

Comfort

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] I, Lord, in my heart, I am, my whole hand on thee.

O Lord, I, our blessed hour, thy structures beside me.

Thou joys, O thyPD, one, thy blessing clear without.

For joy I cast in all His way, and riches all He gave.

I will my holy priestess pay, my heaven is strong.

[1 : 17] And bear holy I have respect unto Thy willing one.

I will my son, just my divine, shall of the glory be set.

I will my life, I never will, to Thy holy word for it.

It is a great privilege to have been asked to come and share this communion season with you. Our congregation of Glasgow City Free Church has taken lessons from the way in which you operate.

You have a six o'clock prayer meeting on the first day of the month, and that's something we began to adopt as well after your own minister came down and told us about your work. We hold you in very high esteem, and you have our prayers and our affection in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 39] I've been there now as minister for a little over ten years, and over those years I'd like to think I've learned many lessons. But let me tell you about one of the most important lessons I've learned over all my years of being a minister in Glasgow.

A couple of years ago I was privileged, I'll use that word privileged, to be present as one of the older members of my congregation was breathing her last and passing into eternity.

I had been visiting her daily in hospital during the last days of her life, and struck up quite a precious spiritual bond with her over those days.

And during those last days I asked her advice how, as a young minister, I should conduct myself.

And on what issues, as a young minister, I still think of myself as young even if I'm not, as a young minister the kind of issues that I should be preaching about.

She thought about it for a moment, and she pulled off her oxygen mask, and she whispered in my ear, Preach comfort.

[3 : 49] Preach comfort. These were the last words she ever spoke to me. But it was later than that day she entered into Christ's presence in heaven itself, where now she experiences the comfort of the inner presence of Christ.

But though she's gone, those words still haunt me. Preach comfort. Preach comfort, she said. The longer I go on as a Christian and as a minister, the more I realise how much we need the comfort of the gospel.

We come to church week on week, often hiding big issues. Grief, frustration, boredom, exhaustion, doubt, fear.

Hiding it behind a mask of stoicism and piety. But all the time, in the language of Psalm 23 verse 4, we are walking in the valley of the shadow of death.

And at times like that, our deepest need is for the comfort the gospel brings. Not just a gospel which we can intellectually understand and defend, but a gospel we can experience for ourselves.

[5 : 08] It seems to me that the primary comfort the gospel of Jesus Christ offers is that motivated by the love of God the Father for us, applied by the Spirit of God toward us, the blood of Jesus Christ shed for us on the cross at Calvary opens up a new and living way to the very presence of God himself.

A presence which you can know in your day-to-day life. Without the forgiving and justifying power of the blood of Jesus, there could be no fellowship between us and God other than the terrifying consciousness of our guilt before him and our impending judgment.

But now that we have been made right with God through the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, the valley of the shadow of death is not a place of emptiness and barrenness for us, but it may be the most fruitful and fulfilling place of all because it's there the presence of God is with us in a very special way.

In Psalm 23, verse 4, David says, Walking in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you yourself are with me.

In today's confused evangelical world, so influenced by God TV with its health and prosperity gospel, which is no gospel at all, it would seem almost blasphemous to suggest that a faithful Christian could ever walk in such a dark place as the valley of the shadow of death.

[6 : 55] And yet we do. And not always because we've taken a wrong turn in life. Through long Christian experience, you know the shape of this valley only too well.

You've been there often. The Bible describes this valley in many different ways. For example, in Amos chapter 5, verse 8, it's the darkest of the night's darkness.

It's just before the dawn breaks. In Job chapter 16, verse 6, it's the darkness of eyes which are heavy with weeping. In Psalm 107, verse 10, it's the darkness of sheer terror.

In Jeremiah 2, verse 6, it's the darkness of the danger of famine and threat. In Job 10, verse 21, it's the darkness of the land of the dead.

This is the valley of the shadow of death. You've been there. You know what it looks like, how it feels. Grief.

[8 : 02] Illness. Broken relationship. Doubt. Fatigue. Depression. Exhaustion.

