

THE FIRST 15

Monday, July 29, 2024

Today is Monday, July 29 and we are learning about the rod and the staff of the Shepherd.

OPENING PRAYER

As the sun rises on another day, I listen for the voice of my Shepherd. I still my mind, slow my breath and rest quietly in His love. As we journey together side by side, I have comfort knowing my Lord and Shepherd has my best interests at heart. I look to Him for guidance and direction in the smallest details of the upcoming day. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. Psalm 23:1-6 (RSV)

REFLECTION

This summer we delve deeply into the ancient wisdom of Psalm twenty-three. For a Psalm of only six verses, the 23rd Psalm is chock-full of inspiration and insights applicable to daily life. This week we reflect on the words, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." In late summer, shepherds take their sheep on a long trek up into the mountains to enjoy the fresh grass of remote alpine meadows. The shepherd stays with the flock during this season until the cold weather and winter approaches. When the shepherd stays in this remote high country, he brings a minimum of equipment. In the Middle East the shepherd carries only a rod and a staff. These are the common tools of primitive shepherds across the world.

A shepherd's rod is a relatively short heavy club-like device that he learns to throw with speed and accuracy. It is a weapon he uses to protect himself and his sheep from predators - wolves, coyotes, wild dogs or mountain lions. He uses it to beat the brush to scare away snakes. The shepherd keeps his rod in-hand ready to use at all times. He might also toss his rod near a grazing sheep to scare it away from munching on a poisonous plant or straying too close to a dangerous edge.

A shepherd's staff is a long, thin carved wooden pole with a round crook or hook at one end. The staff is designed specifically to work with sheep and is used for their benefit. The staff is used to draw sheep together or to gently lift a newborn lamb and bring it close to its mother. The shepherd uses the staff to bring a sheep close for inspection to look for signs of disease or illness. The staff is used for guiding the sheep. The shepherd applies pressure against the animal's side nudging the sheep in the direction he wants it to go. The staff might be used to rescue a sheep that has gotten itself trapped in brambles or a thorn bush or to recover a sheep

that has fallen and is injured. The crook of the staff fits perfectly around a sheep so the shepherd can pull or lift the sheep to safety. The rod and staff are the perfect combination to shepherd sheep.

In the same way, our Good Shepherd uses the images of the rod and the staff to care for and comfort us. Our Good Shepherd looks out for us, protects us from danger, disciplines us and keeps us on the right path. He draws us close to His side, brings us into relationships with others, examines, rescues and guides us. This is all for our good benefit. I can rely on my Lord and Shepherd to care for me even when I don't realize I need caring for. He is already there aware of my needs and ready to provide. I can trust Him. I can rely on Him. His rod and His staff, they comfort me.

Ask: How is my Good Shepherd currently working in my life? How am I responding?

Pause and Pray

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You are my Good Shepherd. Lead me to higher ground. Draw me close to Your side and keep me on the right paths. Protect me from harm and guide me in the good way. Examine my heart, reveal what needs mending, strengthen my spirit, forgive my trespasses and correct the error of my ways. Nudge me to walk in the way I should go - the way that leads to holiness of heart and life. Amen.

(This First 15 was inspired by the book: *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, by W. Phillip Keller)