

Psalm 23 (Part 3)

Psalm 23:4-6 and Summary

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The twenty-third Psalm, which I think even the world will tell you is probably the best-known piece of scripture in the entirety of the Bible and is undoubtedly, for many, many people, the most beloved piece of Scripture, as well, is also one of the least understood. Just because its stanzas go together so beautifully and even though they are able to glean a little bit of meaning from it, I am sure that very few people really understand the kind of application it has for you and me on a practical basis day by day. I think, as we went through the first two sermons, you are beginning to see that this psalm applies to you and me every single day of our life. I think that will be reinforced as we go through the remaining portion of it.

I have permission from my wife to speak as long as I want today. However, I do not think I will do that. I am not going to give much background here at the beginning because I do want to make sure we get this thing finished today. If I have time at the end, I will give a little summary.

We are going to pick this up in verse 4, where it says,

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.

Up to this point, the sheep has been bragging across the fence to his neighbor about the kind of flock in which he is, what kind of master he serves, and the kind of master that takes care of him. He is trying to put a guilt trip on his fellow sheep across the fence. In verse 4, though, the psalm takes a turn, because now it becomes a personal and private conversation between the sheep and his shepherd.

Notice that he says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for *You* are with me." The sheep is talking to his shepherd; he is not talking to the sheep that are across the fence and are under another shepherd. His attention is directly focused on the shepherd.

There is also a shift of scenery that will become a little bit clearer when we get into the next verse, but it is already beginning: we are moving from home base to the spring and summer pastures. That becomes clear if you know anything about shepherding. A sheep being surrounded by a fence means that he is probably not in an open pasture in a high area at all but at home base. The rancher's home is where he has wintered, in a pasture, in a corral. We might even say a feeding pen, a feedlot. However, now the shepherd has moved the sheep out of the feedlot and has begun to direct them to pasture that is out away from the home.

Beginning in verse 4, these verses are done against the backdrop of mountains, rushing rivers,

high meadows, and rangelands. It was the kind of circumstance/environment with which David was familiar when he wrote this psalm. He knew of rivers and floods. He undoubtedly knew of avalanches that occurred, and he knew of predators. Remember the lion and the bear he said he had slain. He knew about poisonous plants, sleet, hail, thunderstorms, snow. David showed that he was fully prepared to protect his flock.

I remember an old Protestant hymn from when I was attending the Methodist Church before my conversion. The title of the song was about moving to higher ground. We have already come across this, those of you who have been attending the Bible Studies. We have talked about Abraham and Lot and how there was a choice made between the two of them. Actually, Lot made the choice. Abraham took the higher ground; Lot went to the lower ground. It was on the lower ground where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities of the plains that where so much like Egypt were.

The implication of moving to higher ground is moving into a closer, personal, more intimate relationship with God. This verse is describing how one gets into a personal, intimate, and close relationship with God. Many of us have the idea that somehow or other we can be airlifted by helicopter from home base up into the high range lands where we are really close to God.

It seems so many times in the Old Testament—I can think of Moses, and there was Abraham, of course—that somehow or other God was associated with these people in high places. Remember Mount Sinai, for example? That was the dwelling place of God, and Moses went up into the mount to dwell with God. It is symbolic of moving up in your relationship with God, and it is very important that we should do that.

Are you going to be airlifted? No. In every case found in the Bible, the people walked into their close, personal, intimate relationship with God. That is what the sheep is describing. The way one gets to the top, the way one gets into a close, personal, intimate relationship with God is to walk through the valleys—the valleys of the shadow of death.

I might also inject at this moment that this is a phrase that so frequently used by the world at a time of death. Death is included—"walk[ing] through the valley of the shadow of death"—but the word *death* is not what the Hebrew says there. It is walking through a valley of deep gloom. Death may be included; death may be feared; but the application is much broader than that. It includes a very wide range of daily problems, trials, difficulties, frustrations, fears, and temptations that come upon us while we are slogging our way as a foot soldier all the way up to that intimate, personal, and close relationship with God.

You do not become intimate with God by being airlifted into His presence. You become intimate with God by walking with your Shepherd all the way to the top! Remember, the Shepherd is there. "I will fear no evil for You are with me." That is the key to the sheep's confidence: that somehow or other he is going to be able to make it into that close, personal, and intimate relationship with God despite the periods of disappointment, discouragement, and dead end streets that we find ourselves on—the dilemmas, the difficult days, the working foes, and the fears that we have to surmount on the way there.

