

Harris Creek Baptist Church
Jonathan Pokluda
Series: The Shepherd in the Psalm
April 25, 2021

The Shepherd Comforts and Protects

Psalm 23:4

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever – Amen! It is great to be with you. If you are a guest with us, welcome home! I am so glad that you can be a part of this family this morning as we dive into the Word of God. If we have not met, my name is JP Jonathan Pokluda – and I have the privilege of serving on staff here at Harris Creek. I want to start with a question. Have you ever been at a sporting event, and you are sitting in the wrong section? You know what I mean? Has that ever happened to you? You go and you are cheering for the visitor, but you are sitting in the home section. You are cheering for the red team, and you look around you and you just see a sea of blue people. And you do not want to cheer too loudly, because they seem kind of angry and they might turn on you. And you are kind of sitting in that awkward tension. You feel as though you are in the wrong place as at it relates to this event. Has this ever happened to anyone? Good.

This happened to me in the strangest sporting venue you can imagine. Really, the worst one that this could possibly happen in. It was an ultimate fighting championship tournament kind of thing. Cage fighting, MMA, anybody? It was last night...yeah so. I was not there last night, there was one on TV last night – I heard. So, if you are not familiar with this it is two people in a cage beating one another up. So, I am there, and it is a little complicated so I will walk you through – bear with me. My friend – his name is Brandon – is an Olympic gold medal wrestler. He is literally the best in the world at some wrestling moves. He is training for this fight, my childhood hero, Ken Shamrock. Ken Shamrock is fighting a guy named Kimbo Slice. This fight is taking place in Miami and Kimbo lives and is from Miami. Ken Shamrock is not.

So, I get to go over there with my friend Brandon who is training Ken. You guys look a little lost and confused, let me get you some pictures. Okay? (Picture shows on screen of Ken and Kimbo – Kimbo is significantly larger than Ken.) The large gentleman to the left is affectionately called Kimbo Slice. And this guy to the right is my childhood her, Ken Shamrock. And they are going to fight in a cage. Everyone with me? Great! So, my friend Brandon is training the guy on the right, Ken Shamrock. And so, I am there with Brandon and Brandon gets mad respect in this arena and these venues. So, Ken Shamrock was kind enough to give me a bunch of Ken

Shamrock gear, swag, clothes, drip if you will. So, I have my Ken Shamrock hat, my Ken Shamrock shirt, I have even got some pants that say Ken Shamrock down the thigh. And as I walk in there with Brandon, people just get out of his way. They are asking for his autograph and taking pictures; they love Brandon! They do not even notice the way that I am dressed.

So, Brandon goes to the back to be with the fighters and whatever they are going to do. This was a long time ago by the way, stop judging me! I feel it from some of you like I cannot believe the preacher would...this was a long time ago! So, Brandon goes to the back, and I am sitting in the stands in Miami where Kimbo is from with a lot of Ken Shamrock gear on. And I realize that I am a little famished. I am kind of hungry. So, I need to get something to eat, I will go to the concession stand. This was a terrible idea! I go to the concession stand, right, there in Miami where Kimbo Slice is from. I have all of my Ken Shamrock gear on, and this guy comes up to me. Now keep in mind that everyone there is full of alcohol and testosterone – I do not want to stereotype, but I will. So, this guy comes and just squares me up. He goes, “Nice shirt...” And I said, “Oh yeah this, it probably comes in your size – my friend gave it to me.” And then this other guy comes to my right and says, “Cute hat...” And I was like, “oh yeah?” And then their other friend came up to my left and said, “Yeah we really like those pants...” And then all of the sudden it dawned on me; they do not really like my pants – they are just saying that. And I realize that I am in Miami, where Kimbo Slice is from, with a lot of Ken Shamrock gear and Brandon’s not with me.

