

St. Matthew AME Church
Orange, New Jersey
Presiding Elder Winton Hill III, Interim Pastor

Women's Bible Study Fellowship
Saturday, January 14, 2023

Fall and Winter Series: "THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD "
"The Lord is my shepherd." Psalm 23:1a

Session IV: " God and I"

"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. Psalm 23:4

I. Review of Previous Sessions

Review of Session I: "Relationship and Resources "

"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." Psalm 23:1

- We acknowledge God as the manager and keeper of our lives. By faith, we believe that we shall not lack the expert care and management of God. No problem is too great as He cares for us. Our very lives depend on a relationship with God.

Review of Session II: "Rest and Refreshment "

"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. "Psalm 23:2

- In our lives we will face great challenges, stubborn roadblocks, loud negative voices, disagreeable experiences and even some petty frustrations. All of these may cause us to lose our peace. We may become overwhelmingly frustrated. In the midst of these uncomfortable times the gracious Holy Spirit brings quietness, serenity, strength and calmness in the face of these challenges. We must ask the Holy Spirit to come in to assist us. He, (Holy Spirit) the Good Shepherd takes over in His own wondrous way. He immediately comes into our consciousness. A sense of quiet contentment comes over us. Then we are able to lie down in peace and rest.

Review of Session III. "Restoration and Righteousness "

"He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name sake. " Psalm 23:3

- It would be assumed that anyone in the Good Shepherd's care could never become so distressed in soul as to need restoration. Even David, the author of the Psalm, who was much loved by God, knew what it was to be cast down. A cast sheep is a very pathetic sight. Lying on its back, it's feet in the air, it struggles to stand up with success. If the owner does not arrive on the scene within a reasonably short time, the sheep will die. Even Christians become cast down, dejected, downhearted and despondent. As believers, we know that when we find ourselves in this cast down state, OUR GOOD SHEPHERD is there to lift us. God comes quietly, gently reassuringly to us, no matter when or where we may be cast down.

"He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name sake. "Psalm 23:3b

- The person who decides to do what God asks him has moved onto fresh ground which will do him and others a world of good. God wants us to move on with Him. He wants us to walk with Him. He wants it not only for our welfare, but for the benefit of others as well as His own dear reputation.

•If God fails to care and lead, He fails to be THE GOOD SHEPHERD. Therefore, He must care for us because HIS name demands it. Christ has many other names beside that of Shepherd, some of these can be found in this Psalm.

- Jehovah Rohi -"The Lord is my Shepherd." verse 1
- Jehovah Jireh-"The Lord will provide. " "I shall not want" verse 1
- Jehovah Shalom-"The Lord send peace"- "He leadeth me beside still waters." Verse 2
- Jehovah Rophi- "The Lord that Healeth"- "He restoreth my soul. "verse 3
- Jehovah Tsidkenu-"The Lord our Righteousness "-Path of righteousness " verse 3
- Jehovah Shammah-"The Lord is there"- "Thou art with me." verse 4
- Jehovah Nissi-"The Lord my Banner"- "In the presence of mine enemies." verse 5

II. **Session IV: "The Valley Experience "**

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. "Psalm 23:4a

•It is customary to use this verse as consolation to those who are passing through the dark valley of death. Death casts a frightening shadow over us because we are entirely helpless in its presence. But even here, for the child of God, death is not an end, but merely the door into a higher and more exalted life of intimate contact with Christ. Death is but the dark valley opening out into an eternity of delight with God.

• In the Christian life we often speak of wanting "to move onto higher ground with God." How we long to live above the lowlands of life. We want to enter a more intimate walk with God. We speak of mountaintop experiences and sometimes we envy those who have ascended the heights.

•Often, we get an erroneous idea about how this takes place. It is though we imagined we could be "air lifted" onto higher ground. On the rough trail of the Christian life, this is not so. As with ordinary sheep management, so with God's people only one gains higher ground by climbing up through the valleys. Every shepherd knows that every mountain has its valleys. Its sides are scarred by deep ravines. And the best route to the top is always along these valleys. Any shepherd familiar with the high country knows this. He leads his flock gently, but persistently, up the paths that wind through the dark valleys. It should be noticed that the verse states, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." It does not say, "I die there, or stop there-but rather " I walk through."

