

The Shepherd's Rod and Staff

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Date: 03 May 2020

Preacher: Rev Kenneth I Macleod

[0 : 00] I want to extend a very warm welcome to everybody this morning and it's really good if you're able to tune in and join with us in our worship. And we pray that God will bless our time together and that we will know his presence and his peace wherever we are.

So first of all we're going to bow for a word of prayer. Lord our gracious God we give thanks for this morning. We give thanks for the blessings of a new day.

We give thanks O Lord that this day is a reminder to us that the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead. And we pray that you will indeed make this day ever more precious to us.

And that we may realise that the resurrected Jesus is the great Lord of heaven and earth. And that he is ruling and overruling all things for good.

And that his church is the most important and precious possession that he has here in this world.

Help us Lord to realise more and more how precious we are to Christ.

[1 : 05] Because so often we don't grasp that. Because as we look at ourselves and we're aware of our own faults and failings and our own sin. And of how we let you down and of how we let others down.

And of how we let ourselves down. We often fail to grasp just how precious we are to you. But help us Lord to grasp and to lay hold of this. And that it might help us in our walk with you.

And that we may seek to come closer to you every day. Help us to realise Lord that we are on a journey. And this journey is brief. One day it will soon be over.

And Lord we pray that you will prepare us as we go through life. For the great journey that ultimately we will be on. Where we will pass from time into eternity.

Where we will leave this world to enter in to the next. And we give thanks oh Lord for all that your word teaches us. All that your word shows us.

[2 : 08] Because we couldn't work out these things ourselves. But you have revealed so much. So much of who you are. And so much of what you require from us.

And you have revealed to us Lord the way things are. Because we are very limited in what we can even work out ourselves. And so we pray that you will help us to accept your word.

And even if there are any watching today who up to now have never accepted the truth. Or ever really believed in you. We pray Lord that even today that you will help them to believe.

Help them to see. Help them to trust. Help them to believe. Help them to realise that it is in you we have. We have life. You are the one who has said I am the way.

The truth and the life. The way to God. Because we are lost. You are the truth. And that question is asked. What is truth? Well we find truth in you.

[3 : 07] And you are the life. Eternal life. And so we pray that you will bless us. And bless each and every one of us. Bless us in our homes.

In our families. Bless us in this time of isolation. When so often we are separated from other members of our families. It can be difficult. But it is something that we realise that is necessary.

And we pray for the grace so to do. We pray Lord for all those who are ill at this time. And we remember particularly those who are ill with this COVID-19.

And those who are in intensive care. And we realise that the nature of this illness. And how infectious it is.

Is preventing loved ones from being with family members who are critically ill. And even those who are dying. It is so, so sad.

[4 : 05] And there are so many broken hearts. With the added brokenness of not being able to be with loved ones. As they pass away. O Lord, O God. We pray that into this hurting, sore, sad world.

And this people of our nation. We cry to you. Lord, hear us. Lord, forgive. Lord, heal us. We pray. Pray that a vaccine will soon be found.

We give thanks Lord for encouraging signs. That are already being shown. And we pray that treatment may be found. And we pray Lord that in that. That we will be able to give glory to you. We pray for all frontline workers. Or we give thanks for our NHS. And we pray Lord for those who are. They've gone through such difficult, painful, sad times.

As they have nursed the dying. And they have acted not only in the professional way of being, of nursing and tending to them and their illness.

[5 : 08] But they've been there as comforters and counsellors. And we pray Lord that you will help them. Because that's difficult. Difficult to deal with. And so we ask that you'll support them.

We pray Lord that you will be with all others. We remember all our emergency services. The fire, the police, the ambulance, paramedics. Remember Lord those who work in care homes.

And we commit them to you. Many who are putting themselves in a risky place. We ask Lord that you will bless them. Bless our posties.

And all our delivery drivers. And all our lorry drivers. And just there are so many who are involved in keeping the nation running. All the bus drivers. And train drivers.

And everybody who's involved in taking people here, there and everywhere. Watch over us then we pray. And may your presence be with us. And take away sin in Jesus name. Amen.

[6 : 06] I'm just going to say a wee word to any of the young people. Who might be listening in. When I became a Christian. One of my great heroes. As a young Christian. Was the late Douglas Macmillan.