Here is my point in saying that. Who you are with in times of trouble really matters. Okay? Some of you are like finally he gets to the point. I get it, I feel that. Who you are with in times of trouble really matters. So today, we are talking about the darkest valleys. I want you to know that your protection comes from the proximity with which you are to the Shepherd. How close to the Shepherd are you? And as a sheep this idea really matters! So, if you are just joining us for the first time or you were not here last week, we are in this series called The Shepherd in the Psalm. It is a look at Psalm 23 – the most famous chapter in the Old Testament. And today, I am going to be in the verse of the most famous chapter in the Old Testament which I believe to be the most famous verse in the entire Old Testament. Most well-known. Featured in rap songs, featured on coffee mugs, featured in movies – we talked about that last week.

The subject last week was that the Shepherd leads. He leads his sheep. **“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”** He makes me lie down, He leads me, He guides me. That is what we talked about last week. Today, **“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”** Even though I walk through the darkest valley...

Today I want to talk about how the Shepherd comforts and protects you in the valleys. This is important to you, because everyone hear and everyone reading this is either coming out of a valley, you are in the middle of a valley, or you are headed towards a valley. This is true for every single one of you. You are coming out of a valley. You are right in the middle of a valley and as a last resort you might have decided to come to church. I need hope, I need to fill my heart with some sort of hope. I need to remind myself that there is a God. I am in this valley, my marriage is in this valley, my child is in this valley, my work is in this valley, I am in a situation

where I need to be reminded that I have a good Shepherd. Welcome home. You are not in one? You are not coming out of one? You are headed towards one. Such is life. And so, our Shepherd comforts and protects us.

I think there are so many of us that every Sunday we come into a place like this, and we sing, “Oh no you never let go...” and you walk through those doors; you go back to your car; you find yourself in a valley; and you ask, “God where are you? Why have you left me and forsaken me? Why did you let me go? How come I am here all alone? How did I get here? What did I do wrong? Why did I find myself in this valley?” We say that God is with us, we sing that God is with us, we pray that God is with us, we praise that God is with us. But when we hit the valley, we feel all by ourselves. It does not seem that He is with us. And for some of you, you begin to question everything!

And what does it mean that He protects us? Because I do not want to just hit you with some Christian platitudes this morning and say God you are protector and you leave out of here and here is the truth – Christians die, they get cancer, they get disease, bad things happen. So how does God protect us? If the same things happen to us that happen to non-believers how does God protect us? These are really important theological ideas that we should be going to the Word for answers to them or else we sound delusional out there. “God’s my protector” and then you get in a car wreck. How did He protect you?

The promise of the Scripture today is that you do not have to be afraid. I have always taught it as He protects you, but the word that is actually used is that He comforts you. In the valley, which you will go through, He comforts you. And you want to make sure that you are in close proximity to the Shepherd.

As I move through this, verse 4, we are going to look at one verse today. We are going to look at how the Shepherd is with us, how the Shepherd protects us, and how the Shepherd comforts us in this verse. As a reminder, the metaphor in the text God is the Shepherd, you are the sheep. Sheep are the most defenseless animal in the Animal Kingdom. Okay? They have no defense mechanism. They are the most vulnerable animal in the entire Animal Kingdom. This is the role that the Scripture say that you play in the world. And the only way that a sheep is protect, is if they are close by the Shepherd. That idea moving through this Psalm is absolutely important! Of paramount importance. So much of what I researched for this Psalm is through *A Shepherd’s Look at Psalm 23* by Phillip Keller. I commend that to you again if you have not picked it up and you are not reading it.

This is what it says, verse 4, **“Even though I walk through the darkest valley,”** first part of that Psalm, **“Even though I walk through the darkest valley,”**. And that “even though” is to say that there is hope coming. That it is going to pull up; there is going to be a but... There is going to be this idea that something else that redeems is coming. Even though – even though I am sad...you would assume, well I know I will be happy. Or even though I am poor...you would assume I have something redemptive coming. So, he says, “Even though I walk through the valley.”

