

Psalm 23

Lesson 8

Your Rod and Staff, They Comfort Me

Leader Guide

A Bible Study to Accompany
“A Shepherd Looks At Psalm 23”
by Phillip Keller

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Lesson 8, Psalm 23, A Psalm of David Your rod and staff, they comfort me

Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance *Micah 7:14*

Prayers

Luther's Morning Prayer

Thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Psalm 23, A Psalm of David. The LORD Is My Shepherd

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Even 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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Introduction

The two main tools of a shepherd in Biblical times were his rod and staff. A shepherd is identified by his staff because it is uniquely suited to the care of sheep. The staff is always used for the benefit of the sheep. A shepherd uses the staff to calm and gently guide his sheep. He also uses it to lift a lost lamb and return it to the ewe so she doesn't reject it for bearing a human scent. A rod is a short club used to protect the flock from predators and, on occasion, is used to discipline a wayward sheep. A rod symbolizes the shepherd's power, authority and protection, whereas the staff symbolizes his care and guidance.

In this lesson, we will look at the themes of God's discipline and means of protection in chapter 8, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23."

Discussion – The Shepherd's Rod

1. A rod is a short club that can be wielded by hand or thrown. A rod was the main weapon a shepherd carried to ward off predators like coyotes, dogs, wolves, or rustlers. It was the shepherd's primary means to safeguard himself and his flock, just as a rifle is used by shepherds today. David also carried a sling to fight off lions and bears. A secondary use of the rod is to discipline the sheep – always for their welfare. The shepherd might throw the rod toward a wayward sheep wandering too close to danger or poisonous weeds to scurry them back to the fold. Likewise, God disciplines us to discourage harmful behaviors and to encourage beneficial behaviors.

- a. What is God's primary tool (rod) to guide us so we don't wander into dangerous ground?

Ps 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

2Ti 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

We are guided by the Holy Spirit speaking to us primarily through the scriptures.

- b. If the scriptures are God's primary tool to guide us, how does he rebuke us (a harsher form of discipline)?

2Sa 12:13 Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.

2Sa 12:14 But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die."

Gal 6:7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

God never removes his love for us in his discipline but can allow us to suffer the consequences of our sins. But God is also merciful and gracious and forgives many of our sins without consequence.

- c. What can we conclude about God's discipline from Hebrews 12:5-6?

Heb 12:5 And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son” (Hebrews 12:5–6, quoting Proverbs 3:11–12).

Heb 12:7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?

God disciplines us as his children in love.

Note in verse 7, endure hardship as discipline – (This idea needs to be discussed further, question 2) All hardship discipline?

2. Hebrews 12:7 says that we should endure hardship as discipline; it doesn’t say that all hardship is discipline, but the purposes are the same. God means for good to come out of both hardship and discipline. In Jesus’ day, people believed that poverty, disease, and suffering were God’s punishment for sin, whereas health and wealth were God’s reward for righteousness. Consequently, it was only natural for the disciples to ask, “Who sinned for a man to be born blind?” (John 9:2). Neither could they understand why Jesus said it was “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19:24). God does not remove us from all hardship and suffering because he uses it for our benefit. Let’s review the following scriptures and identify the good purposes God provides in suffering:

1) 1 Peter 4:12-13: We rejoice in suffering because **it identifies us with Christ.**

^{1Pe 4:12} Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ^{1Pe 4:13} But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

2) 1 Peter 1:6: We should rejoice in suffering and trials because they **strengthen our faith.**

^{1Pe 1:6} In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

3) Romans 5:3-5: We should rejoice in our suffering because **suffering develops our character**

^{Ro 5:3} Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

- 4) 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, We should rejoice in our suffering because **suffering enables us to comfort others.**

^{2Co 1:3} Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

3. God's discipline is always an act of love and can take many forms in guiding us back to a proper path in our life, keeping us from sin, growing our faith, or increasing our empathy and compassion for others. Looking back on your life, how have you seen God's discipline or guidance at work?
4. The shepherd uses a rod to count and examine his sheep. As the sheep are counted, they pass under the shepherd's control and authority for inspection. Long wool hides disease, wounds, and parasites that are difficult to detect, so the shepherd uses his rod to part the wool to inspect it for cleanliness and health. Each animal enters the gate to the coral and passes under the shepherd's outstretched hand, holding the rod for inspection. The shepherd's concern is for the welfare of his sheep.

