

Walk In Deaths Dark Vale

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Date: 08 September 2019

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- [0 : 00] I would like us now to turn to the Book of Psalms and Psalm 23. The Book of Psalms, Psalm 23, we can read the whole Psalm.
- For Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pasture. He leads me beside still water. He restores my soul.
- He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil.
- My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
- [1 : 04] I can turn and consider for a short while the words of Eshfor. The words of Eshfor, 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.
- These are the most familiar words I would imagine of the whole of the scripture. They're familiar to us because we often sing these words, and we often sing them, especially when we gather together on locations of death and bereavement.
- And these words are appropriate in these circumstances because of the message that they carry. But, as I said to the children, there's a danger when we're familiar with words like that, we can vice them.
- We can have them on our lips without really allowing these words to penetrate beyond the surface of our emotions, if you like.
- [2 : 34] And any service that is free of emotion is questionable as to its worth.
- Of course, if it's all emotion, and if there's no activity on the head of the brain of the heart, if it's entirely based on emotion, then the value of it is also questionable.
- The late Professor Finlison, some of you will know the name of Professor Finlison, some of his sermons, some of his writings were gathered together after his death.
- And he has a lecture which was entitled The Fading Leaf and its message. And it's based on a passage from the Old Testament on the book of the prophet Isaiah.
- And the verse there, Isaiah 64 verse 6, we have all become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
- [4 : 02] We all fade like a leaf and are iniquities like the wind. Take us away. That was the verse he was talking about. And his comment, or one of his comments, concerned how our lives compare to the fading leaf of which that passage speaks.
- He says, we were all young and buoyant and life seemed full to overflowing, but silently our ranks got thinned.
- One after another dropped out as noiselessly as a leaf was carried by a gust of wind. When we pause to think and reflect, the silence of the East Departus overwhelms us.

And if you reflect on what he's saying there, I think you find that's quite true. The longer lived we are, the more we are aware occasionally anyway of the thinning of the ranks.

And the way that happens, it can happen without us being aware of it.

[5 : 26] There may be occasions of intense consciousness, but for the most part that happens. And we don't realise it's happening until maybe on the other occasion it's brought home to us.

There's no escaping the fact that everybody must die. And even those who are hardened in their sin and who have no time for the gospel, they'll say that to you.

Death is inevitable. Death is part of the experience of living. It's something that you just have to grin and bear as it were.

And it can be very philosophical about what death means. It is not, however, as Rabbi Duncan put it, a death of nature. Death is an appointment of God.

And that is the thing. If we take God out of this experience, we are not dealing with the experience as we are meant to deal with it.

[6 : 40] And I want us to think of the words of the Samist in order to focus meaningfully on this solid reality.

That death is a universal experience. Nobody will escape it except for one thing.

And that is that Christ may come before that happens. But nobody knows when Christ is going to come. He may come before this day ends.

But many of us think back and we think, well, he hasn't come until now. Every day will be the same. And all the experiences will be simply experiences that have replicated previous experiences.

In this sense, we are not really going to see any change. But, whatever, if we believe God's word, if we believe God's word tells us that there is a universality about death, and that universality is all down to the fact that there is sin in the world and God pronounced judgment upon the sinner. And death is the consequence.

[7 : 58] And the only thing that will bring that cycle to an end is the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, looking at these words of the Samist, as someone who knows this to be true, even though he says, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, that's his experience.

It's your experience. It's my experience. We are at the moment and all times walking through the valley of the shadow of death. And the words are words of encouragement and consolation to God's people regarding the love and protection that the shepherd of which the Sam speaks brings to those who know him.

That even as they walk through the valley of the shadow, because of the care and protection of the good shepherd, they have a relationship or an understanding of what that means.

That enables them to meet with it with fortitude and with understanding. And this is true of them all the days of their life until the time comes when death will be real.

He's using a metaphor from a pastoral scene where the shepherd is caring for the sheep. That's the first thing. The second thing is that the verses, in particular the verses usually apply to the point of death or the experience of dying and teaching that the believer needs to have no fear when death comes.

[10 : 04] It's encouraging the believer, because they're a believer, because of who the shepherd is, because of what he is able to do, that even when death comes they need not fear that.

And the original text tells us that the valley is a valley of profound darkness or deepest darkness. And that valley is in reality the darkness is the shadow that is cast by death as it comes.

Now my understanding is that when we look at these words, there are lives every one of us. We have this sense of overshadowing. We have this inner measure at all times and awareness that death is something that's in the world.

And we are at times aware of it, at times more so than other times. Sometimes it is someone that we may have little knowledge of.

Sometimes it is somebody close to us, maybe a family member or a neighbour. But there is a shadow of it passing over us.

