

3. The Valley of the Shadow of Death

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] In our Bibles, please, to Psalm 23. We're partway through a series on this psalm, and this is the third of four sessions that we have together on these Wednesday lunchtimes.

We've been looking over the last couple of weeks at the first three verses of the psalm. Today I want to look at verse 4, and then next week, God willing, at verses 5 and 6. But let me read the whole psalm again, and you'll find this in our Visitor's Bibles on page 458.

Page 458. Psalm 23. 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.

[1 : 04] 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.

One of the responsibilities of the Christian preacher is to help the congregation, those who listen, to prepare for their own death.

And verse 4 here in Psalm 23 is a breath from heaven, because it helps us to face death with real understanding. Let me read this one lovely verse again.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me, says David to the Lord.

[2 : 02] You are with me, your rod and your staff. They comfort me. Human societies have not always faced death in exactly the same way.

And if you think of Britain and the way that we have thought about these things over the last century or two, I guess there has been quite a shift one way or the other. The Victorians were often speaking about death.

If you read the novels of Dickens, for example, you'll find many scenes where death is being contemplated. But although they were so eager to discuss death and think about it, they were very coy in speaking about sex.

Whereas today, sex is much discussed, I guess far too much discussed, and yet people tend to be coy about death. Although it may be that coyness about death is not as great in Britain as it was 20 or 30 years ago.

There's much thought about death, for example, in relation to terrorism these days, in relation to the loss of young British soldiers in Afghanistan. I think five more were lost just in the last 24 hours.

[3 : 04] Or think of the very recent, just in the last five years or so, the very recent growth of the movement to accept and legalise assisted suicide. Only last week, the Swiss government was on the news because they're having to bring in new legislation to curb the activities of Dignitas, the group who run clinics in Switzerland where people who are suffering from terminal illness can go to end their lives prematurely.

And I think we can see in certain types of modern crime fiction an interest, a fascination, not only in the criminal mind, but in death itself. I'm thinking of writers like Ruth Rendell and P.D. James.

So death, I think it's true to say, is being thought about and talked about more openly than it was a generation ago. And yet, however much individual societies may fluctuate in their attitude to death, the fear of death remains one of the defining characteristics of the human race.

People do not naturally welcome death. They fear it. Some people try to blot it out of their consciousness as if it might never happen. Others will try to sweeten it and beautify it. I heard an example of this about three weeks ago. I was listening to the Sunday morning broadcast service. Do you know on Radio 4, quarter past eight in the morning, there's always a service broadcast. And the preacher was quoting from St. Francis of Assisi.

[4 : 30] And St. Francis, apparently, would speak of death as sister death. Now, there's something very misleading about calling death sister death. To call death my sister is to treat it as if it were a kindly friend.

But the Bible calls death the last enemy. Now, the Bible's teaching on death is that it is not a natural process. It is a supernatural judgment.

Death was not part of the Lord's original intention for human beings. Do you remember how in the very centre of the Garden of Eden, there was the Tree of Life, which the Lord had planted there. We read of it in Genesis chapter 2, verse 9.

So, life was to have been the crowning possession of Adam and Eve. Death was imposed upon Adam and Eve because of their rebellion against God. It was part of his righteous judgment against them for their sin.

He had said to Adam about the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the day you eat of it, you will surely die. So, death was the ultimate sanction, the ultimate penalty.

[5 : 35] So, we mustn't sweeten it by calling it my sister. It is too formidable to be treated like that. But because of the coming of Jesus, Paul the Apostle 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 indestructible because Christ holds the key to death. He has done to it what no other man could do.

He submitted to it on our behalf. He absorbed in his dying the penalty and punishment that we deserved. And by his rising from the grave, he demonstrates his victory over it so that Paul is able to write in Romans 6, Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again.

Death has no more dominion over him. And the teaching of the New Testament is that death ultimately will not have dominion either over those who belong to Christ.

So, to put this just as shortly as possible, the Bible's teaching about death is that it is not natural, it's supernaturally imposed, it's hostile, it's the last enemy, but its power has been destroyed by Christ's death and resurrection.

