

The Lord is my shepherd - Fear no evil

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[0 : 0 0] me to psalm 23 and we'll use the rest of our time to look at the psalm together but let's just come before god and ask for his help our loving father we thank you for your word it really is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path and father we pray now you speak to us from your word i pray lord that i wouldn't so much be the the teacher of your word this evening but the holy spirit himself and that he might take the things of christ and apply them to each one of our hearts we pray that that might be the case and we ask these things in jesus name amen i read a good number of years ago that years ago uh during victorian days they they they wouldn't speak uh about sex but they would speak about death victorian days they would speak about death quite readily something they would discuss but they wouldn't speak about sex the generation in which we live nowadays will speak about sex but they don't speak about death we live in very different days where we're very much living for the moment that's why one of the the best things i've ever done as a pastor as a christian as an somebody who's interested in evangelism was to go to to one of these things a death cafe how many of you have heard of death cafes oh apart from my wife uh death cafes this is an organization that's it's run not by a christian but it's just by somebody who realized that that many people were keen to talk about death but they didn't really have a forum for this anybody can hold a death cafe and uh i just i just loved it as an idea i thought it was great and uh basically if you want to to run one you you have to use their branding which i think if i remember rightly might be a cup and saucer with a wee skull and crossbones on it and uh that's that might be the logo and all you have to do is provide a forum where people can discuss and you must provide tea and cake or coffee and cake that's the only thing you have to do and basically it's to give people the opportunity to talk about death it's not counseling and there's no counselors there that says anybody can do this somebody just to facilitate discussion they say that you're not really there to to try and promote your views or whatever you're not trying to you don't have a goal in mind to try and save folk and that for me i struggled with that a wee bit and i thought well can i really go because really uh jesus is our only hope beyond the grave but i went to one in crouch end in london it was in a big tower big kind of bell tower so the area was was quite small there was about a dozen of us there and it starts off by having tea and cake and then you just go around and you say why you're there and it was a hodgepodge of everybody it's only about a dozen of us or so that were there and folk are there for different reasons some were there to talk about the price of funerals isn't cost a fortune uh or whatever some were there to talk about i miss my mum my mum passed away and they they have the opportunity to share how they feel and and we all sit and we listen uh various things some of the the things you hear would tear your heart out i remember the one i was at there was a woman who had been to a previous death cafe and somebody had said that on ebay you can buy a tablet that you can take to end your life and she came to that one to find out where you can get the tablet and that that would have tore your heart out just to hear that uh and everybody gets to to share just whatever they're there to talk about death they're all interested in death they want to talk about it but because you're there and then they can go you're allowed to share what you believe and during the time i was there there was a big stained glass window uh and it was in the shape of a cross and the sun come in and the sun just happened to put this cross right in the floor where we were all looking i kept staring at this that the whole time and uh there was another it transpired that a curate was there and a member of his church

was with him and uh i didn't when we were going around i thought well you might be a christian don't know might be a christian with a small c i'll not pin my hopes in you transpired he was a christian and he'd been to a few of them so he knew how to massage the whole thing but it was great and then when it came to didn't come to my turn i could have said nothing but i've listening to everybody without any hope i remember saying and i pointed to the cross on on the ground i says