1. The Shepherd is with us in the Dark Valleys.

That is important! The Shepherd has not left us in the dark valleys, He is with us in the dark valleys. Let me tell you about these valleys for a minute. In the summer, sheep have to move through the valley to the tablelands. This is true. They graze in the pasture lands and then when summer hits, they start their journey. They have eaten all of the pasture's food and so they have to move to another field. And the only way to get to the tablelands, where there is still grass for them to eat, is they have to move through the valley. Now what is a valley? We do not have valleys. We think of valleys in South Texas. We do not have valleys in Waco. So, what is a valley? We have Valley Mills, but that is not the valley he is talking about.

In the Middle East, there are these things called sekas. They are really pathways through rock formations. There is a wall on the right and a wall on the left and you walk through the middle. The closest example that we have here in Waco is almost like the Brazos River. There are parts of the Brazos River where there are cliffs on either side and the river in the middle. Imagine that with no river in the middle and just dry lands. That is where the sheep go through.

Here is what you need to know! In the valley, the sheep are the closest to the predator. Why? Because the predators live in those cavern walls. In those stone walls, that is where the wolves are; that is where the cougars live. That is where their dens and caves are. They live in there. So, in the valleys the sheep are closest to that which seeks to steal, kill, and destroy them. Likewise, because of this natural perimeter, in the valley the sheep is closest to the Shepherd. The Shepherd is the only hope that sheep have for survival in the valley. I want you to know something. That Shepherd is intentionally taking them through that valley where they will be close to their enemy and the Shepherd is leading.

See what happens when we hit a valley, is we start to question. Our theology gets all out of whack. "God what did I do for you to put me here? Why are you not leading me anymore? Why did you take your hands off of the wheel? Why did you leave me? Why did you forsake me even when you said you would not?" And this text is saying no, the Shepherd is still leading you through the valley, THROUGH the valley. No to the valley, to leave you in the valley. But leading you through the valley to the tablelands. To the higher green grass for you to eat. For you to have your fill. A place where you are protected. But to get there, you have got to go through the valley.

Jesus said we would have valleys. John 16:33 – **"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."** These are circumstances – you understand the metaphor, right? Valleys – job loss, break-ups, divorce, heartache, diagnoses, despair, disease, depression, death, cancer.

My friend took his five-year old, thinking he had mono, to the doctor. It was not Mono. It was Acute Lymphoma. An aggressive form of cancer in a five-year-old. That diagnosis was not the finish line. That diagnosis was the starting line of systematic suffering at the hands of medical professionals. At that moment what my friend signed up for was to stand on this side of a window and watch his son be poked, prodded, and poisoned. Screaming, "Daddy help! Daddy it hurts!" All the while he has to be behind the window. Restrain him, regularly. And he

would tell you, if he were here, he would tell you, “You don’t want to determine who your Shepherd is for the first time, you do not want to ask who your Shepherd is on the 9th floor of Children’s Medical Center.” That is not the time to figure out who you are following. Right now, you have to resolve God when I walk through that door whatever comes my way You are my Shepherd. You are the one I trust. You are the One I am going to follow. Not my desires, not my wants, not my fears – You are the one I follow.

I told you last week, while I was at FM 72. Last week at about 10:30 Monica calls and says, “Hey I am taking Weston to the Emergency Room. He is not breathing well. He is sick.” And I have baggage, let me be fully transparent with you. There is a whack theology that sits at the foundation of everything I believe from my childhood. So, when that happens, what I tempted to believe is “Here we go. This is where you get me. You are going to take my son from all the things I have done before I knew you. I get it.” And you might say, “That escalated quickly.” I agree. It is just where my head goes. And what I have to do, is I sit in my truck, and I say, “Hey God. I know you are good. I just want to commit to you right now – if you take him, I will still worship You. I am not going anywhere. I want to declare out loud that regardless of what happens.” And this feels silly because Weston is fine! He is totally fine. He is running around in the other room right now, but this is the conversation that happened with God, out loud in my truck. “You take him, I am going to worship You. I am going to continue to praise you.”