[6 : 50] And all who belong to Christ, though we may have to go through physical death ourselves, can confidently expect to enjoy eternal life in the age to come.

Now, verse 4 in Psalm 23 needs to be read and understood within that big biblical framework. So, let's look more closely at the verse itself.

It's a verse that gives us a very vivid picture. And this is a picture of a valley. I guess that most of us, if we're out in the countryside walking, enjoy walking through a valley.

Valleys can be very pretty. Usually there's a stream flowing through them. The streams in our valleys out in Ayrshire this morning were so swollen that you could hardly get down the valleys. But you know what a valley's like.

There's a lovely stream usually there, often a pretty farmhouse or two on the lower slopes of the valley, cattle and sheep and pigs and so on grazing around near the farmhouses. And if there's some gorse in bloom and the thrushes and the blackbirds are warbling away in the hawthorn bushes, you've got the setting for a lovely walk.

[7 : 53] It's a delightful thing. But this valley here in verse 4 is a different kind of valley. It's a valley in deep shadow. Now, you're on your feet, or David is on his feet, he's walking, that's the first verb in the verse.

But a great dark shadow is stretching itself across the valley. I guess it's a little bit like that time of day. Some of you, I'm sure, are Wimbledon fans and you enjoy watching the tennis tournament in the height of summer at the end of June.

You know that time of day, about half past six in the afternoon, when the shadow of the stand begins to fall across the tennis court and it makes life a little bit difficult for the players. At first, you just notice the edge of the shadow, but as the evening deepens, seven o'clock, eight o'clock and so on, the shadow eventually falls right across the tennis court.

Now, isn't that rather the way the shadow of death begins to fall across an individual's life? In the middle of the day, when you're in your twenties and thirties, shall we say, or in the early afternoon, the light is bright.

You know in theory that you're going to die, but you're so busy and you're so active that you hardly ever think about it. But then the evening begins to come, five o'clock, six o'clock, and you see the edge of the shadow beginning to creep onto the tennis court.

[9 : 15] It's always later than you think. When does this begin to happen for an individual? I guess at some time between the ages of 50 and 60.

You might be a person who's still fit and active and hard at work, but you know when you get to that age that most people die in their 70s and 80s. So when you get to 50 odd, you suddenly realise that the sun is beginning to go down.

So how does our verse help us here? Let's notice two things. I've just got two headings. First, the Lord is leading me, me as David, but could apply to any of us, the Lord is leading me in the valley of the shadow of death.

Now it doesn't say that in verse 4 in quite so many words, but look back to verse 3. He leads me in paths of righteousness. And he's been leading me back in verse 2 as well, hasn't he?

He leads me beside still waters. Now the shepherd leads his sheep in right paths, which are also righteous paths, paths of holiness and godliness. This is the way that the Middle Eastern shepherds look after their sheep.

[10 : 23] They lead them forward. But there is no suggestion that somewhere between verse 3 and verse 4, the Lord has stopped leading his sheep.

There's no suggestion that somehow the shepherd has lost his way or has run off. And that's why I now find myself in the valley of the shadow of death. No. The shepherd has not forgotten how to read the map.

He made the map in the first place. 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. Verse 4 makes that plain.

You are with me. So I can come to the conclusion that the Lord, the shepherd, is the one who has led me into the valley. He is leading me. He's not struggling with his ordinance survey map and scratching his head in confusion and saying, I'm terribly sorry, I seem to have taken you up the wrong path into a nasty place.

I was never very good at geography. No, it's not like that. David is walking, I am walking, in a place where he is leading me. Verse 3, therefore, helps us to understand verse 4.

[11 : 29] He has led me here and he is my shepherd and he is a good shepherd. Now once we've seen this, once we see that it's the Lord who leads us into this dark and difficult valley, it will greatly help us as we enter the last period, the final period of our lives.

Whatever age we are, even if we're still relatively young. Some years ago, I think 20 years or so ago, the Christian Medical Fellowship produced a booklet which was written by a young doctor, a Christian man whose name was James Casson.

