

Walking In The Valley Of Deep Darkness

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[0 : 00] If then you can turn with me in the Old Testament to the book of Psalms and Psalm 23.

The verse that we're going to be looking at today is found in verse 4 where David makes this statement, 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.

Of course this no doubt is about the most well-known Psalm in the book of Psalms and indeed in the world. I reckon that to be the case. So no doubt that there's not really anything very new that I will be able to bring greater people than myself have been exegeting and preaching on this Psalm. But it's a timeless Psalm and it's a challenging Psalm and it's a Psalm that has brought tremendous hope and comfort to millions of people throughout history. It's a song that is still sung after all those years. Even if this Psalm, say if it's a Psalm of David composed during his time, then we have a Psalm, a song here that is 3000 years old. I'm a child of the 60s, well not a child of the 60s but anyway, and it's interesting to see that even some of my grandchildren say that they quite like the Beatles. So that's interesting. Anyway, as we look at this Psalm, we meet someone, don't we, who is completely confident and at peace with himself and who also feels supremely blessed. We thought of that opening statement so bold, isn't it? The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing as one translation puts it. What is David's secret? Last week, we looked at verses one to three of this Psalm and I suggested it could be thought of as a Psalm of testimony and reflection. I said we could imagine someone saying to David, how do you cope with all that life throws at you? What is the guiding principle of your life? Where do you get your sense of meaning and purpose, of peace and contentment from?

And of course, that's what I mean as a Psalm of testimony. You can imagine these people saying these things to David and this Psalm in a sense being a response to those questions.

Let me give my testimony, let me answer you, the Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

[4 : 05] But perhaps those questioners may say to David, hold on a minute David, what happens when, like any other human being, human beings that are born of women are born unto trouble as the sparks fly upwards? Look David, what happens when you're confronted with tragedy and you have to walk through and live through some dark and difficult experience? What do you say then David? What do you say then? There it is, there's what he says, look at those opening words, even though I live through, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil. Are you mad David? How can David take up such a position in the face of those sorts of situations in life? So what I want to do today is to look at three things from this verse. I want to look at David in the valley. I secondly want to look at David's response in the valley. And thirdly, I want to look at David's reassuring experience of God in the valley. Having said that, there's a prior question that I want to ask. And the prior question is this, why should there be such valleys anyway? I made joke in my first degree on philosophy. And when I was a student of philosophy, I engaged one of the professors so bold and daring, I engaged one of the professors in a conversation about God and about suffering.

Probably because we were considering that in one of our philosophy seminars. And we were considering that if God is infinitely good and God is infinitely powerful, why is there any suffering? Because if he's infinitely good and he doesn't wish to see people suffering, why does he not intervene and do something about it to remove it and to stop it? Because after all, what are we actually doing right now in this coronavirus? We're doing our level best to see if we can deal with it. And we consider ourselves moral beings, hopefully good. But of course, there's some things that we don't have the power to do much about because of our mortality or humanity or limitations, but God. So I said to the professor, it's because this is the best of all possible worlds that God has created. What do you mean? I mean that if God wishes to share his being, and if God wishes to

offer a real authentic relationship with you and I, he needs to construct a world that has freedom at its center. He needs to construct a world where people can bang nails into his son. What about God's, what I might call *modus operandi* in the world? I mean by that, any of you that will know any sort of

Latin, I mean by that, his way of working, his method of operation. Well, I've been a Christian for 43 years. Let me just say one story. We have three daughters. Our youngest daughter was severely bullied and something not very nice happened to her. Let's just put it that way as well. And she plunged into deep depression, self harming and suicidal and was in that situation for three years. God's *modus operandi* wasn't to stop that happening. As I have read history, I also studied history for two years at uni. It seems to me that his default *modus operandi* is what's expressed in this son, you are with me in the valley. May I say for you to think about nine times out of ten, that's how it is. The

Christian is their share of human suffering, but the Christian may also suffer for their faith. Does God especially intervene to stop believers suffering according to history? No.

But I did read some comments, didn't I, from Romans? God works all things, even the things that are not intrinsically good in and of themselves, together for good. Not that they're good, but he works them together for good. Now there's three ways I suggest to you of understanding the valley. We want, it's our entire Christian pilgrimage. That's what David is talking about.

[12:55] That's one way to understand it. As a believer, as a Christian, I walk through, I live through, I navigate my way through as an exile, as God's exiles through this valley, with all its opposition, with all its secularism, with all its marginalisation of Christianity today.

I walk through such a world, such a valley, and I fear no evil. Because I do not walk alone. He is with me every single step of the way. Way too of understanding this phrase.

Now let me assure you that the Hebrew is very able to be translated deep darkness. But the second way, and it's a valid way, is David has in mind the prospect of death. That thing that stops like a shadow every single human being. It is appointed unto people, men and women, boys and girls, once to die. And after death judgment. This thing that has been a fear of human beings throughout history. I'm not so sure that it's, I have to say to you, still that fearful. I've worked an awful lot in the last ten years with dying and death.

