

Templates of Truth with Rick Smith  
Audio Script – October 2, 2009

Legend holds that shepherds purposefully and customarily fractured the leg of a wayward sheep in order to teach it loyalty and obedience to the shepherd. Is it true? David describes the relationship between the Shepherd and His sheep in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, our focus for this week's Templates of Truth.

The legend is born out of a report published by Roy Gustafson, who came across a shepherd while leading a tour through the Holy Land, toting a sheep on his shoulders. The sheep's leg was noticeably bandaged, and upon asking the shepherd about the animal, he replied that the sheep was constantly wandering away from the rest of the flock and getting into trouble. In order to teach him obedience, the shepherd purposefully broke one of the sheep's legs. He reset it, splint & bandaged it, carried the sheep and cared for it until the broken leg mended. Once healed, the sheep would never wander away again. The story supposedly inspired the popular pictures and replicas of the shepherd carrying the sheep on his shoulders.

While there is no Biblical evidence that such a custom was ever practiced in ancient days, David does allude to the Shepherd's role of discipline in the life of his sheep: *Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me* (Psalm 23:4). The words *rod* and *staff* are two different Hebrew words. The *rod* referred to a branch or stick of wood used for punishing, fighting, ruling and correcting. The word *staff* comes from a root word meaning to support one's self, and means to lean on or rest upon like we would a walking cane. Shepherds used the *rod* to direct, to prod, to deter and to deflect the sheep, if they were wandering into trouble areas. A shepherd would even throw the rod like a spear into the sheep's path to frighten him away. If a predator came upon the flock, the rod was used to fight and fend off the threat. The *staff* was usually carved with a hook feature on the end. With the hook, the shepherd would often pick up a lamb and lift it gently to its mother for milk. He could hook one of the sheep and guide it in the direction he wanted the flock to follow. While it is unclear whether there were two separate devices, the stick the shepherd carried certainly seems to have served different purposes.

As our Shepherd, God certainly applies divine discipline to our wayward disobedience and rebellion. He sometimes administers that discipline through righteous punishment. David knew this all too well. He wrote: *Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep Thy word...It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes* (Psalm 119:67,71). David also affirmed: *With reproofs Thou dost chasten a man for iniquity; Thou dost consume as a moth what is precious to him* (Psalm 39:11). Just as the breaking of a leg would be painful, the application of God's divine punishment and discipline is also painful: *For those whom the Lord loves he disciplines, and He scourges every son He receives...all discipline for the moment seems not be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness...so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather to be healed* (Hebrews 12:6-13). God does not discipline us because He is a mean Father. He disciplines us because He loves us and desires the abundant, blessed and favored life that comes with living in obedience to him. Such a life is comfortable and peaceful – *Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me*.

While we cannot be certain that breaking the leg of a wayward sheep was a common practice among shepherds, it does provide a graphic illustration of the tremendous love and care God holds for us as His sheep. It helps us grasp the sacrifice God makes as our Shepherd to assure our best welfare. He knows what is best for us, even when we wander and fail Him. He *restores (our) soul and guides (us) in the paths righteousness* (Psalm 23:3). What wondrous grace is this, O my soul!

That's today's Templates of Truth. This is your Bible teacher, Rick Smith, reminding you to attend church this Sunday for Bible study and worship, pray for one another, and always strive to abide. Until next time, have a blessed and glorious day in Christ Jesus.

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