

Psalm 24:4-6

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[0 : 0 0] with me please to the book of Psalms, Psalm 23, the book of Psalms, the 23rd Psalm. It's on page 550. In fact, if you can turn to 549, we'll read from the beginning of this passage.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

And this evening we're going to focus in particular on verses 4 to 6. He shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I'd like us this evening to consider three things in relation to this passage that's so well known, known to us all. Psalm 23 verses 4 to 6. And I'd like us to look at this passage under three headings, death, deliverance, and declaration. Let's begin by focusing on verse 4.

Woody Allen, the Hollywood screenwriter, once said, I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens.

[2 : 2 0] Well, David takes us there. And he gives us more than a snapshot of what it is like when it happens.

Now, this evening, as the curtain falls on another communion weekend, we move on, but we do so as those who will continue to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

And come he will. But until such time as he comes, we are to proclaim, we are to trust in him and in his name. He will come, and he may come in a very personal manner, in your experience and my experience, before he comes to judge this world.

What if he comes sooner rather than later? What if he comes now? What if he comes this evening?

What is it like? Perhaps some of us are asking that question. Perhaps some of us are more than a little apprehensive about death. But David leaves us in no doubt.

[4 : 0 1] What if he comes now? What if he comes now? What if he comes now?

There is no disadvantage in death for the believer because this Jesus who died, who conquered death, who rose again victorious from the grave, our living mediator who lives and ever lives as our great high priest, he who is with us in death. And when you read Psalm 23, it's striking, isn't it?

Because death's dark veil is perceived at times to be a place of separation, a place of remoteness, a place of abandonment.

But for those who die in the Lord, for those who fall asleep in Jesus, it is not. Why? Because the good shepherd is there. His abiding presence is assured. Now let's just try for a moment to put the valley of the shadow of death into some kind of historical context. What does this death valley mean to David?

Well, David, as you know, was no stranger to shepherding his flock through some very dark, shadowy, eerie valleys throughout the wilderness of Judah. Picture it, if you will. You're a shepherd.

[6 : 24] You're responsible for a flock and there are these ravines, these canyons, if you like. There's a mountain pass and you have no alternative but to lead your flock through this dark valley. There is no alternative route. There is no bypass. Now there were such dark valleys. I want you to pay attention to the footnote at the bottom of page 550. Notice that the reference to the valley of the shadow of death, the reference is to the valley of deep darkness. Now in all probability that would have been the name of this particular valley that David is leading us through. You know how in close proximity to California, there's in eastern California, there is a valley that's called Death Valley and it's called Death Valley for good reason. And this valley is no exception. There's something imposing about this valley.

It's dark, it's eerie, it's gloomy. It perhaps saw little of the light of day. It's not for the faint-hearted. David knows that there may be robbers and thieves, bandits, menacing men prowling around in these darker recesses of Death Valley, the valley of deep darkness. Deep darkness prevails.

And then there's the animal kingdom to contend with. There would have been bears and lions and scorpions and snakes and more besides. You sense an element of suspense and danger.

And yet David tells us, even though I walk as I must through this valley of deep darkness, the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. This is negative number two in this psalm.

I shall not want. I shall not want. I will fear no evil. I will fear no distress. I will fear no calamity.

[9 : 26] I will fear no adversity. I will fear no injury, no harm, no trouble. All of these words you can dovetail to the word evil. What is David saying? He's saying to us that the presence of evil does not equate to the absence of God. And that is significant as we begin to contemplate the symbolic significance of this passage. David is saying, you, the covenant God of Israel, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, you are with me. Notice too, he's no longer speaking about the shepherd. As he has been to this point, he is now speaking to him. There's something very personal about that, isn't there?

The God of all comfort is present. The God who administers grace. And I want us to notice how grace is administered here in verse 5, symbolized here by a protective, safeguarding staff that also acts like a defensive rod, keeping all that is perceived to be a danger at a safe distance.

This passage is bulging with consolation and encouragement for us all this evening.