You know what shadows symbolize: Shadows are things that we fear. We want to go through the bad areas of town in the daylight, if we want to go through them at all. If it is approaching

twilight or getting into dark, we make very sure that we dash from streetlight to streetlight so that we do not get into any area where there might be something fearful lurking. We avoid those things.

I think we eventually learn that we cannot avoid them all. There are times when we are going to get into very shadowed areas—those periods of disappointment, frustration, and discouragement—and there is no way around them. We have to go through them if we are going to get to the top.

Think about it in a practical application. You are in an area that has many high mountains around it. Does not every road that leads to the top go through the valleys? Does not every road that leads to the top cut through the defiles in order to get up there? Take, for example, Laguna Canyon Road. It goes through the defile in order to get you up to the top of the mountain, does it not? That is typical. When the engineers laid out the roads across the United States—these great super highways we have leading everywhere—they always followed the lowlands. They go through the valleys. However, if there is no other way to get around and they have to get to the top, they have to get to the top by way of the valley.

Brethren, do you see what the sheep is saying? The only way to get into a close and personal relationship with God is to make sure you go through the valley of dark gloom.

There is great spiritual purpose behind this. It would be so easy if we could get into that close relationship with God by avoiding those things and skip our way through life, ignorant of all the dangers that are around us; but that is not the way it is. God wants you and me to be aware of the shadowed areas. He wants you to know that even though you go through them, He is holding your hand the whole time. He understands the difficulty. It is absolutely necessary that we go through those periods with Him holding our hands or with Him that close to us. We are aware for ourselves of His presence through those difficulties.

There is a second reason why it is necessary one must reach the top by going through the valleys of dark gloom, and that is that even as the valleys are where the roads and paths are most likely to follow, they are also where there is going to be water. Water means life. Water means refreshment. That is where the streams are going to run. The snow is going to melt from the high hills. It is going to seep its way into lower levels, and it is going to do that by going through the valley.

Remember that we talked about water before. Water is a strengthener and refresher. What God is saying here is that it is through the valleys of dark gloom, it is through those periods of disappointment, dilemmas, testing, trials, and frustrations that those things are going to prove to be a source of life and refreshment for you. Can you imagine that trials, testing, and fear are going to be productive? That is what is going to produce the fruit, in company with the Spirit of God.

Fruit is something of which other people eat. Pretend that you are a tree. Does a tree benefit from its fruit? It does only when the fruit falls on the ground and rots and becomes fertilizer. By and large, the great majority of the productivity of a tree is for those who pluck the fruit.

Going through the valley of dark gloom is going to produce fruit that is going to be of benefit to

others, because you are going to become a king and a priest. Along the way, you are going to be fellowshiping with a lot of other people who have not yet gone through the kinds of things you have already experienced in the hand of the Shepherd. You are going to be able to give them the benefit of your experience of walking through those difficulties and trials of life with Him.

Then you will be able to give comfort; then you will be able to give encouragement; then you will be able to give hope; and then you will be able to give instruction. You can say without bragging, "I was there before. I did it. I experienced it. Here is what happened. Let me try to buck up your faith. Let me try to help you and encourage you."

If you never had any experience in that, how could you relate in any way, shape, or form with that through which others are going? The fruit of your experience could very well mean the salvation of some other person.

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Our High Priest, Jesus Christ, was trained—perfected, as it were—for the position He now holds. He is High Priest. We are going to be priests and kings under Him. God had never experienced life as a human being until He became flesh and He was encompassed with the same kind of frame with which we are. He had a mind that was subject to Satan the devil, if He would allow it.

He suffered many things: He went through difficulties and angers. He felt pain like you and me. He took care of a mother. He worked with a father. He had younger brothers and sisters. When his father died, the indication is that He was then responsible for the family and running the family business. He experienced, in principle, everything in life. He ran a business as a stone maker, a construction worker; and He did it, undoubtedly, very well.

He learned to work with His hands; He learned to get hungry; He fasted; He prayed; He learned to be hated; He learned to endure pain; He learned to trust God; and He walked with God, hand in hand, through His own personal periods in the valley of the shadow of deep gloom.