But here is the truth, lest you think “Oh, what a man of great faith.”, I did not have to prove it. You understand? I did not have to prove it. Some of you are here today - sitting in this room, watching from home - and you have proved it. You know what I mean? There are people here who have lost children to death, to disease. I mean went to bed fine, did not wake up – those parents are here. Suicide. Murder. They are here. Having a still-born in the hospital – this time should be a celebration and it is not. There is great mourning. Those people are here. Miscarriage – you are here. I know you are here. And you sing, “*Oh no you never let go...*” you are here singing that, and you are proving it.

Can I tell you something about sheep? Sometimes they cannot see the Shepherd. Sometimes they have to follow the sheep who are following the Shepherd. I want to declare to you, I want to honor you, and just say that we are following you as you follow Him in your dark valley. That is the reality. You are here, you are proving it, you are singing praises to a God in your suffering, and we are learning from you, and you are teaching us. And I am thankful. I am thankful for you.

It says, “**the darkest valley**”, see the valley, at the low point, the wall hides the sun, and it casts a shadow on the cave walls. And what happens for a sheep in the darkness is that a rock looks like a wolf. They are scared animals – in fact to say synonymous with scared we say sheepish. You are sheep like, you are scared, you are afraid. Sheep will freeze in their own shadow. If a sheep cannot see the Shepherd, and it gets dark, it will just lock up. And what happens is that if he is leading you through the valley and you lock up, you get separated from the pack. Right?

The pack continues to move forward, and you get isolated and at that point, friends this is a message for the Church right here, at that point you are lunch.

It is your greatest temptation in the valley to say, “Nah man, I cannot go to Life Group tonight. Surely you understand. You know what we are going through. You know what just happened. No, listen in this season we just need to pull back a little bit from church. We are really struggling.” No that is the worst thing you can do! The worst thing you can do! Right? You get stuck in that valley. The pack moves forward, and you find yourself by yourself. What you do if somebody in your Life Groups says, “Hey I can’t make it tonight. You know what we are going through.” You go over, you knock on the door, and you say, “Hey, we are here. We are coming in. Get out of our way. We are going to pray for you. We brought dinner. We got you.” You show up; you shut up; and you meet a need. Resist the urge to say something profound and care for them. Be the flock. Be the herd around them. Care for them.

We have got to keep moving in the valley. Do not be separated from the Shepherd in the valley. Who you are with, in the dark valleys, really matter. He says this, **“I will fear no evil, for you are with me”**. **“I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”**

2. We are Protected by the Shepherd’s Presence.

Now I learned this passage in NIV (New International Version) 1984’ – the ’84 version. They shifted it in 2011. I learned **“even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will not fear for you are with me.”** I will not fear – anyone else learned that version? I will not fear for You are with me. This verse really ministered to me this week and here is why. I woke up at 4:30 a.m. Wednesday morning. 4:30 in the morning and I could not sleep. If I am completely transparent with you, I just sensed an evil presence. And I know that is weird. I know that we are Baptist, and we do not talk like that, but I talk like that because the Bible talks like that. There was an evil presence – there was something dark. You know? And so, I woke up and it just seemed to follow me throughout my day. And so, I told my wife, I just want you to know that I sense an attack today. I am being attacked today. She is an amazing woman and she stopped right there and prayed for me and prayed for the Lord’s protection. She prayed for clarity of mind. And she just prayed for me which is the greatest thing you can do in that situation. Right?

Then I went to prepare and write this message. And so, I am off to the races – I will not fear, I will not fear, I will not fear but then I looked in the Hebrew. In the Hebrew, there is this word Ra, which is evil. (JP aggressively pronounces this word.) That is the word for evil in Hebrew. And it is there, it does not say I will not fear – it says I will fear no evil. It was just the Lord’s kindness to remind me I am not afraid of you. I have my Shepherd. I have got a Shepherd with me. I am not afraid of you. I do not need to fear. Now he seeks to steal, kill, and destroy – the Scripture says that. Some of us, you need to sit in that unsettling feeling that you are being hunted. I do not think we think about that enough. That there is an enemy that hates you. He hates your family. He hates your marriage. He hates your children. He hates your faith. He hates everything about you, and he is after you. Right? You have got to know that. I do not know that we give consideration to that enough. That he is leading you to death.

