

Introduction:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
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 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 mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.
—King David, **Psalm 23**

Isn't that beautiful? It's so serene and comforting. It's just the picture of beauty. Green pastures. Still waters. Paths of righteousness. Overflowing cups. Goodness. Mercy. But wait! One of these lines is not like the others. One of these lines just doesn't belong. Can you tell which line is not like the others by the time I finish this psalm? Smack in the middle of this serenity psalm is a path going right through the valley of the shadow of death. What's that about?

Discussion:

I. **Psalm 23** isn't a sales pitch that is just blowing smoke.

- A. The sad thing is many presentations of Christianity come off like a naïve sales pitch. To hear some modern "Christians," if you follow Jesus, your marriage will get better, your kids will all become president, your stocks will all split, your portfolios will multiply, your health will improve, you'll lose weight, people will like you more. Follow the Bible and you will have your best life now, health and wealth. And while folks in this congregation know the health and wealth gospel is false, I fear that even many otherwise faithful Christians essentially believe: "Do your best, follow the instructions I give you, and God will make your life successful."¹
- B. But **Psalm 23** isn't blowing that smoke. It isn't making empty promises. It is anchored in reality. This psalm doesn't promise a life of rainbows and buttercups. Yes, with Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd, there are days of green pastures and quiet waters. Yes, with Jesus Christ our Good Host, there are feasts with anointed heads and overflowing cups. Yes, with Jesus Christ we will walk along paths of righteousness. But know this, with Jesus Christ, some of those righteous paths go right through the valley of the shadow of death.

II. What is this valley of the shadow of death?

- A. Regrettably, we struggle to get past the word "death" in this Hebrew idiom. While being arrested for your faith in Jesus and having the threat of execution looming over your head, receiving a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer, or sitting through the funeral of your spouse, child, or parent could all be examples of walking through the valley of the shadow of death, this phrase isn't strictly talking about facing death itself.

¹ Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 2008, p.69. This is Horton's rebuke of what we might call a mainstream prosperity gospel approach. He is not in favor of it.

- B. Please forgive a brief English lesson from an English major turned preacher just to make sure we are all on the same page. When I say that “shadow of death” is an idiomatic expression, I’m not just making up words. And I’m not trying to say that the psalm doesn’t mean what it says. We don’t commonly use the word “idiom” as we talk about this in everyday language. Normally, we say something like, “That’s just a common expression.” Or, “That’s just a way of speaking.” That is, literally, we know the phrase doesn’t make much sense, but through common use, we all know what we mean by it. But someone who isn’t used to that manner of speaking will have no idea what is being said.
1. Allow me an illustration. First, allow me to say I know almost no Spanish at all. So, I had to call Luke Chandler to get help on this one. Imagine you are learning Spanish, and someone says to you, “Tomo el pelo.” So, you look up this phrase on Google Translate and learn it literally means “I take the hair.” What? That doesn’t make any sense. What do you do with that?
 2. You call up your friend Luke Chandler or Jaime Gonzalez or Cale Andrews and tell him about the exchange. They laugh and say, “Ha, that just means they were pulling your leg.” Not sure if you caught what I did there. “Pulling your leg” is an English idiom. The person wasn’t even touching your leg. That’s a common expression to mean “I was just joking.” Well, why didn’t you just say that? I did. I just said it using a figure of speech that native speakers of my language understand. Nobody would accuse me of lying or saying that I didn’t say what I meant. It’s just a manner of speaking. It’s an idiom.
 3. Sometimes we can figure out a reason the phrase came to be a common expression and sometimes we can’t. But it is a very common way of speaking and it happens in every language including the Biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek.
- C. The word translated “shadow of death” in **Psalm 23:4** is “tsalmaveth.” It is a Hebrew idiom or common expression that essentially meant “really, really dark.” Our English idiom might be “pitch black.” Allow me to show you some other uses:
1. In **Job 28:1-3**, we see that “tsalmaveth,” here translated “deep darkness” (ESV), is the darkness of a mining shaft or cave under the earth.
 2. In English idiom, we say, “It is always darkest before the dawn.” In **Amos 5:8**, we see something similar. Here, God is the one who turns “deep darkness (tsalmaveth) into the morning” (ESV).
 3. In New Testament passages like **Romans 13:12-13** and **1 Thessalonians 5:5-8**, we see that the darkness of night is the time for sin. That makes sense. We want our sins hidden.
 - a) In the Old Testament, we see this same picture. In **Job 24:13-17**, “deep darkness (tsalmaveth)” is the time for sinning: “For deep darkness (tsalmaveth) is morning to all of them; for they are friends with the terrors of deep darkness (tsalmaveth)” (**vs. 17**, ESV).
 - b) However, sinners need to be aware that God sees all the deeds of men “there is no gloom or deep darkness (tsalmaveth) where evildoers may hide themselves” (**Job 34:21-22**, ESV).
 4. To truly see the idiomatic nature of this phrase, recognize Job even uses it to describe the color of his eyelids when they have been disfigured by great mourning and weeping: “My face is red with weeping, and on my eyelids is deep darkness (tsalmaveth)” (**Job 16:16**, ESV).
 5. This expression likely came to be common because of the darkness of the grave which bled over to the view of darkness of the realm of the dead.
 - a) When Job was crying out for God to leave him alone because all that was left for him was death, he said it this way, “Before I go—and I shall not return—to the land of darkness and deep shadow (tsalmaveth), the land of gloom like thick darkness, like deep shadow (tsalmaveth) without any order, where light is as thick as darkness” (**Job 10:21-22**, ESV).
 - b) When God responded to Job, He asked, “Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness (tsalmaveth)?” (**Job 38:17**, ESV).
- D. I hope this part of the lesson hasn’t felt like meandering through a dark valley, but has rather been an enlightening look at **Psalm 23:4**. Our Shepherd sometimes leads us through valleys so dark, we can’t even see Him or sense His presence. Facing the death of a loved one or our own death might in fact be a dark time like that. But there are others. The betrayal of a friend. The loss of a job. Being abandoned by your parents, your children, your spouse. Infighting in a congregation. Being stabbed in the back by a co-worker. Watching those you love abandon the Lord. Being falsely accused of wickedness because of your faithfulness to Jesus. Enemies, whether physical or spiritual, surrounding, threatening, and even getting the upper hand. Facing some crazy situation in which it is hard to believe anyone else can possibly understand what you’re going through. On and on the list goes. Life with Jesus Christ is not always darkness. But sometimes His paths of righteousness go right through the darkest valley we can imagine.

