

My Valley, God's Comforts

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Date: 08 November 2020

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[0 : 0 0] to Psalm 23 verse 4. All of us, I'm sure, have verses of Scripture which are very precious to us, but for many of us this is the most precious verse in all the Bible, perhaps best rendered in the King James Version. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

A couple of months ago I received a circular email from Crosswalk entitled, 10 verses about fear and anxiety to remind us that God is in control. And unsurprisingly, one of the verses they quoted was Psalm 23 verse 4. It reinforces for me that this is God's word for this day, that though we may be passing through valleys, God's comforts are always new and always reliable. He will be with us. His rod and staff will comfort us. God has comforts for us in the valley that we shall experience nowhere else. And so as we enter into this most precious verse, this sacred teaching, this burning bush, we take off our shoes because we are on truly holy ground.

If ever there was one, this is a verse for the fearful and anxious among us. I want us to consider two things together this morning. First, my valleys, and second, God's comforts.

King David, who wrote this psalm, could never have imagined in his darkest nightmares this present pandemic. But the comfort he experienced and to which he points is the same for us yesterday, today, today, and forever. The presence, the protection, the power, and the promises of God.

First of all then, my valleys, my valleys, the valley of the shadow of death. I don't know if there's a more powerful image of human experience in the raw in any language of men.

[2 : 3 3] For the people of David's day, valleys were very dangerous places, mainly because where you have valleys, you also have mountains. And where you have mountains, you have the twin dangers of wild animals attacking and fierce bandits ambushing. I don't know if you've ever thought this way before, but it makes sense. Where you have valleys, you also have mountains. And where you have mountains, you also have valleys. There are no valleys in Cambridgeshire, because the land is absolutely flat.

But where there are mountains, in the highlands of Scotland, there are also valleys, or glens, as we would call them. It's the combination of these three dark words which make this such a powerful image. Valley, shadow, death. We've all been there. Perhaps that's where some of you feel yourself to be right now. Not just in a valley, not just in a valley of shadow, but in a valley of the shadow of death.

For some of us, we don't feel it could get any worse than it is. But this verse is for you. This sacred teaching, this burning bush, your father has designed this verse just for you.

Now, we don't know when David wrote this psalm, but it bears the marks of mature reflection. As a young man, we know that David had been a shepherd. Could it be that as an old man, having been king for many decades and having been a follower of God since a child, he compares his long life to that of a sheep he used to shepherd as a young man?

With God as the ideal shepherd. The shepherd who was with him when he faced down that giant philistine Goliath. The shepherd who restored him after he had fallen to sin with Bathsheba.

[4 : 46] Yes, David knew all about the valleys of the shadow of death. For throughout his long life, he had walked there way more times than he would have liked.

And so they are David's valleys. But they are your valleys also. There are valleys you walked through in the past.

There are shadows perhaps you are walking in right now. They're your valleys. They're my valleys. God is with us here as he was with King David and his. Our shepherd is leading and guiding and protecting us even when we cannot see the way ahead. We his sheep, he our shepherd.

And I want to point to three types of valley through which we may be walking this morning. Valleys of the body, of the mind, and of the soul. Now perhaps you aren't in the valley and that's good. Perhaps you're on the flat plain or perhaps you're on the mountain. That's good.

But don't switch off because you know where there are mountains? There are also valleys. First of all, there are valleys of the body. There are valleys of the body. I guess this is the most obvious meaning of the valley of the shadow of death. Physical threat. Where there are valleys, there are wild animals. There are bandits. There are robbers. Read the story of the good Samaritan to learn how dangerous a thing it was to walk through the mountains and the valleys of the Judean wilderness. These were days of lions and jackals of violence and of anarchy. The valley of the shadow of death is a physically dangerous place. As I say, I suspect David wrote this psalm not as a young man, but as an old man later life. And throughout his life, he had experienced many valleys of the body where, whether by illness or violence, he was in physical shadow.

[6 : 55] These were valleys of the body. Times of extreme exhaustion brought on by being endlessly chased by mad King Saul. Times of physical grief because of the guilt of his sin. Times of old age when no matter how many layers of clothing he wore, he still couldn't keep warm. Battered and bruised, King David always led with a limp. And perhaps that's the way it is for you today.

