

39. The Book of Psalms 23:4a

The Great Shepherd-Part 7

a message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
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Psalm 23:1–4 (NKJV)

¹ The Lord *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. ³ He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. ⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me...

As we come to this statement by David, it marks the beginning of the second half of this psalm where we've kind of 'shifted gears.'

Up until this point we get the picture in our minds eye of David as a sheep standing next to another sheep from a different flock and bragging to it about *his* Shepherd—"The Lord is my Shepherd!"

And as David is bragging about his Shepherd (one sheep to another)—it's as if during the course of the conversation, the Lord walks up and seeing Him David now turns and begins to address the Lord directly as the personal pronouns shift from "he" and "my" to "I" and "You."

At this point, David begins to pour out to the Lord his confidence in His protection and care towards him as a good shepherd cares for his sheep.

Now with regard to sheep, this statement of David's regarding "dark valleys" relates to the common practice of leading the sheep into the high country during the hot days of summer.

Both in Israel and on our Western sheep ranches, this division of the year is commonplace.

Author (and one time shepherd) Phillip Keller in his book, "A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23" talks about this—

"During the cold winter months, when it was too cold and snowy for the sheep up high—the shepherd would keep the sheep down in the lowlands and there in a protected or sheltered place they would feed.

But when Spring came and the snow melted—as the winds turned warmer and the sun grew hotter (as summer drew near)—the diligent shepherd would begin to lead his flock to higher ground. That meant he would lead them up the mountain trail, gradually working their way up the mountain behind the receding snow. By late summer they would be well up on the remote alpine meadows above the timberline.

But the shepherd would lead them up the mountain trail to higher elevations where it would be cooler and where fresh mountain springs or rivers from melting snow would provide refreshment and where green mountain meadows would provide pasture."

He goes on to explain that part of the journey between the lowlands and the highlands would take the sheep through valleys of deep darkness—valleys where the 'shadow of death' would be.

These were dangerous, threatening places where wolves would be lurking, and the terrain would be rough and rocky.

Sometimes on one side of the trail the mountain would go straight up and on the other side of the path there would many times be a drop off of 50 to 100 feet into the raging river below or into a rocky canyon. So, to get to the mountain top the shepherd would have to, many times, take the sheep through some pretty dangerous valleys.

Valleys of deep darkness where there was the fear of the unknown—but these valleys were the only way to get to the mountain top. And the shepherd's presence was the sheep's only source of comfort and security—hence David's statement,

"Yea, though I walk through the deep, dark, dangerous valley of potential death I will fear no evil for You are with me."

Keller said that during this time of moving slowly up the mountain trails, the flock was entirely alone with the shepherd—it was a time of intimacy with him as they were under his most personal attention day and night.

So here in Psalm 23:4—David imagined himself a sheep on this journey, making his way up the mountain through dangerous valleys of darkness, remembering that when he was a shepherd, how he was careful to lead his flock through these dark and dangerous places.

The shepherd knew the way like the back of his hand, so the sheep had nothing to fear, because—he knew exactly where he was going and how to get there. And David applies all of this to himself as a sheep, and to the Lord as his Shepherd.

That even though the Lord as our Shepherd may have to lead our lives through some pretty dark valleys, where the fear of the unknown will grip our hearts—let's remember before we panic or slip into hopelessness and despair that—He knows what He's doing and where He's taking our lives!

Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT)

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

So, like David we can say, ***"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'm not going to fear because I know He is with me and He knows what He's doing!"***

In fact, the language David uses is very comforting in and of itself when you find yourself facing a dark valley of some kind—***"Yea, though I walk through the valley..."***

In other words, *"I'm going to pass through this valley—the darkness will only be temporary, God isn't going to leave me here—I'm going to see the sunshine in my life once again!"*

Psalm 30:5 (NKJV)

⁵ ...Weeping may endure for a night, but joy *comes* in the morning.