III. Let's be honest about this valley of the shadow of death.

- A. We'll get to the comforting point of **Psalm 23** before we are done, but for a moment, let's just linger in this pitch-black valley. Let's be honest about what it feels like when we are in that valley. I hope by the time we are done today, we will get to the faith of the **Psalm 23** sheep, but let's be frank about what we often actually feel when we are walking through that dark vale.
1. Often, we don't feel like **Psalm 23**. Rather, we feel like **Psalm 44**. **Psalm 44** is one of those few negative psalms. The Israelites were faithful. They were trusting in God, not in their own strength. But, God had rejected them. He wasn't going out with their armies (**Psalm 44:9**).
 2. Notice **Psalm 44:18-19**: "Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way; yet you have broken us in the place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of death (tsalmaveth)" (ESV). They couldn't understand. Certainly, if they had gone after other gods, if they had followed other shepherds, they could understand why they were going through this valley (see **Psalm 44:20-21**). But as it is, they are not being led to a feast while enemies look on helpless. Rather, in **Psalm 44:22**, they are "as sheep to be slaughtered" (ESV; see also **Psalm 44:11**).
 3. I admit. It is hard to take comfort in our Shepherd when it feels like He is simply leading us to the slaughter. It is hard to walk in the valley of the shadow of death when we can't see Him or sense Him and we know there are jackals all around. And I get it. In these moments, I can understand why we might decide to bolt and try to get out of the valley on our own. But notice, even the psalmist of **Psalm 44** is still hanging on to the Shepherd.
- B. Here is perhaps the very hardest thing for us to grasp. Please, understand clearly, what I'm about to share with you is not always true (we can look back at **Psalm 44** and understand that). But sometimes it is true. And we need to be 100% honest with ourselves. We need to examine ourselves thoroughly when we are walking through the valley of death's shadow. There is one other place the psalms refer to the shadow of death. We find it in **Psalm 107:10, 14**.
1. Notice how the psalm begins: "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south." (**Psalm 107:1-3**, ESV). This psalm is about to recount the goodness of the Lord. It is about to recount what the Lord did to redeem people from trouble.
 2. The psalm goes on to give four illustrations of those who got themselves in big messes, who then cried out to the Lord, and the Lord saved and delivered them. The second illustration is found in **Psalm 107:10-16** (this seems to refer to the oppressions the Jews faced during the time of the judges). Notice where these folks were and from where God saved them: "Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death (tsalmaveth), prisoners in affliction and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High. So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor; they fell down, with none to help. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death (tsalmaveth), and burst their bonds apart. Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! For he shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron." (ESV).
 3. Why did the Good Shepherd lead these folks through the valley of the shadow of death? Yes, it is discipline. But it is not simply punitive. He isn't just punishing them. This discipline is given to train and to teach. This discipline is given to call them back. The Good Shepherd led them through this valley because it was going to take the shock of the shadow of death to bring them to their senses. It was the valley of the shadow of death that prompted them to realize their only hope was their Good Shepherd. It took time in that valley to get them to rely on the Good Shepherd. If He hadn't let them get into that valley, they wouldn't have merely faced the shadow of death, but death itself. And then it would be too late. It was not His anger that took them into the valley, it was His love.
- C. I repeat. I am not saying that every time we find ourselves in the valley of death's shadow it is because of our sins. After all, we go back to **Psalm 44** and discover those worshipers were faithful. They had not rebelled against the words of God or spurned the counsel of the Most High. Yet, they were in the dark valley.
1. And here is some good news. When you are in death's dark valley, you don't actually have to figure out why. Sure, when sin is exposed in your life, you need to repent and turn from it. But you need to do that whether you are in the valley or not. But, the fact is when you are in death's dark valley, your reaction should be the same whether you are there because of your own sins or not.

