

Our Shepherd

A Shepherd Through the Valley

Psalm 23:4

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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 (Ps. 23:4).

Intro

Fear can be a powerful, debilitating, paralyzing influence in our lives.

Psalm 23 teaches us that we, as followers of Christ, have no reason to fear—ever. Because even though there is evil in the world, it will never ultimately touch us. Because of our Shepherd’s presence and protection.

SENTENCE DIAGRAM OF Psalm 23:4

I. THE PROBLEM: The Valley

Two weeks ago, Evan got us off to a great start in our July study of Psalm 23 by helping us see from verse 1 how, because “the Lord, the Lord,” is our Shepherd, we lack nothing. His care for us is perfect. Then last week, Bob showed in verses 2-3 *how* he cares for us by providing all we need: for nourishment, rest, and direction in His paths. What a beautiful place he left us last Sunday, in 23:3. In some ways, it would have been nice if the psalm had just ended there. The problem is: life doesn’t end there. Life is not always sunshine and rainbows, lollipops, and butterflies. Sometimes life sucks.

In verse 4, we move from being directed in paths of righteousness to now walking in a dark, dangerous, depressing valley. And in that valley, we may have to face mankind’s greatest and final enemy: death itself.

The type of valley in view is the deep, rocky wadi, a dry streambed carved by rushing waters in the spring but dark and foreboding most of the year. Dangers included flash floods and attacks from animals or outlaws. The phrase itself is used only seventeen times in the Old Testament, usually poetic descriptions of an emotional darkness caused by threatening circumstances, usually with an implied sorrow or fear. Terror, doom, distress, danger. Job uses the phrase seven times to signify a deep shadow, great distress, or a long dark passageway that seems to have no end in sight. This “valley of deep darkness” represents any difficult experience of life that makes us afraid or hopeless. It is the

Slough of Despond in *Pilgrim's Progress*, or for those with lighter entertainment tastes, the Fire Swamp of *The Princess Bride*.

Some of you may be in this valley right now. If you're not, tuck this sermon away for another day, because the walk through the valley is coming. A prolonged unemployment that leaves you wondering if God knows or cares. A life-changing illness that seems to have no cure or a pain so persistent that you wonder if you've lost your mind. It might be a fractured relationship that hurts so deeply that you cry when you feel the pain; or children, your beloved children, who wander off like lost sheep, seeking their own way. And then, of course, there is the darkest valley of all: death. It may be that you or your family may have experienced death recently and the loss is still breaking your heart. Not to mention that we all are just emerging from the valley of the shadow of COVID—with whatever stresses and challenges that has brought, particularly those of you in the medical community who have served so long and so hard and at risk of your own health and you're just worn out. You have walked through the valley and you have walked through the valley *with* so many this past year. Thank you!

You would think, wouldn't you, that a good shepherd would never lead his sheep into a valley of darkness? Ah, but a wise one might. Because it is in the valley of darkness that we learn those lessons about ourselves, about our limitations and weaknesses, and about God. His tender care, power, and wisdom are characteristics that we can never learn by the still waters, in the green pastures. So he brings us here to teach us precious, but costly lessons. He has us walk through the valley, not around it—on purpose. But his purpose is good and when we understand it we will see the divine wisdom in it all that far surpasses our own.

Consider the following:

“But no one of us ever goes down into the valley of the shadow of death of his own accord. We are willing to live the unconscious life if we can. We know the depths that lie below, but nonetheless rejoice to skim lightly over the surface. By and by God comes, and with His own Fatherly hand He leads us into the gloom, and leaves us there awhile alone. There is not one of us who would not rejoice in life-long exemption from bitter bereavement, who would not, if he could, choose this form of blessing almost before any other. And yet it is far better that God's visitation should come this way than not at all. We never know what God is, and may be, to our spirits till we have gone down with Him into the valley of the shadow, and there in the thick darkness felt the stay of His presence and the comfort of His love” (C. Beard).

