

WOOD WORKING

A Message About the Comforting Work of God The Lord Is My Shepherd (Part 6)

A Symbol of Authority

Back in the days when David wrote this Psalm, good shepherds needed to know an awful lot. They had to know about grasses and agriculture, about sheep psychology, and at least a little about veterinary medicine. They had to know where still waters were most likely to be found, and how to lead your flock up dark valleys to the mountain pastures beyond. But on top of all that, a good shepherd also had to know something about wood working—in order to create two extremely important tools of his trade.

To this day, rural shepherds will go into the bush and carefully select a thick young sapling. Cutting it off just above the roots, and then again up the trunk, he emerges with a piece of wood roughly the length of his arm. He'll then whittle the wood into an instrument about the size and shape of a short baseball bat, he called a "rod." A shepherd's rod served a variety of functions. It was, FIRST of all, a symbol of authority—sort of a shepherd's version of a king's scepter. Now, I don't know about you, but if I saw someone walking towards me with one of these things in hand, I'd tend to get a little anxious. But the writer of Psalm 23 says that the shepherd's rod is actually a "*comfort*" to him. Why is that?

Well, you may remember that sheep are enormously skittish creatures by nature; but I'm told that few things so settled down a flock as the sight of the shepherd walking among them, his rod in hand. It was as if it reminded them that there was someone in authority upon whom they could depend... someone powerful in control of the pasture... a sovereign strength going before them.

You know, the Psalms aren't the first place in the Bible where that rich image is first developed. If you've read the biblical book of Exodus then you know that Moses also carried a rod. It was often through that rod that God's miracles were done. That rod turned a river into blood; it parted the Red Sea; it brought water forth from a bare rock. The rod *itself* didn't do all that, of course. It didn't have any magical powers. We know that because the use of the rod in Exodus was always accompanied by the recitation of GOD'S commandments. The rod represented the reality-shaping Word of God. It stood like a visual exclamation point to the sentence: 'Thus saith the Lord!' Pharaoh might say: "You're nothing but slaves." But when Moses raised the rod and said in the name of the Lord God of Hosts: "That's not true. You're my blessed children and you are free!"—the people of Israel dared to believe it. They dared to believe that there was a more authoritative, more powerful Voice in history than even that of Pharaoh—and that was immensely comforting to them.

There is comfort for me too in the shepherd's rod. I can be as prone as the children of Israel in Egypt or as a sheep upon a hillside to get a little skittish sometimes. What

about you? Who do we follow and who should we run from, among the many voices out there in the field? Do I pin my hopes on this candidate or that one? Do I derive my views from the pundit on this channel or in that publication? Is ultimate security to be found by learning the lessons of September 11 or those of Wall Street? And then we hear another voice speaking. It says: “Verily, verily, I say unto you... come follow me,” and we are reminded that there truly is a Master of the Pasture.

We forget sometimes that it was not his refined ethics or his debonair demeanor that most impressed Christ's first listeners. It was the rodlike authority of Jesus' words. In Mark 1:22 we read that **“the people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.”** In Mark 4:41, the people ask: **“Who is this man, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”** We can easily get confused by the noise of modern life, by the persuasive voices of lesser leaders. But in God's Word we encounter an authority truly worth following—one who can bring to our lives a comforting freedom from the past, serenity in the present, and hope for the future.

A Tool of Discipline

This leads us to the SECOND function of the shepherd's rod. You see, it wasn't just an icon, it was a practical instrument. The rod was a tool of discipline. Phillip Keller, writes: “I could never get over how often, and with what accuracy, the African herders would hurl [their rods] at some recalcitrant beast... If the shepherd saw a sheep wandering away on its own, or approaching poisonous weeds, or getting too close to danger of one sort or another, the club would go whistling through the air to send the wayward animal scurrying back to the bunch.”

Have you ever been thumped like that? I have. I've been all ready to level someone for their failings when the Word of God comes whistling through the air: **“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye [Dan] and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged.”ⁱ** Thump. Or I get ready to pay back someone, an eye for an eye, and God's Word finds me: **“Render to no one evil for evilⁱⁱ... but do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”ⁱⁱⁱ** I start to measure my fruitfulness in life by the things I own and the size of the organization I pastor and I hear: **“But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”^{iv}**

I have learned over and over again the truth of what St. Paul said to young Timothy: **“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”^v** The famous Proverb: **“Spare the rod and spoil the child,”^{vi}** has also taken on a whole new meaning for me. Are we using Scripture enough in our homes to direct the path of one another? Do you regularly have your hand upon the rod of God's Word or is it just lying in some corner somewhere like some long-forgotten tool?

A Weapon of Defense

There was one more practical use for the shepherd's rod, as I understand it—maybe the most obvious one. The rod was also a weapon by which a good shepherd would defend his flock. Milt Callero, who once showed me an actual shepherd's rod, describes how the shepherd from whom he received it told of being able—with one blow of that rod—to drive away a charging mountain lion that threatened him and his flock. But it's not just the large, obvious threats for which the rod is handy. Phillip Keller tells of a time when he and a young Masai herder in Kenya were working to dislodge a large boulder from a hillside. "As we heaved and pushed against the great rock, a cobra, coiled beneath it, suddenly came into view ready to strike. In a split second, the alert shepherd boy lashed out with his club, killing the snake on the spot." And then, here's the really important part of the story, and I quote: I realized that "the weapon had never left his hand even while we worked on the rock."