And in his late 30s, I think it was about 37, Dr. Casson was diagnosed with an incurable form of cancer. Now he was a married man and he had two or three young children. And knowing that he had only a year or so to live, he decided that when he was well enough, he would write this booklet in which he gives a very clear-headed account of the experience of dying as a Christian believer and still a young man.

And in the booklet, he explains the Bible's teaching about life and death, about the promise of resurrection for all Christians. It is a lovely little book. I don't know whether it's still in print, but it's worth getting.

It's a terrific read. Its title, I think, gives a very good idea of its tone. He called it Dying, The Greatest Adventure of My Life.

[12 : 53] 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.

He loves the ones that he leads. So there's the first thing to notice from this verse. The Lord is leading me. And now, secondly, the Lord is with me in the valley of the shadow of death.

You can follow a leader, but the leader may be a little bit in front. But here in verse 4, the leader, the shepherd, proves to be right beside, right alongside the sheep that he's leading.

David says to the Lord, you are with me. Halfway through the verse. Now, we've all been on country walks with a group of friends, perhaps a rambling club. And as you walk along through the country, people will split up into little groups of twos and threes and fours and talk to each other.

And the ones who are a few paces up ahead or the ones who are a few paces back, you can't really talk to them. But if you're walking with somebody who's right alongside you, that is your close friend and companion.

[14:04] So close that if you stumble, he'll reach out his hand to support you. He is your intimate companion. He is with you. Now, let me point out two things about this phrase for you are with me.

The first is the change of pronoun. In the first three verses of the psalm, the Lord is 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 as David is here about somebody as a he, there's a little bit of distance between you and him.

But as soon as you use the word you, you're talking to him, with 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 with him, I'm talking to him. So when death begins to cast its long shadow across the valley, the Lord doesn't quietly leave us and slip off into the shadows.

[15:06] he draws so close to us that the one who was he now becomes you. We may therefore be walking more slowly but we can walk more cheerfully.

And then secondly, let's notice that you with me, that's the heart of the verse, you with me, in effect, that is God with man.

And that in itself is a great wonder. The tragic fact of early Genesis is that God and man become separated, disrupted is their friendship, estranged.

And that separation between God and man continues for such a long time. Now it's true that Abraham knew the Lord and his son Isaac and his son Jacob.

It's true that Moses enjoyed a rare intimacy with the Lord. The Lord spoke to him as a friend and revealed his will to him. But by and large, throughout that long Old Testament period, the Lord's people, the Jews, did not know the Lord or follow him closely.

[16:10] They far more often rebelled against him than obeyed him. They grumbled at him and in every generation they turned to idols because idols are so much easier to serve.

They are morally so undemanding. There's no moral content in worshipping the Baals. It's all about hedonism and fertility. And that's the way people's hearts will always turn. Even the Israelites who had been so spectacularly rescued by God at the Red Sea soon turned against him.

They were separated from God. They were alienated from their creator. And even in the days of David and Solomon, when the temple was built in Jerusalem, the Lord designed that building to emphasize that access to God was not open and free except through sacrifice.

And even those sacrifices had to be repeated year after year which demonstrated that they were not finally effective. And yet here is David writing a thousand years before the coming of Jesus.

And he is given this precious foretaste of the coming of the gospel. You, he says, are with me. God and man once again able to enjoy each other's company.

[17:22] The old separation finally resolved. The ancient and tragic problem finally overcome. God with us. Emmanuel, I will dwell with them and I will be their people and I will be their God and they will be my people.

Now if that is 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?

If I know as I approach the gateway of death that the Lord is with me, indeed to speak personally, that you, Lord, are with me, that if I know that I can talk to him and enjoy lovely companionship with him in my final journey, then that final journey is transformed.

Think of it like this. A dying Christian will probably be surrounded by loving family and friends. Lots of people visited by their friends, their Christian fellow members of their church and so on.