Shepherds would lead their sheep during the different seasons of the year. They would take their flock onto distant ranges during summer. But by late summer, they are well up on the remote alpine meadows above the timberline. With the approach of autumn, early snow settles on the highest ridges, relentlessly forcing the flock to withdraw to lower elevations. Sheep are taken to the mountaintops by way of the valleys. This way is the well-watered route. There are rivers, streams, springs and quiet pools. During the summer months long drives can be hot and tiresome. The flocks experience intense thirst. They are glad for the frequent watering places along the valley route where they can be refreshed. Only in the valley was there water for their parched flesh.

•As Christians, we will sooner or later discover that it is in the valleys of our lives that we find Refreshment from God Himself. It is not until we have walked with Him through some very deep troubles that we discover He can lead us to find our refreshment in Him, right there in the midst of difficulty.

A shepherd chooses to take his flock into the high country by way of the valleys because he knows that the richest feed is to be found along this route. Generally, the choicest meadows are in these valleys along the stream banks. Here the sheep can feed as they move toward the higher country.

Naturally these grassy glades are often on the floor of steep-walled canyons. There may be towering cliffs above them on either side. The valley floor itself may be in dark shadow with the sun seldom reaching the bottom except for a few hours around noon. Going through these valleys is a must and the goal of the mountaintop pastureland is worthy, even though it is dangerous.

- The shepherd knows from past experience that predators like coyotes, bears, wolves, or cougars can take cover in these broken cliffs and from their vantage point prey on the flock. He knows these valleys can be subject to sudden storms and flash floods that send walls of water rampaging down the slopes. There could be rock slides, mud or snow avalanches, and many more natural disasters that would destroy or injure his sheep. But in spite of such hazards, he also knows that this is still the best way to take his flock to the high country.

- There are going to be some valleys in life for all of us. The Good Shepherd Himself assured us that "in this world you will have trouble. But take heart I have overcome the world." John 16:33

- The basic question is not whether we have many or few valleys. It is not whether those valleys are dark or merely dim with shadows. The question is how do I react to them? How do I go through them? How do I cope with the calamities that come my way?

YOU ARE NOT ON THIS JOURNEY ALONE!

- WITH CHRIST, I FACE THEM CALMLY
- WITH HIS GRACIOUS SPIRIT TO GUIDE ME, I FACE THEM FEARLESSLY
- WITH CHRIST, WE CAN TRAVEL THROUGH THE VALLEYS AND REACH HIGHER GROUND!

III. "There Is Nothing Like His Comfort"

"your rod and your staff, they comfort me" Psalm 23:4b

- In the Middle East, the shepherd carries only a rod and staff. Also, the African herdsman shepherd their sheep with only a long slender stick and a round knob- Kerrie in their hands. These two, the rod and staff are the universal equipment of the primitive shepherd.

- The rod was, in fact, an extension of the owner's right arm. It stood as a symbol of his strength, his power and his authority in any serious situation. The rod was what he relied on to safeguard both himself and his flock in danger. And it was furthermore, the instrument he used to discipline and corral any wayward sheep that insisted on wandering away. 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 rod would go whistling through the air to send the wayward sheep scurrying back to the bunch.

- Another interesting use of the rod in the Shepherd's hand was to examine and count the sheep. In the terminology of the Old Testament this was referred to as passing "under the rod" (Ezekiel 20:37). This meant not only coming under the owner's control and authority, but also to be subject to his most careful, intimate, and firsthand examination. A sheep that passed "under the rod" was one which had been counted and looked over with great care to make sure all was well with it.

- Because of their long wool, it is not always easy to detect disease, wounds, or defects in sheep. In caring for his sheep, the good shepherd, will from time to time make a careful examination of each individual sheep. As each sheep come out of the corral and through the gate, it is stopped by the shepherd's outstretched rod. He opens the fleece with the rod; he runs his skillful hands over the body; he feels for any sign of trouble; he examines the sheep with care to see that all is well. It is comforting to the sheep, for only in this way can its hidden problem be laid bare before the shepherd.