We have to remember, brethren, that we are being trained to work under Him. Some of the fruit that is produced as a result of our going through these valleys is going to be helpful to others, even here and now. However, it is going to be extremely helpful when we are in the Kingdom of God. We need to understand that always, no matter how dark, no matter how shadowy, no matter how painful, we have the *very best* management that any sheep could ever possibly have. We have to remember this in verse 5:

Hebrews 13:5 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" So we may boldly say: "*The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*"

Perhaps the greatest benefit that comes from going through the valleys of deep gloom is

experiencing these things with God. All too often we are too shaken by the things we go through—life's storms. We claim to have confidence in Jesus Christ, but when the dark shadows appear, then whether or not we have confidence is going to show. The times of difficulty are going to show the weaknesses and flaws in our character, as well. Sometimes, brethren, we just go into very deep despair. We want to just lie down right in the midst of the deep gloom.

Jesus told us,

John 16:33 "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you *will* have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Psalm 23: 4 does not end with the valley of shadow, because it also includes the statement, "Your rod and Your staff comfort me." What kind of comfort can a sheep, a child of God, get from a rod and a staff?

Shepherds ordinarily travel pretty light. Even today in this mechanized era, even though a shepherd may have a rough cabin of some kind that he is able to get into out of the problems that might come along at night, and even though he might have a truck that he has to leave at certain areas, still a shepherd travels light. He might have a rifle. He has a lunch he takes with him from wherever he has camped out. He probably has a water bottle, perhaps a blanket, and a first-aid kit of some kind. He may have something for the sheep, as well, to be able to take care of them.

Back in the old days, back in the days of David, they did not have those kinds of comforts. It is very unlikely that David ever had anything more than a tent in which to spend the nights. When he traveled with the sheep, it was very likely that the only equipment that he had was his rod and his staff.

The rod is especially interesting. I think we are all familiar with the shepherd's staff. We have seen pictures of Moses with his staff. We have seen pictures of the supposed Christ who had a staff, picturing Him as a Shepherd as well. We are not very familiar with the rod, though. It is very interesting because the rod gives comfort as well as the staff.

The rod was usually a short, stout stick no more than about two feet long. It was usually cut from a hardwood sapling that was maybe two inches in diameter; and because it was usually cut from the very bottom of the sapling, right where the roots go out, there would be a narrowed, somewhat rough, end. The shepherd would spend a great deal of time looking for just the right sapling, probably of ash or hickory. It had to be pretty hard, maybe a piece of oak or maple. He would shape the thing so that it exactly fit his hand and nobody else's.

He would take the bark off it, sand it down, polish it, and make sure it exactly fit him: that it was just long enough and had just the right weight and balance to it. Then, after he got it to where he wanted it, he would spend, as young boys do today, hours on end practicing throwing it. Today, young boys throw baseballs, and they spend hours doing it. A shepherd spends hours throwing his rod, because the rod is the main instrument of offense and defense that a shepherd carries with him.

The term *rod* has come into the American vocabulary. Those of you who are familiar with Westerns or detective stories know that in them somebody was always packing a "rod." Today, we mean a pistol, a revolver. In the days of shepherding, the rod was a stout, husky piece of wood.

It was with this that he defended his flock, and it was with this that he corrected his flock. This is why he needed to be able to throw it with a great deal of accuracy. It is very unlikely that he would throw it at a bear, lion, cougar, or anything like that because he did not want it to get out of his hands in case that predator came after him. Because he wanted that rod to be able to whack that lion right on the forehead if he possibly could, he would not let it get out of his hand. However, when the sheep got a little bit unruly, he would throw it. It would hit the recalcitrant sheep right in the side of the head and give it a good solid whack.

How in the world could a good solid whack in the side of the head be a comfort to a sheep? You remember earlier verses where I said that there are four things a sheep needs in order to feel at peace? One of those is that he needs to be free from the tension outside, and he needs to be free from tension within the flock. If there were a sheep causing tension within the flock, it was very likely that the sheep was going to get a good solid whack on the side of the head from the shepherd. Because it was stirring them up, the rest of the sheep could not get comfortable. They could not be at peace because there was one ewe butting her way to the top, and that ewe needed to be put into line.

Whenever that ewe was put into line, the whole flock settled down. The rod was appropriate. The whole flock settled down. They could go back to munching their munchies, or ruminating and feel perfectly at peace.

It would also give peace if a predator showed up and the flock was stirred up because they knew there was a bear, lion, coyote, or wolf circling around the edges of the flock. The shepherd would go out there with his predator-whackers, and the sheep would feel that and be comforted. It was a comforter to them.

I am sure the sheep that got whacked on the side of the head would hurt for a little while. However, it, too, would calm down, because now it was not trying to butt its way to the top. Butting heads is never fun, and it is even a comfort for those butting heads to not have to be competitive with one another. Even they calm down.