Like the good shepherd, God also searches us out of concern for our welfare. He seeks to remove our "old self" that is hanging on: self-will, pride, and self-assertion. He gives us spiritual rebirth His Spirit and Word to transform us. His word exposes our sin, leads us to repentance in Christ, and calls us to God's standards so that we might seek the transforming power of his Spirit. Read the following passages and discuss how God is at work on your "old self."

^{Jn 3:5} Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

^{2Co 5:17} Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

^{Tit 3:5} He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

^{Ro 6:6} For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, ²⁴ that we should no longer be slaves to sin — ⁷ because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

- a. What part of your "old self" is still stubbornly hanging on and needs renewal?

b. How is Holy Spirit at work at renewing your old self?

5. A rod is an extension of the shepherd's arm, which he uses to defend himself and his flock. The Scriptures are an extension of God's mind and carry His authority and power. God gave us the scriptures for our defense and benefit and to counter the attacks of Satan. Christ's temptations in the wilderness illustrate this concept. God's word allows us to examine the most complex challenges of our time: morality, integrity, leadership, power, wealth and influence, homosexuality and gender, salvation through Christ, eternal life, our role as stewards of the environment, and our identity and purpose in life.

The scriptures keep us from confusion, the chaos of strange philosophies and opinions of a post-Christian society. Discuss the following views among Christians today.

- 1) The Bible is the inspired word of God but should not be taken literally (49% agree).

Most American Christians believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, but only 20% believe it can be taken literally. Paul instructed Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2Timothy 3:16). Problems arise beyond figures of speech and poetic illustrations to teachings deemed politically incorrect by modern standards so that we become the arbitrators of what is God's word and what isn't.

- 2) People are basically good (72% agree)

The issue is not so much if people are basically good or bad but that they all need a Savior who is Jesus Christ, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Acts 3:23).

- 3) People go to heaven by doing good works and living a good life (58% agree)

This statement fails to acknowledge that there is no salvation apart from faith in Christ (Acts 4:12).

- 4) Having faith in God is more important than which faith you pursue (66% agree)

I wish I could agree with this statement in many ways, but Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

- 5) I believe in God with certainty and believe He has a personal interest in me (45% agree, under the age of 30).

Of all the statistics I've read on the modern views of Christians, this one makes me profoundly sad that only 45% of young Christians believe God was personally interested in them. About 60% of Christians over 65 responded yes to this question. We should never stop praising God's goodness and love toward us, to both Christians and non-Christians.

The Shepherd's Staff

6. The staff is used to guide sheep along the path, often to a new and more difficult path. The shepherd does not hit the animal but guides it by placing the staff gently along its side and applying pressure. Sheep have assurance of the shepherd's presence and enjoy the attention as they walk with the shepherd. God assures us of his presence through the Scriptures and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. We often experience His presence most closely in times of loss and suffering. When have you experienced God's presence and the peace that surpasses all understanding in any of the following circumstances?

Guidance in major decisions	Conflict
Sickness	Distress or danger
Restoration and forgiveness	Relational brokenness
Times of peace, joy, and beauty	

7. Sheep do ridiculous things for a blade of grass they perceive as better than the other blades of grass. As a result, they end up in brambles, on unstable slopes, or along steep slopes. The shepherd uses his staff to lift the sheep from harm's way.
- Has God ever rescued you from difficult circumstances resulting from your stubbornness and self-will?
 - Can you identify times when God has kept you safe without your asking or even be conscious of the threat?

God is faithful even when we do not ask in prayer or seek him only when we experience difficulty. We have abundant opportunities to seek his counsel before a situation becomes hopelessly broken.

8. God is sovereign, good, and loving, so why doesn't he protect his people from the hatred, disease, and violence in the world? The question of suffering and God's protection is profound and unfathomable. Most Christians don't blame God for crimes of violence but blame the people who commit them or the leaders who encourage them. Scriptures provide insights into aspects of suffering and His protection.
- God promises us **protection from the evil one and wicked men.**

^{2Th 3:2} And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

^{2Ti 4:18} The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

b. Jesus promises us **eternal security.**

^{Jn 10:27} My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all;

c. God has promised to **never forsake us.**

^{Heb 13:5b} God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

^{Heb 13:6} So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

d. God promises that **no one or nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.**

^{Ro 8:35} Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

^{Ro 8:38} For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God^l that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Closing, The Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:9-13.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.