

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon, friends. Good afternoon, everybody, and a very warm welcome to our Wednesday afternoon Bible talk. Very good to see you all here. I'm going to read Psalm 23 again because that's our passage for study over these few weeks in September. And today we're looking simply at one verse, and that is verse 4. But I'll read the whole of the psalm. If you'd like to follow it in our church Bibles, you'll find it on page 458.

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 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 mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Let's bow our heads to pray.

Dear God, our Father, we thank you for this wonderful psalm which brings us and has brought us very great comfort over the years. And we thank you for the picture that you paint of yourself throughout the Bible as the great shepherd of the sheep and of Jesus as being the good shepherd who knows each one of his own by name and leads his flock out and leads them into good pasture.

So we thank you, dear Heavenly Father, that we can look up to you this afternoon in the midst of the pressures and difficulties of life and know that for every person who belongs to you, you are the shepherd whom we can trust and under whose rule and discipline we gladly place ourselves.

[2 : 1 6] So please be with us this afternoon. Teach us old things and new things and help us to grow in our confidence in your loving care and kindness towards us. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. One of the greatest things that the Bible does for Christian people is to help to prepare us for the end of our lives, to prepare us for death. And the fourth verse of Psalm 23 is like a breath from heaven because it helps us to face our approaching death with understanding. Let me read just this one verse again. 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. Now human societies have dealt with and faced the question, the questions raised by death in rather different ways. In Britain, for example, I guess we've seen a shift in the last century or two. The Victorians were often speaking about death, but they were very coy in speaking about sex, whereas today sex is over-discussed and yet people tend to be coy in speaking about death. Although it may be that that coyness about death is not quite as strong as it was 20 or 30 years ago. For example, there's a lot of thinking about death arising from international terrorism these days, or we think of the loss of young British soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last 10 or 15 years.

Or think of the recent growth of the movement to accept and legalize assisted suicide. Switzerland has these clinics, doesn't it, operated by a group called Dignitas, and I think the Swiss had to alter their legislation as they came to terms with what was happening as people from Britain and elsewhere would go to their clinics in order to die prematurely because they were suffering from some unbearable illness. I think also we can detect in certain types of crime fiction a fascination in not just the criminal mind, but in death itself. I'm thinking of writers like Ruth Rendell or P.D.

James, whose books I occasionally buy to give to my wife for holiday reading, largely because I like to read them myself after she's read them. So death is being thought about and talked about a little more openly, perhaps these days than it was a generation ago. And yet, however much individual societies may fluctuate in their attitude towards death, the fear of death remains a defining characteristic of the human race. People do not naturally welcome death. They fear it. Some folk try to blot it out of their consciousness as if it might never happen. I remember visiting an old man in a parish I worked in many years ago who said to me, he was quite ill and very old, he said, you know, sometimes Edward, I think I'm never going to die.

He was wrong, as it happened. So some people treat it like that. Others try to sweeten it, to beautify it. I remember hearing, not the present Archbishop of Canterbury, but his predecessor, Rowan Williams, giving a Sunday morning sermon on Radio 4 a number of years ago. And he was quoting with approval from St. Francis of Assisi, who spoke of death as sister death. Sister death. But there's something very misleading about calling death sister death. To call it my sister is to treat it as if it's really a kindly friend, whereas the Bible calls it the last enemy. The Bible's teaching on death is that it's not a natural process. It is a supernatural judgment. Death was not part of God's original intention for human beings. In the center of the Garden of Eden was the Tree of Life. And we read in Genesis chapter 2 that life has been the crowning possession of Adam and Eve. At least it was always intended to be like that. Death was imposed upon Adam and Eve because of their sin. It was because of their rebellion against

[6 : 36] God that God came and brought it in as a judgment. It was part of his righteous dealings with them. He had said to Adam, of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the day you eat of this tree you shall surely die. So death was the ultimate penalty, was the ultimate sanction that God brought.

So we mustn't sweeten it by calling it my sister. It is too formidable to be treated like that. It is the last enemy. It is hostile. But because of the coming of Jesus, Paul is able to write in 1 Corinthians 15, the last enemy to be destroyed is death. So it's the last enemy, but it's not invincible because Christ holds the key to its destruction. He has done to it what no other person could do. He willingly accepted it and submitted to it on our behalf. He absorbed in his dying the just penalty and punishment that we deserve for our sins. And by his rising from the grave, he has demonstrated his victory over it.

