

## 7. Psalm 23:4-6

October 18, 2007

In Palestine, most of the good shepherds make a great effort to take their flocks onto distant summer ranges during summer. The sheep move along slowly, feeding as they go, gradually working their way up the mountains behind the receding snow. By late summer they are well up on the remote alpine meadows above the timberline.

With the approach of fall, early snow settles on the highest ridges, continuously forcing the flock to withdraw back down to lower elevations. It is this segment of the yearly operations that is described in the last half of the poem.

During this time the flock is entirely alone with the shepherd. They are in intimate contact with him and under his most personal attention day and night.

David, a former shepherd and the psalmist, knew from firsthand experience about all the difficulties and dangers, as well as the delights of the trips into high country. As a king of Israel, he remembered the intimacy he shared with the Lord and penned it in the second half of Psalm 23.

### ***A. Psalm 23:4a Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death***

A Good shepherd is familiar with the way to the high country and leads his flock gently, but persistently up the paths that wind through the valleys.

We may wonder why shepherd uses valleys rather than ridges. Valley has normally gentler slope and safer route than the sharp and rugged ridge.

Please make a great emphasis on two words "walk through". It does not say, "I die there, or stop there", but rather "I walk through" to the higher ground where we will experience intimacy with the Savior. These don't have to be "dead end" streets. The disappointments, the frustrations, the discouragements, the dilemmas, the dark and difficult days, though they be shadowed valleys, need not be complete destruction.

It is common to use this verse as a comfort to those who are facing their own death or someone close. But even here, for the child of God, death is not an end but merely the door into the eternal life with Christ in heaven.

I am sure that you've heard me saying this, it is "the valley of the SHADOW of death" before. To a Christian, death no longer applies. Yes, we all will have physical death if the Lord Jesus tarries. But the sting of death to Christians was taken away by Christ who died for our sins on the cross.

There is a second reason why sheep are taken to the mountain tops by way of the valleys. Not only is this the way of the gentlest grades, but also it is the well-watered route. Here one finds refreshing water all along the way. There are rivers, streams, springs and quiet pools.

As Christians we will sooner or later discover that it is in the valleys of our lives that we find refreshment from God Himself. It is not until we have walked with Him through some very deep troubles that we discover He can lead us to find our refreshment in Him right there in the midst of our difficulty.

I remember my own "spiritual valley of the shadow of death" like it happened yesterday. It seems dark, difficult and lonely. But as I was walking through, He embraced me, He carried me when I was stumbling over obstacles. When I cried, He comforted me and assured me that He was with me. By the time we came out of the valley, I was taller and stronger spiritually and more sensitive to the Holy Spirit and have learned to recognize His voice.

I wouldn't trade that experience for all the money in the world, but I wouldn't pay a penny to go through it again. But if I have to go through it again because the Lord see that I need, I know that He will be there with me all the way through again.

***B. Psalm 23:4b I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.***

In the ancient Middle East the shepherd carried only a rod and staff normally. Each of these equipment has a distinctive function and reason.

The rod was an extension of the owner's own right arm. It stood as a symbol of his strength, his power and his authority in any serious situation. The rod was what he relied on to defend both himself and his flock in danger. And it was the instrument he used to discipline and correct any wayward sheep that insisted on wandering away.

When God called Moses, the desert shepherd, and sent him to deliver Israel out of Egypt from under Pharaoh's bondage, it was his rod that was to demonstrate the power vested in him. It was always through Moses' rod that miracles were made manifest not only to convince Pharaoh of Moses' divine commission, but also to reassure the people of Israel.

The rod speaks of the spoken Word, the expressed intent, the extended activity of God's mind and will in dealing with men. It implies the authority of divinity.

I am sure that you all have heard often, "This Bible will keep you from sin!" It is the Word of God that comes swiftly to our hearts, that comes with surprising suddenness to correct and reprove us when we go astray. It is the Spirit of the Living God, using the living Word, that convicts our conscience of right conduct. In this way we are kept under control by Christ who wants us to walk in the ways of righteousness.

In the case of the staff, it identifies the shepherd as a shepherd. No one in any other profession carries a shepherd's staff. It is uniquely an instrument used for the care and management of sheep – and only sheep. He uses his staff to guide the sheep.

While the rod conveys the concept of authority, of power, of discipline, of defense against danger, the word "staff" speaks of all that is patience and kindness.