2. Did you notice the response of the sheep was the same in both **Psalm 107** and in **Psalm 44**? Whether they were in the valley of deep darkness because of their own sins and disobedience or for some other reason (perhaps known only to God), the response was to cry out to God, to turn to the Good shepherd.
3. And that should be our response. And honestly, that should be our counsel to others when they are facing the valley of the shadow of death. We don't have to accuse them of sin. We don't have to figure out what they've done wrong. If they have, they can deal with that with God. We don't have to be like Job's friends. Rather, we can simply come alongside, mourn with them and together cry out to the Good Shepherd.

IV. But how can the sheep of **Psalm 23** be so calm about this valley?

- A. I'll tell you why. Because this is no adolescent sheep who has simply read a book about the Shepherd, jumping around like an over-excited puppy trying to tell us the way he thinks it will be with the Good Shepherd. This is the mature, grizzled sheep who has followed the Shepherd through the good and the bad already. This is the grandfather sheep calling the lambs to gather around and hear what his years with the Shepherd have taught Him. He has had the times of green pastures and still waters. But he has also been through many pitch-black valleys with the Shepherd. And he knows. He knows because he has been there. And he is asking us to walk with the Shepherd in faith because of his experiences.
- B. Think about the man who is writing this psalm. This is no shepherd boy peering up at the night sky with nothing better to do than to write a psalm. This is the wizened king who has been taken from the pasture and brought to the palace. He walked into the valley with Goliath. He fled around the countryside from King Saul. He even hid in dark caves. He had gotten himself into messes because of his own sins with Bathsheba and Uriah. He had seen his kids fall apart as one of his sons (Amnon) raped one of his daughters (Tamar) and then as a second son (Absalom) killed that first one. He had been run out of Jerusalem as that second son carried out a coup. He had watched as his people had been decimated by a God-sent plague because of his own lack of faith demonstrated by taking a census instead of just relying on God as his strength. There is no naivete in this psalm. There is wisdom and experience.
- C. And as this sheep looks back over his life full of mountain peaks and dark valleys, marked with bright days of green pastures and still waters, but also pitted with dark nights of deserts and salty wastes (see **Psalm 107:33-34**), he gathers us around and tells of his adventures with our Shepherd. And he lets us know: "My brothers and sisters, fellow sheep, I've been there. It was frightening. It was harrowing. I was tempted to bolt and find my own way. But I hung on. I couldn't see our Shepherd. I couldn't even sense Him. All I could feel was the presence of the jackals, the lions, the bears, the giants. Sometimes even the other sheep were against me. But I had to believe...I just had to. I had to believe He was there, and He was. And He is. And I'll tell you what else I know? He still knows how to use His rod and staff even in the dark because what is dark to us isn't dark to Him. And now here I am. He has taken me from the pasture and has planted me in His house as one of his guests. And I wouldn't go anywhere else and I wouldn't follow anyone else. Why? Because what I've learned is whether we were in the green pasture, beside the still waters, or in pitch-black desert valley, I wasn't being followed by jackals and wolves, I was being pursued by the goodness and mercy of the greatest of Shepherds. And I know that is what will follow me always. Why would I leave Him?"

Conclusion:

My friends and brethren. I don't know where you are right now. Maybe you are lying down in the green pasture or drinking from the still waters. But then again, maybe you are on the verge of bolting in fear because you are smack in the pitch-black valley of the shadow of death. Allow me to assure you, and if you won't believe me, believe King David, there is no other Shepherd who can carry you through. There is no place to go but to my Good Shepherd. And I know that because my Good Shepherd went through the valley of the shadow of death, and He conquered it. He will lead us through as well. Please, hang on to Him no matter what! Do what He says no matter what. Go where He leads no matter what. Even when you can't see Him, He is here. And He is the Good Shepherd, we will lack nothing.