We proclaim his death. We take up the cross. We live for Jesus. We sense perhaps that we are up against it. As we deny ourselves. As we commit our lives to Jesus. Perhaps the uncertainties of what tomorrow might bring in our own personal lives is an issue for us. And perhaps death's dark veil is a pressing issue. And one that perhaps robs us of our sleep from time to time. What will it be like? How will I cope? How will I cope? When the hour comes? Do I have what it takes? Well, that's not really the issue, is it? Because David tells us, and I know in certain terms, that Jesus will administer what we need so that we can see Emmanuel's land, the house of many mansions. Charles Spurgeon spoke of these words, the words of Psalm 23, verse 5, this text, these words, not unlike a pillow, said Spurgeon, a dying pillow, no less, said Spurgeon, to thousands of the saints of God who have laid their heads down on it and they have passed into glory with calmness and assurance confidence and confidence. Death is swallowed up in victory, Paul tells us. And I want us to notice that it's all about shadows. I remember some years back, one of our girls coming through to the living room, absolutely terrified, telling her dad that there was a tarantula in her bedroom. And on closer inspection, the spider was so incredibly small that it was barely noticeable. But it cast a shadow.

And the shadow was somewhat intimidating when you're only four. And there is a difference, isn't there, between the shadow of a snake and the substance of a snake or a bear or a lion that's prowling.

[14 : 16] Nothing, Paul says, in this life or in death. Death cannot separate us from the love of God. In Christ Jesus, our Lord. We are more than conquerors in death as we are in life.

When you conduct a marriage ceremony, as the couple tie the knot, it's a defining moment, particularly poignant as you utter these words, till death do you part.

But these words do not apply in any way to our union with Jesus Christ. This is a marriage like no other.

Till death do us part. No, that has no place in this marriage. Because death will not part us.

You know, sometimes we speak of leaving the land of the living and entering the land of the dying. But it's not like that, is it?

[15 : 55] We leave the land of the dying and in reality we are bound for the land of the living. where we will live and ever live world without end.

And know the joy of the marriage supper of the lamb throughout the endless ages of eternity. Friends, there's much to look forward to.

As one Christian writer, Dr. Preston, once put it, blessed be God, though I change my place, I shall not change my company, for I have walked with God while living and now I go to rest with God.

There's a very touching story told of a father, a dad, who's walking through the Clyde Tunnel with his four-year-old son. and as they approach the Clyde Tunnel, there's a sense of anticipation peppered with apprehension on the part of this little boy and he holds onto his dad's hand.

and as they walk through the tunnel, at its darkest point, he asks his dad, Dad, is there water up there?

[17 : 31] And dad said, yes, but what if it comes down here, dad? And his face became troubled, he became agitated and anxious and he said to his dad, please, hurry, can we just walk a little faster?

I don't like this place. And just then, they started to climb out of the tunnel and the little boy said, I, he says, that's better.

We've made it to the other side. I can see the other end. I can see daylight. Remember the words of the prophet, when you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

Perhaps the Jordan is of concern to some of us this evening. We've heard much over this communion weekend, but perhaps this in particular leaves us feeling just a little anxious and agitated in our souls from time to time.

But Jesus says, I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

[18 : 54] hand. And the hand that leads us in this life is the same hand that will guide us and shepherd us through that tunnel, through that ravine, through that mountain pass, through that valley of deep darkness.

He's true to his word. and when he says, I will never leave you, I will never forsake you, David is making it very, very clear that when we get there, he'll be waiting for us and he will continue to undertake for us and ultimately guide us into glory.

death. But then we have the language of deliverance in verse five. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil and my cup overflows. Now if this was perhaps a film or a particular piece of writing, you would be introduced to a new scene.

And a new scene it is because death's dark veil, the valley of the shadow of death has passed. It's very clear, isn't it, that the valley of deep darkness is now behind David.

[20 : 36] The former things have passed away. All things have become new. David has reached his destination.

He is in the presence of the king. He's dining at the king's table. This is, if you like, the Mephibosheth moment of 2 Samuel chapter 9.

He ate always at the king's table, just like one of the king's sons. This table, you will note, is prepared before this saint who has passed from the land of the dying into the land of the living.

This table is set, it's ready, it's arranged specifically for him, and notice that his enemies are no more, and in a sense he can see the last enemy.

This table is set in the presence of what was a defeated foe, conquered, crushed, bruised, broken, behind him.

[22 : 02] no more. And he mulls over his deliverance, doesn't he, his salvation, as an honoured guest at this heavenly feast, his head is anointed, and he is here to stay, and if you had asked him, if perhaps we could ask, what is it like, summarise, if you will, just in a word, what is it like, and he says, my cup overflows.

This cup that once knew much of the bittersweet of life, it overflows with goodness and with mercy.

He's now at home, all that was is no more. What of the transition from death's dark veil to this eternal house?

