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You Comfort Me *Everything We Need Series*

Psalm 23:4b

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I have referenced before the fascinating book by Michael Easter. The beginning of the book opens with a Harvard research study that indicates for us as 21st century Americans, every time we're introduced to a new level of comfort, the previous comforts are no longer acceptable, which creates what he refers to as a "comfort crisis," which is the title of his book. Well, if we understand that, and as 21st century Americans as a backdrop through which we hear these words, **"Your rod and your staff, they comfort me,"** I'm pretty confident that most of us don't understand what that really means. We know what we want it to mean, but what does it really mean? That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 23. We're taking the summer to work our way through the 23rd Psalm.

Last week, Ryan took us part way through verse 4. We'll finish that up this morning. Verse 4 all goes together, so you really have to understand the first part of the verse to get the momentum rolling into the second part of the verse. So, I just want to do a quick review of things Ryan went over last week. He told us that starting in verse 4, there is a shift in the psalm, captured by the phrase, **even though**, which has kind of an ominous tone to it. **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.** He opened his sermon last week saying he wished he could promise that that meant no pain, no sorrow, no difficulty, no troubles, no challenges, but that's not what God promises. What He does promise is the Good Shepherd will be faithful. What's implied in that verse is we *are* going to walk through the dark valley. That is part of life on a fallen planet. But when we walk through the valley, **I will fear no evil.** Why? Because **You are with me.** He ended by talking about, for us as believers in the new covenant, it's the very presence of Jesus Himself that dwells in us, who walks with us through whatever it is we're going through.

A lot of people today are fascinated by technology. There's a lot of people convinced that AI is going to save the world. (*laughter*) Me? eh, not so much. You want to know what I think is fascinating? As a matter of fact, do you want to know what I think is utterly mind blowing? It's that the God of the universe knows me personally and **walks with me through the valley of the shadow of death.** That's mind blowing! And He doesn't do that without the proper equipment. As the Good Shepherd...**your rod and your staff, they comfort me.** What does that mean? The Hebrew word translated **comfort** does not mean comfortable. It's not talking about a La-Z-Boy chair. It's not talking about air conditioning. It's not talking about a voice remote control. It carries more the idea of consolation, care. What's implied is we are going to walk through this valley, and it's very hard and it's very painful, but He's going to walk with us, and He'll comfort us. He'll console us. It implies difficult times are coming.

But what does the **rod and staff** have to do with it, and how do they comfort me? To understand that we need to start by understanding literally what the rod and the staff were to the shepherd, in order to understand the imagery. When a shepherd would go out into the wilderness, the shepherd traveled with as little as possible. They're the ultimate minimalists. But the shepherd never went into the wilderness without his rod and staff...standard, essential equipment.

The rod was a shorter rod, about 30 inches long. The handle was something you could grip with one hand. At the end was kind of a mace-like bulb. It wasn't unusual that shepherds would embed pieces of iron into that mace-like bulb. It was an offensive weapon. It could be used like a club, but it also was used to throw. It was astonishing how skillful and accurate these shepherds became in their ability to throw this club. As a matter of fact, it was such an effective piece of equipment that Near East shepherds continued to use it well into the 20th century. Basically they would put it in their belt, and they were never in the wilderness without it. It had two primary purposes. One is, at the end of the day, the sheep would be gathered into some sort of a crude sheepfold. Usually it was just a bunch of rocks stacked on top of each other in a circle with a very narrow opening. The shepherd would take this rod, would stand in the doorway, and stretch the rod across the door. The sheep then would come in under the rod, walking single file into the sheepfold.