[11 : 30] I'm sure you've all been concerned for obvious reasons of the disaster that's followed in the wake of the terrible storm in the Bahamas there.

And the number of deaths are still undetermined. But you know people lost their lives and depending on the kind of person you are you've probably got a measure of sympathy towards these people.

And you've certainly seen the destruction that was left in its wake. Property and possessions have been scattered over all the area.

But most of all you've sensitive to the fact that numerous people lost their lives because of it. Now unless you're extremely hard-hearted you can't be oblivious to that.

You can't deny that. But because it is not to you, because it is not directly related to you the reaction is maybe, well in all likelihood, its reaction that's tempered by that distance.

[12 : 53] But it's always there. This thing is always there. This experience is always there. Whether it's somebody else suffering an accident or an illness or a disease or old age or whatever we're all aware of death being in the vicinity and death, its shadow cast over us.

One of the commentators writes it is called a valley of death because the fall of Adam put the stamp of death on everything here. We are walking through this world and it is not our dwelling place.

What makes it not our dwelling place is that death is going to remove us from this world at some point. Now the words of the Samas surely should comfort the believer because of the passion of whom these words speak and the relationship he has to those that he is speaking to.

But not everybody needs that comfort. Maybe you're saying well surely everybody needs to be comforted. Well not everybody needs to be comforted simply because there is only those who understand what death is that need comfort.

Those who understand what the reality of death is all about that need the words of consolation that the Samas brings. If you don't have an appreciation of what death is or what it means then clearly why would words of comfort and consolation such as the ones offered by the Samas why would they be of any worth to you?

[14 : 48] There are many people and some of them you might think well you wouldn't expect any different of them because they've not lived under the Gospel and they're not appreciated.

The kind of enemy death is. They don't understand what it means to be a human being.

They don't understand themselves to possess a soul. They don't understand themselves to encounter death so as to understand that death will mean for them an encounter with God.

So if they don't think of their soul, if they don't think of dying as an encounter with God if they don't think of death as anything other than bringing them to the end of their journey in life then they may not appreciate comfort, they may not require comfort and that's clear from all kinds of sources of evidence.

Somebody was telling me recently about a person who knew themselves to be dying and this was somebody who was exposed to the Gospel, who had heard the Gospel preach who had been raised in a Christian home and yet when they were confronted with the reality of their circumstances somebody who knew themselves to be terminally ill they were quite content to say well I've left my wife well prepared for I've left my children well prepared for my...

[16 : 38] I'm no deaths and I'm happy to go and face death because for them that was all he was facing, that was all there was to it an appointment, an encounter with death and there was a...

well so be it, that was the feeling. I'm sure many of you will be aware of the man who this week made an appointment with death, he went to Switzerland and he died there according to that appointment.

I don't know what his circumstances were, I don't know why he felt the need to do that he was suffering a terrible illness, I understand that but one thing I don't think he understood was that for every person living once they meet the last enemy, death it is not the end and they may not believe that, they may not appreciate that there is the word of God that tells us that death is called the last enemy for a reason and that death is not the end for any individual.

There are these solemn words that the Divine's theologians gathered together in the Catechism and it speaks there of the death of the unbeliever somebody who doesn't know the Lord, somebody who doesn't...

and hasn't believed the Gospel and this is what it says the souls of the wicked, by that word wicked we think that means the extremist somebody who is really bad, somebody who is really beyond the pale but the word wicked really means there anybody who is Christless anybody who has not believed the Gospel anybody who has not committed to faith in Jesus Christ the soul of that person at their death are cast into hell where they remain in torments and utter darkness their bodies kept in their graves as their prisons to the resurrection and judgement of the grave day it's a solemn statement but it's based not on the theologian's own meanderings or speculations, their thoughts that are drawn from the scripture and what the scripture says happens to a person when death comes that the person who is not a believer they have one destiny and they have one encounter to look to but for the believer we are told it's different even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death he says death is a shadow because Christ has removed from the experience of death the substance of death, again and again in the scripture we are told that it is only the shadow that remains for the believer these words are a consolation to the person who believes because they are the words of the shepherd to them concerning the experience that awaits them from which there is no turning back the believer is entitled to believe that Christ has abolished death and brought life and mortality to life through the gospel the believer is entitled to believe that the words of Paul to the Corinthian church are true he says where all death where is thy sting, all grave where is thy victory and the reason he is able to say that is because of Christ's death and all that Christ's death means to the believer and that is what's important for the believer, the comfort comes even though I walk through the valley of death, of the shadow of death