So that Paul the Apostle is able to say in Romans chapter 6, Christ being raised from the dead, will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him. And the teaching of the New Testament is that death will not ultimately have dominion over those who belong to Christ.

So to put this as shortly as possible, the Bible's teaching about death is that it's not natural. It is supernaturally imposed. It is hostile. It's the last enemy. But its power is now destroyed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. And everyone who belongs to Christ, though we may well have to go through physical death, we can confidently expect to enjoy eternal life in the world to come.

So this verse 4 of Psalm 23 needs to be read within that big biblical framework of how God has dealt with death through the death and resurrection of Christ. So let's look a little more closely at the words of the verse itself. It's a verse that paints a very vivid picture. It's the picture of a valley.

[8 : 51] I guess most of us, if we're out in the countryside walking, enjoy walking up through a valley. Valleys can be very pretty. Usually there's a stream running through the bottom of the valley. And in Scotland and in England, often there are farmhouses on the lower slopes with cattle and sheep grazing nearby. If there's some gorse in bloom, if the thrushes and the blackbirds are warbling away in the hawthorn bushes, you've got the setting for a lovely walk, haven't you? We've all enjoyed that kind of a walk.

However, this valley in Psalm 23 is a very different kind of valley. It's a valley in deep shadow. Now, you're on your feet. Well, it's a sheep, isn't it? David pictures himself as a sheep. The sheep is on his feet.

He's walking, even though I walk, he says. But a great dark shadow is stretching itself out across the valley. It's a little bit like, I guess many of us enjoy watching Wimbledon in the summer. Do you know what happens on a sunny day at Wimbledon? As the day gets towards its end, the shadow begins to creep across the tennis court, doesn't it? It starts off just at one side. And then over a period of about half past six till eight o'clock in the evening, the shadow creeps right across the course, the court, and the shadow deepens.

Now, isn't that rather the way in which the shadow of death falls gradually, progressively, across an individual's life? In what you might call the middle of the day, when you're perhaps in your thirties or your forties, the early afternoon, if you like, the light is bright. You know at that stage of life, in theory, that you're going to die. But you're so busy and you're so active with work and bringing up a family and all the rest of it, that you don't think very much about it.

But then the evening begins to come. It's five o'clock. It's six o'clock, if you like. And you see the edge of the shadow creeping onto the tennis court. It is always later than you think.

[10 : 48] Now, when does this begin to happen? I guess at some time between the ages of 50 and 60. You might be still fit. You might be still able to go out and work hard and so on. But you know very well that most people die in their 70s or their 80s. So when you get to 50 odd, you suddenly realize that the sun is beginning to sink. So how does this verse of ours, verse 4, help us? Let's notice two things.

First, the Lord is leading me in the valley of the shadow of death. It doesn't quite say that in verse 4, not in so many words. But just look back to verse 3. He leads me. That's his characteristic way of dealing with me. He leads me in paths of righteousness. So the shepherd is leading his sheep in right paths, the paths of holiness and godliness. And that's the way the Middle Eastern shepherds, I think, still look after their sheep. They lead them forward. But there's no suggestion that between verse 3 and verse 4, the shepherd has stopped leading his sheep. There's no suggestion that once we get into verse 4, the shepherd has somehow lost his way or has run off. And that's why the sheep now finds himself in the valley of the shadow of death by himself. No, the shepherd has not forgotten how to read the map. After all, the shepherd made the map in the first place. So he knows what he's doing. So I may be walking through the valley of the shadow of death, but he is still with me, as verse 4 makes plain. So I can come to the conclusion that it's he who has led me purposefully into this valley. He's not struggling with his Ordnance Survey map and scratching his head in confusion and saying, I'm terribly sorry for leading you into this nasty place. I was never very good at geography. He's not saying that. Here I am walking in a place where he is leading me. Verse 3 helps us to understand verse 4. He has led me through the paths of godliness or into them, and he is good, and he continues to lead me. Now, once we've seen this, it will greatly help us as we enter the latter period of our lives, whatever age we are. For some folk, serious illness can come early. For others, it comes much later. Some years ago, the Christian Medical Fellowship, the CMF, published a booklet written by a young doctor, a Christian man, whose name was James Casson. He was a man in his late 30s, and he was diagnosed with an incurable form of cancer. He was a married man with two or three young children. And knowing that he had only a year or so to live, he decided to write this little booklet, in which he gives a very clear-headed account of the experience of dying as a Christian believer. And in the booklet, which is 40 or 50 pages long, he explains the Bible's teaching about life and death and the promise of the resurrection for all Christians. It's a lovely little book, and if you can still get it, I would recommend it. Its title gives you a very good idea of its tone and its contents. He called it, *dying, the greatest adventure of my life*.