that that is our hope that is our only hope jesus and the cross and basically i said if god created us and we've all gone astray he has to have a plan to save us otherwise he's not worth following it's as simple as that he a god who who's helpless to save and can't save and doesn't love we had to take that seriously and and and the cross was was god's only answer that's what we're looking at tonight the subject of death as we look at this this uh together we're looking at jesus as the the good shepherd it's very personal sam for you and for me if you're a christian here we've seen that he is my shepherd and he causes us to lie down in green pastures to lead me beside quiet waters and because of that we can say that i will not be in want last week we looked at the the truth that we have this tendency to wander milked at sheep don't we in wacky places uh that is us even in the best of christians like david king david uh had we've all got feet of clay the best of men are men at best and uh and we all fall in some way and yet the good shepherd's desire is to guide us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake it's always his desire that we walk and we live holy and godly lives and then so here is that's something about life rest refreshment guiding us in paths of righteousness but then when you come to verse 4 the picture changes very dramatically from green pastures and still waters it turns into scotland in october a night like tonight when it's pretty dreary and dark and dim the picture changes it's it's from walking in the right path and and rest and relaxation as the savior guides us through life you come to verse 4 even though i walk through the darkest valley other versions talk about even though i walk through the valley of the shadow of death it refers this wee phrase shadow of death or darkest valley is only one word in hebrew and it's found about 20 times in the scriptures in the old testament and it talks about times of affliction psalm 107 says some people sat in darkness deepest gloom prisoners suffering in iron chains they had rebelled against the words of the lord despite the counsel of the most high so he subjected them to bitter labor jeremiah 2 verse 6 they did not ask where is the lord who brought us up out of egypt and led us through the barren wilderness through the land of deserts and rifts a land of drought and darkness a land where no one travels and no one lives and here many commentators look at verse 4 and some commentators say that this is speaking just of our dark times in life those difficult times and it's true that the shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness sunny days but life can be pictured like days like today nights like tonight sometimes it's difficult and it can appear dark both of them come from the hand of the lord and the ultimate role of the shepherd during dark times in our life is to preserve us not only to protect us in this life but also in the life to come let me remind you of three of his verses or three of the verses john 17 while i was with them i protected them and kept them saved by that name you gave me none of the sheep has been lost except the one doomed to destruction john 6 39 this is the will of him who sent me that i should lose none of all that he has given me but raise them up at the last day and in john 10 i give them eternal life and they shall never perish no one can snatch them out of my hand here is the eternal security of believers and that is what verse 4 is dealing with whether it's death or just dark days though i walk through the valley or through the darkest valley i will fear no ill so let's look at this then let's look at the care of the lord for his shepherd during the dark times so first of all dark days will come uh some of the commentators say these are the dark days just now that i've just mentioned to you green pastures quiet waters valley of darkness and this can be the case if you know anything of the psalms the psalms speak of many dark days many dark valleys and so forth and that's often what it's like but mostly this is to do most of the commentators will say this is not just speaking about the dark days of this life it's talking about the ultimate dark day here's an image from pilgrim's progress uh i like pilgrim's progress i just i just love it i just love reading pilgrim's progress it just it just pushes so many buttons if you know anything of pilgrim's progress john bunyan's in prison and he's writing trying to convey something to christians about what it means to be a christian and just the difficulties of life and during his his pilgrimage he comes to hill difficulty doubting castle the valley of humiliation and then the valley of the shadow of death and then after that the river of death here's another image that's shown him walking through this valley it is scary as he takes this final journey and in pilgrim's progress he encounters folk running the other way it's too scary i can't cope with this and the temptation to to go back but christian knows that he has to go through the valley if he is to reach the celestial city and pilgrim's progress he mentions when he fought in the valley of humiliation he used the word of god in that fight but now when he comes to the the valley of the shadow of death yes the word can comfort him but the weapon he uses mostly at that time is prayer he's he's saying lord help me this is uh whatever lies ahead of me here and really that is uh how the lord leads us whether in life whether producing character and molding us and shape shaping us but it really has to do here with the dark days that not only are here now but will come later and most

