

“The Only Sure Ground for Our Comfort and Contentment—Three”

Psalm 23:4-6

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

1. Describe the most frightening experience you’ve had.
 - a. Was it a real or imagined fear?

- b. Try to identify what you were most fearful of losing.

2. Read through all of Psalm 23, but come back and focus on verses 4-6.

Shepherds, like David, would move their herds from the home pastureland up into highland pastureland as summer approached. These grounds were often up in the mountains (cf. Jeremiah 50:6 or Ezekiel 34:6) and were only assessable by leading the flock through valleys. The weather could be unpredictable along the way, and they would travel through places that would fall in dark shadows and where predators could be lurking. The trek was necessary but potentially dangerous for the sheep, and the shepherd needed to be extra vigilant. This is likely what is being described in verse 4.

- a. Discuss the similarities between this aspect of a sheep’s life and our lives.
 - i. What kinds of things would most spook the sheep?
 1. What kinds of things cause us fear? Tempt us to worry?
 - ii. What were the real dangers? What might be the perceived or imagined dangers?
 1. What are real dangers you face physically? What about spiritually?
 2. What are some perceived or imagined dangers that might cause you anxiety?
 3. How much time do you spend speculating about potential outcomes? How productive is this?
 - iii. The Psalm indicates that the Lord’s sheep fear **no** evil.
 1. Does the psalmist leave any room for exceptions?
 2. Why don’t the sheep fear?
 3. Can you say that you “fear **no** evil”? What kinds of evil are you tempted to fear?
 4. What needs to happen in order for you to be able to increasingly say this?
 - iv. Why would the presence of the shepherd be the primary source of comfort to the sheep during this time?

1. What does the Lord say will be the greatest source of comfort to you in times of fear, worry, or anxiety?
 2. Where are you tempted to look for help in these times? *Try to be specific to actual fears you face.*
- v. The rod and the staff were used to protect, discipline, and care for the sheep.
1. How might the shepherd have used these tools?
 2. How does this correspond to the way that God treats you?
 3. Why might the Lord's use of the rod or staff seem like mistreatment to you?

The "table" being prepared is likely the mountain pastureland to which the shepherd is taking the sheep. It is interesting that in our terminology we call these "tablelands" or "mesas", which means "table." This is not to say that we are not meant to think of tables at which we would sit for a feast, but we need to remember that David is describing sheep in this poem, and they don't eat from tables. As the flock approached the tableland pastures, the shepherd would go ahead to look it over and ensure that there were no poisonous flowers or polluted water holes or obvious haunts for predators. He would "prepare" the table, and it would be "in the presence of" a wide variety of "enemies", i.e. the predators who would be lurking about trying to find a way to feast on the sheep.

- b. In what ways does this illustration correspond to our walk with the Lord both now (cf. Isaiah 45:2-3) and in the future (cf. John 14:2)?
 - i. What are the dangerous grasses that we might be tempted to eat or the dangerous water holes from which we might be tempted to drink?
 - ii. Who are the spiritual predators that threaten us?
- c. What would an overflowing cup look like for a sheep?
 - i. Are you tempted to think of "overflow" more as material things or spiritual things?
 - ii. What are some examples of spiritual overflow that God has given you?
 - iii. What is the "goodness" and "lovingkindness" that follows you? How will you be helped to see these things as they are?
 - iv. What would change if you focused on these things?
- d. Are you looking forward to dwelling in the house of the Lord forever? Why or why not?
- e. What are some practical things you could do that might help you to grow in your desire to be in the presence of the Lord?