Remember, 2 things when you find yourself going through a valley of deep darkness—He is with you; and you will pass through it.

Let's apply this to our lives as Christians. We often speak of wanting to move to 'higher ground' with God. We long to move to new heights of spirituality with Jesus—a more intimate life with Him. We want to (or we should want to) climb above the level of mediocrity in our Christian life.

We talk about ‘*mountain top experiences*’ with God and we envy those who have reached higher ground in their walk with the Lord. But all too often we have mistaken ideas as to how this takes place.

We imagine ourselves being “*air lifted*” if you will, to the mountain top through some incredible spiritual experience where all of a sudden “*the Spirit falls on me and suddenly I’m standing on the mountain top with God!*” This is not the way it happens.

Remember in Matthew 17 when Peter, James and John stood on the mountain top where they saw Jesus’ glory and where God appeared to them? How did they get there? They had to follow Jesus up the mountain to the top—no doubt passing through some dark valleys or canyons.

You see, there are seasons in your Christian life where the constant sunshine (metaphorically speaking of good times and blessings) in your life starts to dry you out spiritually (“*all sunshine makes a desert*”).

When that begins to happen, God will try to lead you to higher ground—but we can’t move to higher ground (places of intimacy and fellowship with Him) unless we first pass through dark valleys (trials, adversity, sorrow, hardship, pain, etc.)

Even though they’re dark and dismal and can be very frightening, where I’m tempted to let the fear of the unknown grip my heart and shake my faith—as David proclaimed, “*I’m not going to fear because You are with me!*”

We have to learn to look at the dark valleys in life as actually places of blessing where faith is grown and the victory is really won! The mountain top is nothing more than the culmination of my valley experience—in other words, God rewards us with the mountain top for persevering through the valley!

Someone has said that “*The only blessing on the mountain top—are those you bring up from the valley!*”—but only if you approach the valley with praise.

(See 2 Chronicles 20:1-29 and King Jehoshaphat and the Valley of Berachah (blessing).)

You know you’re growing in your Christian life and moving to higher ground with God when He takes you through some deep, dark, valley and in your heart there is a quiet acceptance and a calm assurance in the face of the adversity and the fear of the unknown—because “*He is with me!*”

Some Christians believe that valleys are from the devil and that it’s God will for His kids that we live continually on the mountain top (on a spiritual high)—

Matthew 17:1–4 (NIV)

¹ After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. ⁴ Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

In other words, Peter is saying, “*Let’s just live on this mountain top!*” But understand, we don’t grow on the mountain top—we grow in the valley (adversity and suffering). Because the valley is where spiritual warfare takes place (when Jesus and His disciples came down from the mountain into the valley, they were confronted with spiritual warfare—Matthew 17:9, 14-21)

“But I don’t think that’s fair that God should put us through adversity.”

Job said it best, *“Shall we accept only good from God and not adversity?”*

You see, the purpose of God in the lives of His children is to build character in us—which is the purpose of trials.

Trials have a way of setting us free from the things that have us bound (bad habits, anger, fear, addictions etc.)—probably because they drive us to our knees in prayer and dependance upon God which is where our strength comes from—even as Paul said:

2 Corinthians 12:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

But again, trials have a way of setting us free from whatever the devil is using to bind us and hinder our fellowship and effectiveness for God.

In Daniel Chapter 3 we read the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the fiery furnace. As we read, the only thing that was destroyed in that fiery furnace (trial) were the cords that bound them! In fact, it was in the fiery furnace where God met them and had fellowship with them. (Daniel 3:24-25)

Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi (Acts 16) sang praises to God at *midnight* (a dark place they found themselves in)—and the place was shaken and their prison doors were flung open!

When you accept trials and adversity as being from God, if you accept them and see them as a blessing and not a curse and you face them with praise—it will destroy the cords that bind you and cause the prison doors that confine you to be flung open and set you free.

