

The Good Shepherd's Crook

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[0 : 00] Could you turn with me now to the second passage that we read in Psalm 23, and particularly verse 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. It's certain, it's universal, its timing is unpredictable. But it's the one thing that nobody wants to talk about. Filmmaker Woody Allen put it this way, It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.

In other words, he was afraid to die. It's scary. Henry Rollins, in one of his songs, says, Life is a hurdle, and you'll never clear it.

Death is the end of the ride, and you fear it. Death is not just scary for ourselves, but also when we lose someone that we love.

[1 : 18] C.S. Lewis, in his book, A Grief Observed, which was written after the death of his wife, he says, No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. Grieving over the death of a loved one or a friend is one of the hardest experiences of life that we can go through.

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, whom I quoted a little bit from this morning, in another poem of his, he says, Here among the light of the lording sky, an old blind man is with me where I go, walking in the meadow of his son's eye, on whom a world of ills came down like snow.

He cried as he died, fearing at last the sphere's last sound, the world going out without a breath.

Too proud to cry, too frail to check the tears, and caught between two nights blindness and death.

Oh, deepest wound of all that he should die on that darkest day. Oh, he could hide the tears out of his eyes, too proud to cry. Until I die, he will not leave my side.

A beautiful poem, and yet a poem without hope. The Queen, after the tragedy of 9-11, said, Grief is the price we pay for love.

[2 : 46] But why do we suffer such hurt and heartache? In particular, why does the Christian experience trouble and distress? Perhaps that's a question that bothers you.

Maybe you're a Christian, and you wonder why you have to suffer as you do. Or maybe someone known to you who's a Christian. Why do they have to suffer when God has promised his love towards us?

Maybe you're not a Christian here tonight, but that same question bothers you. What if you were to become a Christian, and you might still have to face up to suffering, even more suffering than what you are at the moment?

Why can't God just make the path of the Christian smooth? After all, there are these great promises in God's word of healing and peace and prosperity.

Why can't it always be like that? Surely, if it was obvious that Christians all led happy, fulfilled, trouble-free lives, then everyone would want to become a Christian.

[3 : 52] Well, maybe, maybe not. But it might be for all the wrong reasons, if that were the case. Would it really be genuine? But we're called in the Bible, his children.

So why doesn't he look after us like a good parent would, we might ask? Why does he allow all this bad stuff to happen? Why can't we always lie down in the green pastures and be led beside the still waters?

Why do we have to go through the valley of the shadow of death? Let me say at the outset that I don't know the answers to all these questions.

And if anyone does claim to know all the answers, don't believe in them. Some of the great saints of God in the Bible, like Job and David and Paul, they all wrestled with these questions.

And they didn't know all the answers. And that has been true of some of the greatest believers down through the centuries. We will get help from some of the insights that they were given.

[4 : 58] But no one knows all the answers. Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly, shall God unfold the pattern and explain the reason why.

The dark threads were as needful in the master's skillful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern which he planned. However, David does give us a clue here in Psalm 23, verse 4. He speaks of the Lord's rod and staff, the good shepherd's crook, as we may call it. It comforts him. But what does that mean?

But before we get into that, we need to look at the circumstances where the rod and staff comfort him, the valley of the shadow of death. This is speaking, first of all, of a place of danger.

If we imagine the background of this, David is using the picture of the shepherd and his sheep. The sheep are coming from the pasture into the sheepfold for the night, and they're passing through a deep, dark valley as night is coming on.

[6 : 11] And there's the dangers of wild animals, the dangers of those who might attack them and try to steal them. And so it's a place of danger and of imminent death.

And of course, death is the greatest trouble and distress that we have to face. It's the end of life here and now, separation from those, all those we've loved, and those who love us.

I quoted this morning a little bit from the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell, who said, Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race, the slow, sure doom falls, pitiless and dark.

That pessimistic outlook that we looked at this morning. But it's very easy for all of us to feel something of the force of that, because death is opening up an uncertain future unless we know and believe the promises of God.

But not only is it death itself, not only is it the process of dying, the Bible itself is quite clear that it's appointed unto men once to die, and after that, the judgment.

[7 : 31] So we're in a place of great danger. That's a picture that's being used in this psalm. And even for the Christian, there may be all sorts of doubts in the face of death.

But our text here is not talking about death itself directly. It's talking about the shadow of death. It's the valley of the shadow of death.

It's speaking here of a darkness, of death casting a long shadow, if you like. All the pains and troubles that we face in life, all the dark times, all the hurts and the heartaches.

It's as if these are forerunners of that greater evil, our last enemy of death itself. But it also speaks of spiritual danger, just as the sheep were in danger of being attacked or being led away from the right path.

So we are in constant danger of being attacked spiritually and being led away from the right path. Destructive influences of all kinds enslaving us.

