

Psalm 23:4

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Preacher: Rev. Daniel Beilman

[0 : 00] We are continuing our pilgrimage through the 23rd Psalm. We're going verse by verse. We started four weeks ago. If you look at the Psalms as a whole, a lot of the imagery in the Psalms rings of homeland security.

Now, none of us live in towns that are in danger of being besieged by Bedouin raiders or besieging armies. So when the psalmists write that God is a rock or a fortress or a tower or a horn of salvation, God had to do some work to fire up the imagination in order to get the full impact of these metaphors.

But for some reason, even though most of us are not shepherds and none of us are sheep, we get Psalm 23. Especially the first half of verse four.

We understand what a valley of the shadow of death is. Now, we may not picture in our minds exactly the kind of valley that David might have had in mind, but we know we're pretty close.

Now, some of us have been through such a valley at least once in our lives. Some of us are in such a valley now. Be it depression or mental illness, separation and divorce, infertility, miscarriage, the loneliness that singleness can bring, grief, grief, cancer, either yours or one who is close to you, unemployment, addiction, the severe illness of your child.

[2 : 00] A number of you frequently experience the valley of racism on a day-to-day basis.

Both personal and systemic. And that valley, you have found to be a lonely place, in part because many of your white brothers and sisters have remained silent on this issue.

And as ugly and as abhorrent as the events in Charlottesville were yesterday, for you, it's just another day in the valley.

Suffering has been a central question of philosophy and world religions since time immemorial.

There's been enough written to fill a library. But what is David saying about it?

That's what we're going to look at tonight. What does David have to tell us? What is he telling us with these specific words and images? So we're going to look at the valley. We're going to look at the shepherd's equipment, his rod and his staff.

[3 : 05] We're going to look at God's presence. So, valley, equipment, presence. Before we do that, let's pray. Amen. We would need your help no matter where we were, Lord.

All of us need your help right now to understand what David is trying to say here and what you are trying to say to us across 3,000 years. Would tonight you appear to be more of the shepherd that you are to us?

Would we understand your tender care for us? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So let's first look at what David had in mind.

What he wrote about the valley of the shadow of death. That could also be translated the valley of deepest darkness. And we're not talking about really broad, shiny, green, lush valley.

In the Holy Land, at the bottom of valleys, winter streams have cut long, deep crevices into the rocks. And there's such a canyon like this in the old city of Petri.

[4 : 27] You have to travel through this canyon to get to the old city. Has anybody ever been there? Can you confirm this? Yeah? Okay, good. So it's narrow, and it's 30 feet high.

And when it rains, it creates a flash flood in this valley. And one such flood occurred in 1957. There was a group of French tourists there. Now, two of the women who were in the front heard screaming, among other things, behind them.

So they bolted up into, like, this side crevice to hide themselves from whatever was coming. And then they turn around and see a wall of water rush by, along with boulders and mangled bodies.

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mangled bodies. They encountered a valley of death. These gulches are not uncommon in the Holy Land.

There's an Armenian shepherd named Mishakh Krikorian. And he recorded his observations about Psalm 23 a few decades ago.

[5 : 37] And he tells about a particular valley just south of the Jerusalem-Jericho road. He writes, There is an actual valley of the shadow of death in Palestine, and every shepherd knows of it.

I had the good fortune of having at least a passing view of this valley. It is a very narrow defile through a mountain range where the water often foams and roars, torn by jagged rocks.

The path plunges downward into a deep and narrow gorge of sheer precipices overhung by battlements of rocks, which almost touch overhead.

Its sidewalls like the stone walls of a great cathedral. The valley is about five miles long, yet it is not more than 12 feet at the widest section of the base.

The actual path on the solid rock in places is so narrow that the sheep can hardly turn around in case of danger. David was probably thinking about one of these valleys when he wrote this song.

[6 : 41] Travelers in his day would be very wary of a gulch like this. They would march slowly and silently in order to avoid being seen or heard by bandits.

The fear of death would be constantly on their minds. They would tremble and expect trouble and death at any time they were passing through. So, let's observe three things about this valley.

The first thing about the valley we should know is that it's not the final destination. Now, having heard this psalm numerous times at funerals, and having seen it spoken as the Titanic was going down in James Cameron's film, you might think that the valley of death, the valley of the shadow of death, is the end of the trail, but it's not.

David doesn't have that in mind because he's a shepherd, and he knows that the shepherd is leading the sheep through the valley en route to a destination. A shepherd often does this because, even though it doesn't look like this to the sheep, it really is the best route.

If he wants to get up into the mountains where some good pasture is to feed the sheep, the best way to go is not over mountaintops, but up through the valley. Okay, so it's not the final destination.

[7 : 58] And the second thing to observe is that it's unavoidable. The valley of deep darkness is a section of the trail that cannot be avoided. There's no bypass or magical escape.

