

# The valley of the shadow of death

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'm actually going to be speaking on just one verse, verse 4, which reads, 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. That's on page 450 out of the Bibles that are at the back there if you need a Bible.

Wow, so last week, if you remember, we were looking at the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

This week, we're looking at the reality of life, the valley of the shadow of death.

Is it just me or does that verse stick out to you as well as we read this? Maybe it's not the words that I would use, but 3,000 years later, I still think it captures the sense of what life can be like, doesn't it?

Life is difficult, tragic at times, and life ultimately ends in death. The problem with actually landing in a passage like this is that when we look at each other's lives, we see the highs, but we kind of screen out the struggles.

[ 1 : 27 ] We just don't see them. Do we choose not to or that we are actually so good at hiding our own pain that no one else gets to see it? I'm not sure. But regardless, we expect more from life than we get.

If we were writing the script, we would not write the script with valleys of shadows, the shadow of death in them. We expect life to be all the highs stitched together.

And we wonder why we don't experience that. Particularly as people who are actually trusting in the God of the universe, why is it that we're experiencing these things?

Last week, I went to my SMBC, Bible College, 10-year anniversary, and I got together with a whole bunch of people who were also going through similar things to me.

They'd gone through ministry training. They'd gone into ministry roles in their churches and various different organizations, mission agencies. And every one of them had a story of tragedy, of challenge, of hardship, of difficulty, whether it be relational, physical.

[ 2 : 36 ] One couple couldn't be there because the wife is actually in the last stages of cancer. She won't survive. So many different ways that tragedy touches us.

And there we were at Bible College. We didn't set out into Bible College thinking that this was the way that life was going to be. Getting this bigger and bigger picture of who God is, and then suddenly discovering that the greatness of that picture of God meant that there were things in store for me that I never would have ever hoped for.

Life has not turned out the way that I expected it to after college. How is your life going? And how do we make sense of it? What I'm going to suggest from this particular verse, verse 4, is that David actually gives us a way of making sense of this difficulty.

I mean, he talks about the, you know, he talks about God providing all that we want. He talks about the green pastures and the still waters. And now he's going to talk about how real life bites.

And he's going to show us in some small way how to actually start to deal with these things. And he does it by two ways. First, by teaching us to move from truth to trust.

[ 3 : 56 ] And by teaching us to meet our fear with faith. So from truth to trust, let me explain that a little bit. See, we need to actually make a little bit of a shift in perspective.

If you read through that psalm again, in fact, do it now. Have a read through the psalm again and just scan through it. And as you do, what I want you to do is imagine who David is speaking to as you scan through it.

Do you notice that David moves from he and me and my, at the beginning, the first three verses, to you and I?

The truth is that the Lord is my shepherd. The application of this into our lives is to make it personal.

And that's what David is guiding us to do. He moves from he is my shepherd to you are with me. Have you noticed that? That's a difference in perspective.

[ 5 : 01 ] One is to declare something that's true. And the other is to actually apply it to your life by turning to the one that it's actually true about. So that's the first thing David encourages us to do in this passage in terms of dealing with the hardships of life.

The second thing that he does is he teaches us to meet our fear with our faith. You see, this valley of the shadow of death is real. For David, as he wrote it, he'd experienced quite a number of different versions of this valley of shadow of death.

There is evil in the world. There is brokenness. There is hardship. There is difficulty. I'm going to encounter it. I'm going to be afraid when I do.

My good shepherd leads me in paths of righteousness, though. He leads me on the right path. Will I fear?

Or will I have faith in his lead, in his goodness? We go back to these words. Will I respond like this? Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

[ 6 : 11 ] Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Do you notice there how David meets hardship and difficulty? The fear starts to rise in him, and he challenges it with the truth that his good shepherd has him, even through this difficulty.

This psalm is a song or a prayer, and it's a journey of faith, whichever it is for you.

What I'm going to ask you to do is go on this journey of faith together with 3,000 years after David did. And let's look at this verse. It's got several sections to it, so hopefully I can help you to see through this a little bit more about what it looks like to embark on the journey of faith.

David begins this way at this point. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I've already said this is a bit of a gear change in the psalm. He's gone on from green pastures and still waters to the valley of the shadow of death.

How did we get here? What is David saying to us? I'm going to suggest to you that David isn't interested in giving us sweet sentiments. You know, the kind of thing we print on fridge magnets, maybe print on T-shirts, calendars, cross-stitch onto pillows.

[ 7 : 29 ] This good shepherd is guiding us through a wilderness towards something very good. Don't get me wrong, but I don't want to spoil too many spoilers for next week. He's guiding us towards something very good.