The shadows of death “increase the spirit of prayer more. They do dissolve and loosen the affections more from the world, they make us better to discern the shadows of life, the poor empty vanities of the world, and set the heart more on heavenly purchases” (O. Sedgwick).

“True believers, although they dwell safely under the protection of God, are, notwithstanding, exposed to many dangers, or rather they are liable to all the afflictions which befall mankind in

common, that they may the better feel how much they need the protection of God” (John Calvin).

Jane Marczweski (March-ef'-skee), who goes by the stage name “Nightbirde,” auditioned on *America’s Got Talent* last month. In 2017, she got a diagnosis of stage 3 breast cancer. A year later, it came back and she was given a 2 percent chance of survival. Her husband left her and even now she has cancer in her liver, spine, and lungs. Here’s what she has written in her valley of the shadow of death:

“I believe that God can heal in one instant. I also believe that ‘no good thing does he withhold,’ so there was something God was growing in the field that is me, and if God had pulled up all of this hardship too soon, it would have also pulled up all these miracles he did in my spirit.”¹

As she wrote in a May 3 blog post,

“Maybe we missed it—what God showed us when he first introduced himself: that he will crawl into the dirt to be near us, and he will fill our lungs with air when we don’t know how to breathe.”

When it comes to pain, God isn’t often in the business of taking it away. Instead, he adds to it. He is more of a giver than a taker. He doesn’t take away my darkness, he adds light. He doesn’t spare me of thirst, he brings water. He doesn’t cure my loneliness, he comes near. So why do we believe that when we are in pain, it must mean that God is far?

Call me cursed, call me lost, call me scorned. But that’s not all. Call me chosen, blessed, sought-after. Call me the one who God whispers his secrets to. I am the one whose belly is filled with loaves of mercy that were hidden for me. Even on days when I’m not so sick, sometimes I go lay on the mat in the afternoon light to listen for Him. I know it sounds crazy, and I can’t really explain it, but God is in there—even now. I have heard it said that some people can’t see God because they won’t look low enough, and it’s true. Look lower. God is on the bathroom floor.”

II. THE PROMISE: His Presence

There is really one solution to the problem of the valley, and only one. And it is enough. The answer is that the Lord is with us.

There are two important things to notice about this phrase. First, it is at the exact structural center of the psalm. Twenty-six Hebrew words before and twenty-six come after. This is a Hebrew poet’s clue that this verse is central to what the author is saying. Secondly, did you notice a change of pronoun?! Verses 1-3: it’s “He”, and now it is “You.” God becomes intensely personal in the valley. David is no longer speaking about the Shepherd but to him. It moves from an abstract concept to a personal relationship with the living God.

¹ <https://www.nightbirde.co/blog/room-for-air>

The psalmist says that he will not be afraid even in the darkest valley because God is with him, “for.” Such a simple phrase, one we use so often. But do we really understand what this means?!

In the movie *My Bodyguard*, Clifford is the new rich kid at Lakeview High School in Chicago. He is small and kind of geeky. There is a gang of bullies led by a guy named Moody who threaten kids to extort their lunch money. When Clifford gets tired of forking over his money, he decides to hire the class outcast, a large, sullen kid named Ricky Linderman, to be his bodyguard. Suddenly Clifford has a new bounce in his step as he walks the halls at school, because Ricky has his back. Now the plot is a bit more complex than that, but the image is so apropos. But now imagine that Ricky had hired Arnold Schwarzenegger as his bodyguard. How would he feel walking the halls of Lakeview High now, with the Terminator at his side?! He’d feel 10 feet tall, and Moody and his thugs would give him a wide berth.