Well, perhaps the words of the catechism sum up what scripture conveys to us about this remarkable moment when the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and they do immediately pass into glory.

the Mephibosheth moment David has reached his destination. You know how sometimes you're driving along and the journey is long and you program your sat nav and so the drive commences.

[24 : 06] The hours pass and at times you think you're never going to get there but how wonderful it is when you arrive and you hear these words you have reached your destination and for David he experiences something here doesn't he of the house of many rooms highlighted for us in John 14 foretold here the house of the Lord has a place for David and he takes his place this reserved room this top table this seat for him and for you and for me if we are in Christ this evening heaven's banqueting house verse 5 the former things have passed away the green pastures highlighted at the beginning of this psalm they're forever green in

Emmanuel's land the still waters that perhaps some of you experienced over this weekend but you know that these still waters will not last and yet the still waters of heaven have an eternal stillness the storms of life that thundered changed into a calm at his command and will so that the waves which raged before now quiet are and still perhaps you're no stranger to such waves and billows I was sharing with our congregation at back yesterday of an experience in my teenage years my friend and I we would avail ourselves of a rowing boat which was less than seaworthy but on one occasion we found ourselves in a particularly pressing terrifying situation between

Scalpy and Kyle Scalpy before the bridge was built the Hebridean Isles which has been birthed down at the pier over recent days it would sail on occasions through that pass between Scalpy and Kyle Scalpy passengers enjoyed an alternative route to the usual to today's designated route we found ourselves doing a spot of creel fishing and we were alerted to a loud drone and a very disconcerting sound of an engine of something coming towards us we found ourselves in close proximity to the bow of this ship this ferry travelling at some considerable speed so we had to take evasive action but believe me it took me some years to share this with my parents but it was a close call and we made for the nearest bay and we found a little anchorage that gave us sufficient shelter from the breakers from the billows that were quite overpowering overwhelming and could so easily have swamped us in a moment but we made it into that little haven and we were profoundly grateful for

God's guidance he kept us he safeguarded us in that moment and we felt aware of that at that time but sometimes it's years later as you look back that you sense how the angel of the Lord encamps and looks after those who trust in him and so it is there are times when perhaps we sense that we're exposed to the elements times when perhaps we find ourselves just beneath the bow times when these breakers are in danger we feel we're in danger of being overwhelmed yet we are reminded this evening that we are glory bound heaven is an eternal reality heaven's haven awaits those of us who are in

Jesus Christ somebody once said to me it's too good to be true revelation 22 6 these words are trustworthy and true I shall not die but live grace chose us grace saved us grace keeps us and grace will present us faultless in glory and then finally we have this declaration in verse 6 surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever well it's almost as if we're back to reality David reminds those of us who are walking the path of discipleship as he must walk the wilderness of Judah as he contemplates as he as he imagines in his own mind what it will be like in the meantime he continues his journey and as you and

[30 : 22] I must with its highs with its lows with its twists and turns perhaps these moments of anxiety times when we lack assurance when we have struggles along the way when we're more than a little afraid and we have this declaration of faith in Jesus Christ on the pages of scripture David speaks with absolute certainty of God's covenant mercy and grace and we would do well to adopt this formula as our own formula of faith in Jesus Christ this evening for the journey for the days ahead your covenant mercy and grace will follow me closely in all of my ways and in all of my days in other words he's saying in the meantime in the here and now you're with me and you will remain with me in all of life's valleys you are with me and as

I face the valley of deep darkness I know that you will not abandon me you will not leave me you will not forsake me and ultimately I too will dwell in that house reserved a place prepared for a prepared people it was the preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards who once said that he made his practice to meditate on heaven at least 20 minutes every day and he maintained that this often gave him the strength to live the Christian life with focus with a particular resolve and determination to go on for hope today remember the end of the story eternity with

God that's a wonderful quotation for us to conclude with this evening for hope today remember the end of the story eternity with God the best is yet to come when we've been there 10,000 years bright shining as the sun we have no will have no less days to sing God's praise than when we first began so let's continue to proclaim let's continue to worship God in our lives this evening by trusting in him knowing with assurance that his goodness and mercy and grace will follow me and because I know that I will live by faith in the son of God who loved me and who gave himself for me this is my story this is my song praising my saviour all the day long for hope today remember the end of the story eternity world without

God with Jesus and there's much there to keep us awake in the best way and as we move on we give thanks that he goes before us and that there is a house reserved for those who are in Christ Jesus no condemnation no separation for those who belong to the good shepherd amen let's close let's take is to sorry he