And I have got to tell you something really, really important about him as it relates to you. He, the enemy, is in no way – no even a little bit – afraid of you. There is nothing even remotely intimidating about you. So, when you sense that the enemy is after you, you do not want to pull

out your 5th grade Tie Quan Do. That is not the time to show your Brazilian Ju Jitsu moves. You do not have what it takes to beat him. He is not remotely intimidated by you. But he is TERRIFIED of your Shepherd. Terrified! Proximity really matters in situations of protection. You want to remain close to the Shepherd.

Let me show you some things. 1 Peter 5:8 – **“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”** The Scripture says he is a lion. Someone remind me what the Scripture says we are. (Someone in the crowd bleats like a sheep.) Yeah... Did you guys hear about that time the sheep beat up the lion? Me neither... Me neither. Alright? A lion has never looked at a sheep and thought “Oh no, what am I going to do?” No. A lion looks at a sheep and thinks, “Oh dinner! This is amazing someone served me up some food.” It says, **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy”** John 10:10. This is his modus operandi; this is his mission statement; this is what he is trying to do. Then Ephesians 4:27 says, **“...do not give the devil a foothold.”** This is what happens when you sin. When you go to that hashtag, you go that site, you say that thing, you hang out with those people, you drink that stuff, you smoke – whatever your thing is. When you go too far or you have crossed that line of what is holy, you have just cracked open the door. You are like, “Come on in. Come on in Lion, there is a sheep in here.” Right? Ephesians 4:27 **“...do not give the devil a foothold.”** 1 Peter 5:9 – **“Resist him, standing firm in the faith...”** Resist him. Listen to James 4:7 – **“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”** This is good news! So, I do not have to give myself over to him, I can resist him, and he leaves. Ephesians 6 says, this is important, **“Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”** We do not talk about that enough.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. You are not going to win in your strength. Your only hope for victory is to remain close to the Shepherd. Without the protection of the Shepherd, you are lunch. But in the valley the sheep are closest to the Shepherd. God is with you in the valleys. You have heard me say a dozen times now, and I won’t stop. I will keep saying it because it is important. If dependence is the goal, weakness is the advantage. If dependence is the goal, weakness is the advantage. Here is what I might say about this passage. If closeness to the Shepherd is the goal, the valley is the advantage. If closeness to the Shepherd is the goal, the valley is the advantage because in the valley we are the closest to the Shepherd.

And do you see what happens in this text? Something really profound happens in this poetic literature. Listen. There is a pronoun shift. **“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. For even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not fear for You are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me.”** There is a pronoun shift. He goes from talking about his daddy, to his daddy. My daddy is the biggest and the strongest. My daddy will beat your daddy up. My daddy is so smart. My daddy... Hey daddy! How are you doing? I know that you are with me. Sometimes we sing songs about God, sometimes we sing songs to God. Some people talk a lot about God. Some people talk a lot to God. For the believer, we must do both. A balanced doctrine is a lot of talking about God and a lot of talking to God. And what happens in the valley, David goes to pray. He is

not just talking about his Daddy in the valley anymore. In the valley, he is talking to his daddy. In moments of danger, we rely on relationship. In moments of danger, we rely on relationship.

The greatest example I can give you of this is this scene in the Lion King. Okay? Simba, he is out in the wild – baby cub Simba, by the way. Little bitty lion, Simba. And he wanders into a cave and then the hyenas wander in there. Do you know the scene? The hyenas come into the cave and they back Simba up against the wall. And Simba is like, “But I am a lion!” and so he lets out this roar – but his roar is more like a pipsqueak bicycle horn. And the hyenas begin to laugh, because that is the kind of hyenas they are - the laughing kind. So, they start laughing at him thinking “we are about to devour you little lion cub”. And then what happens really quickly in the scene is Mufasa – the king of the jungle – comes up behind Simba. And for just a moment, the hyenas cower down, and Simba thinks it is him. He is like, “Yeah, you are afraid of me.” And then Mufasa lets out that roar – ROOOAAARRRR. And just with a swoop of the paw takes out the hyenas, right? The Gospel according to Disney.