commentators take this picture job paints a picture similar to verse 4 in job chapter 10 before i go to the place of no return to the land of gloom and deep shadow to the land of darkest night of deep shadow disorder where even the light is like darkness that was the picture that uh that job had thinking of of death and one of the reasons that why most commentators say that david in verse 4 is speaking not just about dark days now but about death and ultimately future glory is because when you come to verse 4 his tone changes david's tone changes up until now he's talking about things that he has already experienced he leads me beside quiet waters he restores my soul things that he's already experienced things that have already happened but when you come to verse 4 this is something that hasn't yet happened it still it lies ahead of him that's why he says in verse 4 even though i walk through the darkest valley i will fear no evil so his tone changes he's not looking back how the lord has led him to this point he's looking forward to what lies ahead to that difficult day and uh when he walks his final journey in this valley of darkness and he's looking ahead and uh really that's what's happening here here is pilgrim's progress i can't remember if i've got another image yeah this is this is pilgrim uh going into the the river and uh it's very graphic let bear with me as i read his account of this so pilgrim says this so i saw when the pilgrims awoke they prepared to go up to the city so i saw that as they went on that two men in clothing which shone like gold met them their faces also shone as the light these men asked the pilgrims where they came from and they told them they also asked them where they had lodged what difficulty and dangers what comforts and pleasures they met along the way and they told them then the men said you have but two more difficulties to meet with and then you're in the city christian and hopeful asked the men to go along with them and they said that they would but they said you must obtain it by your own faith so i saw in my dream that as they went together until they came within the sight of the city of the gate now i saw further that between them and the gate was a river this is the river that's pictured here but there was no bridge to pass over it and the river was very deep at the sight of this river the pilgrims were bewildered but the men said to them you must go through the river or you cannot enter in at the gate the pilgrims then began to inquire if there was any other way to the gate of which the men answered yes but only two since the foundation of the world have been permitted to tread that way namely who are the two enoch and elijah those are the only two who didn't have to go through the river they were taken to glory nor shall any others go that way until the last trumpet shall sound then pilgrims then especially christian began to lose heart they looked this way and that but they could find no way by which they might escape the river then they asked the man if the waters were all the same depth no they replied you will find it deeper or shallower just as you believe in the king of the city in other words depending on your faith determines the depth of the river the pilgrims then approached the water upon entering christian began to sink crying out to his good friend hopeful he shouted i am sinking in deep waters the billows are rolling over my head all his waves are washing over me then hopeful replied take courage my brother i feel the bottom and it is firm christian then cried out ah my friend the sorrows of death have compassed me about i shall not see the land which flows with milk and honey without a great darkness and horror fell upon christian so that he could not see ahead of him hopeful therefore labored hard to keep his brother's head above the water yes sometimes christian almost drowned but then in a short time he would surface again half dead hopeful would also endeavor to encourage him saying brother i see the gate the men standing ready to receive us but christian would answer it is you it is you they are waiting for you have been hopeful ever since i first knew you and so have you replied responded hopeful ah brother christian replied christian surely if i were right with him then he would arise and help me because of my sins he has brought me to this snare and has left me hopeful reminded him these troubles and distresses that you are going through in these waters are no indication that god has forsaken you rather they are only set to test you as to whether you will call to mind what you have hitherto received of his goodness and live upon him in the present distress then i saw in my dream that christian was in deep thought for a while hopeful then added this word take courage jesus christ makes you whole with that christian cried out with a loud voice oh i see him again and he tells me when you pass through the waters i will be with you when you go through the waters they shall not overflow you then they both took courage after that the enemy was as still as a stone and could no longer hinder them christian therefore felt firm ground to stand upon and found that the rest of the river was but shallow thus they both crossed over the river here is a very graphic picture isn't it of a of passing over the river of death and it's a fearful thing and yet it's a wonderful thing and we can't really appreciate just what that might be like i often wonder it's been my privilege to be at the