[8 : 38] So David is here speaking about a place of danger. But it's also speaking about a place of fear. Often it isn't the external danger or difficulty that's the trouble.

It's the internal fear and distress that's the real trouble. Because the same kind of circumstances can face two different people and one person seems able to cope fine with it but another person is overcome by fear.

And so often it's that. It's our reaction that is the trouble. How can I cope with this? How can I cope with this hurt, this heartache, this fear, this sense of loss, this anxiety about family or friends?

Well at this stage I'll just say this. The very fact that God in his word speaks of the valley of the shadow of death in the experience of the believer, remember, that in itself is encouraging.

It is something not unknown in the experience of the believer. It is something that David could identify with. He was speaking out of his own experience here. You are not alone if you have experienced this.

[9 : 50] You are not the only person who's passing through the valley of the shadow. And also there's this for encouragement. I walk through, our text says, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow.

It's not just walking in but walking through. The believer is walking through. There's light at the end of the tunnel if you like to put it that way. In Isaiah chapter 9 verse 2 we're told, The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. That's that passage that leads on to speak about the coming of the Messiah. Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And it's speaking about light shining out of darkness. And that's the picture here of our psalm. He's walking through that valley of the shadow. Corrie ten Boom, who was a Dutch lady who was

imprisoned by the Nazis in a concentration camp where her sister died.

She knew all about suffering. She had been imprisoned for helping Jewish people. And she said, When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away your ticket and jump off. [11:13] You sit still and trust the engine driver. And this is what this psalm is speaking about. Yes, there is the valley of the shadow of death. Yes, there is death itself, the last enemy.

And there are all the other evils and troubles that come to us in this world. But for the Christian we are passing through. And how is that possible? How can we have that confidence?

How can we have that hope? Well, it comes in the second part of this verse. What I've called the Good Shepherd's Crook. I don't know if you know that sometimes the Psalms 22, 23 and 24 are referred to the Psalms of the Cross, the Crook and the Crown.

Psalm 22 speaking about the experience of Jesus on the Cross. Psalm 23 speaking about our Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus and his Crook.

And Psalm 24 speaking about his Crown. Here we have the emphasis on the rod and the staff of the shepherd. Now we might ask, Well, what were they, this rod and staff?

[12:21] And if you read commentators about this, you'll get different ideas about it. And some will say, well, it's two different instruments, a club or a cudgel and a stick or a staff. Or perhaps they are two ways of referring to the same thing.

Remember that this is poetry. And so often in Hebrew poetry, things get repeated twice in different ways. And so I think we can be on sure ground when we say, this is talking about the shepherd's stick.

It's talking about what we would say the shepherd's crook. A stout staff that he used for various purposes. And the main point is to consider, not so much the physical implement or implements themselves, but the main point is to consider their uses.

Why did the shepherd have this staff? Or why did he have this rod and staff? Well, the first point was that he used it for defense. He used it for protection against enemies.

Think of David, the shepherd boy, who said that he defended his sheep from the lion and the bear. And it was the staff that shepherds so often used to fend off wild animals who were wanting to attack the sheep.

[13:36] Or they could be used in rescuing a sheep or a lamb from danger. I've often seen my father, who was a shepherd, catching a sheep or a lamb and pulling them out of danger with the crook.

And that's another use in which the shepherd would use his stick or his crook. And so it's a great comfort to know that the good shepherd is with us in the darkest places to protect us from our enemies.

Whatever dark experience you may be going through, and however the enemy of our souls may try to exploit it, the Lord Jesus is there to protect us.

And no power on earth or in hell can withstand his rod of iron. That's the expression that is used in Psalm 2. He will rule the kings of the earth with an iron scepter, literally an iron rod.

Picturing the shepherd's rod or staff, but it's iron. It's powerful. And he uses it to beat down the enemies of his kingdom, of his people.

[14:44] Bob Dylan in a song says, The iron hand ain't no match for the iron rod. The strongest wall will crumble and fall to a mighty God. You know, the iron hand is often used of political power, the power of those in government or authority.

But he says, The iron hand ain't no match for the iron rod. So, the rod or staff was used in protection. And that speaks to us of the great protecting love of the Lord Jesus Christ against all the kind of hostility and enemies that may attack us spiritually or in every other way.

But secondly, it speaks of discipline. The rod was also used in discipline. The wayward sheep sometimes needed to be prodded back into the right way by the shepherd's crook.

And often in the Old Testament, the rod is spoken of in the context of God disciplining his people. And that's why we read the passage in Hebrews chapter 12, which also quotes from the book of Proverbs, verses 5 to 7 there, And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons.

My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone who accepts as a son.

[16:09] That's quoting from Proverbs. Then it goes on to say, In other words, those things that happen to us, hard and difficult though they may be, the troubles and distresses we go through, we can come to see them as God working with us and in and through those things to sometimes bring us to our senses, to sometimes bring us to repentance, to sometimes cause us to rely more upon him than we were doing before, or whatever it may be.

