

The Shepherd's Staff - Source of Comfort

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Your rod and staff comfort me.” Psalms 23:4

It is significant to note that, “*Your rod and staff comfort me,*” immediately follows, “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*”

Have you ever lived under the threat or possibility of death? Every man, woman and child in Baghdad, Iraq lives under the shadow of violent death. They know that a bomb or bullet could kill them at school, home or shopping. They have no safe place to hide. How would God comfort you in that situation? How does God comfort those who discover that they have a disease in their body that may be incurable; or that a loved one has been killed or maimed in an accident; or killed in an act of violence?

The Psalmist plainly says that the shepherd's staff brings him comfort when he is under the fearful shadow of death.

Shepherds dress in different garbs, but the staff is the unique symbol that identifies no profession other than that of the shepherd.

The staff is a unique instrument used for the care and management of sheep—only sheep. It is a symbol of the concern and compassion that a shepherd has for his sheep. The rod conveys the concept of authority, power, discipline and defense of the sheep. The staff represents all that is longsuffering and kind.

A staff is a long, slender stick, often with a crook or hook on one end. The owner selects the stick with care and shapes, smoothes and cuts it to best suit his personal use.

W. Philip Keller notes three ways a shepherd manages his sheep with his staff. The staff is used in drawing sheep together into an intimate relationship. He will use his staff to gently lift a newborn lamb and bring it to its mother if they become separated. He does not use his hands for fear that the ewe will reject her offspring if it bears the odor of his hands upon it.

The staff is also used for guiding sheep through a new gate or along a dangerous, difficult route. He will use the slender stick to press gently against the animal's side, and this pressure guides the sheep in the way the owner wants it to go. Thus the sheep is reassured of its proper path.

If a shepherd's staff is six feet long, it means that his arm and hand are extended that far. The shepherd is able to use the staff almost as well as he uses his hand.

Keller says that he has seen a shepherd walk beside a pet or favorite sheep with his staff gently resting on its back. It appears that they are in touch or walking “hand in hand.”

These tender scenes may depict what the psalmist wants to convey to us. The Shepherd, the Lord, is a tender and loving person that has only our best interest at heart. Jesus says that a false or “hired-hand” shepherd does not care for the sheep and may abuse them and desert them in time of danger. Jesus says that he is the “Good” shepherd that knows his sheep by name and that the sheep know the shepherd's voice and will gladly and safely follow him.

“All the way my Savior leads me, cheers each winding path I tread. Gives me grace for every trial, feeds me with the living bread. Tho' my weary steps may falter, and my soul athirst may be. Gushing from the rock before me, lo! a spring of joy I see. Gushing from the rock before me, lo! a spring of joy I see.” (Crosby-Lowry)