You guys are all looking at me – kind of leaning forward if I am honest. But that is the best picture that I can give you of what it looks like to go against Satan. It is not an “I am not afraid of you because I” it is “I am not afraid of you because He”. I have a bigger lion. It is “cute” you are a lion; I have the Lion of Judah. Do you understand? My lion is bigger than your lion. Infinitely so! I have got a Shepherd, not to mix metaphors, but my Shepherd is stronger than you.

“Your rod and your staff they comfort me.” “Your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

3. We are Comforted by the Shepherd's Presence.

In the valley the Shepherd risks His life. You understand? As he goes through that, he knows the predators are right there and he is going to be near them. So, what he does is he puts his life between that which wants to eat the sheep and the sheep – he is in the middle. And he is like, “to get to the sheep you have to get through me.” And he is risking his life, speaking in the human narrative. Right? This is the metaphor that we have. And what I want you to know is he is saying, “Hey, the Shepherd is with you in the valley.” But it is so easy to read that and think the Shepherd was with David in the valley; the Shepherd was with them in the valley – Old Testament. I want you to know the Shepherd is still with us. The Shepherd is still with us in the valley. I am going to show you this really carefully in this text. We have the Shepherd's presence. His rod and His staff, they comfort us.

What does the presence of God look like today? His Word and His Spirit, they comfort us. Rod and staff; Word and Spirit. Phillip Keller makes this connection. It does not spell it out in the text, I want to just announce that clearly. I want to teach the Bible accurately. But I think it is certainly true that the presence of God, that we have, is His Word and His Holy Spirit. So let us just talk about that for a second.

This is what a rod would look like. (JP has a Shepherd's rod in his hands.) Sometimes it would swell on the end and be a little weighted on the end. It is an extension of the Shepherd's right hand. Wolf comes up, BOOM, crack his skull. Cougar comes up, BAM, cracked skull. This is the rod. The rod is used for correction and protection. Hardheaded sheep doing something stupid

– bop (JP hits his hand and exclaims Ow). Wolf, cougar, correction, and protection. What else is used for correction and protection? The Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. The Word of God. The Bible, it tells us where to go. So, it says, “Woah, no. Do not step over there. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only that which is helpful for building others up.” “Woah, no. Do not step over there. Do not be angry. For man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” It corrects us and it protects us.

Jesus’, He is face to face with Satan in the wilderness – Matthew 4. Satan is telling Him lies, because that is what he does, and what does Jesus respond with? Scripture is correct. Anyone know what Scripture? He responds three times from Deuteronomy. His three favorite memory verses from Deuteronomy. Someone tell me your favorite memory verse from Deuteronomy. Or maybe give me your three favorites. If that was our only way to overcome the Prince of Darkness, is to respond with our favorite memory verses from Deuteronomy – but it protects us. Holding fast to that truth in the valley – I cannot tell you how powerful it is. My buddy, when his five-year-old is being poked, prodded, and poisoned, he returns to the Word of God and says, “What is true? What is true?” Never will you leave me nor forsake me. I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. You care for the birds. Do not worry about tomorrow. Okay – right. It protects you and corrects you.

The rod is what is used to inspect the sheep after they have been lost. You bring them closely, run it through their wool, parasites - things that want to destroy them. The Word of God does this. James talks about how we examine it and then examine our lives and see what is out of place. How are we doing with that? Some of us, we feel like the Word entangles us, “It does not make sense. It is just another thing to do!” No, no, no – it is your lifeline. It protects you – it is God’s clearest voice in your life. How does God speak to us? Through His people – yes. Through promptings of the Holy Spirit – yes. The clearest way God speaks to us also is through His Word. The written Word of God. It is the voice of God in our lives. We have it! He has left us here with it – not to flounder.