side of those who pass away in hospices it's one of the greatest privileges as a pastor to be there during those last times the very last time was in london just before covid uh before this person passed away i was literally the she went downhill very quickly and i was the only person with her at that time and she just slipped away what a privilege and you do not know what goes through somebody's uh what their experiences so the lord uh dark days will come secondly our shepherd is with us our shepherd is with us it's not only a change you've seen in verse 4 but david's way of relating to the shepherd also changes from talking about the shepherd in verses 1 2 and 3 he now talks to the shepherd he's speaking directly to the shepherd says even though i walk through the valley the darkest valley i will fear no evil for you are with me his tone changes his way of speaking now changes he's not reflecting on life and how he led him beside quiet waters he's now in this at this moment speaking to him you will lead me you are with me and david's experiences now changed from he did this to you will do this the role of the shepherd at this time is not leading is not guiding it is simply being with uh the sheep and he walks alongside him says for you are with me it really is quite something it's really worth meditating on it's the only time uh you you picture this uh my daughters are usually witnessing to anybody and everybody and uh i know there there is one guy that that one of them keeps witnessing to and uh maybe just throwing up excuses about why he doesn't believe in god but it's interesting that he said something recently uh about a particular church we never talk about death he says we never talk about that i said well they must talk [20:19] about death and eternal life but he's just talking about death and the reality of death and i remember saying well he wants to come here tonight because this is exactly what we're looking at this time in their life when death looms large when you can try and find a death cafe and talk about death or you can come to this psalm and look at this but there comes a time in life you go through you pick up many companions in life many acquaintances many close friends many family members but in this last journey they cannot go with you uh you need someone else to go with you and that's the most amazing thing that you imagine the gospel that jesus didn't just die to save us and somehow we're saved and we're just muddling through he helps us in this life but when we need him most that he promises to be with us and that is really very special and he is the best qualified because he has gone through death members of your family might say hang on in there you're doing well we'll be with you but in these last moments perhaps of unconsciousness we do not know the lord in this psalm though i fear for you are with me and the holy spirit has recorded this for our reason he has been through that valley before you and me i don't know about you but in life if somebody can help you that's already done the thing that you need done that's that's that means an awful lot and now if i want somebody a doctor's no good uh nobody can help my family members can't help what we need then is a good shepherd one who's been there before us and his situation was worse he went through it alone he had nobody with him the disciples deserted him my god my god why have you forsaken me we will never experience that in our darkest days those of you who have read douglas mcmillan's wee book tells of a story i find this quite powerful uh he says this in his book douglas mcmillan you remember the morning on uh just getting emotional just thinking about have we read it yet because i know what's coming it says i remember the morning of the day in which my father died rather it was the day before the saturday morning for he died just after the entrance of the sabbath on that saturday morning i was going out on the hill early my father had been ill for three weeks and as i looked into his room before going out at half past six that june morning he was propped up on pillows looking out of his bedroom window on a kind of long sweeping hill that rose behind our house he was very weak but he looked at me and said hello douglas are you going out i said yes he said sit down sit for a minute then he said what do you see out the window douglas so i looked and told him well i see the sheep just beginning to come down he said it's strange you know and a smile came over his face i cannot see that now at all he said i said what do you see he said it's strange i'm looking out of the window and it's as if i was looking into an orchard it's a very beautiful place and i can see people and i know a lot of them i can see my mother i can see your mother i had lost my mother six years before then he smiled again and said do you think i'm seeing into heaven i think i am he said i have been on the doorstep for three weeks he had been asking people not to pray that he would get better and i am going to go over it today then he said for 40 years i have followed christ and for 40 years i have prayed for grace to live for christ and for 40 years i have prayed for grace to die like a christian i've always been afraid secretly never admitting it but i have always secretly been afraid that i wouldn't get grace to die

but now i see how stupid i was god wouldn't give me grace i didn't need until i needed it and when i need it i have it he says don't be afraid of death it's going to be wonderful that's quite something isn't it to experience that you we never know what goes through somebody's mind in the last hours before they pass away one of my favorite comedians was woody allen uh he had a famous quote i'm not afraid to die i just don't want to be there when it happens uh here is somebody who's basically saying i'm not afraid to die and i don't mind being there when it happens for your rod and your staff you are with me i fear no evil and this is what a difference and that is why david can rejoice because the shepherd is with him he is with us and he will be with us this life and into death thirdly our shepherd gives us courage because we walk through the darkest valley and he is with us we will fear no evil it's it's something that you walk through though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we don't live there it's something that we have to walk through like the river that pilgrim and hopeful walk through death in the bible is called a sleep on this passage it's called a shadow and i like ch spurgeon nobody speaks like spurgeon spurgeon is great he said no shadow ever hurt anyone the shadow of a dog never bit anyone in the shadow of a sword never hurt anyone the shadow of death doesn't hurt us in that sense it's just a shadow but we have to go through it but the shepherd is with us and uh the horrors of this have been removed from us do you ever think of the reality of that not just that that that from here and then heaven but there's this transition that the horrors of that have been held from us i i love when i'm at a funeral just reading 1 corinthians 15 55 where oh death is your victory where oh death is your sting the sting has been removed from death it's not something that we should fear and we get grace whenever we need it hebrews 2 is a great passage since the children have flesh and blood he too shared in their humanity speaking of jesus so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death that is the devil and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death in other words he didn't just die to free us from death but to free us from the fear of death to take the sting away from us death is our entry into glory christ has walked this way before us he will come to take us to the place he has prepared for us do not let your hearts be troubled trust in god trust also in me in my father's house are many rooms if it were not so i would have told you i am going there to prepare a place for you and if i go and prepare a place for you i will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where i am therefore do not be afraid that is the the lesson here he will give us courage i will fear no evil lastly and with this i'll close the shepherd also reassures us the valley of the shadow of death is indeed scary or it can be but with the lord with us giving us courage we are also reassured in this passage it says your rod and your staff they comfort me david was comforted at the thought of death and basically there's been