Now, if the Lord is leading me through the valley of the shadow of death, I know that he is making no mistakes. His purposes are always and only good for those who love him and belong to him. He does love the ones that he leads. So there's the first thing from our verse, the Lord is leading me through this dark valley. Now, secondly, the Lord is with me in the valley of the shadow of death. You can follow a leader, but the leader sometimes can be a little way out in front. But it's not like that here. Here in verse 4, the leader, the shepherd, proves to be right beside the sheep that he's leading. You are with me, says David to the Lord halfway through the verse. I guess we've all been on country walks with groups of friends, perhaps a rambling club. And as you walk along, people tend to split up, don't they, into small groups. You've got two or three here and two or three there, and there's a little group a hundred yards behind. And you can't talk to the folk who are separated from you. But the person who is right alongside you is with you. And if you stumble suddenly, he'll reach out a hand to support you.

He's your close companion. He is with you. And let me point out two things about this phrase, for you are with me. The first is the change of the pronoun. Look at the first three verses of the psalm. There David speaks of the Lord as he. He makes me lie down. He leads me. He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness. Now, when you're talking about somebody as he, there's a bit of distance between you and him. But as soon as you use the word you, you're actually talking to him. He's right there with you. If I say of my friend he, I'm talking about him. But if I say to my friend you, I'm talking actually to him, with him. So when death begins to cast its long shadow across the valley, the Lord does not quietly leave us and slip off into the shadows. He draws so close to us that he, he, the pronoun he, becomes you. We may therefore be walking more slowly at this part of life, but we can walk more cheerfully because he's with us. Now, secondly, let's notice that you with me effectively is God with man. You with me is God with man. And that is a wonder in itself.

[16 : 46] The tragic fact of early Genesis is that God and man, because of man's rebellion, become estranged and separated. And that separation continues in the Old Testament for such a long time. It is true that Abraham knew the Lord and Isaac and Jacob spoke to him personally and he spoke to them. It's true that Moses enjoyed a rare and wonderful intimacy with the Lord. The Lord spoke to him and revealed his will to him. But by and large, God's people, the Jews, did not know the Lord at all well. They far more often in the course of the Old Testament rebelled against him than lived in obedience to him. They grumbled at him. And in every generation, they turned to the idols, the idols of the Canaanites and other people, because idols are so much easier at one level to worship. They're so undemanding.

There's no moral content in worshiping the Baals. It's all about hedonism and fertility. And that's the way people's hearts will always naturally turn. And even the Israelites who had been so spectacularly rescued by God at the Red Sea soon turned against him, they were separated from God, alienated from their creator. And even in the days, the great days of David and Solomon, think of Solomon building the temple. Even then, it becomes clear that the Lord's design is to show that access to him is not free and open. The temple was a system of barriers. And you couldn't go into the holiest place of all, where the Ark of the Covenant was on pain of death. Access to God was not opened up until the death of Jesus. And yet here's David, writing a thousand years before the coming of Jesus. He is given this precious foretaste of the coming of the gospel. You are with me. God and man, able once again to enjoy each other's company. The old separation finally resolved. The ancient tragic problem finally overcome. God with us. Emmanuel. I will be with them. I will dwell with them, says God in the Old

Testament. And they will be my people and I will be their God. That's the picture the Bible gives of it. Now, if that's wonderful good news for men and women at any stage in life, and it certainly is, how much more wonderful is it to know that in the valley of the shadow of death this is true?

If I know, as I approach that gateway of death, that the Lord is with me, that I can say to him, you, Lord, are with me, that I can talk to him and enjoy lovely companionship with him in my final journey, that is going to make my final journey transformed. Now, just think of it like this.