But for now, we find ourselves in the wilderness. Even though, even if we find ourselves walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

The valley of the shadow of death. Just so you understand, it is a poetic sort of expression. It can actually mean anything from deep distress to extreme danger to death itself.

Or even actually beyond death to the realm of the dead. David is preparing us for the fact that life can be and is hard.

We instinctively know what David is talking about here. Hardship is a part of life. And hardship comes in a variety of forms. What is your even if?

[ 8 : 37 ] What would you put as the things that you've experienced? How would you catalogue those valleys of the shadow of death that you've been through so far? Even though I find myself in the deepest darkness, David is saying.

What David is doing here is he's actually leaving it open for us to fill in the blanks. He's saying, think of what that darkness is for you. What is your even if?

What makes your life feel like it's gone off the rails, out of control? Crushing you like you're losing yourself. There are so many different ways from large to small that affect us, aren't there?

I can tell you now that I'm afraid to be up here, that is. I don't like public speaking. I find it scary. I always have. My preferred position in this room would be, if you can see where Sam is sitting at the desk, there's a seat just at the back in there behind him, where you're hidden from half the room at least, and the other half isn't facing your way.

My personal choice would be sitting somewhere anonymous. Not only am I afraid to speak publicly, I am actually afraid to speak truth into your lives.

[ 9 : 58 ] Because sometimes that truth is going to confront you and you're not going to like it. I don't like to disappoint or upset people. I'm afraid to challenge the sin in our church.

If you're here and you're not a Christian, I hope that's not a surprise to you. We aren't perfect here. If you've come here and you're expecting us to be perfect, well, we will be when Jesus returns or

after we've died.

But not just yet. I'm afraid of the power of gossip. I've experienced the sharpness of it. I'm afraid to approach people in conflict.

I've seen so much of it in my life and seen how badly it can end. And how infrequently people reconcile to one another. I'm afraid that after all I've experienced in my life to date, even in my ministry life, only the past 10 years or so, I'm afraid that after what I've experienced, that I'm actually going to break down.

I have this fear in me that at some point, I'm just going to crack and that'll be it. The valley of the shadow of death is real.

[ 11 : 18 ] It's different for all of us, but it's real. And there's something else that we need to address about this valley and the face about this valley before we go on.

You see, it's not just that it's real. It's not just that those even ifs are actually out there. There may actually be things we've already experienced. It's that it's our shepherd's path as we go through them.

There is no room in this psalm for thinking that hardship catches my shepherd by surprise. The thought that maybe God has taken his eye off me for a moment and, oh no, danger was lurking and it's got me.

And all I have to do, if only I can just believe hard enough, if my faith is strong enough, if my prayers are fervent enough, he'll hear me and just bring everything back on track, smooth everything out and life is wonderful again.

This is simply not true. The path we walk is the path that he leads us on. In verses 2 and 3, David says, he leads, our shepherd leads.

[ 12 : 30 ] So when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I don't accidentally stumble in there. He guides me. It's his valley. So we are never victims.

Maybe I need to put some caveats in here just so you understand this. Don't get me wrong. Your sin is still your sin.

You bear responsibility for that. But even in our sinful patterns, God has a path through those things toward growth. Growth in our ability to glorify him, to honor him with how we live.

Even the consequences of sin are not beyond God's ability to use in our lives. He is always nurturing us and growing us.

And you can read Romans 8, 28 for Paul's version of that. But for now, at least take this away. That the shepherd's path is the pilgrim's path. Have you read Pilgrim's Progress?

[ 13 : 32 ] If you haven't, I've got a copy. I'll loan it to you. I'm happy to. The reality, my good shepherd leads me through dark places. Your good shepherd leads you through dark places.

We don't always understand why. But we know why. Let's understand that there. We don't always understand why, but we know why.

You see, it's for his name's sake. That's what he's concerned about. The sake of his holy name. And his name is honored when I learn to apply my faith in him to my fear in life.

David goes on from surfacing the issue of the valley of the shadow of death. And he says these words. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Wow. In this verse, David tackles a massive issue head on. He says, even if I'm going through the worst thing I could possibly imagine, there is an alternative pathway to the pathway of fear.

[ 14 : 46 ] This is a huge call. I mean, if it wasn't back then, it surely must be now. Because anxiety is the most common health issue in Australia. One in four people will suffer from clinical anxiety in their lifetime.

Over two million people will suffer from clinical anxiety each year. Anxiety. Anxiety. Anxiety is fear just gone totally haywire.

You know that feeling you get when you experience something stressful? You know, like when Joe's on the ladder trying to catch that spider for you? Or, you know, what are the things that actually concern you?