much talk about these two the rod and the staff whether there was two or whether there was one douglas mcmillan millen says it was basically just one rod he goes i've never ever seen a shepherd two two staffs you only ever have one he says the first one the rod is probably maybe a cudgel that's worn on the belt it's used for defense if an animal should come or whatever and he says in his book another commentator says that during that time the wicked one would seek to discourage us like christian going through the waters that the lord is able to to cudgel any thoughts anything that that might hinder us anything that that we need protected from even in our darkest moment our salvation is secure the devil is kept at bay nothing can harm us the staff is that long pole with a curve at one end the crook as it were it's used for caring for the sheep and for for lifting that the sheep that the sheep out of of danger and it's used to care so if one is used for defense the other one is used for care david was a shepherd he notes these two aspects of the care of the shepherd as he thinks about death and what that mean and he sees the shepherd tooled up he can protect him he can care for him during this darkest time so here then is is something that we will all experience and in death cafes you'll never hear anything as good as psalm 23 verse 4 people will come up with the wackiest strangest of things but what an opportunity i often think about holding one here maybe not in western hills but holding one in scotland there's not many in scotland there was one in may uh this year in in edinburgh great opportunities for folk to to talk about this and you and i uh if we are christians we know the love of god and his the care of the shepherd doesn't just care for us just now but in those times when we begin to lose our faculties that he will be with us nearer then than perhaps at any other time and like douglas mcmillan's father who knows what we will begin to experience if you really believe that and you really believe his rod and staff they will comfort you and you will take great encouragement and knowing that that the shepherd is with you not only in this life but even in that final journey as we go into glory it's not pie in the sky uh it i used to say that it's this is not just mumble jumble god has to provide a way whereby sinners can really

be kept all the way into glory he doesn't just say well it's going to be difficult the last bit that'll see the other side he can take us through as best he knows he can speak to us in ways that that no one else can how does pilgrims progress ends that first part we'd better not leave them just coming out the water let me just finish and then we'll sing now upon the bank of the river on the other side they saw two shining men again who were waiting for them therefore having coming out come out of the river the shining men greeted them saying we are ministering spirits sent forth to serve those who are heirs of salvation thus they went along together towards the gate now that city stood upon a mighty hill but the pilgrims went up that hill with ease because they had these two shining men to lead them by their hands also they left their mortal garments behind in the river for though they went in with them they came out without them they therefore went up towards the city with much agility and speed though the foundations upon that city were framed was higher than the clouds they went up through the regions of the air sweetly talking as they went being comforted because they had safely gotten over the

river and had such glorious companions to attend them the conversation they had with the shining one was about the splendor of the of that place they told the pilgrims that the beauty and glory of it was inexpressible there said they is mount zion the heavenly jerusalem the incomparable company of angels and the spirits of just men made perfect you are now going to the paradise of god wherein you shall see the tree of life and eat of its never fading fruits when you arrive there you shall have white robes given to you and you shall walk and talk with the king every day even though even through all the days of eternity there you shall never again see such things as you saw when you were in the lower regions of the earth namely sorrow sickness affliction and death for the former things have passed away what a great picture that is of heaven and glory if you've never read pilgrims progress you can actually listen to it free of charge it's very easy you can there's a site called monergism and if you just go in there and put in pilgrims progress you can get audio uh you can just sit and listen to that on the bus listen to pilgrims progress it takes you into a different world it makes you really appreciate what it's like to be a christian all the bumps and all the bruises all the joys and all the sorrows are included in that so yeah if you want i can you just need to write the name down monergism and then you'll you'll find it we're going to stand there i'm going to sing christ the sure and steady anchor this is one of my favorite songs it's quite a new one we'll sung this a few times in here especially when you get to the