Let me show you how frequently this phraseology appears in the Bible. You will be surprised. When I read the verses to you, you are going to ask, "Why did I not see that before?"

Isaiah 10:5 "Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger." [God says.]

Someday in the future, modern Assyria is going to whack the United States and Great Britain a good solid one right on the side of the head, and it will start calming things down and pushing things in the right direction.

In verse 15, the same metaphor is employed; but in this instance, God uses an ax as His object, rather than a rod:

Isaiah 10:15 Shall the ax boast itself against him who chops with it?
Or shall the saw exalt [magnify] itself against him who saws with it? As
if a rod could wield itself against those who lift it up.

Assyria is going to be a rod in the hand of God, and God is going to raise up that rod in order to whack Israel a good solid one and get us back into line.

Psalm 2:9 "...You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel...."

Exodus 4:2 So the LORD said to him [that is, Moses], "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A *rod*."

I bet you have always pictured Moses with a staff in his hand. No, it was the shepherd's rod that was in his hand. Moses was a shepherd and he undoubtedly had both a staff and a rod. It was the rod that was lifted up over the river. It was the rod that was taken into the presence of Pharaoh. It was the rod that turned into a snake. It was that snake that ate up Pharaoh's magicians' snakes, and Moses had to pick it up, whereupon it turned back into a rod. Since it was the rod, He said:

Exodus 4:3-4, 17 "Cast it on the ground." So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent and Moses fled from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Reach out your hand and take it by the tail" (and he reached out his hand and caught it and it became a rod in his hand) . . . "And you shall take this rod in your hand, with which you shall do the signs."

Exodus 7:9 "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Show a miracle for yourselves,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it before Pharaoh, and let it become a serpent.'"

The word that is translated *rod* is not the same one that is translated *rod* in Psalm 23, but the implication and usage are the same.

What did Moses do with the rod? It was by the rod that God, through Moses, demonstrated His authority and power. The rod became a serpent. The rod was waved over the river, and the water turned into blood. It was the rod by which God demonstrated His authority and power that was invested in Moses. The rod was an extension, symbolically, of God's will, of His power, of His strength, of His mind, of His wisdom.

That rod is still alive today. I say "alive" because the actual rod was just symbolic. Today, the Word of God is the rod of God for you and me. "Thus saith the LORD," and anything that follows after that carries the mind, the power, the will, the strength, the might, and the authority of God that is invested in His Word.

Brethren, we need to contemplate the power that is contained there, the truth that is there, the authority that is there; and look upon His Word as an extension of His mind, His will, and His

intentions for man. In His Word for you and me—those of us who are under His control, who have put ourselves there as a result of His call—there are no ifs, no ands, no buts, no maybes, no guesses about a certain philosophy of life; instead, there is a clear cut authority.

Hebrews 4:12-13 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 discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

If the shepherd sees a sheep that is wandering away or is just about ready to eat something that is poisonous, he throws his rod. Even as it is flying through the air, it is an extension of the power and the will and the mind of the shepherd for that sheep. Then comes the whack. The shepherd did not have to be there; the rod carried the message. That is the way it is with God's Word: it is an extension of Him.

In Hebrews 4, Paul is saying that God's Word penetrates. It is dynamic. It reaches into our innermost being. There is no secret, as verse 13 shows, that passes by Him. He sees it all. His Word passes judgment on our thoughts, our actions, our feelings, everything! Sometimes, brethren, we get whacked in the head, if we just allow it.

We are still not off the rod yet, because the rod was used for something else, as well. God says to Israel,

Ezekiel 20:37-38 "I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; I will purge the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against Me; I will bring them out of the country where they dwell, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD."

Did you notice that the sheep pass under the rod? Besides being an instrument of offense and defense—a little two-foot club—it was also tool under which the sheep passed. What does that picture to you? It pictures counting, does it not? It pictures something else too. As the sheep pass under the rod—the Word of God—they are undergoing a very close scrutiny. The shepherd takes his rod, and runs it backwards and counter across the grain of the wool. He separates it, and thereby looks down into the skin. He is then able to see the quality of the skin, and the quality of the wool.

What God is showing here is that by means of His rod, He is giving us careful, close scrutiny for two reasons: One, it gives the opportunity for evaluation as to the quality of the sheep; two, it provides a means of separation. Quality and separation—those are the two reasons for His scrutiny of us.