Douglas Macmillan was probably one of the greatest preachers. Our church ever had. And one of the greatest personalities. And I was very fortunate. That when I was studying.

To become a minister. In the college. Which is now the seminary. Douglas at that time. Was professor of history. But before Douglas went into the ministry.

He was called into the ministry. He was a shepherd. He spent quite a number of years. As a full time shepherd. Spending half his life. On the hills. Looking after the sheep. And he wrote a book. Well it was a series of lectures. That he. Did down in Wales. And it was turned into a book. The Lord of Shepherd. And if ever you can get hold of that book.

[7 : 06] Get it. Because it's. I believe the best book. That has ever been written. On Psalm 23. And Douglas tells lots of stories. From his shepherding experience.

And one story that he tells. Was. On. It was at lambing time. And we're. At lambing time just now. Outside. Outside. The back. Of our house.

There's fields. There. And loads of lambs. It's always lovely to see. Little baby lambs. Jumping around. Those that. In the evening. They seem to become. More and more excited.

And they're always playing games. Well. That's what it looks like. They're doing. But Douglas was saying. That this particular year. Was. Really bad. For foxes.

Killing. Young lambs. And this particular night. He had spent the night. Up on the hill. Because the lamb. It was at lambing time. And.

[8 : 03] It was about half past five. In the morning. And he was sitting away. Up on the hill. He had. Binoculars with him. But he also had a gun. Because he was. Determined to get some of these foxes.

That had killed. So. So many of the lambs. And he was. Sitting. Way up on this hill. Looking down. Watching. And he had the gun.

Beside him. And he saw this fox. Coming. And it started. Working the sheep. And it was. Pushing the sheep. In the direction. Of a marsh.

And there was a sheep. With their little lambs. And the mothers. Were terrified. Because they were. Helpless. Against this fox. And the fox.

Was working them. And Douglas. Was saying. The fox. Was working them. Better than any collie dog. But all the time. Douglas was up there. Just watching. And then came the time.

[8 : 58] Where he thought. This fox. Is now going to go in. For the kill. And just as the fox. Was getting prepared to go. All Douglas did. Was he put his fingers. In his mouth.

And he whistled. And straight away. The fox. Realised. Someone said. And shot off. That was it. Fox disappeared. And what Douglas. Was saying is. That. These sheep. Would have been panicking. And probably. They would be saying. Oh if only the shepherd. Was here.

Well the shepherd was. Shepherd was watching them. All the time. And he was saying. That's exactly. The same. With the Lord Jesus. Who is a good shepherd. That he's watching his sheep. All the time. And even when we don't know it. And sometimes we say. Oh where is Jesus. Just now. Because sometimes. We're facing trouble. [9 : 53] And worries. And oh. If only Jesus was here. Well actually he is. He's watching. And he knows exactly. The right time.

To come. You ask Jesus. To be. Your shepherd. You ask Jesus. To watch over your life. And to keep you. And so that. Every day. He will guide you. He will protect you. He will lead you. And at the end of the day. Take you home. To be. With himself. Ask Jesus. To be. Your. Good shepherd. Let's say the Lord's prayer. Our Father. Which art in heaven. Hallowed. Be. Thy name. Thy kingdom. Come. I will be done. On earth. As it is in heaven. Give us this day. Our daily bread. And forgive us. Our debts. As we forgive. Our debtors. Lead us not. Into temptation. But deliver us. [10 : 48] From evil. For thine is the kingdom. The power. And the glory. Forever. Amen. Now. I'm going to read. Psalm 23.

From. The book of Psalms. Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil. For you are with me. You rod and your staff. They comfort me. You prepare a table before me. In the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. And my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy. Shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell. [11 : 49] In the house of the Lord. Forever. Amen. And may God bless to us. This reading of his own. Holy word. Now we're going to look at.

Psalm 23. Verse 4. 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. I'm sure this is the best known psalm. It's probably one of the best known. Portions of God's word.

And even people who have very very little knowledge of the Bible. I'm sure most know. These opening words. The Lord is my shepherd. Now this psalm of course has been a psalm of great comfort to God's people. Down throughout the years. And the imagery in this psalm is really tremendous. Of course God so often uses everyday things and things of nature to show us spiritual truths. [12 : 53] Jesus when he was here was always doing things like that. Like for instance he would give great illustrations by using or talking about a coin or trees or water or sheep or bread.