And the family and friends and Christians will give them great encouragement in those final parts of their life. And those other Christians can walk with the dying Christian along very much of the dark valley and they can accompany their friend for most of the way.

[18:40] But finally, the little gateway is reached and at that point, the others cannot go through with the dying Christian. They have to turn back.

But there is one who goes through with the dying Christian. You are with me. The shepherd is the one who takes the Christian through the dark little gate and brings him safe through to the other side.

As Paul the Apostle said a thousand years later, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? I'm 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 rod and staff at the end of verse 4. The rod was a stout cudgel, something like an oversized policeman's truncheon that was worn at the belt and this was used to beat off anything that threatened the sheep.

[19 : 51] And the staff was a long walking stick, perhaps with a crooked part at the top end, which the shepherd would use to discipline the sheep and to keep the sheep moving in the right direction. Now it's possible, of course, even at the end of life, to have thoughts of deserting the shepherd.

But the 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 soon as David sees these formidable pieces of equipment, he is not frightened, not cowed, but comforted.

Your rod and staff comfort me. Now we might ask, but does a man like David need comfort? This man who knew the Lord so well, this man with whom the Lord had covenanted that he would set his love upon him forever, that he would make of his descendants a kingly line who would rule forever. Does this man, so bolstered and shored up by God's promises, does he need comfort? The answer is, yes he does. Not because God's promises are shaky, but because the valley itself is dark.

That final part of life is not much fun. Our powers of body and mind, first more slowly but then more rapidly, everything begins to collapse.

[21 : 08] As the little gate finally approaches and we're within sight of it. We shan't, I guess, even have the strength to raise a cup of tea to our own lips. We'll need comfort then, however well we know the Lord and the scriptures.

But when we see the shepherd's rod and staff and think of his power to use them, 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 into the very presence of God.

So, friends, in our own hearts and with our friends, let's not avoid the subject of death. If we're Christians, ultimately we have nothing to be afraid of. If we are not Christians, we have everything to fear because it means that our sins are not yet forgiven, that God's anger still rests upon us. We need, therefore, humbly to turn to Christ to be forgiven and rescued and to have our lives turned around. But if we belong to the Lord, death holds no final terrors for us.

Christ has dealt with it and has conquered it. None of us will enjoy the process of dying, the weakness and the hospital visits and the falling apart of body and mind.

[22 : 31] Of course that won't be fun. Nobody enjoys walking in a dark valley nearly as much as walking in a sun-filled valley. But there is no ultimate terror 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 finish now by making a suggestion. And it's this. It's this. But before this day ends, you learn verse 4 off by heart.

How about that? You've got several hours before the end of the day. Why not write it out on a piece of card and stick it up by the kitchen sink or some other place where you know you're going to spend some time. And as you look at this card sitting there by the kitchen sink, every time you wash the dishes, you'll get that by heart very quickly.

Get the verse deep into your heart because it will help you enormously when you begin to be aware that the shadow is stealing across the tennis court. Now for some of you, that won't happen for many years, but it will happen.

[23 : 41] This verse 4 is a word from heaven, a great verse, to prepare us for dying and to take away our natural fear. 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. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. How we thank you, our dear Father, that Paul the Apostle was able to cry out triumphantly, O death, where is your sting?

O grave, where is your victory? We think of our Lord Jesus, who was seen on that first Easter Sunday morning, at first not believed at all because it seemed so impossible that a man should be raised from the dead.

But we believe, our dear Father, that he is the prototype of the new order, the new creation, and that all who belong to him have the same promise, that the same thing will happen to us.

That even though we have to die, yet we shall be raised afterwards, and that we shall be able to sit at table with the Lord Jesus in heaven and enjoy his company, unalloyed, unshadowed by any difficulty or problem or sin.

[25 : 14] So we thank you, dear Father, for this gospel. It is indeed the best news. And we pray that you will write it in our hearts, so that as our own lives draw to a close finally, and as we help others whose lives are drawing to a close, we shall be, we shall have the fear, the natural fear of death taken from us, knowing that you are with us.

And these things we ask for your dear name's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.