- This is what was meant in Psalm 139:23-24 when the psalmist wrote, "Search me O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. "
- If we allow it, if we submit to it, God by His word will search us. There will be no pulling the wool over His eyes." He will get below the surface, behind the front of our old self-life and expose things that need to be made right. The Great Shepherd of our souls has our best interests at heart when He searches us.
- Finally, the shepherd's rod is an instrument of protection both for himself and his sheep when they are in danger. It is used both as a defense and a deterrent against anything that would attack. The skilled shepherd uses his rod to drive off predators like coyotes, wolves, cougars or stray dogs. Often it is used to beat the brush, discouraging snakes and other creatures from disturbing the flock.
- Just as for the sheep of David's day there was comfort and consolation in seeing the rod in the Shepherd's skillful hands, so in our day there is great assurance in our own hearts as we contemplate the power, veracity and potent authority vested in God's Word. For in fact the Scriptures are His rod. They are the extension of His mind and will and His intentions to us. It is reassuring to the child of God to turn to the Word of God and know it to be His Shepherd's hand of authority. What a comfort to have this authoritative, clear-cut, powerful instrument under which to conduct ourselves. By it we are kept from confusion amid chaos. This in itself brings into our lives a great sense of quiet serenity which is precisely what the psalmist meant when he said, " your rod comforts me."

The staff, more than any other item of his personal equipment, identifies the shepherd as a shepherd. No one in any other profession carries a shepherd's staff. It is uniquely an instrument used for the care and management of sheep- and only sheep. It will not do for cattle, horses or hogs. It is designed, shaped and adapted especially to the needs of sheep. And it is used only for their benefit. The staff is essentially a symbol of the concern, the compassion that a shepherd has for his charges. No other single word can better describe its function on behalf of the flock than that it is for their comfort.

- Whereas the rod conveys the concept of authority, of power, of discipline, of defense against danger, the word "staff" speaks of all that is patient and kind. The shepherd's staff is normally a long slender stick, with a crook or hook on one end. It is selected with care by the owner; it is shaped, smoothed and cut to his own personal use.
- There are three areas of sheep management in which the staff plays a most significant role. The first of these lies in drawing sheep into an intimate relationship. The shepherd will use his staff to greatly lift a newborn lamb and bring it to its mother if they become separated. He does this because he does not wish to have the ewe reject her offspring if it bears the odor of his hands upon it. With gentle strokes, the newborns are lifted with the staff and placed side by side with their mother. But in precisely the same way the staff is used by the shepherd to reach out and catch individual sheep and draw them closer to himself for intimate examination. The staff is very useful this way for the shy and timid sheep that normally tend to keep at a distance from the shepherd.
- Similarly, in the Christian life we find the gracious Holy Spirit, the Comforter, drawing folks together into a warm, personal fellowship with one another. It is also He who draws us to Christ.
- The staff is also used for guiding sheep. The shepherd does not use it actually to beat the sheep. Rather the tip of the long slender stick is laid gently against the animal's side, and the pressure applied guides the sheep in the way the owner wants it to go. Thus, the sheep is reassured of its proper path.

- In our walk with God, we are told explicitly by Christ Himself that it would be His Spirit who will be sent to guide us and to lead us into all truth (John16:13). This same gracious Spirit takes the truth of God, the Word of God and makes it plain to our hearts and minds and spiritual understanding. It is He who gently, tenderly, but persistently says to us, "This is the way-walk in it" And as we comply and cooperate with His gentle prompting, a sense of safety, comfort and well-being envelops us.
- The Christian life is not just one of subscribing to certain doctrines or believing certain facts. Essential as all of this confidence in the Scriptures may be, there is, as well, the actual reality of experiencing and knowing firsthand the feel of His touch- the sense of His Spirit upon my spirit. There is a magnificent experience of sensing the Comforter at our side. God can be relied on to assist us in every decision and in there lies tremendous comfort for the Christian.
- Many shepherds have lifted sheep who have climbed down steep cliffs where they slipped and fell into the sea. Only the long shepherd's staff could lift them out of the water back onto solid ground again.
- Another common occurrence was to find sheep caught up in wild roses or brambles where they have pushed in to find a few stray mouthfuls of green grass. Soon the thorns were so hooked in their wool, they could not possibly pull free from their entanglement.
- Likewise, with us. Many of our jams in life are of our own making. In stubborn, self-willed, self-assertion we keep pushing ourselves into a situation where we cannot get out. Then in tenderness, compassion and care our Shepherd comes to us. He draws near and in tenderness lifts us by His Spirit out of the difficulty and dilemma.

YOUR STAFF COMFORTS ME!