The vigor of youth is a distant memory. You used to be able to keep going all day and all night, but now your joints are sore and your muscles complain. There was a day when you could eat anything because you had an iron constitution. You went to the Kui Nuhr and said, I'll have the hottest thing you have ever seen in your life. But even now, the slightest of spices gives you nausea and heartburn. Don't even mention chocolate, right? That's a distant memory for you.

More seriously, you've noticed other symptoms. Your eyesight's deteriorated. Your hearing's not what it used to be. And get up seven times a night at the toilet.

And when you try to get back to sleep, that doesn't work either. You try to count sheep, but their collective baths keep you awake. Physically, you're just not what you once were. And you know it. And then there's those even more serious symptoms.

Yes, there are such things as valleys of the body. Yes, common to all, King David included. Places of fear and anxiety where we long to experience God's intimate presence with us and his comfort of us.

[8 : 54] But then there are also valleys of the mind. Valleys of the mind. The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote, Oh, the mind, the mind has mountains.

Cliffs of fall, frightful sheer, no man fathomed. Yes, Gerard, the mind has mountains which are frightful, but it has valleys which are no less sheer.

I suspect many more of us walk through these valleys of the mind than we might choose to admit. We may choose to call these valleys depression, anxiety, phobia, or obsession, but they find a common source here.

Our minds walk in dark valleys where we have told ourselves that these are valleys of the shadow of death. Have you ever walked in them?

Are you there now? No. You may not, and I envy you the light, but if you do, you're in good company. Charles Spurgeon.

[10 : 05] Martin Luther. King David himself. Read Psalm 13. You're drawn to the inescapable conclusion that his mind had dark valleys in which he walked.

And you know, when the mind is dark, the world has no color. The blue sky is gray, and the green grass is gray, and the red dawn is gray.

Everything is in shadow. Such is the lying and twisted tendency of gray logic, as I call it, of an internal world of dark make-believe that the valleys of the mind are often the most painful of all.

Break my leg, we might say, but do not break my mind. Slowly but surely, the COVID-19 pandemic, with all its restrictions, whilst not breaking our bodies, the majority of us has in many cases broken our minds.

As I said last week, the mental health implications of 2020 will take generations to be overcome.

[11 : 22] These valleys of the mind are far more common than you might think. You're certainly, certainly not alone when you walk there. And then there are valleys of the soul.

There are valleys of the soul. For others of us, the valleys we experience aren't in the body, nothing so tangible. They're not in the mind, nothing so immediate. They're in the soul, because they concern matters of the spirit.

Questions that we struggle to ask, never mind answer. Questions like, where is God in COVID? Has God forgotten all about me?

And when you pray, your voice seems to reach no further than the ceiling. You read your Bible, and though you understand the grammar of words and sentences, there's no warming of your heart as you read the gospel of the kingdom.

You're as present as often as you could be at services of worship, either physically or online, but they all leave you cold and empty. You're in that valley of the soul. Days of spiritual crisis where you're struggling to ask, never mind answer.

[12 : 32] Maybe it's nothing quite so serious as unasked questions or unspoken answers. Maybe for you it's been a gradual slipping away into the nothingness of spiritual apathy.

Well, don't think you're alone, because you simply ain't. You're in company with King David, who in Psalm 13 plaintively asks, How long, O Lord?

Have you forgotten me forever? You're with the writer of Psalm 73 when he confessed, As for me, my feet had almost slipped. You once walked on spiritual mountaintops, and you know how it feels when you're there, but here in the valley of the shadow of spiritual death, there's just nothing.

You go through stages of feeling so guilty about walking in the valley of the soul, and then you go through stages of feeling just fine with it, and sometimes feeling nothing about it at all. But you know that as it stands, this can't go on.

But the valley experience which you're enduring throughout all these months must come to an end at one point or another. No, we really don't know when King David wrote this psalm, but it does bear the mark of mature reflection, an old man looking back.

[13 : 56] In all likelihood, King David had experienced all of these valleys throughout his life, valleys of the body, of the mind, and of the soul. That's sad for him, but it's good for us.

You may not be able to see anyone else in that valley of the shadow of death, such as the darkness of the shadow. But David's within calling distance, as are many other hundreds of thousands of faithful Christians today in this strange, weird, COVID wilderness.

My valleys. Second and more important, God's comforts. God's comforts.

This image of the valley of the shadow of death, it speaks to all men everywhere. Today, of course, is Remembrance Sunday, and I can't help but think that those trenches in which our gallant soldiers hid during World War I were their valleys.

