

Psalm 23

Read Psalm 23:1-3: One of the benefits of teaching the scriptures is that the bible teacher is one of the first to get to drink the medicine. This psalm is ministering to my own needs. This psalm has given me some insights into reasons for my own occasional unrest, and disruptive emotional *burdens*. I think that some of my own normal life duties and their resulting anxiety comes from trying to take on the role of being my own shepherd. I need to take whatever is in my *in-basket*, and put it back into God's *in-basket*. I need to take timely proper action (prayerfully); and stop obsessing over it. God has told us to not worry about tomorrow; because we have no control over it. I cannot only ask for God's help with my daily challenges; and then bypass his appointed less-pressing *rest stops* and *group activities*.

He said to them, "You will surely say this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself!' (Luke 4:23)

We have two life choices. We are told to opt for the simple life of trusting God; and living under his banner with all of its benefits. Our good shepherd has his flock out in his field. Anyone can join the flock; by following the shepherd.

Since the beginning; man has been curious as to what is behind door #2. Eve had to double-check God by questioning perfection; and trying something else. It blew up on her and her family. We need to curb our tendencies to try something else. Supposedly the Satanic Bible is about *doing your own thing*. *It extols the virtues of exploring one's own nature and instincts*. That is Satan's message.

Psalm 23 describes what it is like to just let Jesus be in charge of your life. You have to trust that going out into the world and trying alternate lifestyles ends with dissolution and disappointment. He is the only *good shepherd*. We can get stressed out by not exactly knowing what to do as we encounter things along life's daily trail.

We give ourselves too much credit. We are treading on more grace than we know. We also cannot trust our fellow man completely. God is completely trustworthy and he sees things more-completely and differently. He can see where each trail leads. We cannot rely upon public consensus or approval. Jesus pointed out that

our critics and those who impose burdens on us are not our shepherds. Wolves try to separate the weakest animal from the flock and get it away from the shepherd as well. Anyone in our holding pen or in our field who is eying us with disruptive intent is probably not our shepherd. The Bible describes gentle and humble leaders. Paul tried to be an example to Timothy and others. Jesus commissions the under-shepherds of God's flock. They lead by example; and they speak the word of God. They are not sheep-beaters or hard drivers or abusers. They are like Jesus; who only does his fathers will.

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. 7 Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.^[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. 11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” (John 10:1-18)

The nature of a shepherd is different from a wolf or a hired hand (career-minded pastor). Their message and methods are telltale signs. How do we distinguish our Good Shepherd's voice? Don't fall prey to someone telling you what God told them about your life (unless God confirms it with you). We need to be in the word, and in prayer daily. We are surrounded with counterfeit messages; human reasoning, and active imaginations. We need to be able to see a counterfeit a mile away. A phony televangelist or misguided preacher should make our sensors go off.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

Flock protection is not only pertaining to feed and water and predators. Part of being a good shepherd is keeping the flock together. I may want to wander far away, looking at some *greener grass*. The worst times recorded in the Bible were when people just did whatever seemed right to them (without consulting God).

The shepherd has to think ahead; and visualize how our life will be under various pathway options. We might be attracted to a path promising one benefit; and dismiss the need for another of our needs to be met. We can't see where the paths lead. One example is the need for ongoing water supplies that will be reasonably close by. It does no good to go to the tallest grass; if there is no water there. I have to trust that God is steering me towards the best things for me.

We tend to turn away from our shepherd when we stare at our problems too long. We do need to plan ahead for our commitments; but not to fret and become anxious about approaching things. Do I fixate my stare at my obstacle course; or do I stare at Jesus? If I stare too long at my obstacle course; I cannot give Jesus my undivided attention. It becomes hard to even sit still to have a quiet time with God.

Let's give ourselves the test as to if we are following the Good Shepherd; or ourself:

1. Am I experiencing *unmet perceived needs* and a lack of fulfillment?
2. Am I able to enjoy my life where I am right now?

3. Is my life best described as quiet and peaceful; or full of frustration?
4. Is there any ongoing emotional restoration taking place; or do I just *soldier on* with my ongoing underlying anxieties and burdens?
5. Is my life taking a turn towards righteousness; or am I finding reasons to allow some questionable (*spiritual junk food*) things to pass the time?
6. Am I focused on myself; or others, and God's glory?

Read Psalm 22:4: This verse is not saying that we should have no fear of things that can bring us harm. It is saying that there is an appointed path amidst the hazards that is secure.

Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. 20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but [I]rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10:19-20)

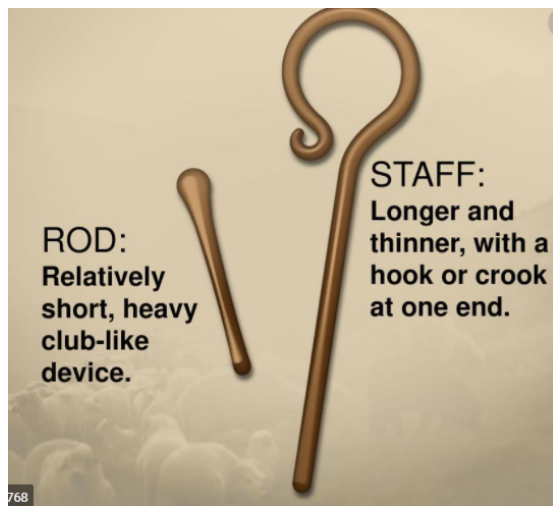
Do my mind and emotions spin when I encounter issues and setbacks and threatening news? This world is plagued with bad news. It helps to have a sense of purpose that transcends all the events in this world. That way; we do not hang on the status of all of the issues in our lives, or on worldwide events. Becoming a leader requires thriving amidst chaos...because that is the way this world is.

