

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

1 Timothy 1:2 ...Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

“God Protects His People”

Introduction: Too Much

Too much of anything isn't good for you. Too much sand and you are in a desert where you could die from lack of water. Too much water and you are in an ocean where you could die by capsizing.

Throughout the church's history, it has used the imagery of water and sand to describe our walk on Earth. During the time of Moses, God's people wandered through the sand with only the Lord to guide them. During the time of Noah, the Lord protected his people from the flood by using an ark. For nearly two thousand years, the Christian Church has been depicted as a ship, a safe place in life's stormy ocean.

Today, we will look at the 23rd psalm, a psalm that talks about God's protection for his people.

A Safe Place in the Desert

Many scholars interpret the 23rd psalm with reference to God's people leaving Egypt. The imagery of God protecting and providing for his people is found in the account of Israel in the desert. The imagery of a staff being the means by which God protects or provides for his people is found there too.

In Exodus, God commands his people to leave the fertile land of Egypt and to walk through the desert to the Promised Land. While they wander in the desert, they long for the rich food they had in Egypt. They complain about not having bread, so God sends them bread from heaven. They complain about not having meat, so God sends them quail. They complain about not having enough water, so God gives them water from a stone when Moses hits it with his staff.

God's people also fear those who will attack them but God protects them through Moses and his staff. Pharaoh's army attacks but is swallowed by the Red Sea after Moses parts it with his staff. Another tribe (called the Amalekites) attacks but God protects his people by telling Moses to raise his staff above his head. Poisonous snakes bite the Israelites but God protects those with faith by telling them to look at a bronze serpent on a staff. God worked through a staff to protect and provide for his people while they traveled.

A Club and a Staff

Much of the 23rd psalm can be compared to this image of God's people wandering in the desert and God protecting his people by means of a staff. By time that the 23rd psalm is written, God has led his people into the Promised Land. Instead of sand, there are green pastures. Instead of an arid desert, there are still waters.

God's people are in a better place here than they were when they were in the desert. Unfortunately, they are not completely safe. Even in this green land with still waters, they will continue to

encounter the shadow of death. They are not completely safe as we see from the tools the shepherd carries.

According to the King James translation, the shepherd carries a “rod” and a “staff.” Another possible translation is a club and a staff. The club is used to kill anything that will hurt the sheep. The club is to attack wolves or lions. The staff is to guide the sheep themselves. It can pull them from a pit or give them swat so they go in the right direction.

A Feast in the Face of Enemies

The final verses of this psalm shift the imagery from one of sheep, to one of King David enjoying a feast. Of course, the sheep represented David all along so it isn't really much of a shift. Now instead of pastures, we have a banquet hall, presumably near the Temple in Jerusalem.

Like with the green pastures, most of the imagery in this final section is positive. We have a table that is set with food, expensive oil being poured freely and a cup that overflows.

Yet King David is not without threats. Like wolves and lions, there are people who would like to take his throne from him. This feast is set before his enemies. Like Jesus eating with Judas, David eats with those he knows would like to betray him. He does not underestimate their power. He understands that if God lifts his protection for minute, it will be over for him. Nonetheless, he trusts that God will keep him safe.

Jesus, Our Good Shepherd

In today's gospel lesson, David's descendent, Jesus, tells us that he is *the* Good Shepherd. In his role as shepherd, he disciplines us using his staff and he keeps us safe using his club. In our daily lives, we may feel like we are getting hit by the club sometimes but that is just his staff keeping us on the right road. The club is for those who are not his sheep.

Our epistle lesson reminds us that we were all straying like sheep. We needed to be pulled from the pit of sin by crook of our shepherd's staff. By Christ's death on the cross for our sin, we were "returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls."

Conclusion: Point to Christ

Moses was the shepherd of God's people in the Old Testament. He led them safely through the desert.

David was a shepherd in his youth. This prepared him to write the beautiful 23rd psalm. He was not always such a good shepherd to God's people but he did point to the one who is *truly* the Good Shepherd.

Finally, Jesus reveals that he is the one who will care for our every need. He is the one who will protect us physically, but even more importantly, spiritually. The 23rd psalm, like all Scripture, points to Christ.

*May that peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.*