Whatever it is, you feel like you're walking in the deepest darkness. The valley of the shadow of death. Do not be surprised.

Every normal Christian must experience periods in life like this. What you need most when you're walking in the valley of the shadow of death isn't mere intellectual understanding of the gospel, as important as that is.

You need to experience for yourself the protecting, guiding, comforting, empowering, joy-giving, divine presence of God with you. The divine arms underneath you.

The divine voice in your heart. The divine light guiding your way. My late friend challenged me, preach comfort. Preach comfort.

[9 : 07] And this, the presence of God with us in the valley of death's shadow. That's the greatest comfort I can offer to anybody. Psalm 23, verse 4, we read these words, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you yourself are with me.

And from these words, we are to understand that God is with us as we walk in the valley of the shadow of death in three ways. First of all, in that valley, we have a fulfilled presence.

And then secondly, we have a factual presence. And then lastly, we have a future presence. We have, first of all, in Psalm 23, verse 4, a fulfilled presence.

We must remember that when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we're not the first to have walked there. We're not the first to have found ourselves in this dark place. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that every faithful believer who has ever lived has at one point or another found themselves walking in the darkness of grief, pain, exhaustion, fear.

When David speaks of the Lord being present in the valley of the shadow of death, his mind is ranging over the experiences of all those faithful believers who went before him. He's not the first to have walked in this valley and neither are we.

[10 : 40] But likewise, we're not the first and neither was he to have depended upon and proved for himself the presence of God with us. to see us through these times.

We are not the first to have longed for the experience of the intimacy of God with us in our doubt and our fear and our trouble. The history of God's people is the history of God's presence with them.

The truth is that in past days, even though God's people have experienced the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death, they have also experienced God's presence penetrating deeper than the depth of the ice and this gives David and this gives us great confidence that God shall be with us when we need him most.

for example, think of Jacob the lonely in Genesis chapter 28. Jacob the lonely. Jacob had to leave home because of the hatred of his brother Esau and he was in such desperate need when he reached a place that he would later call Bethel that he could only find a stone on which to rest his

head so he could sleep.

And that night of course he had his famous dream of a ladder stretching from heaven to earth and in all his own personal loneliness and uncertainty Jacob hears the voice of God saying to him in Genesis chapter 28 verse 15 I am with you.

[12 : 22] God is with Jacob in his own darkness of personal loneliness. Then think of Moses the fearful. The Moses who God was calling to go back to Egypt and confront Pharaoh.

Moses cowers before God who has revealed himself in the bush. Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh he says. Moses objects but God says to him in Exodus 3 verse 12 I will be with you through all the challenges and fears of his own personal experience of the valley of the shadow of death.

God was with Moses. And then think also of Joshua the stressed out. Joshua the stressed. The Joshua who succeeded Moses in leading the wandering Israelites and brought them across the river Jordan into the promised land.

There was an almost inhuman burden laid on Joshua's human shoulders entering into the land of Canaan was what these millions of wandering Israelites had been waiting for for 40 years.

But to stressed out under pressure Joshua God says in Joshua 3 verse 7 I am with you. God is with Joshua in his own personal darkness of stress.

[13 : 54] There are so many more examples we could point to in the Old Testament of God being with his people in the valley of the shadow of death. But it brought David such confidence to think that I am not the first to have walked in this dark place.

Others have been there before me. They have experienced God's presence in the valley and so will I. And then we move to the New Testament.

For example think of Mary the troubled. This young girl to whom an angel appeared informing her that she would be carrying in her womb the Messiah the Son of God himself.

She was deeply troubled by what she saw and by what she heard. Her heart was wandering in darkness for a time. But surely these are the words which brought her light when in Luke chapter 1 verse 28 the angel says to her the Lord is with you.

God is with Mary in her own personal darkness of trouble. And then think of the disciples the disciples the commissioned these disciples who have been commanded to go by Jesus and make disciples of all nations.

[15 : 11] These men who have seen what the consequences of living a holy and God were life were when they saw their master Jesus being nailed to a cross and now they're being told you go and do the same.