There are a whole bunch of different things, aren't there, that freak you out. Heights. Are you worried about heights? Does that make your stomach turn? That's a natural response, isn't it? When you experience something scary, it's a natural response for things to start to happen in your own body.

Anxiety is where that happens. And there is no spider. There are no heights. There was no near miss in the car. And it can happen at random times. Not just...

[15:53] Or all the time. Not just as simply and easily packaged. This kind of fear is just growing in our culture. Never before have we been more comfortable in life.

Never before have our rights been more clearly defined and protected. Never before have we been more capable of dealing with life hardships. And yet our fears are not receding.

We feel out of control. The world is out of control. Even normal life can feel like too much for us. So is it that simple that I just do what David says here and decide, well, I will fear no evil?

I'm going to suggest to you at this point that this is actually... What David is suggesting here is to embark on a conversation with God.

Not just to try and flip a switch in your mind. David is saying that even when the worst is happening, even when I'm out of control scared, I'm going to choose not to fear.

[17:03] I'm going to choose to have faith in my good shepherd. Does that mean my fear should just disappear? That I should ditch my medication? Or the presence of anxiety means my faith is weak?

Not at all. That means I'm going to choose to meet my fear with my faith. Even when I don't know why I'm afraid, I'm going to fight my fear with my faith.

My faith that, God, you are with me. My faith that you are that good shepherd. I will fear no evil.

David then goes on to give some flesh to that, to how that actually works out. Because he goes on and says in the next verse, For you are with me. I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

It's the presence of God that helps us to fight our fear. You are with me. There's something profoundly comforting about not being alone, isn't there?

[18:15] We know that one of the most severe punishments we can give to someone, psychologically harmful, permanently at times, if you have it for too long, is solitary confinement.

Fear grows when we're isolated from one another, when we're disconnected. And we live in a disconnected world. Do you know there are 70 million refugees in the world at the moment? 37,000 people a day are being forced to flee their homes. There's now an Olympic team for refugees.

70 million. Three times our country's population. But I'm going to say this, you don't actually need to be displaced, you don't actually need to be out of your own home to feel disconnected and to feel alone.

We've never been more socially connected as a culture, and never more profoundly lonely at the same time. There is something in us that yearns for connection, that yearns to be not found to be alone.

[19:36] And when someone else is there, when someone who we do connect with is there with us, that brings us a deep sense of relief. This issue of the presence of God, the story of the Bible could be told around the presence of God, this you are with me.

This is like one of the major themes that runs through the Bible. We could look at, for example, how we were created to live in relationship with God, face-to-face relationship with him.

How we chose to be gods of our own lives, so God graciously exiled us. We broke the relationship, so he moved us away from himself.

I say graciously, for him not to do that would have been our immediate end. But God didn't just graciously move us apart from himself, he continued to move toward us throughout history, through covenant and nation of Israel, and then law that he gave them.

And finally, finally, when these things demonstrated God's desire to move toward us and our inability to move toward him, God became one of us.

[20:49] He died to pay the penalty for us rebelling against him. And by doing this, he saved us who believe from eternal death, from eternal separation from God.

And he saved us for, when he returns, eternal life with him, where we will live together, where we can say, you are with me, and it is a reality that we see day by day.

Hansen writes in the book *Lost and Found*, it's in the first chapter, he writes these words, I've never found that life, this is a Christian man, I've never found that life gets easier or better, but I have found that God is with me, that Jesus walks with me through the valley of the shadow of death, that he will leave the 99 in order to find me when I call out to him, that he promises me nothing in this world except that the God of the universe sees and knows and loves me.

And that in the next world, I will see him face to face when he lifts the burden of my sin and the burden of this evil, broken world.

God is our gospel. Our hope is that we get more of him, more of his presence. This is the truth that's encapsulated in David's words here. You are with me.

[ 22 : 27 ] I get the sense of that. How do you, the feeling of that, start to think about how that actually works in our lives. I'll tell you a story about our, where we used to live in England and how our kids used to interact with a particular aspect of the architecture of our house.

You see, we used to live in a, what do you call them, just a terrace house joined up, like a whole street full of houses, all joined up. But every two, every four houses, there was actually a tunnel through the houses to get to the back because everyone used their back doors.

Even though these houses were all joined up and it was really inconvenient, we still all used our back doors. No one used their front door. And so we walk through this general and then turn to the right and go to our back door.

Well, that was fine. I mean, it was kind of dark during the day. But at night time, it was seriously dark. And so one of the tenants, one of the people who lived in one of the houses, had actually installed a sensor light on the end of the tunnel.

So as you walked along the tunnel at night time, it clicked on and suddenly there was bright light and you could walk up quite happily. But as you approached it, it was deep darkness, pitch black.