James 1:2–4 (NKJV)

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Another blessing in the shepherd taking the sheep to the mountain top to find green pastures is that—it is the most well-watered route.

Here the sheep find refreshing mountain streams all the way up.

Phillip Keller—

“During the summer months long drives can be hot and tiresome where the sheep experience intense thirst—how glad they are for the cool mountain streams along the valley route where they can stop and be refreshed!”

As Christians sooner or later, we’re going to discover that it is in the valleys of our lives that we are refreshed by God Himself.

There have been trials in my life where things looked so dark and hopeless that I felt I couldn’t go on and if it wasn’t for the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who refreshed me as I stopped and prayed to Him or spent time drinking in the ‘water of His Word’ (Ephesians 5:26)—I’m not sure I’d be here today.

There can be some real blessings in your valley experiences for others because only those who have been through dark valleys can comfort and encourage others in similar situations—which is the whole definition of ministry (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

One author—

“Only those who have been through such dark valleys can console, comfort and encourage others. We pray or sing the hymn, requesting God to make us an inspiration to someone else. We want instinctively to be a channel of blessing to other lives. The simple fact is that just as water can only flow in a ditch or a channel or a valley—so too the life of God can only flow in blessing through the valleys that have been carved and cut into our own lives by excruciating circumstances and experiences. For example, the one best able to come forward and minister to those who have suffered loss, is the person who himself or herself has lost a loved one. The one who can best minister to a broken heart is the one who has known a broken heart. Most of us do not want valleys in our lives. We shrink from them with a sense of fear and foreboding. Yet in spite of our worst misgivings, God can bring great benefit and lasting benediction to others through those valleys. Let us not always try to avoid the dark times, the distressing days—they may well prove to be the way of greatest refreshment to ourselves and to those around us.”

(Mention Erika Fry being gang raped but then being sent to Africa by the Lord to minister to the women of a tribe that were routinely raped by gangs of men in that tribe—‘Clay in God’s Hands’ ministry)

As we bring this to a close—there are blessings in the valley—blessings for others that come as the result of our pain and tears:

Psalm 84:5–7 (NIV)

⁵ Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baca [‘weeping’], they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools [‘blessings’]. ⁷ They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion [Heavenly Zion].

If we want to be a channel of blessing to others, then we must understand that just as water can only flow through a ditch or channel or valley—so too in the Christian life the blessing and power of God can only flow through the channels that have been carved into our lives by God through the chisel of adversity.

Only the Christian who has come to realize that dark valleys are just a part of the Christian life, and only the Christian who has learned to have faith in their Shepherd will be able to walk with Him and encourage others along the way.

Dark valleys are a given in the Christian life—even as Jesus said, *“In the world you will have tribulation...”*

I believe the end of verse 3 and the beginning of verse 4 in Psalm 23 are connected thoughts—**“He leads me in the right paths for His name’s sake—Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”**

There are no mistakes when God is leading our lives, everything is in the sovereign will and plan of God—including and especially those dark valleys! Even as Paul the Apostle said: *“And we know that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.”* (Romans 8:28)

Therefore, since all things are from God (except for the circumstances we bring on ourselves through sin) and are working for our good—therefore *“in all things we are to give thanks to God!”* (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Yet it's only when I'm walking with Him in obedience to His will for my life that I can say like David—"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me..." (verse 4)

As we said last time following Jesus as our Shepherd is not always easy because the '*right paths*' He leads us on are not necessarily the easiest paths! But by His grace, I can handle the dark valleys if I know that He is leading me and is with me—because I trust His purpose for my life.

What scares me is walking into a dark valley on my own!

A valley that He is not leading me to walk through—a valley that I find myself in through my own stubborn rebellion! Those valleys will only lead to heartache, sorrow, pain and sometimes even death. How much better to turn your life over to the Good, and Great Shepherd to lead you in the right paths for your life. Yet so many are determined to shepherd their own lives instead of following Jesus as their Shepherd.

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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