

THE LORD'S ROD AND STAFF

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Lessons: Psalm 23; John 14:15-27

In the reading from the Gospel of John, the Lord told his disciples that He would not leave them comfortless. This meant that in times of trouble, in times when they did not know what to do or whom to turn to for help, the Lord would be with them, showing them the way out of their troubles and teaching them what they must do to find peace and happiness. The Lord will not leave us comfortless either. We, too, have His promise that He will be with us to help us and teach us. But how does the Lord do this?

There is an answer to this in the Twenty-third Psalm: "Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." What does this mean? What are the Lord's rod and staff, and how do they comfort us? The Lord's rod and staff are like a shepherd's rod and staff, for that is what this Psalm is speaking of: the Lord as our shepherd.

This is a Psalm of David. David was the greatest king of Israel. But do you remember what David was before he became a great king? David had been a shepherd boy. He tended flocks of sheep in the hills around Bethlehem, where many years later an angel would find shepherds and tell them about the birth of the Lord. So David knew what shepherds were like and what kinds of things they did. Just as he was a shepherd to the sheep, so he thought of the Lord as a Shepherd for him.

As a shepherd, David would have used a rod and staff. With them he could lead his flocks to places where they would be happy, to green pastures and still waters. Sometimes, of course, the sheep would not know that he was leading them to such good places, and they would want to wander off on their own. Then David would have to use his rod and staff to make them go the right way, the way that would make them happy once they followed it. And David could also use the rod and staff to protect and defend his sheep. When wicked animals that wished to harm the sheep came, he could chase them away. All the things that David did with the rod and the staff, then, comforted his sheep. All the ways in which he used the rod and staff led them to their greatest peace and happiness. And the Psalm tells us that the Lord's rod and His staff will comfort us. Do you know what the Lord's rod and staff are? What does the Lord use to comfort us?

The answer is, the Lord's Word. He uses the Word as His rod and staff to comfort us. We usually think of the Lord's Word as a book, which He has given us to teach us things. You may wonder, then, how a book can be like a rod and

staff. But, if you think about it, you will see that the Lord can use His Word in just the same ways as a shepherd uses his staff. The shepherd shows his flocks where they will be happy and peaceful; the Lord's Word tells us things we must do if we wish to be happy and peaceful, if we wish to find our green pastures and still waters. Sometimes, just as the sheep don't want to follow their shepherd, we don't want to do what the Word tells us to do. But, if we allow the Word to make us do things we don't want to, we will find out later that the Lord really knew best how to guide us to our happiness. He will lead us in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake. And even if we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, even if all kinds of wickedness seem to be attacking us, we need fear no evil. For as a shepherd defends and protects his flock with his rod and staff, so the Lord will defend and protect us if we trust in His Word.

What the Lord does with His Word is very much like what a shepherd does with his rod and staff. So, if we allow the Lord to use His Word in our lives, if we read or listen to His Word and try to do what it tells us, the Lord will not leave us comfortless. His rod and His staff will comfort us.