No man's land was the shadow, and the machine guns of the enemy were death. I recently watched the movie 1917 and was struck afresh with the horror of what these young soldiers endured on the Western Front all those years ago, on whatever side they were.

[15 : 20] No wonder so many of them never recovered. But I was also struck by how many of these soldiers must have repeated the words of Psalm 23, verse 4, to themselves over and over and over again as they waited for the whistles of their officers to blow, to go over the top.

I wonder how many of them said quietly to themselves, Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

By rod and staff they comfort me. Now their trenches aren't our valleys, and nevertheless, for some of us today, we're walking through the valleys of the body and the mind and the soul, and we desperately need to experience for ourselves the loving comfort of our Good Shepherd.

We need to sense his hand upon us, steadying us, strengthening us, encouraging us to keep going.

And in Psalm 23, verse 4, this most precious of verses, our Good Shepherd provides us with four strong foundations of his comfort. Presence, protection, power, and promise.

[16 : 43] My valleys aren't yours. Your valleys aren't mine. But God's comfort to us is the same in them all. You can find comfort here in the great promises of the gospel in Psalm 23, 4.

Presence, first of all. Presence. There is something utterly absorbing about the precise wording of this clause in Psalm 23, verse 4. For you are with me.

Thus far in Psalm 23, David has spoken of God only in the third person. He is my shepherd. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.

It's rather like David is speaking to someone else about God. But in verse 4, it all changes. The situation in David's life has become so critical, so personal, so painful that David can no longer speak about God to anyone.

He can only speak to God. No longer does he speak about God in the third person, he. Rather, it's all in the second person language of you and yours.

[17 : 58] The thing is that God is present in the valley and David knows it. Along with the shadows of death come the certainties of the divine.

God is holding David's heart in the palm of his mighty hand. The valley experiences are proving so painful to him that he can no longer talk to others about God.

He wells up. He lacks confidence. He may only talk to God himself. But that's fine because that's where God is.

God is right with him. God is with Joshua taking the fight to hostile enemies. God is with the apostle Peter in prison for his preaching of the gospel and facing death.

God is with King David as he faces down the giant Goliath. I bet none of us ever want to be in that valley of the shadow of death. But like us not it's only when we're there that we prove the loving faithfulness of God in a way we'd never before done.

[19 : 10] But then we want to ask this most obvious of questions. What is God doing in the valley of the shadow of death? God is the God of light.

Why is he in the shadow with me? Is this not impossible? That he should go from the glories of heaven's pleasures to the gloom of this world's pain?

And then we see Jesus humbled emptied and obedient unto death. the Jesus who has walked in the darkness of Golgotha's cross.

The Jesus who is with us and calls out to us do not be afraid I am with you. So we take our sorrows to him our valleys of the body and of the mind and of the soul and we will meet a Jesus who knows them all by name and is first off the mark to give us grace to help in our time of need.

Second, the second comfort is power. Power. In the ancient Middle East shepherds would carry with them both a rod and a staff.

[20 : 39] The rod was for the guidance of the sheep. The staff was for the protection of the sheep. The shepherd's rod was designed in such a way that it could be used by the shepherd to lead his sheep in the direction he wanted them to go.

So if they were walking too close to the edge of a cliff he used his rod to guide them away from it. If they were walking away from the green pastures in which he wanted them to feed he used his rod to guide them toward it.

God, our good shepherd who was with us in the valley of the shadow of death has a rod. I remember reaching the peak of a Monroe in Western Ross.

Monroe is a mountain over 3,000 feet or 970 meters here in Scotland. And at the summit the cloud was so thick that it was virtually impossible to see your hand in front of your face.

It was very dangerous. One wrong step you could fall hundreds of feet to your death as many climbers in Scotland do. For a few moments that is until I got out my compass and my map I was afraid.

[21 : 56] The clouded vision at the top of one of the Torridan mountains in the Northwest Highlands is mirrored by the darkened vision in the valley of the shadow of death. Left to ourselves we don't know in which direction to walk.

Who knows that we might fall into a bog and a marsh from which we shall never escape. It is a fearful experience whether in body mind or soul. But we have a guide in the darkness.

We have the powerful rod of our sovereign God. Actually the word rod is used to describe a king's scepter. the instrument of his power.

The power of King Jesus leads us through the valley. He is here with us and though we may stumble he will pick us up and he will set us on our way once again.