Then there is this other tool, the staff. The rod is correction and protection; the staff is salvation and direction. Saving sheep. One falls into the river – this hook end – this little thing it is usually curved out right here and has a little notch so that you can get it around a sheep’s neck and pull them out of whatever they are stuck in. Reach down into the pit and pull them out. So, saving and directing. A shepherd will put the staff on the left of the sheep’s neck, and it will go right. Put it on the right side of the sheep and it will go left. The Shepherd directs the sheep with their staff. And this is what the Holy Spirit does in our life. Not only does the Holy Spirit save you; His work is not done when He saves you. He continues to direct you. God is alive and active!

We do not think that He has just saved us and left us there to wander and flounder. He continues to work in our lives through the Holy Spirit; the one that Francis Chan calls the “Forgotten God”. We cannot forget this third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit. We do not talk about – another thing we do not talk about enough - God’s Holy Spirit is alive and active. And He has desires for us; and He speaks to us; and He is directing us.

This is what Jesus said... Remember Jesus? The One we follow. Who died for our sins on the cross – we celebrate it at Easter. He raised from the dead, and it is by Him our wounds are healed. Jesus, He is so great – right? The Son of God; God incarnate. The story of Christmas is God’s literal presence came here. But do you know what Jesus said? He said, “I’m leaving, and it is good for you that I am leaving. Because if I didn’t leave – John 16:7 **“But I tell you the truth it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you. The Holy Spirit will still be with you.”**

This is the staff that would be used to put a baby ewe back next to his mom, so the mother does not reject him or her. This is the staff that brings the sheep near for inspection. The staff that lifts the sheep out of danger. The staff that guides the sheep. The reason that we have comfort in the valley is because the Creator of the heavens and the earth is literally with us. He is with us. He has not forsaken us. And so, we are comforted.

Remember last week my wife does not like when I travel – or she does not sleep well when I travel? You remember when I said that last week? When I am traveling, she does not sleep well. Sometimes I will get these calls at 1 in the morning. “Hey, I heard something.” And so, rest does not come to her well. What is interesting about that, is when I am there you cannot wake her. Okay? She sleeps very deeply. Right? There have been times where I have been, “Babe. Babe. Babe.” Pushing her. “Wake up!” Not a chance. The kids will come into our room, and they will start on her side of the bed, she is the nurturer. “Momma, Mommy, Mommy!” And then they walk over to my side of the bed, and I am up because I sensed their presence coming down the hallway. I do not know about you guys. Sometimes you just wake up and they are staring at you – like Children of the Corn – and it is the most terrifying thing in the world. Why would anybody do that? Announce yourself! I almost punched you. I do not get it. Sometimes I feel like I am watching me sleep, which is crazy – let us agree. I just feel their presence and I am up – and then I am really up. But she is out. Why? What is the difference? She can sleep so well -what is the difference. Proximity to her protection. Right? She is comforted. She is comforted.

And so, in the valley you have to understand, the Shepherd is closest to you. In summary, the Shepherd is with us in the valley; we are protected by His presence; and we are comforted by His presence. I do not want to leave you wondering what happened in that little skirmish there at that tournament. It was pretty anti-climactic because I am not about to do anything. And so, my plan is to distract them and run, like “free beer”. You know? Then I am out. So, I was okay, I left unscathed. And then the fight was the most bust. My guy did not fight, he got his eye cut in training. They pulled in a little guy who just happened to be there; and he knocked out Kimbo Slice in four seconds in a match that they called, “David vs. Goliath”. Which is interesting.