Go and make disciples of all nations and take your cross with you. Surely though the energy and the empowerment the disciples needed to fulfill Christ's commission are found in Matthew chapter 28 verse 20 when Jesus says to them and behold I am with you.

And then think of Paul the persecuted the Paul who found himself in the center of a storm when he tried to preach the gospel in Corinth he was opposed by many who were trying to attack him for the sake of his own safety he could have left Corinth behind and yet listen to what the Lord says to him in Acts chapter 18 verse 10 he says do not be afraid Paul for I am with you in his own personal darkness of persecution and misunderstanding God was with him are you lonely like Jacob are you fearful like Moses are you stressed like Joshua are you troubled like Mary are you overwhelmed by the future like the disciples are you misunderstood or persecuted like

Paul whatever is the precise nature of your valley of the shadow of death whatever it is God speaks powerfully and lovingly on the basis of his previous fulfillments of his promise and he says to you I am with you where you are I'm with you there in that valley of death shadow even here I am with you it is a fulfilled presence but secondly it is a factual presence it's a factual presence when David wrote these words in Psalm 23 verse 4 for you are with me what did he understand by the presence of God with him such that he could use it as the foundation for going on to say even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil what did he understand by the presence of God what are the features of the presence of God with us which can so comfort us that we can overcome the fear of the valley of the shadow of death as I see it there are at least three the first is intimacy intimacy if we were to translate verse 4 literally we would read

I will fear no evil for you yourself are with me there is an emphasis upon the intimacy of the personal presence of God with him in the valley of the shadow of death God does not send another to comfort us in the darkness rather he comes to be with us and this in itself is amazing that in the very

antithesis of everything God is in the valley where he is enthroned in the heights of heaven in the shadows where he is the God of light in death where he is life but here in the valley of death shadow God himself is with us he does not delegate our comfort to angels or to other spiritual beings rather he himself is with us there is an intimacy of relationship with God which is often to be found in the valley of darkness which you won't find on the mountain of clarity

[19 : 32] Moses experienced the presence of God far more in the poverty of the wilderness when an old man than ever he did in the courts of plenty when he was a young man in the same way although none of us would willingly walk in dark places it's often there we experience the intimacy of God only a month after my brother married his wife she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma cancer she began to suffer all the symptoms which are common to that kind of disease my brother phoned me to cry on my shoulder and to look for answers to his questions why has this happened to us I had no deep answers to give them I never do other than saying that holding his wife's hand in the darkness of her treatment for cancer would mean that their marriage and their interdependence would strengthen more in the three months it would take to treat the cancer than most marriages would enjoy in 30 years it's often in the darkness of the shadow that our relationship with

God assumes new depths intimacy the second factual presence the second feature of God which means that his presence helps us not to fear evil is guidance his guidance in verse four David goes on to explain the context of his comfort and the presence of God with them in the valley he says it's your rod which comforts me every day in those days all shepherds would carry with them a curved rod and when that sheep was going astray he would hook his rod round the sheep's neck and pull it back from danger that was his instrument of guidance he would use that rod to guide the sheep away from from dangerous cliffs he would use it to guide the sheep to green pastures that rod is in our shepherd's hands today he knows the way we walk and he knows where he's leading us and that gives us great comfort because it means first of all that he led us into this valley of the shadow of death in the first place this painful experience that you're enduring right now whatever it is it is all part of his sovereign plan and purpose for you it is the path he has led you to and is guiding you on the shepherd only does what is best for his sheep and he knows that this valley dark as it is is for your good and then of course it comforts us because we know that he leads us in that valley of the shadow of death he leads us when we're there you know how it goes laugh and everybody laughs with you cry and you cry alone you know how often it is that in the valley of the they haven't there's nothing they can do and there's nothing they can say to make that experience any easier because they can speak into our ears but they cannot speak into our hearts we need

