

## A BIBLICAL STUDY ON FEAR

### LESSON TWENTY-FOUR: FOLLOW THE SHEPHERD

by Sandy Harber

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Psalm 23:4

The twenty-third Psalm is read at every funeral I've ever attended. No doubt the reason is the mention of the "valley of the shadow of death" in verse four. This verse, however, is not describing the experience of transitioning from this world (on earth) to the next (in heaven). Physical death for the sheep who is speaking occurs at the end of the Psalm in verse six, where he "will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The fear that the sheep is talking about refers to those tough times in life that are difficult to endure but we get through them eventually. In Hebrew, "the shadow of death" is just one word and it means "deep darkness." The testifying sheep says that he is not afraid to follow his shepherd even in deep darkness. Our Great Shepherd takes us through times of deep darkness in our lives. He is leading us upward toward spiritual growth. As we endure the darkness we become more like Him. We experience a closer relationship with Him.

Verse 4 describes what occurs in the life of the sheep during the summer months in Israel. Verses 2 and 3 make it clear that the shepherd leads his flock to green pastures where they may feed. As the snow of winter is receding, the shepherd leads his flock up the mountainside to the high range lands and alpine meadows for grazing. It is a long and dangerous journey. But the only way to get to higher ground is by climbing through the valleys and mountains. The shepherd leads his flock to higher ground through steep mountain paths that rise high above the valley floor. Notice the sheep walk through the valleys and mountains. They don't stop there. They don't die there. They continue on to the mountain top. We all want that mountain top experience. But to get it we must follow our Great Shepherd through the valleys. We need not fear whatever dangers present themselves because the Shepherd is present with us. We just need to trust the Shepherd.

Sometimes the path through the mountainside is narrow so that the sheep must follow single file in the steps of the shepherd. The shepherd speaks to the flock continuously so that the sheep are reassured by the sound of his voice. At times the path twists and turns so that the Shepherd may be out of sight of the sheep that are farther back in the line. When that happens the shepherd uses his rod to strike the rock as he walks. The sheep hear that sound and are comforted. The shepherd is still with them! Our Shepherd speaks to us continuously, as well, every time we open our Bible. His voice comes through the pages into our hearts providing comfort. It stills our fears.

Half way up the mountainside the shepherd stops. The sheep following him stop as well. Then the shepherd makes his way down the line of sheep, calling each by name and tapping the ground with his staff. Thus, the sheep are comforted by the sounds of the shepherd's staff. If a sheep has fallen off of the path the shepherd uses his staff to lift the sheep up. Then the shepherd carries the frightened sheep on his shoulders. Jesus, our Great Shepherd, may lift us up and carry us along during times of great sorrow or tragedy. When we are at our weakest, He is there to do the heavy lifting. He carries us through the deep darkness.

The shepherd and his flock are alone during the summer months. The journey through the valleys and up the mountainside is long and the flock proceeds slowly. There are pastures and refreshing water along the way. But there is also danger: rock slides, mud slides, poisonous plants, predatory animals, rivers in flood stage, tremendous storms of rain, hail, sleet, or snow. The shepherd protects his flock from all "evil." The Hebrew word translated "evil" is not referring to moral evil. It actually means "adversity, calamity, sorrow, trouble, harm, hurt, misery, wretchedness, or grief." The shepherd brings the sheep through all the evils.

Eventually, the journey through the deep darkness ends and the mountaintop is reached. Here the shepherd prepares a table (v. 5) in the form of luscious meadows. The flock grazes and rests and enjoys the presence of the shepherd. We, too, can enjoy the presence of our Great Shepherd during the dark days of trouble, sorrow, and calamity. But He is also there in the quiet and peaceful times, too. Don't neglect Him when the sun is shining and everything is going well.

*"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." John 10:27*