

Pastor Mark A. Cordes
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Psalm 23:4b
 CW 479

“Your Rod and Staff Comfort Me”

- 👁️ **The “rod” of the Word**
- 👁️ **The “staff” of the Spirit**

In the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, dear sheep:

Minimum shepherd equipment – maximum sheep comfort – that’s the goal of the shepherd when he gathers his gear for the long summer months alone with his sheep in the high country. For centuries the shepherd’s barest essentials have come down to his rod and staff. For spiritual sheep like us it is a soothing comfort to see these in the strong hands of Jesus our Good Shepherd. **“Your Rod and Staff Comfort Me.”**

👁️ **The “rod” of the Word**

Childhood memories for shepherd/pastor/agricultural scientist Phillip Keller were vivid with pictures of African shepherd boys carefully digging up a sapling and carving a rough “knob-kerrie” out of it. These “knob-kerrie” rods were made to exactly fit each owner’s hand. After hours of practice he could send it whistling through the air with amazing speed and accuracy. The enlarged end of the former sapling could break the skull of some predators and send others scurrying back into the bush. The shepherd’s rod was an extension of his arm, the symbol of his power and authority in serious situations.

The “rod” of our Good Shepherd Jesus is God’s Word, for the spoken Word is an extension of God’s mind. It whistles through the air with amazing speed and accuracy whenever the LORD’s spokesmen say, **“Thus says the LORD.”** In our day of mass moral confusion, false prophets and diviners are giving **“empty comfort”** (Zechariah 10:2 – Hebrew) to wandering, shepherdless sheep. **“The idols speak deceit, diviners see visions that lie; they tell dreams that are false, they give comfort in vain. Therefore the people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd.”** (Zechariah 10:2 NIV84) But it brings us full comfort to see this authoritative, clear-cut, powerful Word still in Jesus’ hand. What quiet serenity in **The “rod of the Word”** as the Good Shepherd uses it to safeguard and control His flock. God’s Word still rules over all.

But discipline also comes from **The “rod” of the Word**. When an African herdsman sees a sheep wandering away or getting too close to poisonous weeds, his rod can keep his animal out of danger with one sharp throw. Likewise, it has often been said that “this Book will keep you from sin.” It comes swiftly to our hearts with surprising suddenness to correct and keep us from going astray.

And then there is the intimate, firsthand examination which our Good Shepherd can perform as He causes us sheep to pass **“under the rod.”** (Ezekiel 20:37) The wool of our self-assertion and pride may hide many defects and diseases in its matted fleece. But as we pass under **The “rod” of the Word**, every intimate detail becomes visible to the Shepherd’s eye as He counts us one by one and parts the wool with His rod. We can’t “pull the wool over His eyes,” nor would we want to. With David in Psalm 139, we pray: **“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.”** (Psalm 139:23f NIV84)

Control, discipline, examination – **The “rod” of the Word** also **COMFORTS ME** with my Shepherd’s protection. When King David was a shepherd boy, he no doubt used his rod to kill the lion and

¹ Keller, Philip. *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. Zondervan Publ. House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970. Available from NPH, 1-800-662-6022. Also at Amazon / Audible Books. Eighth in Summer Sermon Series by Pastor Mark A. Cordes.

the bear that attacked his flock. Phillip Keller recalls a Masai herder in Kenya saving them both from a coiled cobra in a split second lash with his club. Remember **The “rod”** Jesus used against Satan’s wilderness temptations? Three times He struck the old evil foe with *“It is written....”* We do the same when the subtle, smooth and sophisticated world strikes at our upright, godly lives. Nonbelievers do tell lies about Christians because that’s what their father the devil does. But do not underestimate the lightning speed of our Shepherd’s right arm when He sends the extension of His almighty intelligence, **The “rod” of His Word**, whistling through the air. Skulls crack as our enemies disappear into the bush.

👁 **The “staff” of the Spirit**

Whereas the rod pictures the shepherd’s power and authority, the staff reminds us of his longsuffering kindness, concern and compassion. When we look to Jesus our Good Shepherd for sweetness and comfort, consolation and gentle correction, we see His **“staff”** as His gracious Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus and the Father, gives us faith and makes salvation our personal possession. Just as Jesus promised His disciples: *“When the Counselor [Comforter] comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father – he will testify about me....The Spirit of truth...will guide you into all truth. For he will not speak on his own, but whatever he hears, he will speak. He will also declare to you what is to come.”* (John 15:26; 16:13 EHV)

A shepherd uses his staff to draw his sheep together in the close, intimate relationship of a ewe with her newborn lamb. If the shepherd would pick up the lamb, the odor of his hands would cause the ewe to reject it. But with his staff he can gently lift the newborn lamb over to its mother. Similarly the angel Gabriel described the Holy Spirit’s work in the ministry of John the Baptist. He was to *“go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”* (Luke 1:17) When **The “staff” of the Spirit** lifts a home, the father recognizes his responsibility to his children and the children respect their parents as God’s representatives. The family enjoys new life in Jesus the Good Shepherd.

As the shepherd walks along, he will sometimes reach out with the tip of his long slender stick to lay it gently on the side of a sheep and guide it through a gate or along a difficult path. Sometimes he holds his staff against the side of a special favorite. Now they are “in touch,” walking “hand-in-hand” in a close and caring relationship the sheep obviously enjoys along with her master. Special treatment, great comfort.

Again, the Bible describes this closeness as the work of the Holy Spirit. He takes the truth of God’s Word and makes it plain to our hearts and minds. The spiritual understanding we need to walk with God is ours as the Holy Spirit brings passages to our mind and says, *“This is the way – walk in it.”* (Isaiah 30:21 NIV84). The Spirit of Christ keeps us “in touch” with Jesus our brother and our heavenly Father. He gives us special attention, calling us by name in Baptism, forgiving us in that precious Sacrament “given and shed for you.” These touch us and guide us in a relationship which is a warm delight to us and to our Shepherd. How calming and comforting to have Him walking beside us with **The “staff” of the Spirit** in His hand.

But what if I’m the sheep who keeps climbing down steep cliffs after one more mouthful of green grass only to slip into the sea? What if I keep pushing after the things I want and get my wool all tangled up in the thorns and brambles of life? If sinners like us were the only shepherds available, we might leave such stubborn sheep like some churches dump “dead wood.” They just remove members from church roles if they don’t come and contribute. But we all deserved rejection by God for our sins. Instead our Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep. He is determined to rescue all He can from wayward pride and stubborn self-assertion. In kindness and compassion He hurries to gently draw us out of every predicament with the crook of His staff. He lifts you by His Spirit when you’ve fallen and sets you safely by His side. How patient God is with us! How long on love and strong on forbearance! How forgiving! **“Your Rod and Staff Comfort Me.”** Your Spirit, O Christ, is my consolation! Thank-you, good LORD! Amen.

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