And we’re worried about walking through a dark valley, with God at our side? The God who gathers the waters of the ocean in the palm of his hand, who puts Mt. Everest in a scale and weighs it, who marks off the heavens with his hand, the universe that if you were to travel at one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second (seven times around the world) would take you 93 billion years to go across? The God who with a word from his mouth created the sun, which produces the energy of 60 trillion Hiroshima bombs every second? And there are more stars like that in the universe than there are sands of grain on all the beaches in all the world. Now they think maybe ten times more! The God who parted the Red Sea in two and made water stand up like a wall; who sent simply one of his angelic messengers out of millions and in one night the angel killed one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrians; the God who spoke to the raging storm that was sinking the disciples’ boat and the wind and the waves heard his voice and obeyed him and were still. This God is with us and we’re still afraid?

Now, can you understand why when God told Moses to go and tell Pharaoh to let his people go and he promised in Exodus 3:12, “I will be with you”, he got so upset when Moses demurred? Or how he could tell Joshua in Joshua 1:9—as he prepared to go into the Promised Land and do battle with the giants there who had so terrified the people forty years earlier—to “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go”? Or how he could tell Gideon—a simple farmer who said he was the least in his father’s house which was from the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh—to go and fight the hordes of the Midianites because, Judges 6:16, “I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.” Or why, when the servant of Elijah looked out one morning and saw a vast army of horses and chariots of Syria surrounding Dothan, Elijah told him, “Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them” (2 Kings 6:16). Then he prayed that God would open the servant’s eyes that he might see, and when he did, he saw the mountain full of horses and chariots all around.

Or when Sennacherib the King of Assyria invaded Judah having wiped out Hamath and Arpad and Sepharvaim and Samaria, lapping them up like fire does water, God’s Word to His people was,

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him, for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles” (2 Chron. 32:7-8).

And the people took confidence from the words of Hezekiah king of Judah.”

The God who gives his people these words of assurance in Isaiah. 43:1-3a,

But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.’”

The God who one day in the person of his Son took on flesh and came down to live among us, to be Immanuel, God with us, to show us God’s grace and his truth in flesh and blood. For three years, the disciples saw what it meant that God was with us when Jesus multiplied food, healed the paralyzed, cleansed the leper, cured the deaf, gave sight to the blind, and raise the dead to life! There is nothing that can happen to us in this life that God with us cannot solve!

This Jesus then gave his followers an impossible task to do, to go and make disciples of all nations, but along with it gave the promise that he would be with them, to the end of the age. And when he gave them the commission again at the end of Luke, he said, wait, don’t go out to the nations yet, but wait until you have been clothed with power from on high. And so he had said it is better for you if I go away because unless I go the Comforter will not come to you but if I go I will send him to you, and he did, and the Holy Spirit came down in power on the disciples and filled them with the life of God so that God was no longer just *with* them, he was actually *in* them.

It is not the valley that matters or the darkness that discourages us or the dangers that threaten us; it is the God who is *with us* that matters!! If you can just see him today—in all of his glory and power and love and wisdom—it will bring light into your darkness and the size of your problems will shrink to their proper proportions. As Max Lucado said, “Don’t measure the size of the mountain; talk to the One who can move it. Instead of carrying the world on your shoulders, talk to the One who holds the universe on his. Hope is a look away.”²

For singles and those widowed who may be lonely, this is a precious truth. Loneliness doesn’t come from *being* alone; it comes from *feeling* alone.

“You may be facing death, but you aren’t facing death alone; the Lord is with you. You may be facing unemployment, but you aren’t facing unemployment alone; the Lord is with you. You may be facing marital struggles, but you aren’t facing them alone; the Lord is with you. You may be facing debt, but you aren’t facing debt alone; the Lord is with you.”³

He is for us, he is with us, he is in us! As God said in Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not with him also freely give us all things?!”

² <https://maxlucado.com/give-your-fears-to-your-father/>

³ Lucado, Max. 2003. *Traveling Light*. Waterville, Maine Thorndike Press.

