

Psalm 23 – The Valley of the Shadow of Death

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Scripture: Psalm 23 (ESV)

¹ A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

Introduction

Psalm 23:4 must be one the most well-known verses in the Bible. We turn to this Psalm both in our time of need and for comfort. Usually, the context is that we do not have to fear death or darkness because God is with us and His presence gives us hope and strength.

“Valley of the shadow of death” – *“Tsalmlâveth”* literally means “the shade of death,” which we can translate to darkness or dark shadows; a specific type of darkness. The word valley here means a narrow gorge. Now a valley, dangerous as it is with avalanches, flash floods, predators, snakes, poisonous plants and outlaws, is at the same time the best route the yearly journey up to the mountain pastures because valleys have the easiest gradients, the best water sources and the best grazing for the journey.

Many notable Bible figures: Moses, Joseph and David, for example, made it to higher ground, but not without first going through the valley of the shadow of death. If you are going through a valley so deep and dark that it feels like everything is closing in on you, you are in good company – not because Moses, Joseph and David went through it (they proved it could

be done), but because as God was with them, He is with you.

Not “If” But “When”

Not fearing the valley of the shadow of death, finding strength and comfort is one thing, walking through the valley and experiencing what is happening is another. What I am saying is that your view and experience of the valley of the shadow of death depends on whether you are about to enter it, are in it or have just left it. However, no position can change the fact of God being with you. Your awareness of God will greatly influence your journey though.

The valley of the shadow of death is what it is and at some point, we will all experience it. Psalm 23:4 does not speak of “if you enter the valley of the shadow of death,” but “even though I walk through it.” The Psalmist – David – is not assuming that you and I will not experience this valley. That suffering, pain, hard and frightful times – let’s call them dark valleys – will be on our path is a certainty, there is no “if” about it, but a “when.”

Of this fact you can be so certain that you can look at a baby and say, “difficult times lay ahead for you in the years to come.” Indeed, God has not promised us a life without trials, suffering and hardship on this side of the grave. But He has promised us His peace (e.g., John 16:33).

While on this side of the grave, we are citizens of heaven on an evangelical assignment in a broken world.

What Does it Mean to Walk Through This Valley?

Firstly, You Will Also Exit the Valley

You go through the valley. That means in one the side and out on the other side. That’s what it means to go through something. Winston Churchill said some very true words, “If you’re going through hell, keep going.” The valley of the shadow of death is not a place to dwell or stop. Although it’s a dark and dangerous place to go through, it’s at the same time not a place to be feared!

Although the dark times can be ferocious, as with any storm, the rain does not last forever. It will pass. If we can see that pain, suffering, grief and tough times are a process

and that things will get better – because we are going through to the other side – we are less likely to stop or get stuck.

Our great challenge, however, is that in darkness, it is very often difficult to move forward. Sometimes we are paralysed by fear and indecision, meaning that there is so much happening that we simply don't know where to step next or what to hold onto. It may be that the pathway is not clear and that you don't know if you can trust the very ground, that you are standing on. That's why a shepherd leads and protects his sheep in this journey.

But know this: coming out the other side of the valley in safety and wisdom is not because of any other reason other than, as the verse says, "you are with me." God is both our safety in the valley and our guarantee of exiting the valley.

And as Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." God will not leave you in the valley to find your own way out.

Secondly, You Walk Through a Dangerous Place

Remember how I explained that the Hebrew speaks of the shade of death, meaning, a specific darkness?

You can go it alone or go it with God. These are your choices.

I don't think that sheep understand death, yet shepherding is the very imagery used in Psalm 23 before speaking of this dangerous valley and its "deathliness." Sheep have always struck me as animals that are extremely dependent on their shepherd. I have met people who choose to be independent in all areas of their life, including their spiritual life. It is as if they decide what to hand over to God and what to leave to self.

David writes, "The Lord is my shepherd." David uses the language of a shepherd and his sheep to describe our relationship with God because we are totally and fully dependent on Him. Sheep are fully dependent on their shepherd for food, water, leadership, protection and guidance as they move from place to place. Jesus is a good shepherd (John 10:11-18).

Sheep that think they know better or rely on anything than the shepherd certainly won't survive in the valley of the shadow of death.

Thirdly, You Go Through in Safety

When sheep enter the darkness of a valley, they enter under the protection and guidance of their shepherd, who will keep them safe and bring them onto the correct pathway, as we also read, "your rod and your staff, they comfort me." A shepherd would use a rod to fight off enemies and staff to guide and control his sheep. Comfort is found in both the active (fighting off) and passive (guidance) care of God.

This dangerous and dark valley is contrasted with verse 2's green pastures and still waters. And it here that we experience an "aha moment!" It is a shadow of death, a nearness of death, it is darkness.

A shadow itself is harmless – it can't hurt you, nor can it exist without light defining its shape.

Listen to John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Without the light of Christ, all is darkness, misery and death. No shadows. The presence of a shadow reminds us of two things:

1. God is with us (Immanuel – Matthew 1:23).
2. That under His protection and guidance, the evil, death, misery etc. might have a nearness to us and not a hold on us. As long as we are under the protection and guidance of Jesus, a shadow is harmless.

Allow me to repeat, a shadow itself is harmless – it can't hurt you, nor can it exist without light defining its shape:

- We want to see Jesus in all things and
- All things in light of Jesus.

Fourthly, Character is Built

Your character speaks of morality, honesty, ethics, charity etc. The fruit that you bear is

evidence of your salvation, flowing through gratefulness, as you set about the work of the Lord.

Billy Graham said, "Mountaintops are for views and inspiration, but fruit is grown in the valleys." It is from the valleys where you look toward the mountain tops, it is from the valleys where we pray Psalm 121:1, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?"

It is in the valleys that our need for Jesus manifests. Yes, we always need Him and we should always be in an immediate and therefore living relationship with Him, but as someone once said, "there is nothing like hardship to immediately improve one's prayer life."

Here is the thing, our mission field is more likely to be in a valley than on a mountain top. It takes Christian character to demonstrate the fruit of our salvation despite our circumstances. As we said, we want to see Jesus in all things and all things in the light of Jesus, meaning that behind a shadow is light. Without light, there would be no shadow and therefore no way of focussing on our Shepherd, and no way to identify dangerous shapes and sites.

Conclusion

Can you imagine that if somehow, the veil was lifted off of your future and all you could see was every bad decision you would make, every failure, disaster and hardship that lay ahead? Or perhaps right now, you are going through a disaster, failure or hardship and you must still face an uncertain tomorrow.

Fear no evil when you look into the darkness of today and tomorrow. Instead of fear, feel the presence of the Lord who will always be with you when the darkness is at its worst. The Psalmist having written about the valley of the shadow of death could face tomorrow and whatever the future may hold because the Lord was and is our Shepherd.

This is one of the most important things that we can teach our children and practically demonstrate to each other...always follow the Good Shepherd who will protect and care for you, no matter where you are or what life may bring. Amen.