We have a guide in our darkness none other than our mighty king by the light of whose scepter we see our way. One of the many things we say in difficult times is I don't know what's going on.

[23 : 11] I don't know where it's all going where it's all going to end. And perhaps you're right but your shepherd knows what's going on even here.

And in the darkness of the valley he's with you with his rod. Third comfort the protection of God the protection of God.

I'll never forget the privilege of hearing Dale Ralph Davis that famous Old Testament expert and expositor preaching on Psalm 23 here in Glasgow City Free Church from this very spot.

And Davis translated verse 4 from the original and shook us all awake when he talked about God's rod and club. We're also used to a shepherd carrying a staff whereas Dale Ralph Davis rightly translated it as a club because that's what it basically was.

The shepherd carries a rod for guidance and a stout stick for defense. If a wild animal should attack the flock the shepherd would drive it away with his staff his club.

[24 : 19] In his conflict with Goliath David said the Lord who has delivered me from the paw of the lion the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.

David was an expert shepherd who knew full well how to use his staff to protect the flock against lions and bears. One of the problems with walking in the valley of the shadow of death whether in body mind or soul is that we feel so very weak.

feels to us as though the slightest breath of wind will blow us over the slightest touch on our shoulders the slightest wave of the sea.

We feel like a boxer whose legs have turned to jelly tomorrow seems one step too far an enemy who's too strong for us but our shepherd is our father and our father is our shepherd and he is the king and nothing and no one not our todays not our yesterdays not our tomorrows not our friends and not our enemies not our weaknesses not even our sins can overcome us or carry us away from our father who is our shepherd who is our king.

In the world of David's day the surrounding nations worshipped gods who were localized to certain areas so one group worshipped a god of the sea and another group a god of the hills and another group the god of thunder and another group the god of lightning the god of the hills had no power in the valleys and the god of the sea had no power on the land but the god of Israel the shepherd king of David is god of both valley and mountain the god of all places at all times of all peoples and he says to us as his believing people I will protect you and I will be your shield I will love you freely and I will uphold you with my powerful right hand and then the final comfort in this verse is promise is promise

[26 : 51] I don't know any valleys which go on forever the African rift valley is one of the longest in the world measured at almost 4,000 kilometers but even it does not stretch across the whole globe valleys begin valleys end I want you to notice one of the most important words in verse 4 a word which seems so insignificant but is in fact a word of precious promise to all of us who are experiencing valleys of the shadow of death even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death that word is through through is a motion word one dictionary definition of through moving in from one side and out the other side what a precious promise this is from God's word that the valley you're in right now whether it's a valley of body mind or soul it has a beginning and it will have an end the COVID crisis with all its restrictions and all its lockdowns had a beginning and it will have an end we have the promise from God that he'll be with us in the valley we have a promise from him that a day is coming when he will smooth out that valley and rather than being fearful we shall have a table prepared for us in the presence of our enemies and our cup shall overflow whether in this world or in the next our valley shall have an end

I'm not really surprised that Psalm 23 verse 4 is some Christians most precious verse it reminds the fearful and anxious among us that God is in control yes on the mountains and yes in the valleys that he's with us protecting us and guiding us through when I was on holiday in Northumberland I thought and I was thinking very much about this verse and I was thinking about my late father-in-law who had a shepherd's crook and I thought about taking it from his house up north and placing it right here in front of me and asking that anyone who wants to put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ would come and rest their entire weight upon that shepherd's crook would come and place their hand into the arch and rest their entire weight on that shepherd's crook maybe not such a good idea what's left for us today but to place our faith our trust our spiritual emotional physical and mental weight upon the Lord Jesus Christ the good shepherd who call upon him to be with us in all our valleys let us pray

Lord we worship and praise you your word is absolutely realistic it's not jingoistic it tells us the way things really are which is fine by us we're not interested in pretense or pretending about who we really are we're not interested in in a Facebook presentation of ourselves as being all together we're interested in you knowing us as we are and in us relating to you as real human beings Father we want to cling on to the promises of the gospel from this verse your presence with us your power for us your protection of us and your promise toward us especially with those who feel themselves very acutely to be in this valley right now and help them even as we might rest our physical weight upon my late father-in-law's shepherd's crook to place the entirety of their weight upon you we ask these things in Jesus name amen steak thank you for winning well we ask each your second life in j paralyzed in juts care to be united when thank you i may appreciate

Lew that thank you and guys you always hear that understanding something you or has