He knows the purposes and the reasons. Someone has said, The Heavenly Father has no spoiled children. He loves them too much to allow that.

And you know that's sometimes what we would like in our heart of hearts, really to be spoiled children, to always be mollycoddled.

But God knows that that's not the way to make us strong, to make us rely upon him, to make us develop in our faith. And sometimes we have to go through hard experiences that he is leading us through to bring us more and more to himself.

So we need to accept what God is doing in our lives. C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, said, The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things in our lives as interruptions of one's own or real life.

[17:44] The truth is, of course, that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life, the life God is sending one day by day.

It's an amazing thing that, isn't it? To turn the whole thing on its head, instead of looking at those experiences negatively, to look at them positively, and to say, What is God doing here?

What is God teaching me? With these things, even they may be annoying interruptions, or whatever, or they may be very big, heavy things in our lives. But God has some purpose in it.

We may not be able to see it, as we said at the beginning. It may be like that tapestry, that we can't see the finished work. We can only see what seems to us the dark lines and threads.

But God has a good purpose in it. Sometimes we may wonder, What is the good shepherd doing in these things? But many Christians have come to see that he is at work for our good.

[18:42] Martin Luther said, Affliction is the Christian's theologian. You know, sometimes we're very slow to learn true theology, to learn the truth about God and how he relates to us.

But he says, Affliction is the Christian's theologian. In other words, we learn more in these hard experiences than sometimes from the times when things in life are easy.

John Calvin put it this way, Adversity does not fall out to us by chance, but is the method by which God arouses us to repentance. And so often that's the case.

We've been brought to our senses. We've been brought to the foot of the cross and to confess our sins through hard experiences and hard times. Matthew Henry said, Outward losses drive good people to their prayers, but bad people to their curses.

Isn't that so often true? When people go through bad, horrible experiences, those who don't know the Lord, they may view it just as a reason to curse and to blaspheme.

[19:48] But those who know the Lord's kindness to them, they view it as something to drive them to prayer and to seek God's help.

Andrew Bonner, who famously wrote the biography of Robert Murray McChain, he said, We have got more from Paul's prison house than from his visit to the third heaven.

It's a beautiful expression that, isn't it? Because he's saying, basically, we got these amazing letters in the New Testament from the fact that Paul wrote so many of them in prison. But he only mentions once the fact of his visit to the third heaven and there's not much lesson drawn from it.

There is a little bit of lesson. But so much more is drawn from his experience in prison and his suffering. But of course, supremely, what we see here is that the shepherd is leading us through.

The good shepherd, although we may be in the valley of the shadow of death, we are passing through. And there, his rod and his staff comfort us. This is part of the path of righteousness that's spoken of earlier in verse 3.

[21:05] Part of the paths of righteousness that Jesus is leading us on. Samuel Rutherford, the great covenanter writer, said, I bless the Lord that all our troubles come through Christ's fingers.

Great expression, that as well. He doesn't just say Christ's hands, but Christ's fingers as if there's that delicacy of touch that he knows exactly what we can put up with and what will lead us to know himself better and to change direction and to do what he wants us to be doing.

Or Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century Baptist preacher in London said, The refiner is never far from the mouth of the furnace when his gold is in the fire.

In other words, we may be going through an experience that feels like being in a furnace, but he says he's never far from the mouth of the furnace. He is keeping watch over us and we will not suffer beyond what we can endure.

Rather, he is working out his good purposes. There's a hymn called How Firm a Foundation and some of the words go like this. When through the deep waters I call you to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow, for I will be with you your troubles to bless and sanctify to you your deepest distress.

[22 : 28] When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie, my grace all-sufficient shall be your supply. The flame shall not harm you, I only design your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

There's another hymn written by Anne Ross Cousin. It's based on the writings of Samuel Rutherford and some notes that he had on Revelation chapter 22.

And it's a very famous hymn, The Sands of Time. And that's based on the idea of the, you know, the old hourglass where the sand was trickling down showing the passage of time.

The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of heaven breaks, the summer morn I've longed for, the fair sweet morn awakes. Dark, dark has been the midnight, but sunrise is at hand with glory, glory dwelling in Emmanuel's land.

With mercy and with judgment my web of time he wove, and every dew of sorrow was glistening with his love. I'll bless the hand that guided, I'll bless the heart that planned when in his glory dwelling in Emmanuel's land.

[23 : 49] And I want to finish just by quoting a little bit from John Bunyan in his description of the death of Mr. Valiant for Truth. Then said he, I am going to my fathers, and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the troubles I have been at to arrive where I am.

My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me to be my witness for me that I have fought his battles who will now be my rewarder.

When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside, and to which as he went he said, Death, where is thy sting?

And as he went down deeper he said, Grave, where is thy victory? So he passed over, and the trumpet sounded for him on the other side.

Let's pray.