[ 23 : 38 ] And so you had to walk with confidence that the light would come on. And our little kids, they were only tiny, four and two at the time, so our two oldest kids. And so they would be like toddling alongside us in the dark.

Because in England, it's dark nearly all the time. You know, it goes dark at like 4.30 in the afternoon. So they're toddling alongside us. And as we get to the dark, they're just shrinking closer and closer and closer to us.

And sometimes that light wouldn't come on because the person whose house it was connected to would accidentally turn the switch off. And so we walk into this darkness and the light just wouldn't come on.

And then they were just like clinging to our legs like limpets. They were pressing themselves against us in the darkness. It's no accident at this point in the psalm that David turns his focus. He turns from talking about God to talking to God. David is showing us here how to fight our fear with our faith. We need to turn to him, to press closer to him, to talk to him, and to keep talking.

[ 24 : 48 ] Joyful, uplifting, heartfelt singing like we've already had this morning. Or rambling, incoherence, sobbing, desperate, tearful prayers. Whatever it is, pressing into the presence of the God who is here with us.

David goes on from saying, you are with me and describes the ways in which God is with us. In the last part of this verse, he says, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Even as we're pressing into God's presence, he is engaging and pressing into ours.

This shepherding metaphor continues here where David says, God comforts us with his rod and his staff. Perhaps they were the same thing.

I'm not sure if shepherds necessarily had both, but it's trying to give us a clear picture of the kinds of things that they would have had. A rod was something that you use for protection or direction.

[ 25 : 59 ] It actually has two meanings though. One is a weapon of protection, so in terms of the translation from the Hebrew, a weapon of protection, something like a stout club, a brutal but effective way of seeing off threats.

Rod's already explained to us exactly what that might have looked like if a rod was used. He's got four boys. If you have girls, I apologise. Yeah, on behalf of the church, but he's got four boys, so he spoke from that perspective quite effectively.

But the interesting thing is, to use a rod, the shepherd had to physically place themselves between the sheep and the threat. It's not a distance weapon like we have now.

It wasn't just standing off and taking shots at something with a spotlight. He had to physically place himself between the sheep and the threat.

That's the kind of image we're getting here of the God who is our shepherd. Another translation for rod, though, is scepter. It's the same word in Hebrew and it's where the scepter concept came from.

[ 27 : 10 ] The thing that a king holds, you know, the gold thing with all the jewels on it. The king holds that as a sign that he is the shepherd of his sheep. He is the leader, the ruler. They've just

blinged it up a bit.

So the thing in the hands of the king was modeled on the shepherd's rod, symbolic of his rule and symbolic of how he should rule to place himself in the way of his sheep.

The exact idea that Jesus takes up in John when he says, I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The rod and the staff.

Now this was something to lean on for support. It completes the equipment that the shepherd would have had, likely had, and it demonstrates that our shepherd is ready and equipped to be with us through anything that life can throw at us.

So when we read these words, we should get a sense of the kind of God who shepherds us and the kind of way he's going to shepherd us. The God who identifies as the good shepherd, who rules us by saying, follow me.

[ 28 : 33 ] Who has been through the darkest of valleys before us. So he's with us as we go through ours. Who has been there before us and before us even through death itself.

So let me conclude this verse by just sharing that the reality is that throughout life we're going to experience hard things. But with the Lord as our shepherd these things are transformed.

These hard times are transformed. we're no longer victims. These are experiences that God guides us into and they're experiences that God grows us through and that he's with us through.

They're there to teach us to press closer into him to take the truth we know and to begin to trust. To face the fear that rises up in us with the faith that God is with us always.

I don't know the struggle of each of you here. I know some of the struggles that some of you are going through. I don't know the struggle of everyone though. But here's one thing I do know that there is nothing that God isn't able to shepherd us through.

[ 29 : 58 ] Nothing that he hasn't been through before us even for us. I'm going to say as well that this will sound like absolute madness.

Even this concept that I'm talking about that God's guiding us through valleys of darkness. It will sound like absolute madness if we don't carry the right perspective with us. Our lives are to be lived for his name's sake.

We learned that in verse 3 last week. We are not the shepherds we're the sheep. And God is glorified when we find our life and our joy in him.

When we choose to meet our fear with faith. When we turn toward him in trust. Speaking directly to him like he's in the room. Friends, because he is.

Let's pray. God, our shepherd, even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Lord, we will fear no evil for you are with us.

[ 31 : 17 ] Your rod and your staff, they comfort us. Even as we share Lord's supper today, we're reminding ourselves of the truth of what you've already done for us.

And the reality of the things that we can trust even through all that life throws at us, even death. Lord, we thank you that you're with us.

Amen.