There were two purposes for that. One was to count the sheep. So, at the end of the day, if sheep were missing, the shepherd would go out and find them and bring them back. We've talked about that in the psalm. The second purpose was to inspect the sheep. This was actually a very personal, intimate time. The shepherd would watch for cuts and scrapes and injuries, but he was also likely to touch them and feel them to make sure there weren't any problems with the bones or the structure or anything hiding in the wool, to make sure at the end of the day, everything was okay. It was a high level of care for the sheep. Sometimes in reading the Old and New Testament, you'll come across a phrase that reads, *the people of God, as sheep, passed under the rod*. This is where that imagery comes from. It's that they matter to the shepherd. They're counted; they're cared for at the end of each day. The second thing was for protection. This club—the rod—was not used on the sheep. It was used to protect the sheep from predators like bears and lions and snakes. It was also used to protect the sheep from thieves and from robbers. So, sometimes in both Testaments, you'll read something about a person in authority *governing with a rod of iron*. This is where the phrase comes from. It carries the idea that the Good Shepherd, well equipped with the rod, would protect the sheep from those who wanted to do them harm. It was understood in the ancient world, if you had a king or someone in authority that was strong and powerful, that ruled with a rod of iron, it didn't refer to oppressing the people. It referred to protecting the people from those who wanted to do them harm. It was always understood once that is removed, once that restrainer is removed, then chaos will follow. So that's the idea of the rod. If you think about the Old West and the gunslingers, the gunslingers always had their six-shooter on their hip. The rod is the ancient version of that for the shepherd. The shepherd always had the rod through his belt in order to protect the sheep.

The second piece of equipment is the staff. It is much more the signature piece of equipment we think of with shepherds. It's a longer rod—five or six feet—and had a crook at the end. It was used for lots of things. It was a walking stick. It was something the shepherds leaned on. Think about these shepherds being on their feet all day. You see pictures of them; they're often leaning against this staff to rest. But it was also used to direct the sheep, or to redirect the sheep. If the sheep were moving toward a poisonous plant, the shepherd could move them away. If the sheep wandered away and needed to be corrected, he'd use his staff to correct them. If they'd fall into the ditch, he'd use the crook to reach them and pull them back to safety. You might think of the staff as the shepherd's multi-tool. He just used it for pretty much everything.

Okay now, with that in mind, how does God shepherd us with a rod and a staff? And why does that comfort me? We're going to start with the staff, because that's the easy one. I think the best way to understand this is to shift the metaphor from a shepherd to a parent. So, think about a parent—not a helicopter parent, not a fearful parent, not an absentee permissive parent—but just a good, effective parent. It's the job of the parent to raise the kids, to take care of the kids, to make sure everything's okay, to inspect them. It's to lead them. It's to teach them. It's to redirect them. When they fall in the ditch, it's to pull them back out of the ditch. If they're headed off course, it's to bring them back on the path to the right course. Everything about that is what a parent does. If you want to raise confident, secure children, the route to that is not by being permissive. The route to that is for clarity...clarity around rules, clarity around boundaries, clarity around right and wrong... clarity around morality...clarity around difficult issues in our culture. If they start to wander off, there needs to be clarity; there needs to be correction; there needs to be rescue. That builds confidence and security in a child. There is no child that has the emotional capacity to make difficult, challenging decisions as a young child. That's more than they're capable of processing. So, it actually comforts the child to know there is a parent that is with them, that will help them, that will teach them, that will correct them, that will lead them, that will direct them, that will rescue them when needed. It builds confidence in a child. It comforts them.

In the same way, God, as our Shepherd, is with us. He's not with us as a spectator. He's with us like that parent, very involved in our lives. He wants to teach us. He wants to direct us. He wants to redirect us. If we're headed toward the poisonous plant, He's going to move us away. If we get off path, He's going to correct us back on the path. As one of God's children, I want to be convicted of sin. I don't want to mess up my life. I don't want to hurt the people around me. I don't want to get lost in the wilderness. I don't want that. So, I'm thankful that I have a Good Shepherd with a staff that goes with me, that's going to lead and direct and redirect and correct and protect and rescue. That comforts me.

Lots of people think sheep are stupid. I don't know if sheep are stupid. I really don't know how you give them the correct IQ test. (*laughter*) But I do know this. They're smart enough to know that they stand no chance of survival without the care of the shepherd and his staff. I don't know

if sheep are dumb. We do know for sure, they're defenseless. They can't fight; they aren't fast, they can't outrun a predator. They really have no chance other than the shepherd and his staff. So, it comforts them. So, again, I don't know if sheep are stupid. I do know they're smart enough to understand that if they surrender to the shepherd and his staff, that that is the route to flourishing. If sheep can figure that out...(I really don't have to finish that sentence, do I?) (*laughter*) Sometimes you hear people say, "Oh, so and so, they just have to learn everything the hard way." Nobody has to learn everything the hard way. Nobody has to learn that way. The only sheep that wouldn't be comforted by the shepherd and his staff is a sheep that's bent on rebellion, and that sheep is not going to survive in the wilderness.