God to speak to us all these promises of God we considered earlier to God's saints of the Old Testament and New Testament were given to faithful believers as they walked in the valley of the shadow of death God was with them there God was leading Joshua and God was leading Moses God was leading Paul and God was leading Mary so that they would not stumble fall or damage themselves his rod is at work in that valley he's led us into the valley he's with us in the valley leading us in that valley and of course it comforts us because we know that the shepherd who led us in the valley will lead us out of the valley the valley of the shadow of death is only so dark and only so long it has a beginning and a middle and an end the shepherd knows the way out he knows the way to the green pastures he knows the way through the shepherd knows the way out and even though it might not seem to you like that right now he will lead you out of that darkness and into the brightness of his own house he'll hook his rod around your neck guide you to safety and comfort in him what comfort there is to be found in that shepherd's rod painful though it may be round our necks because we know that when that rod is in his hands he is leading and he is guiding us but the third feature of

God's character which gives us comfort as we walk in the valley of the shadow of death is his protection his protection the comfort of God's presence in the valley is not merely his intimacy or his guidance it's also the staff of his protection the Lord who is my shepherd he carries a staff with which to fight off the dangers of wild animals determined to kill his beloved sheep but the Lord carries his staff he'll drive them away the sheep see his staff they know they're safe the wild animals see the staff and they know they will not win past it he is our Lord he is the covenant keeping God of Exodus and Calvary the Lord who seated in the throne of glory and from whom all sovereignty and power emanate the Lord who is with us in the valley of the shadow of death wielding his staff so that even though we may not see those terrors even though we may just hear

those terrors of the night we shall not be consumed by them because he has a purpose for our holiness in that valley that we shall learn to depend upon him for everything and nothing will get in the way of his divine purpose you may say when you're walking in that darkness when you're depressed when you're grieving when you're enduring a broken relationship you may say it doesn't feel to me that

God's protecting me from anything doesn't feel that way to me but then you see only eternity will be able to tell you all that God has kept from you what utter darkness the devil would have imposed upon you if God had not been protecting you from the full force of Satan's malevolence when chicks hear the sound of a fox they run for their mother's wing in the same way the Lord allows us to hear the snarl of Satan so we may run to him for protection when Satan sees the staff of God he knows he is defeated and he backs away back into his layer of darkness no wonder given the intimacy of God's presence with him no wonder given the comfort of

[27 : 26] God's guidance of him no wonder given the comfort of God's protection of him David can say even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil these aren't words of mindless bravado or empty stupidity they are the confidence of a mind and heart which knows that God is greater than any evil which may come against him and that the light of God is brighter than the darkness of the valley meditate then on the presence of God with you in the valley is this not the comfort my friend who passed into glory that day urged me to preach isn't this the comfort she herself experienced in her dying breath isn't this the comfort that you want to know for yourself we have a fulfilled presence and we have a factual presence but lastly when we read these words

I am with you in Psalm 23 verse 4 we are also thinking of a future presence for all that we have said of the presence of God the presence fulfilled and the presence factual we dare not forget the central truth of the presence of God is not to be found in the presentation of the shepherd leading his sheep as they walk in the valley of the shadow of death in the Old Testament but in the face of Jesus Christ in the New Testament because without understanding how God was in Christ the presence of God would bring us no comfort only terror in the awareness of the burning purity of a God who is against us because of our sin but as the truth of Emmanuel God with us as that truth becomes part of us mind and heart we find the deepest comfort in this darkest valley and as we close

I want to reflect upon how this truth that of God's presence in Christ overcomes the darkness of the valley shadow and evil first of all the presence of God in Christ and then the presence of God in communion and then the presence of God in consummation the presence of God first of all in Christ in Matthew 4 verse 12 the introduction to the public ministry of Jesus Matthew chooses the words of Isaiah 9 verses 1 and 2 as the backdrop to the coming of Jesus Matthew writes of this impact that Christ will make he writes the people living in darkness have seen a great light on those walking in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned those walking in the valley of the shadow of death have seen in Christ the dawning of the light it's that light we have in the cradle of Christ in his birth and in his life the Jesus who is the light of the world the Jesus who is Emmanuel God with us God has made his dwelling with us he is tabernacled among us he is with us he is with us in our valleys with us in our hunger and our rejection our loneliness our grief our abandonment our persecution our trouble Emmanuel with us there there is no experience we can endure which he has no knowledge of or experience of furthermore Christ's comfort in the valley was of the same variety as ours must be the intimacy of his father the knowledge of the guidance of the spirit the certainty of his father's protection he knew the stories of his father fathers of Joshua and of Moses he knew how