My friends, as you're going about your weekly work, do you keep the shepherd's rod at hand? You can't help but notice how Jesus himself did. He continually used the Scriptures as a rod with which to handle attacks. When facing the Tempter who appeared to him like a serpent in the wilderness... when responding to the criticism of his opponents... even when hanging upon the cross... Jesus quoted scripture. Hebrews 4:12 says: "**God's Word is living and active. It is sharper than any two-edged sword.**" It is your most potent weapons in the fight against evil. So let me ask you again: Do you hold God's Word closely enough for it to be truly useful in protecting you? Have you memorized any of the great scripture texts of the Bible? If you do, then no matter when the lion of conflict or the snake of temptation comes at you, you'll always have the Shepherd's rod at hand.

An Instrument of Care

Are you beginning to see why sheep would have found comfort in the shepherd's rod? The meaning is even clearer if you break the word "comfort" apart into its two constituent components—"com," meaning "with" or "alongside," and "fort," meaning strength. To comfort someone is to come alongside them with strength. That's exactly what God wants his Word to do for you and me. He wants to strengthen us: by showing us that there is a trustworthy authority in this confusing world; by disciplining us back onto the right path when we've wandered; by providing a powerful weapon of defense against the onslaught of evil.

But the rod of his Word is not the only way the shepherd comforts us. There is another tool He uses on our behalf. The shepherd also comes alongside us with His Spirit. In fact, you may recall that Jesus called the Holy Spirit "**the Comforter.**"^{vii} If the shepherd's *rod* is an apt symbol of God's Word, so the shepherd's *staff* is also a helpful reminder of the work of God's Spirit.

How so, you may wonder? Well, have you ever seen a shepherd's staff? It's made from a sapling that is thinner, longer, and more supple than that chosen for a rod. It has

a curve or crook at the end, sort of like a candy cane or umbrella handle. And I will never forget what gracious work it can do in the hands of a good shepherd. The shepherd I'm thinking of is David Lamberton. For two weeks, during the spring of 1982 and '83, I had the pleasure of following David around on the sheep farm his family had worked in Ireland for nearly 400 years. And what David did with that shepherd's staff remains forever imprinted on my mind.

Sometimes he'd use the hook end of the staff to pull a lamb out of thicket or gully. Other times he'd use it to draw a lamb close to himself in order to give it a good scratch behind the ears. Sometimes he'd take the straight end of the staff and give one of the sheep a light poke when it was beginning to wander too far away or jostle another. Nothing hard or particularly painful, mind you. Just a reminder—like a prick of conscience—if the creature was getting a bit too frisky. But the most delightful picture I carry is the mental image of the times when he would—apparently for no good reason—simply walk alongside of a lamb with his staff, just barely brushing the wool on its side or back. “Why do you do that?” I asked him one day. He said: “I just want her to know I'm here.”

Let me say in closing, that I think that's how God's Spirit works with this flock too. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that there's a lamb or two here today that are in some kind of thicket or gully and are feeling stuck. Don't despair. The shepherd is working to pull you out. Others here this morning may only be starting to realize it, but the Holy Spirit of God has put his hook around you and is trying to draw you near, not to chastise you, but to express the deep affection God has for you—maybe to help scratch some part of your soul where it itches right now.

I wouldn't be surprised if there were a few lambs with us today that God's Holy Spirit is poking at this moment. There's a task that needs completing, a relationship that requires repairing, a gift that needs giving, a change that needs making. That prick of conscience you feel is the touch of the Shepherd's staff trying to encourage you back onto the right path. Finally, I imagine there are those of you who are walking with your head cast down right now. You're dealing with private burdens, losses, or fears. You can't help but feel very alone. But you are not. God is reaching out to you with his Holy Spirit at this very moment. He's laying his staff alongside you, saying in his own way: “I just want you to know that I am here.”

The Shepherd's wood is working today. His rod and his staff are working to comfort you—to come alongside you with strength—for the journey ahead. How do I know that? It's because the Shepherd we meet in the Psalms is also the Carpenter we meet in the gospels. And he's shown his willingness to use every tool at his disposal to meet our deepest need—even if what was required was a Cross.

Let us pray...

Great God of rugged truth and gentle grace, meet us at our point of need. Let the Rod of your Word give us the direction, the discipline, the defense required to make the best

of life this week. Let the Staff of your Spirit pull us free, draw us near, poke us, or convince us of your presence, Lord. For these things we pray in the name of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. When or in what way have you found God's Word to be:
 - A directive authority greater than that of the other laws and leadership in life's pastures?
 - A disciplinary influence when you may have gone or were about to go astray?
 - A defensive power when you were under attack?

2. How, if at all, have you ever experienced God's Holy Spirit to be:
 - Lifting you from a place or position of distress?
 - Prompting you to keep going?
 - Poking you with God's affection?
 - Nudging you toward a better path?
 - Touching you to remind you of God's presence with you?

ⁱ Matthew 7:3

ⁱⁱ Romans 12:17

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 7:12

^{iv} Galatians 5:22-23

^v 1 Timothy 3:17

^{vi} Proverbs 13:24

^{vii} John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7