The only way forward is through the valley. So if we haven't gone through the valley yet, chances are we will. And David knows that he will one day pass through it.

But he never contemplates dwelling there. The valley is not the place to stay. That's the third thing to observe, is that David fears no evil while he is there.

The gloom of the valley itself isn't harmful, but the fear it generates can be paralyzing. Now, we don't have to fear because we look back on the whole story of the good shepherd from beginning to end, and we know that if we are Christians, then we have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection.

His death and his resurrection. Why did Jesus have to die? This question was posed to me by my five-year-old son just a couple days ago.

[9 : 10] We were at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Really great museum, if you've never been there. And a Christian says, Hey, Daddy!

Daddy! There's God! And I look, and there's a picture of the crucifixion. Like, okay. So, you know, wanting to appear to be, like, a rather nuanced father, I say, kind of in a loud voice, Well, son, that's not...

That is Jesus, the Son of God, who is dying on the cross. And then he says, Why did he have to die? It's funny, because, like, five days earlier, somebody else had told me from our church, Hey, my daughter just asked me, like, Why did Jesus have to die?

And sure enough, the quiz came back from my own son. So, anyway, what would you say if a five-year-old asked you, Why did Jesus have to die?

What would you say? Well, maybe it would go something like this. He died because we have two big enemies as human beings.

[10 : 16] Our two enemies are sin. You know, the things you do when you disobey your parents and when you get selfish. So, sin is one of our enemies and death is our other big enemy.

And we can't fight those enemies on our own. We need somebody else to fight those enemies for us. There's only one who can do that, and that's God himself. So, Jesus sent his Son to defeat

death.

And the way he defeated death was rather surprising, pretty clever, although very dangerous. He actually had to die. Jesus, the Son of God, died in order to rise again from death, thereby, I don't know if a kid would understand the word thereby.

Okay. Thereby, defeating death. And now we, as Christians, when we love him, when we put our trust in him, and when we're baptized, now we are united to Christ.

We're not on the same team as Christ. That's not what it means. But we're one with him. And so, because we're united to him, we have died, and we have risen again.

[11 : 28] Isn't that great? Sin is no longer our master. And death is not the end. Our enemies have been destroyed. We no longer have to fear death, because we've already experienced victory.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 15, when the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, death is swallowed up in victory.

Oh, death, where is your victory? Oh, death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. So having been set free from fear, we look to the good shepherd for comfort.

What does David see when he looks at the shepherd? He sees his rod and his staff, the essential equipment for the shepherd. And there are two separate things.

[12 : 39] A rod and a staff are not the same. There are two separate things. The rod is the shepherd's weapon. It's about two and a half feet long. It's made of wood.

And it's shaped like a mace. So it's long and sturdy and thin. And at the end, there's a round ball.

Now into this ball, a shepherd would pound some iron nails to make it even more lethal.

And this is a thing that you use to whack something on the head. Right? And we heard Wes read earlier what David said to Saul about his experiences as a shepherd.

David said, Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. When there came a lion or a bear and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth.

And if he rose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. That's not the sling. Sling is a long-range weapon. It's a short-range. He needed a rod and crushed the skull of his enemies.

[13 : 43] The rod protects the sheep from external threat. And it's also used to count the sheep.

The shepherd would hold his rod in front of the pen just high enough so that only one sheep at a time can pass through the entrance.

As the sheep would pass through, the shepherd would count them. Now, Philip Keller, who Tommy and I have quoted before, he's a shepherd and he wrote about Psalm 23. He observes that with the rod, as the sheep are coming through, if there's something wrong with the sheep, he can take the skinny end of the rod and pull apart the wool and see if there's insects or infection.

And if the whole herd passes through and there's one missing, the shepherd immediately goes on a rescue mission. And that's where his staff comes into play.

Now, often the staff is used to lean on. All those hours he's watching the sheep. Often he uses, it's a much longer instrument. He would use it to steer sheep in the way they would go.

But the rod also has like a hook or a crook on the end of it. So if the shepherd finds the missing sheep stuck in a crevice, he can yank out the sheep from the hole.

[14 : 59] Or if he finds the sheep in a bush and some brambles, he can beat apart the thorns and get the sheep out. Once he does that, he puts the sheep on his shoulders, carries him out.

Now, I don't know if you remember last week. There was a picture we showed. It was from the Roman catacombs of the good shepherd, the staff in one hand. With the other hand, the sheep wrapped around his neck, bringing him home.

Isn't that beautiful? Can you imagine a more intimate picture of God caring for his people? And this is the third thing we're looking at in this verse, this intimacy.

So we've looked at the valley, and we've looked at his equipment, and now we're looking at the presence of the shepherd. There was a significant change in tone in verse 4.

I don't know if you noticed it. Here's where God walks onto the stage in this psalm. The psalmist, David, changes from the third person, the Lord is my shepherd, to the first person, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

[16:03] In the German language, like many other languages, there's a difference between the formal and informal form of the word you.