Various things. He was always illustrating spiritual truths with physical things. And we've got to remember that the physical and spiritual is much more closely tied than we realise. We are physical beings. Very much so. But we're also spiritual. And far too many people forget that and neglect their soul.

And they're losing out in life incredibly. Because God has made us for himself. And the spiritual is so important. So it's vital that we come to know God and hear what he is saying to us. Now this of course is known as the shepherd psalm. And it's interesting the characters in the Bible that were shepherds. Abel. Canaan Abel.

[14 : 02] Abel was a shepherd. Moses who after he ran away from Egypt. And spent his time in hiding. And remember he got married and weighed out. He was about 40 years.

He was a shepherd for 40 years before God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt. And of course the man who penned this psalm. And David. He was a great shepherd king. Right throughout the Bible God terms himself the shepherd of his people. Beginning really in Genesis works all the way through the Bible. Jesus when he came into this world declared. Saying I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep. And Jesus often illustrated the fact that as a shepherd he came to look for the sheep. Because you see by nature we're lost. It's an awful situation when you're lost. And very often we can be lost without knowing we're lost. And we're lost because we cannot make our own way back

to God.

[15:07] We're lost from God. And we don't realise often that we are lost or how bad it is to be lost. But that's what Jesus has come to do. To help us to make a way back for us to God.

And he is that way. So he tells us that he has come to seek and to save those who are lost. And if today you realise this and say well you know that's me.

I'm lost. Then Jesus has come for you. And he is able today to save you and to bring you back to the Lord. And when Jesus as a good shepherd is a hold of you.

He will never ever ever let you go. That's a wonderful thing. But I want us today in particular to look as we look at this psalm. And to look at this verse where it tells us.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil for you are with me. Now the psalmist has been very aware of the shepherd's leading. And to begin with in the psalm it's always a lovely pleasant picture.

[16:16] There's the green pastures and the still water artists dream. You would say I would love to take a photo of that. But life isn't always about the green pastures and the still waters.

We know that sometimes life is going so smoothly. But often it isn't. Sometimes it's rough.

Sometimes it's painful. Sometimes it's sad.

Sometimes we're anxious. Sometimes life is full of fears. Rough times. And so the psalmist is here telling us. That even in the darkest times.

Even in the times when the shadow of death is hanging over. The shepherd is still there. And that's a wonderful thing. And I want us to look at this really.

There's two ways that you can look at it. First of all we can see it by the shepherd being there in our dark providences. In the dark situations in life.

[17:14] Things that frighten us. The things that perplex us. The things that scare us. Sometimes where the shadow of death does hang over us. Maybe there's something that's threatening.

Life threatening. And David himself knew all about these situations. Sometimes David barely escaped with his life. He knew what it was. To be in death's dark veil.

But the thing is about a shadow. We've got to remember that actually a shadow cannot really hurt. It was Spurgeon who said the shadow of a dog can't bite.

The shadow of a sword can't kill. And the shadow of death can't destroy. And that is true. But in order to have a shadow. You really need to have light as well.

If there is total darkness. There are no shadows. But when there's light. There are shadows. And we've got to remember that even when death is coming over.

[18:14] That there is a light there as well. And that is the light of the Lord Jesus. Because he is the light of this world. Now we see here that the Lord asks a shepherd that he has a rod and a staff.

That's what it tells us here. Your rod and your staff they comfort me. Now I believe it's just a one stick. It's a shepherd's crook here.

The rod and staff. Not two different ones. And you and I know that the shepherd uses the rod or a crook for many different things.

For instance sometimes if you're supposing you're taking the sheep into a fanc and you're trying to drive them in. Sometimes they become very hesitant.

And they're not for moving. So sometimes you have to prod them and push them on. And you know sometimes it's like that for us as well. Because in the Christian life sometimes we become lazy.

[19:16] Sometimes we become static. Sometimes we find that we're just not progressing in the way that we should be. Because the Christian life is a life of progression.

We should be going on and on. That's the way we go. Christian life is not about taking it easy and standing still. It's about moving. It's about going on all the time.

All the imagery in the Bible about the Christian life is one of movement. It's running. It's walking. It's fighting. It's progress. It's striving. And so if the Lord sees us beginning to become lazier.

Take it easier. Just not really doing anything or going anywhere. He's going to prod us on. Because we've been made for service. Because God uses us in our journey home to glory.