What would you do if you knew God was with you? How would you live different if you knew God was with you? What if you were certain that in the valley, He was closest to you? Scripture really goes out of the way to show this to you. Joseph, when he is thrown into a well, it says the Lord is with Joseph. And then he goes into prison, and it says the Lord was with Joseph. And then when sold into slavery, it says the Lord was with Joseph. And then Daniel, he is thrown into the lion’s den, and it says that the angel of the Lord goes in there – the lions are hungry – but He shuts their mouth to protect him. That in the valley, the Shepherd is there. Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego they go into the fiery furnace. Can we just agree that is a dark, dark valley – the

fiery furnace – you are getting cooked alive. And the king says, look I threw three men in there and now there are four. And the fourth one looks like the Son of God. God is in the valley. He is closest in proximity in the valley. Stephen, when he is being stoned to death, he looks up and sees the presence of the Lord. God is the closest to you in the valley. You cannot forget that. He is closest to you in the valley.

But can I tell you about another guy? He was a young man, a boy named David. And he went to a valley, a literal valley. It is called the Valley of Elah – I have been there; I have seen it. It is still there today. It is a literal valley, the Valley of Elah. He went there to take his brothers, who are at war, some charcuterie. His dad is like, “Hey, they are hungry.” He builds them a charcuterie board. He goes over there to care for them, but there is this battle line drawn. There is this army – the Philistine army – on the other side. And there is this giant, a literal giant, shouting murderous threats against God’s people and God. And David is like, “why aren’t you guys doing something about that?” They said, “Hey, little boy. Be quiet. You do not understand.” David is like, “No, no, no. He is talking about my God! Why don’t you do something about that?” And he goes to Saul, and he is like I got it. Listen, this is what he says, **“The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”** I came up against a lion; as a shepherd I came up against the bear and God was with me. And now, I will come up against this giant and God will be with me. Here is what Saul said, he is king, he says, **“Go, and the LORD be with you.”** But he did not believe that – he is worldly. He then **“dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them...”** Saul’s like okay and the Lord be with you but come here and let me put on all this worldly stuff to protect you. Let me fill your bank account with money and let me give you a fortress and an armed guard and an AK47 – or whatever it is – let me protect. And David is like, “You do not understand. I just need the presence of God. That is what I need – the presence of God. The Lord is my Shepherd.”

He walks up on the enemy lines. He makes eye contact with a soldier, a warrior. Goliath says to David, **“Am I dog, that you come at me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ‘Come here,’ he said, ‘and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!’ David said to the Philistine, ‘You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered there will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s and He will give all of you into our hands.’”**

Let me tell you again friends, **“...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”** I am so tired of Christians walking into this room to sing, *“Oh no, You’ll never let go...”* and walking out that door and saying, “where did you go? I am out here all alone. Why are you not with me God? Why have you forsaken me God?” You have got to take the Shepherd with you. Some of you – you have been in church for a long time – you have heard me now say countless times “You have got to be in His Word. You

have got to be in prayer. You have got to be moving toward the Shepherd.” But you are doing whatever you want to do. You are like Saul, trying to cover yourself in your own armor. And you look around and you think, “Man my marriage is not exactly what I want. Man, my kids...” and your heart has grown cynical; you are jaded. It is time for a renewal! It is time for a once and for all, “God whatever you want to do, I am going to follow You. Whatever you take from me, I will still follow. The bank account is empty, I am going to follow You. The marriage dries up, I am going to follow You. The kids go away, I am going to follow You. My health declines, I am going to follow You. You are my Shepherd. Where else am I going to go? You alone have the words of eternal life. Lead me through this valley; the tablelands await. I will follow you.

I pray that we would follow Him.

Father, help us to follow You. In our darkest valley, would You please God, please help us to follow You. I know there are valleys represented here. I know it with all of my heart. There are too many people here for there not to be a lot of valleys. Would you help us to hold fast to the reality that You are good, and You are in control, and You protect us and comfort us. When the job goes away, and the children stray, and the love fades You will comfort us. **“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all of the days of my life; and I will dwell in Your house.”** In Your presence – in the tablelands – forever and ever and ever and ever and ever. Amen