We've all been, I guess, at the bedsides of dying Christians. A dying Christian will probably be surrounded by loving family and friends and visited by other Christians and given great encouragement by family and friends. And those other Christians can walk with the dying Christian along the dark valley and they can accompany their friend for most of the way. But finally, that little gateway is reached. And at that point, the others can't go through. They have to turn back.

[20 : 09] But there is one who goes through with the dying Christian. You are with me. The shepherd takes the Christian through that dark little gate and brings him or her safe through to the other side.

As Paul said a thousand years later, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? I am sure that neither death nor life will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Once we belong to Christ, he is with us indissolubly. And there's a further strand of comfort here as well. The shepherd who is with his sheep is very strong. David looks up and he notices the shepherd's equipment, his rod and his staff. Now, the rod was a kind of stout cudgel, a bit like an oversized policeman's truncheon, which was strapped onto the belt. And this was used to beat off anything that threatened to attack the sheep, wolves or lions or whatever. And the staff would be a long walking stick, probably with a crook at the end of the stick, which the shepherd would use to grab the sheep's back leg and bring him back if he's tending to run away. It is possible, of course, even at the end of life, to have thoughts of deserting the shepherd. But that staff is a reminder to David of the shepherd's power to bring the sheep back into line if it tries to wander. So as David sees these formidable pieces of equipment, the rod and the staff, he's not frightened by them or cowed by them. He's greatly comforted by them. Now, we might ask, but does David or did David need that sort of comfort? This man who knew the Lord so well, this man with whom the Lord God had covenanted that he would love him forever and set his love upon him, that he would make his descendants a kingly line that would never die out? Does this man, so bolstered and shored up by God's promise, does he need comfort?

The answer is yes, he does. Not because God's promises are shaky, but because the valley is dark. That final part of life is not much fun. Our powers of body and mind begin to collapse.

As that little gate approaches, finally, we shan't even have the strength to raise a cup of tea to our lips. We'll need comfort then, however well we know the Lord and however well we know the scriptures.

[22 : 46] But when we see the rod and the staff in the shepherd's hand, and when we think of his power to use those pieces of equipment, we will be wonderfully comforted. This is not a weak shepherd. This is a shepherd who has the power and the determination to bring each of his sheep at the end through the dark valley, through the little gate, and beyond into the very presence of God.

So friends, let's not be frightened of this subject of death and dying. If we're Christians, ultimately we have nothing to be afraid of. If we are not yet Christians, we have everything to fear, because it means that our sins are not forgiven, that God is angry with us. So we must humbly turn to Christ in repentance, to be forgiven and rescued and turned around. But if we belong to the Lord God, death holds no final terror for us. Christ has dealt with it and has conquered it. None of us will enjoy the process of dying, the weakness, the hospital visits, the falling apart of body and mind. Of course, that won't be fun. Nobody enjoys walking in a dark valley as much as in a sunlit valley. But there is no ultimate terror there for Christians. Christ has been raised from death. Death has no more dominion over him. And the promise is that all who belong to him will be raised in the same way. His resurrection is the prototype. It's the guarantee of all the others that will follow.

So let me make a suggestion. Perhaps before this day ends, when you get home, get a large piece of paper or a big piece of card and write out this verse 4 on that piece of card and stick it up beside the kitchen sink.

Unless you're the sort of person that never does the washing up. But assuming you do, stick it by the kitchen sink and you will see it there and it will remind you of this great, great truth. Get it into your system. Get it word perfect. Because if you get that verse deeply into your heart, it will help you enormously as you begin to see that shadow stealing across the tennis court. That may not happen for many years, but it will happen. And this verse is a word from heaven to prepare us for dying and to take away our fear. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you, Lord, are with me. Your rod and your staff bring me comfort.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray before we sing together. Lord Jesus, we think of the weakness with which you went to the cross. And we think of the glorious power and strength with which you were raised from the dead, never to die again. And we thank you so much for the promise that you and your resurrection are the first fruits of the harvest of the dead.

[25 : 56] We pray, therefore, that you will help us to trust you. If we've not yet repented, give us the grace to repent and turn to you today. And help us to be built up in confidence that you are death's mighty conqueror and that we have nothing to fear. And we ask it to the glory and the praise of your great name. Amen.