[21 : 05] I will fear no evil for you are with me you are with me, you are my companion you are the person who has been the breaker up of my way you are the person who has experienced the grave on my behalf you are the person who has gone to the cross to bear the penalty of my sins in your body and that is what I believe, that's where my safety is you know the psalmist speaks about a table being prepared it speaks about the provision that this world has for them by virtue of what Christ has done but sometimes you are distracted to look at these things and think these are your comforts but no he is the comfort of the believer he, Jesus Christ, the alone saviour of sinners he is the one that we look to and because of what he has done and my ability to look to him then I take comfort from this somebody has written, in his presence the prince of terror flees some of you will have read the book, The Lord My Shepherd by the late Douglas MacMillan and he's obviously from his own early childhood and youth he's able to draw from his experience shepherding the flock along with his brothers and father but in one of the chapters he reminisces about his father's deathbed and his father, if I remember correctly, looked enjoyed looking out across the hills through his bedroom window and he was bedridden because of his death being imminent but he said when he went to see him one day his father was looking out the window and what he was seeing was not the hills he said he was seeing an orchard and in the orchard he was seeing all these saints that he knew who had gone home to heaven and he believed himself that God was giving him an opportunity to look into heaven and this evening also you'll be here for the garlic we're going to consider what heaven is like for the believer but this was something that sustained this man even in the hours of his dying it's not like that for everyone but what he believed came from the knowledge that he had of Christ you are with me he says

I will fear no evil because you are with me your rod and your staff they comfort me what is the difference between the rod and the staff? well if there is a difference then I'm sure there is the rod was used for driving away the enemies those who were making prey of the sheep and the staff was for guiding, for walking and making sure the way was safe and the assumption, the assurances here that the Lord Jesus is with the believer at all times even here at all times doesn't matter we're thankful and we're grateful at times during our lives here in the world that we can detect his presence that we can appreciate his presence sometimes when we're in worship sometimes when we're in company with his people we know not only are they there but he is and that's the biggest difference he's always there although we're not able to recognise him there and because he's there we have every right to believe that when the point comes that death will be this encounter that is foreshadowed all the days of our life that he is there with us in that as well late Muldoch Campbell in one of his, I think it's in all the reflections he's very good at recounting the experience of God's people in various ways but he speaks on one occasion about a Christian that he knew and that Christian was dying and what his confession was on his deathbed was this he said, I was never, I can say I was never so satisfied with God as I am now

I was never so satisfied with God as I am now and I was never so dissatisfied with myself and that's completely back to front in the way some people think because they're always striving to make themselves in some way acceptable to God and they think that when they come to my deathbed this is what will be this will be my ace in the hole, this will be my greatest weapon because if the Bible is through and it is if what these people have been telling me is through then when I appear before him I'll tell him, I'll tell him what I've done I'll tell him how good I was as a father I will tell him how good I was as a brother or a sister I will tell him how good I was as a neighbour I list my plus points and as long as there's more of them than there was of these other things that I would rather forget and that's the kind of deathbed they look to but this man discovered no, nothing is more important than Christ nothing is more important than the provision that God has made in Christ and this is the comfort that this verse speaks about what Christ is to his own people this is the question, this is the burning issue for any one of us and every one of us

I often said it and I often feel it when we sing these words and we sing the words of Psalm 23 at funerals and we sing them at weddings and we sing them well, because it's the only Psalm people of any knowledge of but they know, do you know the Lord as you shepherd you see the one that when death comes and you've seen its shadow cast over your life often sometimes it's dark and cold and it's left its mark upon your life can you say, well this is my consolation, this is my hope this one is the one to whom I look when this comes I know that he will take me to be with himself remember these words that were spoken to the thief on the cross today he said you will be with me in paradise sometimes we talk about the staff being the staff that's like the crook and the crook is the way the shepherd reaches out to take the lamb or the strength sheep out of the pit and it pulls it to a safe place you can imagine that to be the case that the shepherd of this sheep almost reaching out in the eleventh hour to take the thief on the cross and saying to him today he'll be with me in paradise

I hope you're not depending on an eleventh hour conversion I hope you're not trusting that that's what's going to be your salvation because nervous they accept the time now is the day of salvation and Christ through his word, Christ through his providence is forewarning you that the only true comfort you can take from him in his word is a comfort that faith alone can give to you and may that be so, let us pray and Lord help us to believe your word do not allow us to succumb to the world's wisdom that would have us believe that when the eyes of the person close in death that beyond that lies nothing beyond that is oblivion, beyond that there is nothing to be experienced or seen perhaps others who would have at all will experience the same blessed salvation because Christ has offered that to all despite that offer being to all, not all have received it, not all have believed it help us to understand that only by putting your trust in you can we fully know with assurance that the comforts that are your people are ours also hear our prayers for givers sins in Jesus name amen