To help other people. Other people have helped us. You look back over your Christian life. And think of the different influences upon your life. Before you became a Christian.

[20:19] That were God used to become part of your conversion. Your coming to faith. And all the different people that he has used since then.

To encourage you. To guide you. To help you. And very often we find ourselves. As we go through our Christian life. That we can be moving from one company to another.

That's the way it goes. Psalm 84 in fact. As it says. Those that go from strength to strength. Until in Zion. They appear. That can be translated from company to company.

And in a sense. That's how the Christian walked through this world. Going from one fellowship to another. That it's not meaning that you're turning it back on one. But it's just the way the development goes.

That other people maybe come into your life. But we're all there for one another. God doesn't send angels from heaven. To teach and to preach. And to be elders and deacons.

[21 : 14] And to lead the praise. And to be Sunday school teachers and youth workers. No. He uses us. And so if the Lord sees that we're not willing. Or not ready.

Or not up for it. And just that we've become lazy. He will prod us. Again the shepherd will use his crook. To redirect the sheep.

Sometimes the sheep are going the wrong direction. And so he has to turn them around. The Lord has to do that with us too sometimes. Because our natural inclination is to go the wrong way.

We don't choose the right path by instinct. The Lord has to show us the way. And even when he shows us the way. He still has to enable us to walk in that way.

And he does so by his grace. But sometimes the rod is brought down on the sheep to redirect them. Because they're going the wrong way. The Lord has often to chastise us.

[22 : 16] Because he has to break some of that sin. That powerful sin that's spoiling our fellowship. That's often taking us in the wrong direction. And so it's important to realise that even when the Lord does chastise us.

That chastising rod is held in a living hand. But we notice that this shepherd's crook. If you look at a crook. It's got a horn at the top.

And again that is used for maybe catching the sheep's horn. And pulling the sheep to your shelf.

Because very often that's what you want to do. Or a young lamb. You get the crook round and pull it to yourself.

The shepherd's always pulling the sheep to himself. The Lord is doing that with us as well. He's pulling us to himself. Because we belong to him.

We're made for him. He loves us. We don't realise how much he loves us. Lovers want to be together. And the Lord as the one who loves us. Wants us to be closer and closer and closer to him.

[23 : 23] And the closer we live to the Lord. The more we will love him. The more we will delight in him. The more we will want to remain close to him.

But we also see that this rod is also a staff. Now a staff is something that you lean on. And that's what we do. We lean upon the Lord. We lean upon his promises.

We lean upon the God of the promises. We lean upon him for life. Because we need his strength. His strength is made perfect in our weakness. Do you know one of the things that happens when we come to faith.

Or as God is working in us. We come to realise. That we can't make it through life on our own. And we actually come to realise.

That we don't want to make it through life on our own. That we need the Lord. Now very often people who are not believers can't understand that.

[24 : 24] I remember when I was converted this person. And you very well said to me. You know I'm surprised at you. Going down this road of becoming a Christian.

I thought you were strong enough in yourself to go through life. Without needing this crutch. That's the way he looked on it. That Christianity was simply a crutch.

For those who didn't feel strong enough to go through life on their own. Well you know at one level. What that person said was exactly true. Because you realise that.

You do need someone. That you cannot do it on your own. But as I said. You realise you don't want to do it on your own. And that once you come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The thought of abandoning that faith. And turning away from that faith. And just going your own way. Is abhorrent. Well yes you're tempted. The devil will tempt you to turn back.

[25 : 21] And you say oh forget it. And there are days that your own heart of unbelief will say. But the overriding desire within your heart. Is to follow the Lord completely all the way.

And so we are leaning upon the Lord. Leaning upon the staff. In fact the picture in the Old Testament. We have of the Old Testament churches. Coming up out of the wilderness. We have of us leaning on our beloved. And so as we live out our Christian life. That is how we should be. But as we said this psalm.

The second thing that we look at. And this very briefly is. This psalm is our journey. As we said earlier on. There was a green pasture from the still water. Then we're moving into the shadow of death.

And eventually it arrives into God's house dwelling there forever. And so we realise that part of the process of this life is death.

[26 : 16] Death is that enemy that we don't even want to think about. Because death disrupts. It breaks up. It causes so much pain and sorrow.