Remember Matthew 25, about the separating of the sheep and the goats? The rod is used to show or identify, to make sure of possession. Remember how I told you the sheep was bored

through the ear or distinctively marked on the ear? Sometimes, since the shepherds could not always see that identification because the flocks are all mixed together in the pastureland, they would make the sheep pass under the rod. When they did, the shepherd would flip back the ear to see the mark that shows possession. Again, it also gave them a chance to evaluate and determine the relative quality of that sheep.

All of us are under the rod right now. Now is the time of our judgment and we are undergoing an evaluation to determine to whom we really belong: God or Satan. Who is our shepherd? The rod is a very, very important instrument for the shepherd. No good shepherd would be without one.

The staff is used in three areas most frequently. The first is drawing sheep together into an intimate relationship. This is of special interest during lambing season, because frequently there are dozens, scores of lambs in a large flock being born at the same time. It is very easy for the ewe to lose her lamb in the midst of all the confusion. The shepherd has to make sure the right lamb gets with the right ewe.

For those of us who have just a few sheep, that would be no problem; but when there are hundreds, and sometimes thousands of ewes in one flock, then the staff becomes very important. As much as he is able, the shepherd watches the lambs being born. Then, if there is any confusion at all between the lamb and the ewe, he uses his staff to hook the lamb around the neck through the body (a very deft maneuver that I do not fully understand), picks the lamb up by his staff and carries it to the proper ewe. He cannot touch the lamb. If he touches the lamb, the ewe will not suckle it because there is a wrong odor—the smell of the man—and the ewe fears it too much. It will not feed it. These are the lambs you see people feeding with a bottle. The staff, then, is used to bring the lamb into an intimate relationship with its ewe.

Secondly, the staff is used to reach out and grab a lamb for close inspection. It very frequently precedes the passing under the rod. The shepherd hooks it by the neck or leg and then leads it over to where he wants to examine it.

Thirdly, the staff is used in guiding the sheep as they are moving along, because sheep tend to wander off. They always think the pasture is greener somewhere else, and they start wandering away. The whole flock will be going one way, but there will be one that is going off. What the shepherd does very frequently is use what I would call the blunt end to jab the sheep in the ribs and head it back in the other direction toward the flock.

In many cases, some of these maneuvers no longer have to be done because ranchers have dogs to do a great deal of this for them. However, as far as we know, this was not written at a time when ranchers were using dogs, and the shepherd had to take care of all those things.

The staff represents God's Spirit. It indicates gentle guidance, whereas the rod indicates stern measures such as offense or defense—protection. God leads, He guides by His Spirit.

You might recall John 16:13, where Jesus told them He would not leave them comfortless, but He would give another comforter:

John 16:13 "However, when it, the Spirit of truth, has come, it will

guide you into all truth; for it will not speak on its own authority, but whatever it hears it will speak; and it will tell you things to come."

The staff indicates guidance.

Go on to the next verse in Psalm 23, a very interesting one. Every one of these verses indicates a very important step in the life of a sheep throughout a year. The most important one might be "You lead me in the paths of righteousness." Maybe this one would be the second most important one:

Psalm 23:5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

I think that the meaning of this verse is pretty much hidden from our understanding because we do not live as a shepherd lives. Most of us have not grown up on a ranch; most of us have not even grown up on a farm. You are familiar with the word *table*, though. You might be thinking of a supper table, lunch table, or breakfast table. You would be very close to being right but not quite right, because we are talking about sheep. We are not necessarily talking about human beings.

Again, remember that the sheep are moving. They have moved from home base; they have gone through the valleys. They are moving up the mountain toward the high ranges, to the tableland. What is the word that is used in the southwest United States to indicate a table? It is the Spanish word *mesa*. In French, they use *plateau*.

Believe it or not, this word is used all over the world to indicate the same thing. I do not mean that in South Africa they call it a mesa; they have their own word for it, but it means exactly the same thing. It means "a tableland." A mesa is a high tableland. A plateau is a high tableland.

Notice, the sheep says to the shepherd, "You prepare before me." David, the psalmist, was talking about readying the range for the arrival of the sheep.

This is the order of business: Even before the snow melted, the shepherd would go out and make a preliminary survey of what had happened over the previous winter. He wanted to see what kind of snow pack there was. He wanted to see if any avalanches had occurred. He wanted to see where the water was running. Were there any pools that had formed? What kind of growth was beginning to show? He was checking for poisonous weeds. He was looking for dens of predators, like wolves and such. He would go up there and prepare to make sure there were still waters

Remember, a sheep will not drink from waters that are running. There can be a stream nearby, but th