

“Psalm 23 – Part 2”

Psalm 23:4-6

Delivered during the COVID-19 crisis via Livestream at Central Baptist Church on July 5, 2020

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Psalm 23 is without doubt the most famous of all the psalms and probably the most famous chapter in the Bible. Even Wikipedia has a page dedicated to it.
 - It has been set to music by the likes of Franz Schubert, Leonard Bernstein, the Irish composer Charles Stanford, and the English composer Herbert Howells.
 - It appears in movies like *Titanic* and was recited at Whitney Houston’s funeral. Musicians such as *Pink Floyd*, *The Grateful Dead*, and *Kanye West* have used its lyrics. George Bush used it in his national address following the attacks of September 11, 2001.¹
 - And then there are all kinds of great memes like this one: **(SHOW SLIDE 2)**. Or, this one **(SHOW SLIDE 3)**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 4)** Why does Psalm 23 draw this much appeal even on a secular level? Quite simply because it is a poetic masterpiece. When one is going through an agonizing trial or experiencing excruciating pain there is simply no better way to say it than, **“I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”**
 - People in general, but more specifically Christians, are drawn to Psalm 23 in trials because they sense their need for God, for his help, for his strong hand to uphold them.
 - Psalm 23 has been the companion to those who feel discouraged. It has ministered to single moms and to dying soldiers. It has sustained the martyrs when they were burned at the stake and it has carried many Christians through difficult times.
 - **“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”**
- This morning I pray God will use it again to bring comfort to you and to whatever situation you are facing.
 - Last week we looked at verse 1-3 that picture God as a Shepherd. Today we look at verses 4-6 which focus on God as Shepherd and then God as an extravagant host who prepares a feast for his people to sit down at.
 - These next verses take us from the darkest trials of life to ultimate joy in the presence of God. This morning we will walk through the shadows of our earthly pilgrimage to behold the brilliant light of our final destination with God in the celestial city.
- So, let’s talk about three things today: First, the dark valleys we must walk through. Second, how we can make it through the dark valleys. And finally, the joy of sitting down at God’s table.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_23

- First then, let's talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 5) the dark valleys we must walk through.**
 - As we continue on in Psalm 23, David shows us that being one of God's people does not always involve moments of peace where God lays us down in green pastures beside still waters.
 - It also involves our Shepherd leading us through dark valleys.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6) READ 4 – “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”**
 - This verse is often applied too narrowly. As we said last week, we often read this verse at funerals. It most certainly applies to death itself but remember this is not a psalm about dying. It is a psalm about living. And this verse is about not just about the final valley we must pass through but about every dark valley we pass through in life.
 - Let me explain the picture of what is going on here.
- As shepherds migrate their flocks in search of grass and water, they occasionally have to lead their flocks through deep and rugged “wadis”. Wadis are dry stream beds cut through semi-desert hills by winter rains. **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** These wadis can be very deep valleys. The heat sits down in them and the rising cliff walls block out the sun casting dark shadows over the bottom. Rockslides, flash floods, and predators all made the experience of traveling through them rather dangerous.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 8)** We need to see right away though that when David describes this moment of walking through the valley he is speaking far more broadly than just the experience of death. This is not a psalm about dying; it is a psalm about living. Oh yes, death is the final valley we must pass through but there are many valleys of darkest shadows that we pass through before death. To say one walks through the valley of the shadow of death is to describe life's darkest moments. There are shadows in life and then there is the valley of the shadow of death.
 - This is the cry of the person who says, ***“I am not just in a shadow, I am in the darkest of all shadows. The place I am in right now is the deepest darkest valley. All is dark. Death's shadow covers everything.”***
- Do you know that place? It is the place of deep sorrow. It is the place of helplessness. It is the place where you feel overcome. Fear fills your heart. Your mind reels with anxiety. All seems lost.
 - It is with good reason that in *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R Tolkien described the trials that came on Middle Earth as a shadow that began to cover the land. In the movies things grow darker and darker. The light fades and all seems lost. Then there is that scene in the last movie where the wicked Steward of Gondor sends his son and his army into sure death. As he sits and eats the Steward commands the hobbit named Pippin to sing a song. With images of the army being cut down, and shadows covering the land, Pippin, sings a mournful song: **(SHOW SLIDE 9)**
 - ***“Home is behind, the world ahead
And there are many paths to tread
Through shadow, to the edge of night***

**Until the stars are all alight
Mist and shadow
Cloud and shade
All shall fade
All shall fade"**

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 10)** Do you walk today in the valley of the darkest shadow?
 - Has the path of your life brought you into a dark valley from which you cannot climb out of?
 - Is the path before you so dark that you cannot foresee a bright future?
 - Are you paralyzed by how darkness so you feel you cannot go on?
- You can see why this is read at funerals. Grief consumes us. We can barely see our next step it is so dark.
 - Many in our church family are walking in this right now.