Just as the rod of God is emblematic of the word of God, so the staff of God is symbolic of the Spirit of God. In Christ's dealing with us as individuals there is the essence of the sweetness, the comfort and consolation, the gentle correction brought about by the work of His gracious Spirit.

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

After the flock of sheep and their shepherd go through valleys they get to arrive at wide open area of the mountain.

In some of the finest sheep countries of the world, especially in the Western United States and Southern Europe, the high plateaux of the sheep ranges are always referred to as “mesas” – the Spanish word for “tables.”

Before the sheep arrive the shepherd will make a trip or two to prepare the mesa for them. He takes along a supply of salt and minerals to be distributed over the range at strategic spots for the benefit of the sheep during the summer.

He will check to see if there are poisonous weeds appearing and if so, he will plan his grazing program to avoid them, or simply remove them.

The parallel in the Christian life is clear. Like sheep, we somehow feel that we have to try everything that comes our way. We have to taste this and that, sampling everything just to see what it’s like. And we may very well know that some things are deadly. Still somehow we give them a try anyway. Through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit tells us what not to do because they are harmful to our spirits.

While the shepherd and the flock are on the summer range mesa, so are the predators. The shepherd must be constant alert to protect his sheep from cougars, coyotes and other beasts. In spite of this constant vigil by the shepherd, some sheep would wonder away from him and ends up get killed by the predators.

Our Savior who knows every wile, every trick, every treachery of our enemy satan and his demons. We always are in danger of attack. Scripture sometimes refers to him as “a roaring lion” who goes about seeking whom he may devour. Some Christians are so self-confident in their own faith that they even open themselves up to worldly temptations without a second thought and get destroyed.

*Proverbs 6:27 Can a man take fire to his bosom, And his clothes not be burned?*

Remember what I said about the shepherd making a trip or two to prepare the meadow for his flock before he leads his sheep to the summer range? Jesus did that for us. He went to the Garden of Gethsemane and to the cross ultimately to remove all the poison out of death for us. He prepared the table before us in the presence of our enemies.

#### ***D. Psalm 23:5b You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.***

Imagine with me: the sheep are in a quiet setting on the high meadows where there are clear running springs; where their food is fresh and tender; where there is the intimate close contact with the shepherd. Suddenly we hear annoying buzzing sound of FLIES.

In our last week study, some of you were grossed out by what I described. But it is true. Those nasal flies’ attacks on sheep can readily turn the peaceful summer months into a time of torture for them and drive them almost to insanity.

If a nasal fly is successful in laying eggs inside of the sheep’s nose, the eggs will hatch in a few days to form small, slender worm. They work their way up the nasal passages into the sheep’s head. They burrow into the flesh and there set up an intense irritation accompanied by severe inflammation.

For relief from this agonizing sheep will deliberately beat her head against trees, rocks, posts or brush. So at the very first sign of flies among the flock the shepherd will apply an antidote – linseed oil, sulphur and tar – to their heads and noses.

This is the exact picture of irritations in our own lives. How easy it is for a little problem to ruin our spiritual life with Christ!

Just as with the sheep there must be continuous and renewed application of oil throughout summer to prevent the flies, there must be a continuous anointing of God's Holy Spirit to counteract the ever-present aggravations from satan.

***E. Psalm 23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.***

Not only is this a bold statement, but it is somewhat of a boast, an exclamation of confidence in the Lord who controls David's destiny.

How many Christians actually feel this way about Christ? Of course it is very simple to speak this way when things are going well. If my health is excellent; my income is flourishing; my family is well; and my friends are fond of me it is not hard to say "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

But what about when one's body breaks down? What is my reaction when my job folds up and there is no money to meet bills? What happens if my children get caught running with the wrong gang?

With my natural tendencies to fear, worry and ask "Why," it was not always simple to assume that He really did know what He was doing. There were times I was tempted to panic, to bolt and to leave His care. Somehow I had this strange, stupid notion I could survive better on my own. Most men and women do.

But despite my truly dumb behavior I am so glad He did not give up on me. I am so grateful He did follow me in goodness and mercy. The only possible motivation was His own love, His care and concern for me as on one of His sheep. I love Him because He first loved me.

This is the supreme portrait of my Shepherd to me.

Here is a sheep so utterly satisfied with its lot in life, so fully contented with the care it receives, so much "at home" with the shepherd that there is not a shred of desire for a change.

**F. APPLICATION**

Bless the Lord Jesus with everything within us and everything with us.