God was with them in all their trouble he knows how it is with us today he knows where and how we need him most he's with us in our valleys Christ was with us in our sin he was with us in our sin not that he himself was a sinner but that he took up our cause before a holy God he himself bore the penalty of our sin on the cross at Calvary he himself loved us and gave himself for us he gave himself to the absence and forsaken this of God on the cross in his extreme valley of the shadow of death Jesus Jesus cried out my God my God why have you forsaken me the truth of Psalm 23 verse 4 did not apply to Christ on the cross because God was there not to comfort him but to crush him on account of our sin the solemnity of

[32 : 48] Calvary the ultimate valley of the shadow of death was one Christ bore alone but through his victory we have forgiveness and we have victory before God our sin has been taken away and

we have been made right with God as Paul says God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself not counting men's sins against them it is the cross and the reconciling work of Christ there which opens up the certainty of God's presence with us in our valleys it is the of God in the valley of Christ death shadow which allows the comforting presence of God in our valley of death shadow that truth was hidden or opaque at best to David the writer of Psalm 23 verse 4 but to us who have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ ah to us it's like that dawning light which transforms the valley of the shadow of death into a place of divine presence the presence of

God in Christ the presence of God secondly in communion in communion one of the old Scottish wordies said that the Lord suffered you do not get a better Christ but you do get Christ better it is as if the Lord who promises to be with us in the valley he intensifies and reinforces his presence with us as we eat and drink at his table there at that table we meet with the Lord and he says to us take eat this is my body drink this this is my blood perhaps right now listen to me you you are at a stage in your life where you most desperately need the comfort my old friend challenged me with you most desperately need to experience the presence of Christ with you in a very special way it's been so long since you felt the intimacy of that presence and you need him bad because you're walking in this valley right now this communion weekend you have an experience not to get a better Christ but to get Christ better to experience him along with his other disciples here as together we eat and drink of him and with him the act of eating and drinking is that of receiving all the benefits of the salvation afresh reappropriating your adoption of sons and daughters of living God with all the rights of God and co-heirs of Christ the highest of which is that your father promises to be with you through all the twists and turns of this life in the next few hours anticipate with excitement and long with all your being to have a fresh experience of the intimacy of Christ at his table with you the presence of God in communion and lastly the presence of God in consummation in consummation there will come a day when there shall be no more valleys of the shadow of death when there shall be no more fear grief exhaustion brokenness and shame and we will not even remember how they felt to endure but what shall be greater for us in this glory of the new heavens and the new earth shall not be the absence of the terrors of this valley it shall be the presence of our shepherd this is the great desire of

Jesus the ultimate purpose of his salvation work as expressed when he said to his disciples in John 14 verse 3 he said I go to prepare a place for you and I will come back to take you so that where I am you may be also and the prayer of Jesus in John 17 24 father I want those you have given me to be with me where I am that they may behold my glory it often said that we can describe heaven only in terms of its negatives no sin no death no tears and so on but I rather think a better way of expressing heaven is to describe it in terms of its positive the eternal and full presence of Christ with us even as we read in Revelation chapter 7 verse 17 the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd and he'll lead them to springs of living waters and God will wipe every tear from their eyes imagine that and in

Revelation chapter 21 verse 3 now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them they will be his people and God himself will be with them and he will be their God imagine that does this not fill you with the comfort of hope is this not the comfort my dear old friend urge me to preach is this not the reality that she herself is experiencing even now the comfort of looking into the eyes of Christ and being led by her good shepherd to those springs of living water isn't this even in some small measure the comfort that you so desperately need and want in your life right now whatever your circumstances then beginning with the Lord's Supper strive to experience for yourself the word prayer the sacrament the truth of

[39 : 11] Psalm 23 verse 4 in your life 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