I WILL FEAR NO EVIL, FOR YOU ARE WITH ME

- Now that we've seen the dark valleys we must walk through let's come to the second point. Let's talk now about **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** **how we can make it through the dark valleys.**
 - In this point we will again see why Christianity is so good and why—if you are not a Christian—you should give serious consideration to giving your life to Jesus Christ.
 - You see if there is no God then there is no real comfort for you when you have to walk through the valley of darkest shadows. Oh yes, those who love you do provide a certain measure of comfort but ultimately, they cannot walk your darkest paths. They cannot be inside your thoughts. They cannot truly know how you feel. Other people are important but, if there is no God, then we are ultimately on our own.
 - One of the most famous bands of the last 25 years is Green Day. They're still really famous. Their most commercially successful song is called "Boulevard of Broken Dreams." It was the ninth most famous song on the Billboard Top 100 from 2000-2010. It's a mournful song but it's an honest song. They sing,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** **I walk a lonely road
The only one that I have ever known
Don't know where it goes
But it's only me, and I walk alone**
 - **My shadow's the only one that walks beside me
My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating
Sometimes I wish someone out there will find me
Till then I walk alone**
 - **"Boulevard of Broken Dreams" —Green Day**
- You can hear the sense of inner loneliness. Again, it's not because other people aren't important. But if there is no God, then ultimately Green Day is right. Each of us ultimately walks alone.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** But once again, we see how glorious the Christian message is. When you repent of your sins and give your life to Jesus Christ then he becomes your Shepherd. Oh yes, you still must walk through many valleys filled with dark shadows. But look what David says.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 14) READ 4 - Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."**
- There is no minimizing of pain here. There *is* a valley. There *is* a shadow so terrible it is called **"the shadow of death."** But Jesus' sheep can say in the face of such darkness, **"I will fear no evil."** Why?
 - What keeps a sheep from becoming overcome with fear? Sheep are not exactly courageous animals. What enables the Christian to walk through the darkest valley and say, **"I will fear no evil?"**
 - Answer: **READ 4 - Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me."**
- Here is the good news of Psalm 23: Jesus' sheep do *not* walk alone. We are like the child who fears the dark. That fear vanishes when they crawl into their parent's bed. The child rests easy because of the presence of the parents. When you know God for who He is as the all-powerful, sovereign, all wise, and compassionate one, and you know that this God has said, **"I will never leave you nor forsake you"**, you find comfort in the darkest valley.
 - The sheep rest easy in the presence of their shepherd. David gives two things that comfort him. First, God his shepherd is armed for a fight. **(SHOW SLIDE 15) READ 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.**
- The rod was a 2-foot club. Philip Keller (once a shepherd) says that shepherd boys spend hours learning how to throw it and could do so with amazing accuracy and speed. Describing his experience watching this Keller writes,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 16) "The effectiveness of these crude clubs in the hands of skilled shepherds was a thrill to watch. The rod was, in fact, an extension of the owner's arm. It stood as a symbol of his strength, his power, his authority in any serious situation. The rod was what he relied on to safeguard both himself and his flock in danger."**²
- **(SHOW SLIDE 17) READ 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.**
 - The staff was a long slender stick with a hooked end. The staff is used to guide the sheep onto the right paths, to pluck them from the thickets they entangle themselves in, to keep them near the shepherd.
 - These things comfort the sheep. So it is today, the Christian finds comfort because God protects, comforts, and guides us in times of trial.

² Phillip Keller, "A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23", 93.

- How many Christians can testify of God’s goodness to them in the dark shadows? When a spouse dies, how many times have you heard those who walk with God speak of God’s comfort.
 - Philip Keller writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 18)** **“During my wife’s illness and after her death I could not get over the strength, solace and serene out-look imparted to me virtually hour after hour by the presence of God’s gracious Spirit Himself. It was as if I was being repeatedly refreshed and restored despite the most desperate circumstances around me.”**³
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 19)** How can one say this in the midst of such trials? And yet history is filled with saints who testify that though the valley is black, they find comfort.
 - He says, **“The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised”** (Job 1:21).
 - **“When sorrows like sea-billows roll, whatever my lot thou has taught me to say, “it is well, it is well with my soul.’**
 - It is because of this we can sing, **“you give and take away...Blessed the name of the Lord.”**
 - This is what enables the fearful sheep to lie down even in death’s shadow – the presence of the shepherd.

PILGRIM’S PROGRESS AND THE VALLEY

- One of the greatest books ever written on the Christian life is John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Bunyan wrote it in the late 1600’s while imprisoned for his faith. This great story is an allegory of the Christian life. It portrays a man named Christian who lives in the City of Destruction. After reading the Bible and he flees the city and sets out on a pilgrimage to the Celestial City of Zion.
 - He is greatly burdened down by a weight on his back which symbolizes his sins. Once delivered of them, he is set on the King’s Road which will take him to Celestial City.
 - Bunyan so perfectly describes the Christian life as we watch Christian go through many joys but also face many trials such as discouragement and doubt. We pick up the story as the King’s Road goes through a valley.
- **“The end of this valley turned into the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Christian had to go through it, for the way to the Celestial City lay via its center. I saw in my dream that when Christian reached the borders of the Shadow of Death, two men met him. They told him to hurry back. Christian spoke, ‘Where are you going?’ ‘Back, back, we would have you do the same if life or peace is valued by you.’ ‘Why, what’s the matter?’ ‘Matter! We were going the same way as you. We went as far as we dared. We were almost past the point of no return. Had we gone a little farther, we would not be able to bring back the news to you.’**
 - **‘What did you see?’ Christian asked. ‘We were almost in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. We look by chance, and saw the danger before we reached it.’ ‘What did you see?’ ‘The valley is as dark as pitch. We saw monsters, half**

³ Keller, 86.

men and half goats, and dragons from the pit. Over that valley hangs the discouraging clouds of confusion. Death spread its wings over it. In a word, it is totally dreadful and completely without order.'