God took David to the *Valley of the Shadow of Death* over and over before he became the shepherd over Israel. David had no choice but to live in the moment. Joseph had to be put in prison; without any prospect of ever getting out before he could become the governor who essentially saved the world from starvation. Joseph made the most of his situation; and became an effective administrator in a dungeon. Daniel had to be placed in a lion's den; and be subjected multiple times to politics that had the intent to kill him.

It is one thing to agree to all of this; and it is another thing to actually be at peace when bad things happen. I can trust Jesus; but still lose a lot of sleep over concerns. How do I actually receive this comfort? This psalm says your rod and your staff are what comfort me. The shepherd's rod is for protection from the unknown. The staff is to direct me, and keep me going. God holds the club (rod) in his hand; should a wolf come at me. I can lean on him (my staff/cane) when my

weaknesses need a boost. My concerns might be over which path to follow from here. We may not even know yet. We just have to put one foot in front of the next. We were not made to walk on our own. Sheep do not survive without a shepherd.

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am [f]gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)



Rod: **shêbet**, shay'-bet is defined as something that you can lean on or be disciplined by

Staff: **mish'ênâh**, mish-ay-naw is defined as a walking stick, because of its supporting quality

God is our rest and our strength and our corrector. We might lose track of that and go out on our own. Our emotions and health will reveal that we were not made to be Lone Rangers. Being a good and holy leader is to follow the Chief Shepherd.

For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." 10 When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! As we do, people may follow us. If we try to blaze a trail for our own glory; it could blow up in our face. (Matthew 8:9-10)

Read Psalm 22:5: We might envision the ultimate Christian life as a walk in the garden with Jesus, while all is well in our life. Many times I have prayed to walk more closely with God; to find myself experiencing a barrage of unwelcomed events. For years I prayed to make the bad news stop; without an immediate peaceful resolution. Once I prayed to be made strong enough to enjoy my life and circumstances it happened immediately.

We will not become so obedient that God will remove our enemies and daily challenges. Michael the archangel has probably been 100% faithful to God; and yet he will have to do battle with Satan and his demons. Our challenges might even become bigger, as we transition from strength to higher strength. He will take us through them. He is our tour guide. He determines if we go through the Valley of the Shadow of Death; or if we go around it.

Part of Christian maturity is being able to be at peace knowing that my enemies are near me.

Therefore he sent horses and chariots and a great army there, and they came by night and surrounded the city. 15 And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" 16 So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." 17 And Elisha prayed, and said, "Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:14-17)

We have to live at a *higher elevation*. We need to stand far enough back to allow God's angels do their work. They know what they are doing. Spiritual warfare is evidenced visually by plagues and natural disasters and wars. Man keeps building his own Towers of Babel. God has to continuously intervene to salvage life on earth. That may require demolition, broken dreams and wake up calls. We need to know that our enemies intentions do not matter; because I am protected. Whatever is attacked or destroyed by the enemy with intention to harm is actually a form of God's pruning. That is why we cannot have a *death grip* on having no changes in status in our lives.

We cannot receive the abundant joy that God has for us if our emotions are tied to our circumstances. Can we rest in the Valley of the Shadow of Death; or are we going to fall apart? If God opened our eyes we would see armies of demons trying to destroy man. We would also see how God's *army of light* is protecting us. They have enormous powers; but they have a corresponding level of responsibility. We are not given all of the details about angelic reviews and rewards. For some reason, God has tasked them to do fierce battle for thousands of years. God does not need angels to do his bidding any more than he needs us. He has chosen to cultivate holy angels and holy men.

For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more. (Luke 12:48)

This is all wonderful news; but I am a weak man with little faith. How did Peter get a good night's sleep as he was chained to soldiers in prison on the eve of his possible execution? The answer is that it is not natural. God gives us the strength just for that moment.

Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. 4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four [a]squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. 5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but [b]constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were [c]keeping the prison. 7 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. (Acts 12:1-8)

Obviously Peter has experienced a higher level of trust in Jesus than what I have experienced. I have fears of much smaller issues that seep through. I also have ongoing times of refreshing; and I can sort out my tasks and hurdles. Perhaps the problem is that I fear that the test will be too big. That actually is not my burden to try to carry. Just be faithful with what is in front of me.

No temptation has overtaken you except as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to [d]bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Read Psalm 23:6: This psalm closes with an expectation of a life of blessings. It is better to be blessed and the recipient of mercy, than being capable and recognized. This mindset should be our goal. It all starts with the LORD being our shepherd. A shepherd is not just a boss to obey. A shepherd is also one that you trust and want to be close to. That sounds pretty simple on the surface. It is helpful to contrast *the life of following a shepherd* to a *life of the independent man*.

God's people are like sheep. Those who are not God's people are compared to goats. Sheep have a reputation for being gentle; but stupid and defenseless. Sheep will follow their shepherd's voice. A goat has no intention of following any man. A goat tends to be more independent, headstrong and pushy. Goats are more likely to get into mischief.

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the [c]holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. 33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ 37 “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ 40 And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ 41 “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 43 I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you

did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ 44 “Then they also will answer [d]Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ 45 Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ 46 And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31-46)