But to the Christian heart, there may be this—the conviction that sorrow, when it comes, will not be evil, because God will be with us. Strange as it may sound, the presence of him who sends the sorrow is the best help to bear it. As Martin Luther once said,

“This presence of the Lord is not to be perceived with the five senses; faith alone sees it, which is sure of the fact, that the Lord is nearer to us than our own-selves.”

Let us think once more of the valley of the shadow of death, because this verse is quoted perhaps more than any other at funerals. I trust you have found comfort in it when you’ve lost a loved one. But now I want you to think of your funeral, of that day when, as Ecclesiastes says, the silver cord is broken and you pass from this world. Perhaps the scariest thing about dying is the unknown. What in the world happens when you take your last breath—which will one day, if the Lord tarries? Well, there’s only one who knows, and that is the One who has been to death—and back again! He is the Good Shepherd, who gave his life for the sheep, who entered death, for them, so that as in Hebrews 2:14,15, “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

In that final moment, Jesus, alone of all his children, was abandoned by his Father as he took our sin on himself and became sin for us and his Father could not look on any longer, until its full price was paid. And because he did that, we who believe in him are freed from the fear of death because we have a Shepherd who death can no longer touch who will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death and usher us safely into his heavenly Kingdom. He will be with us every step of the way until we see his face in glory.

III. THE PROTECTION: His Rod & Staff

While God, all by himself, is certainly enough for us in the valley, David now in the last part of the verse highlights two of a shepherd’s tools to help us understand exactly what God does to protect and guide us. Neither of these tools is familiar to modern urbanites like most of us are.

His Rod - This was a sturdy wooden stick that was used as a weapon to fight off wild animals who might have hoped to make an easy meal out of an otherwise defenseless flock of sheep. The rod was generally not used on the sheep, because beating a sheep doesn’t help at all.

Young David recounted an incident to King Saul in which he probably used his shepherd’s rod:

“Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it, and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it, and killed it” (1 Sam. 17:34–35).

The rod was a symbol of the Lord’s strength and protection.

His Staff - The staff, on the other hand, was a symbol of the Lord’s guidance and lovingkindness.

It was a long, slender stick, often hooked at the tip, used primarily to direct the flock. Sheep are notorious wanderers, and once away from the shepherd's watchful eye, they get into all sorts of trouble (Matt. 18:12–14). Sheep lack good vision and are easily frightened in new circumstances, especially where it's dark; and the presence of the shepherd calms them. The shepherd used his staff to keep his sheep out of danger and close to himself. If a sheep became trapped in a precarious position, the shepherd would loop the curved end of the staff around the neck of the sheep and retrieve it back to safety.

You see, we often think that the dangers in the valley come from without, but, just as often, they come from within. In the Fire Swamp, there are ROUS's who may attack you. But there is also the lightning sand, which, if you take a wrong step, will devour you. This was Job's fundamental problem. The Lord let him walk into a long, dark valley. He didn't do anything wrong to get there; where he got it wrong was in how he responded to being there. With anger and bitterness and an ultimate distrust of God (of which he repented in the end).

And so it is in our valleys. It is not just other people or circumstances or Satan himself who are threats; it is our own hearts. We need someone to guide us through and around these dangerous spots in the valley so that we make it out safely on the other side.

Ah, be not afraid of the Shepherd's crook. It is never used on you, save in mercy, to pull you back. The hard cold iceberg of trouble will melt in the warm gulf stream of divine sympathy.

“Yet David did not mean to say that he was devoid of all fear, but only that he would surmount it so as to go without fear wherever his shepherd should lead him” (John Calvin).

His rod and staff comfort us, give us peace because they protect us; but actually that's not quite a strong enough word. Means more like courage; it is not just emotional comfort but that we now have the strength to step forward and keep walking on the paths of righteousness until we make it home.

CONCLUSION

Are you in a valley today? This month or year? Remember, his promise and His protection. And best of all, the road through the valley eventually leads us to verse six.

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