- *'From what you have said, this is my way to the desired haven.' 'It can be your way, but we will not choose it for ours.'*

- *They separated. Christian went on with a drawn sword, concerned that he might be assaulted. I saw in my dream that as far as this valley reached there was a deep ditch on the right where the blind has led the blind in all ages, and both miserably perished. On the left was a dangerous quagmire where even if a good man falls, he finds no bottom for his feet to stand on. King David fell in that mire and would have suffocated, had not He that is able lifted him out.*
 - *The pathway was exceeding narrow. Good Christian had to be most cautious for it was dark. He had to avoid the ditch on his right and the mire on his left. When he tried to avoid the mire he had to be most careful for he could readily fall into the ditch. I heard him sigh bitterly. Beside the dangers mentioned above, the pathway was so dark that when he lifted his foot to go forward, he did not know where, or on what, he would next set it...*
- *...He thought he heard a company of fiends coming to meet him. He began to deliberate. Sometimes he had half a thought to go back. Then he thought he might be halfway through the valley. He also remembered how he had already conquered many dangers. The hazard of going back might be much greater than going forward; he resolved to go on. Yet the fiends seemed to be coming closer and closer. When they were almost on him, he cried with a fervent voice, 'I walk in the strength of the Lord God.' The fiends retreated and came no farther.*
 - *Christian traveled in this distressed condition for a considerable time. He thought he heard the voice of a man ahead of him, 'Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.'*
- *Then he was glad for these reasons:*
 - *First, some who feared God were in this valley with him.*
 - *Second, God was with them even though it was dark and dismal...*
 - *...Third, he hoped (if he could overtake them) to have company.*
- *He moved on calling to him that was ahead, but there was no answer. He thought he was alone. Then the day broke and Christian said, 'He turns the shadow of death into the morning.' (Amos 5:8)*
 - *Now that morning had arrived he looked back, not to return but to see by the light of day the dangers he had passed through in the dark. He clearly saw the ditch on one side, the quagmire on the other side, and the narrow way between them. He also saw frightful apparitions, monsters, and dragons of the pit from a distance. After daybreak they would not come close.*
 - *Now Christian was greatly affected by his deliverance from the dangers of his solitary way. Though he feared the danger, he saw it more clearly because the light made it conspicuous."⁴*

⁴ John Bunyan, "Pilgrim's Progress", pg 53-56.

- This is the path we must all walk. The journey to God’s great city passes through many dark valleys. But we walk through the valleys knowing that our Shepherd is with us.
 - Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come. ‘Twas grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.

THE JOY OF SITTING DOWN AT GOD’S TABLE

- And home is exactly where God is leading us. Now that we have talked about the dark valleys we must walk through and how we walk through the dark valleys, we turn in the final place to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 20) the joy of sitting down at God’s table.**
 - In the last two verses David switches from the viewing God as a shepherd and we as his sheep to God as the generous and extravagant host and we as the guests who sit at his table.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 21) READ 5-6 - You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**
 - Even in this life God blesses his people and lets them know his presence. He fills us with joy. Goodness and mercy do not just follow after – they actively pursue. This also is the testimony of the saints of God as they look back on life and all they have been through.
- When David writes of the **“House of the Lord”** he means the temple. The temple was the place of God’s dwelling and was a symbol of God’s presence with Israel. Here God comes down in a special way and dwells with his people.
 - To be forever in the temple means to remain always in God’s caring and effective presence and escape the trials of life’s circumstances.
- In Christ, this verse reaches a greater fulfillment that goes beyond a physical temple. Christ said he was the temple and spoke of his people dwelling with him for all eternity. To weary Christians in this life this is such good news. This is our longing – to dwell with God forever and ever. This is what strengthens us for the journey.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 22) “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”**
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 23)** Psalm 23 provides what we need to trust God in this life. In the midst of it all there are green pastures, quiet waters, comfort. We fear no evil because He is with me, he comforts, me throughout this life and on into eternity.
- This is comfort. This is hope. Yahweh is my shepherd. My dear brother and sisters, saturate yourself in this psalm. Let its words and truths fill you with the goodness of your God. Let it draw you to your Shepherd today, tomorrow, and into your old age.
 - This is a psalm about living. It is a psalm about living life trusting God in all the circumstances of life. How do we respond? We keep returning to our shepherd.

Keep praying psalm 23. Keep filling your mind with its truths. Keep trusting in God.

- ***“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”***