The rod is a more difficult conversation. The comfort and care and counting, that all makes sense, and we've talked about that in the psalm. What's more difficult is this idea of the Good Shepherd with the rod protecting us. What does the Good Shepherd protect us from? I wish I could tell you this morning, He protects us from cancer, protects us from harm, protects us from abuse, protects us from drunk drivers. I wish I could tell you that. But as Ryan said last week, "I can't tell you that." The Bible says, "***It rains on the righteous and the unrighteous alike.***" Bad things do happen to good people. And this is where the tension lies. So, what exactly is He protecting me from? And why does that comfort me?

One of the classic texts that really captures this tension, I think, is part of the Joseph story. We love the Joseph story, but we have to admit that Joseph's story is really hard. Most of his life could not have made any sense. He was hated by his brothers; they were going to kill him. Instead, they kidnap him, and they sell him to the slave traders who sell him into Egypt. Joseph, then, operating with the highest degree of integrity, is falsely accused of a sexual assault by his master's wife. Listen to how this reads in Genesis, 39,

So Joseph's master took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail. But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible *for it*. The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper. (*NASB, Genesis 39:20-23)

I'm sorry, but that is a very confusing paragraph. Was the Lord with Joseph? Yes, the text says so. Did He extend kindness to him? Yes, the text says so. Did He extend favor to him? Yes, the text says so. Did He cause him to prosper? Yes, the text says so. Was he falsely accused of a sexual assault and thrown in prison? Yes, the text says so. I'm sorry but that doesn't make sense. It doesn't seem like a lot of kindness to me...doesn't seem like God's favor...really doesn't seem like God is with him. And I'll guarantee you, that made no sense to Joseph. That's where the tension lies,

like, “What’s going on here?” Where is God in all this? And if He’s the Good Shepherd with a rod, what exactly is He protecting Joseph from? At the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph understands God’s purpose in his story. He actually voices it to his brothers. He tells them, “**I know you meant this for evil, but God used it for good,**” in order to save His people in the midst of this terrible famine. Most of Joseph’s life could have made no sense to him, but at the end of the story, he gets clarity. What do you know! God *was* up to something. And He did something amazing through the story of Joseph.

But here’s the rub. Most of the time you’re not going to know. Sometimes when people are going through difficult things, people will say, “Well, someday you’ll know,” to which I say, “How do you know that?” I’m going to suggest that most of the time, you won’t know. You won’t understand the reason. Would we love the Joseph story as much if Joseph died in prison? Because over the years, thousands of Christians have died in prison. And they did not understand what God was doing. Today, all around the world, there are thousands of Christians in prisons and, today, some of them will die. They don’t get the rags to riches story that Joseph got. So we’re left with this difficult question, “Then what is the Good Shepherd protecting them from?”

One of the classic texts is Acts Chapter 12. Herod arrests the Apostle James, as in Peter, James, and John, and he executes him. He cuts off his head with a sword, and he realizes that finds favor with the Jewish crowd. So he thinks, “I’m on to something,” and he’s going to do another one. So he arrests Peter, intending to execute him. But God miraculously shows up and rescues and delivers Peter, and Peter goes free. And therein lies the tension. Why did Peter get rescued? Why did James get his head cut off? Where is the Shepherd with His rod for James? Why does this person get healed, and this person doesn’t? Why does this person suffer, and this person doesn’t? Why does everything work out for this person, and it doesn’t work out for this person? This is the reality of the tension that we experience. And often we’re not going to get answers to our most difficult questions. But it’s important to understand that just because I don’t know the reason, doesn’t mean there isn’t a reason. It just means, “I don’t know but God is up to something,” but in the moment, it makes no sense.