And when death comes into your home and into your family. Life is never the same. Because there's a hole in your heart. Where every loved one is taken away.

That you'll never get over. It's always. There's always a brokenness in you. Because of the death of a loved one. So death is something that we. We want to push away from ourselves.

But unless the Lord comes first. It's something that. You and I are going to have to go through. And so this is this death. This is this enemy. That as we see every day.

We're taking a step closer to. And one day. We will enter into death's dark veil. But you'll notice what it says. Even though I walk.

[27 : 12] Through the valley. It doesn't say. Even though I. Walk into the valley. Of the shadow of death. It's I walk through it.

So this is what happens. We. We enter into death. But we go all the way through. And we go through with the shepherd. At no point does the shepherd leave us. The shepherd is with us in life. And he's with us in death. And. I believe that the Christian. When the Christian comes to die. That they will be very conscious. Of the presence of the Lord.

Presence of the shepherd. Maybe today you're saying. I don't feel. I'm scared just now. I would hate to die. Because I'm not. I don't feel. The presence. I'm not. I'm not ready to die.

I don't feel. I don't feel the presence of the Lord. Well that is. Probably because. Most. Are not dying. Maybe there are some. Watching today. Who are. Who are.

[28 : 08] In the process. Of where death is coming. Very close. But I believe. That the Lord. Who gives us the grace to live. Will also give us the grace to die. And that the shepherd.

Won't abandon us. But the shepherd. Will draw close to us. As we go down into death. And he'll be with us there. Because this shepherd is unique. Because he himself.

Has gone into death. And he himself. Has overcome death. And he has broken. The power of death. And he has broken. The victory of the grave. And that is why.

The psalmist could say. You know this. I fear no evil. Death is evil. But I don't fear it. I don't mean this in a bad way.

And I don't mean any ill will. To snakes. But I don't like snakes. I can't help it. Just in the same way. As some people. They don't like spiders. Well. I don't like snakes.

[29 : 05] And if I was put into a room. With a really poisonous snake. And I was told. The poison has been removed. From that snake. I would still.

Feel really. Really uncomfortable. There would be a strong. Element of fear. Within me. Even although. I know. That that snake. Couldn't do me.

Any. Lasting harm. And in a sense. That's what death is like. That we can see. We know. That it's going to hit us. And we know that.

We're. We're. Stuck with it. But we also know. From God's word. That it cannot. Do us. Any lasting harm. Because the shepherd. Is with us.

And the shepherd. Is going to. Who is the light. Is going to take us. Out of that dark. And he's going to take us. To be forever. Into his presence. In glory. And it's no wonder that.

[30 : 02] The psalmist. Was. Able to say. The Lord is. My shepherd. My shepherd. For life. My shepherd. Today. My shepherd. Tonight. My shepherd.

Into death. My shepherd. Through death. My shepherd. Forever and ever. Is he. Is he you shepherd. That's a great question. If he is not.

Then I would ask you today. Lord. Please. Become my shepherd. Let us pray. Oh Lord. Our gracious God. We pray to.

To bless us. Bless your word. To us. And we give thanks. For being under its influence. And power. Take away from us. Our sin. In Jesus name. We ask it.

Amen. We're going to conclude. Singing. The shepherd's psalm. Psalm 23. We're going to sing. Psalm 23. And this is from.

[30 : 55] Sing Psalms. The Lord is my shepherd. No want shall I know. He makes me lie down. Where the green pastures grow. He leads me to rest. Where the calm waters flow.

My wandering steps. He brings back to his way. And straight paths of righteousness. Making me stay. As he has done. His great name to display. The Lord is my shepherd.

No want shall I know. He makes me lie down. Where the green pastures grow.

He leads me to rest. He leads me to rest. Where the calm waters flow. My wandering steps.

He brings back to his way. In straight paths of righteousness. Making me stay.

[31 : 58] And this he has done. His way. He brings me to display. Oh, I walk in depths, valley.

Where darkness is near. Because you are with me. No evil I'll fear.

Your rod and your staff bring me comfort and cheer. And the sight of my enemies, that it will you spread, the oil of rejoicing you pour on my head, my cup of earth flows and anguishers be fed.

So surely your heaven and mercy and grace will follow me closely in all of my ways. I will dwell in the house of the Lord all my days.

Now may the grace, mercy and peace of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest and abide upon each one of you now and forevermore. Amen.