I remember in the, I worked in a kids' hospital, an adult hospital, a children's hospital, and in a health centre. I remember when I was working in the adult hospital, one of the consultants said, I want you to go and see this person, they're dying. I went to see them. And I said to him, how are you feeling about your situation? And so, can't come quick enough. There's been a lot more openness and talk and there are organisations that, to facilitate that. Anyway, David says, even though I walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and I suppose if you take that way of understanding it, that David is thinking about the prospect, even though, is even though, is about death, and he's saying, you know something, it's a shadow anyway, for me. Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy boasting? Because the word is my shipper. Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? I am persuaded, says Paul, that the sufferings of this present time, they are not even worthy to be compared to the glory that awaits us as the sheep of the great shepherd. Third way of understanding this, way one, it's my entire Christian pilgrimage.

Way two of understanding, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, it's the prospect of death. Way three of understanding any place of deep darkness, what the older divine used to call the dark night of the soul. Well, says David, and that of course includes death, if it's any deep darkness, if that's what David really meant. I have no fear, no evil. It's interesting what David didn't say. He didn't say, did he? I won't have any questions. He didn't actually say, necessarily, I will be totally and always untroubled. He didn't say that during such a valley, in such an experience of deep darkness and difficulty and trial, that I would shine like a star in the galaxy in terms of my way of coping with it. What he said was this, I will fear no evil. And it's interesting because there's different words for fear in the Old Testament. And certainly this is the same word, this word that he uses here. It's the same word as, for instance, the great

[19:25] Proverb at the very beginning of the book of Proverbs. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom. What that word fear means in Hebrew is the reverence and due respect that is due unto this great God. And I think, if I could put it this way, all, it's a big all, all that David is saying is, because he is my shepherd, I don't have any fear of it, anything. It's the same peel of praise from David here as we read from Paul. That David is persuaded that nothing shall separate

him from his shepherd. Oh, can I ask you, are you on the same ground as David? Are you able to make this remarkable statement by the grace of God? Do you know this shepherd as your own shepherd? Can you say with David in your heart of hearts even though? Thirdly, how is David able to have such reassurance?

What's his secret? And by the way, in David's history, David knew trial, didn't he? He knew the death of loved ones. He knew the disappointment of their treachery. He knew the opposition that was there constantly. He knew hardship like Paul. It's wonderful, isn't it? That's what I like about the Bible. We're not talking about theoreticians. We're talking about people that have been in the valley. You are with me, says David. This is really what matters.

Father and son, your rodent staff, they comfort me, says David. Now, sometimes we may think that the imagery here of the rodent staff suggests two implements which the shepherd had. But you've got to remember this is poetry. And David is using the vehicle of poetry to convey the truths that he wants to convey at this moment in time about God as his shepherd.

And it's possible that there was only one implement, but it had two functions. And one of those functions was to defend David. And this is why David is able to say, I shall fear no evil, because you know something, Yahweh, Jehovah, the eternal God is my shepherd, and he is more than able to defend me. He will keep me from falling. Remember what Jesus once said, I have prayed for you that your faith fail not. And I think we were reminded also recently that there are two people that pray for us, the Holy Spirit and Jesus. Defending

David from all his enemies, from those wolves that might have been in the caves along the ravines, from those wild animals, from human beings that were seeking to steal the sheep or whatever. But whatever enemies David is saying, you know, as he thinks of the shepherding, this is what God is like. He will defend me. No weapon that is formed against me shall prosper. If Luther put it in one of his great hymns, where this world all divils over and waiting to devour us, they will never succeed. And that other function of that rod was to keep the sheep, if you like, from self destruction. Because there are at least two enemies in terms of human beings. There are those human beings that seek to overthrow us, and there is the enemy of our own nature itself. That's a proverb. I'm not sure where it is, but it's in here, and it's in here. And it's a proverb about he that can overcome his own self is better than he that takes a city. Sometimes have there isn't it to conquer ourselves?

[26 : 41] Well says David. I love those statements in the scripture that I come across. You prevent me. The such a thing isn't there as preventative grace. Is there not a real sense in which not one of us would be in this room today, in this sanctuary, where it not for the preventative grace of God? Here it is then. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. In conclusion, let me just make those statements as I finish.

If God is your shepherd, if you can identify yourself with this astonishing confession and testimony, you will never be alone in the valley. Secondly, let us never forget that's why I read from Mark's gospel. Our wonderful savior did walk that valley alone. The valley of Golgotha, the valley of the cross, the valley of shame, the valley of my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? For you and for me. Because the Lord is David's shepherd, his hope, his saviour, his protector, this and only this is the reason for his triumphant testimony. And if any of us have that testimony, that is the only reason. It's nothing to do with our resourcefulness, but everything to do with his grace. Can you stand square then with David and say, this also is my creed? Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me, you are wrong, and you are staff. They comfort me. May the Lord bless these thoughts to each one of us for his glory and for our eternal good.