In English, we used to have this, right? The formal was you, and the informal, familiar form was thou. But in German, they still have this distinction, and there's all kinds of rules to determine when you use the formal versus the informal.

And no foreigner can keep this straight, and I'm pretty sure 90% of German speakers can't, though they wouldn't admit it. One rule I learned late in my time there is that when you're hiking up in the mountains, you always use the informal.

There's an expression in German translated roughly, above a thousand meters, everyone's on a first name basis. Perhaps it's because everyone is sharing the same goal, or perhaps when you're up that high, everyone has to work together.

My Austrian friends who I asked, they weren't quite sure they had asked their parents. But there's something about altitude that brings intimacy. Remember that the shepherd is bringing his sheep through the valley because they are on their way to a destination, usually up to get to higher ground, where there are good places to feed.

[17:26] Or they could be on their way home. But either way, the thing we find in the valley of deepest darkness, the thing we find in the valley, is the shepherd himself.

We find the presence of the shepherd. I learned how important the presence of a shepherd can be when I was with my son, William.

We were hiking through the Alps, and we were really tired and thirsty. We sat down. We noticed this abandoned shack just a ways down the hill, a different direction from which we came.

He was wondering what it was. So I was curious. Maybe they had water there. So I said, let me go look. I know you're tired. I want you to stay here. And I'll go look at it.

And he didn't think that was a good idea. But I convinced him, it's okay. Everything's beautiful here. It's safe. It's lovely. I'll just be right over that little hill. So I'm walking down.

[18:24] And as soon as I dip below his eyesight, he's five or maybe six at the time. And he starts crying and yelling, Daddy! Daddy!

Daddy! Like, how irrational. William, it's okay. I'm right down here. That doesn't help. What he needed was the presence of his father.

Not just an awareness that he's kind of near, but he needed the actual presence of his father. So as soon as I came back over the hill, he stopped crying. And so it is with our shepherd.

In the valley, so many things lose their value. And what we come to value the most is the presence of the shepherd. Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.

Not be all else to me, save that thou art. God's presence meant a lot to me and to Jennifer when we lived in Austria.

[19:37] We lived there three years. Do I talk about it all the time? I don't mean to. Yeah, it was nice to live there, but it was really hard in some other ways. And in many ways, it was a valley of deepest darkness for us, particularly with one of our sons.

Now, they tell pastors, do not tell stories about your children in front of the church. It'll embarrass them. They're out of town. So this is my one chance to tell the story.

For one of our children, it was a really difficult time. And it had a lot to do with the anxiety he was already feeling and experiencing.

You know, pair that with the difficulty learning the language, not understanding anybody, not being understood by anybody, basically all his classmates turning against him.

And his behavior kind of changed. And it was like really disturbing because this wasn't like the son that we brought to Austria.

[20:40] And we went on what was supposed to be a retreat. It was not very retreatful for us. And we put the kids to bed and we're just at our wits end. And so we go into the bathroom and Jen and I start praying.

And I start yelling at God, basically. Like, God, why are you doing this? Like, we obeyed you.

We felt like you were calling us here. And it's our children that are suffering for it. If you have a problem with us, it's between you and me.

Leave my kids out of it. You've made a promise. I saw it at his baptism. My child belongs to you.

Then why are you letting this happen to him? I realized in that moment, that's the closest God had ever felt to me.

He wasn't a set of propositions propositions or a concept or a theory or a religion. He was a person. And in that valley of deepest darkness, I saw my shepherd.

[22 : 09] In my experience working in the church for about 20 years now, I've seen people walk through cancer. from getting the frightening diagnosis to enduring the suffering that comes from the treatment to coming out of it on the other side.

And many of them, not all of them, many of them have told me, you know what I'm about to say, I bet, perhaps. They say, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

This cancer was the best thing that's ever happened to me. Now, why would they say that?

Because they became more intimate with God in this valley of deepest darkness than they had ever been before.

Now, just to be clear, you can't say to someone who is in a valley, hey, this is the best thing that's ever happened to you. You shouldn't say that.

But what you can offer them and what you should offer them is your presence. If you're a Christian, then the Spirit of the Lord lives in you.

[23 : 20] And your quiet, attentive, faithful presence might be that hook of the staff that the shepherd uses to pull someone out of a jam. And if it's you that are currently finding yourself in the valley of deepest darkness, you have a faith, the Christian faith, that tells you your pain is real.

It's not an illusion. It's not imagined. It's real. But God is, God is not detached. He's leading you through.

And he's there with you. And this shepherd, he himself has experienced the deepest of deep darkness. He was overwhelmed by death.

And he endured separation from his Father so that we might never be separated from God. And the good shepherd tells us in John chapter 10, Jesus says, I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

[24 : 45] He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.

Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.