I don’t think people would disagree with the idea that the apostle Paul is probably the greatest missionary of all time. If there’s anybody that needs a shepherd with a rod, it’s this guy. But listen to how he describes his story,

I...in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews, thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I *have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers

among false brethren; I *have been* in labor and hardship through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)

It's like, "Man, that's rough...that is a rough life!" So, if the Good Shepherd is with him, and he's got a rod, you tell me, "What is He protecting him from, because that's a pretty rough story?" We love Hebrews 11 because we love all the great stories of faith and the amazing things that God did through people of faith. But I'm going to edit my comment this way. We love the front half of Hebrews 11. We're not so fond of the second half of Hebrews 11. This is what it says:

...Others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskin and goatskin, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (*men* of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:35-40)

That's pretty rough. So, if the Shepherd is with them and He's got a rod, what is He protecting them from? Paul helps us with that when he writes his letter to the church in Philippi. He's sitting in a Roman prison cell. He does not know if he's going to live or die. Will he be executed or not? And yet, in chapter four, he writes,

I've learned to be content in whatever circumstances I'm in. (Philippians. 4:11)

Why is that? What did he know that led him to say that? Two key things are earlier in that letter. One, is he identifies that his suffering has actually been used by God to advance the mission of the gospel. He understands he's on assignment. He's here on mission, and God is using his suffering to advance the gospel. But the second thing he says is he knows at some point he's going to come to the end of his story and he's going to die, and he says that's better, because he will be with Christ. He understands that at the end of the story, what awaits him will be absolutely glorious! **To live is Christ; to die is gain.** It's very similar to Hebrews 11. The repeated message in Hebrews 11 is that all these great people of faith were headed for something better. Hebrews calls it a **better country, a place whose architect and builder is God.** They did not receive all the comfort of promises in this life, enroute to the fulfillment of the promise of something better. The reality is, life in this world can be very, very hard. It can be very painful; it can be very confusing, and it often isn't very comfortable. But we do not walk that path alone **for You are with me** every step of the way.

It's helped me over the years to process it this way:

Number 1: "Does God love me?" "Yes, He does." I do not doubt that for a minute. He demonstrated that when He gave up His own Son for me. Yes, He loves me.

Number 2: "Does God hear my prayer? Does He know what I'm going through?" "Hello, God, are you aware?" The answer is, "Yes, absolutely. I do not doubt that for a minute."

Number 3: "Does He have the power necessary to do something to change my circumstances?" Answer is, "Yes...yes. Everything that comes into my life must come through God." "

"Does He love me?" "Yes."

"Does He hear me?" "Yes."

"Does He have the power to change it?" "Yes."

Which leads me to the conclusion there must be some reason why He's allowed this into my life. For me? For the people around me? Just because I don't know the reason doesn't mean there isn't a reason. God is writing a bigger story, and for reasons I'll probably never understand, He has allowed this into my story. And if that's the case, I can accept that!

Think how different this is for the unbeliever, for the secularist, for the naturalist, for the atheist, who has no way to explain suffering and pain, other than the fact you just drew a losing lottery ticket. "Sorry, Charlie, that's just the way it goes." I can't imagine anything more filled with despair than to believe it's all based on chance, and I just happen to get a losing lottery ticket...and it's nothing more than that. That would be unbearable!

But I don't believe that's our story as believers. Everything comes through God's filter, and there must be some reason it's necessary, as God writes the bigger story. And that comforts me. But it's more than that...it's more than that. I understand that this world is not my home. I'm never going to settle for this. I am enroute to a better place. I am headed for the Promised Land, and it will be everything that my soul longs for today. It will be utterly glorious. And I know He walks with me all the way, armed with His rod to protect me. No one can steal that from me. No one can diminish that from me. No one can take it away from me. The Good Shepherd has me firmly in His hand, and **we're going to walk together through the valley of the shadow of death, and I fear no evil, because He is with me**, and He's got his club, and nobody can take that away from me. And that comforts me. No matter what you're going through, no matter what you face, no matter what happens, no matter how confusing, we are headed to glory, to the Promised Land, and no one can change that. That comforts me.

**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.**

May that be so!

Our Father, we're thankful that in the midst of a fallen, broken, confusing, painful world, the Good Shepherd walks with us every step of the way, ultimately to deliver us to a better place, a place whose builder and architect is You. Lord, may we find comfort in knowing that no matter what happens, we are destined for glory. Lord, we pray this in Jesus' name Amen.

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