and holiness. We simply fail to see God's love and care in trials and therefore fail to find comfort in the correction that God gives us. The Bible tells us that trials are for our own good or for the good of those around us. The strong possibility exists for us to try to ignore the trial and its benefits. This was the case with Israel when they got distracted and wandered away from God. God would attempt to correct them and bring them back by applying the rod and they often didn't listen until the pain outweighed their twisted logic.

Appreciating both the rod and the staff is all about faith. It is the belief that God is taking us through the valley of the shadow of death. He is not leaving us in the valley. He didn't send us into the valley without him. He is with us as we pass through. Faith is trust that God knows what he is doing no matter how comfortable or uncomfortable we are in the present.

The point I find interesting about the shepherd using both the rod and staff is that it describes something important about truth. Truth usually has a balancing side that, at first glance, appears to contradict the other. In our earnest efforts to understand truth, we sometimes focus on one side of the truth. When we ignore the balancing side, then what we cling to turns into heresy. We often feel compelled to choose between them as to which one is the most true.

Is the shepherd supposed to be strong and authoritarian or is he supposed to be supportive and merciful? Which one is more true? Well, they both are.

Is God a God of love who shows mercy, or is God a god of justice and judgment who punishes the wicked? Yes.

Do human beings have free will and make their own choices or is God omniscient and knows what were going to do before we even it do it? Yes.

Are we made in the image of God and still have hearts that, to quote scripture, are "desperately wicked and no good thing can come out of it"? Yes.

In light of recent events in West, Texas, and particularly in Boston, I find this concept comforting. I don't have all the answers. If God is everywhere and all powerful, why didn't he prevent what happened? I don't know. Here's what I do know: Without a doubt, The Lord is working in the lives of those of who were wounded and lost loved ones and he was there with them in the midst of their initial suffering. But he also is sovereign and will demand an account from those who are responsible.

The paradoxical truths in scripture describe infinite concepts that cannot be resolved in our finite brains. We will never be able to logically comprehend a formula that will completely explain how life works. God and life are not systematic. But God is relational and wants us to simply come to him and intimately know him. There, in the presence of our shepherd, whose voice we know, will we understand and experience truth.

If you hear nothing else today, know this: God loves you so much, no matter what you've done, he loves you so much that he sent he Son, the great Shepherd, to risk his life for you, to ultimately give it up, so that you can be saved from the pit, so you can live the abundant life now...and forever. Amen.