

## THE LORD PROTECTS

## PSALM 23:4a

Are you afraid of the dark? It's a common enough fear among children, but many adults are afraid of the dark as well. A recent survey of 2,000 adults in the United Kingdom found that 40% of us are scared when walking around the house with the lights off. One in ten admitted they were too terrified even to get up for a toilet trip in the darkness. Fear of the dark is usually not fear of darkness itself, but fear of possible or imagined dangers concealed by the darkness. I want you to think with me today about darkness – not literal darkness, of course, but instead about the dark valleys that we have to walk through in life.

This Lenten season we're reflecting on Psalm 23 week to week. Why Psalm 23? What does Psalm 23 have to do with Good Friday and Easter? Jesus made the connection. He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (John 10:11 NLT) Over and over again in the Bible, God or Jesus is compared to a shepherd and human beings are compared to sheep. One of the best examples of this sheep and shepherd metaphor is Psalm 23 – one of the most well-known passages in all of the Bible. The more we understand about literal sheep and shepherds the more we understand some remarkable spiritual parallels to God's relationship with us.

Each week we read Psalm 23 out loud and together in a different English version. We've read it in the New International Version, the New King James Version, and the New Living Translation. Today, the version we'll read is the New Revised Standard Version. We've already reflected on how Jesus, our good Shepherd, provides for us, restores us, and guides us through life. Today, we're going to reflect on how Jesus protects us. That truth is found in the first part of v. 4. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me." (NRSV) I want you to notice something interesting as we begin. A personal pronoun changes in v. 4 from the vv. 1-3. "He" changes to "you." "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths..." (Ps. 23:2-3 NSRV) For the rest of the psalm starting in v. 4, the pronoun changes to "you." "... For you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me.... You anoint my head with oil...." (Ps 23:4-5 NSRV) Why does that matter? It's as if David, the author of Psalm 23, wants to underline even more the intimacy – the personal connection – he felt between himself and the Lord. As I reflected on this one verse two great truths emerged for me. Here's the first one.

### MY SHEPHERD LEADS ME THROUGH DARK VALLEYS INTENTIONALLY, NOT ACCIDENTALLY.

Many of us have the phrase – "the valley of the shadow of death" – kind of ingrained in our memory. As a result, we assume that David had death or dying on his mind primarily. That's probably not the case. A better translation of that key word is simply "the darkest valley" as in "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me." (Ps 23:4a NRSV) That widens considerably what David might have been thinking about. Sure, it included the experience of death and dying. Who

would deny that's a profound "dark valley" whether it's the death of someone we love deeply or our own death? But life has a lot of other dark valleys, doesn't it? Chronic illness, money problems like debt, losing your job, divorce, broken relationships between parents and kids, loneliness, addiction, being rejected, being treated unfairly, or being persecuted for following Jesus. Those are just a few other dark valleys we experience in this life beyond death and dying.

Remember, as a young man, David had actually been a literal shepherd for literal sheep. From what I've been told the country of Israel is filled with lots of wild, gloomy, dark valleys or deep ravines through which shepherds lead and guide their sheep. Why did they do that? It was common practice to move sheep from one pasture to another so they could access better food. Every year a kind of migration occurred. During the summer months, a shepherd led his sheep through those dark valleys up to higher, mountainous areas. He'd often spend weeks and months alone with his flock. Then when winter returned, he would lead them back down through the same valleys to lower pastures. These valleys or ravines were treacherous places for both sheep and shepherds. Predators such as wolves or mountain lions could hide in the dark shadows and suddenly attack either the shepherd or the sheep. A sudden thunderstorm might trigger a flash flood in the valley. Rock slides or avalanches were a common occurrence in the valley with disastrous results. There were always poisonous plants the shepherd had to make sure the sheep didn't sample along the way.

So, here was the irony. On the one hand, these dark valleys were the easiest way – often the only way - to get sheep from one pasture to another or from inferior pastures to better pastures. The dark valleys themselves provided good pasture on the way up to higher elevations. The dark valleys were often well-watered. On the other hand, these dark valleys were often dangerous, treacherous places for both sheep and shepherds. Last week we looked at that phrase "right paths" as in "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." (Ps 23:3 NSRV) It's easy to assume that David meant "right paths" were only those paths that led into green pastures or beside still waters. Wrong! David said here that taking sheep through these dark valleys was one of those "right paths," too. It was just a necessary part of good shepherding. Sure, you could just be a lazy shepherd and allow your sheep to overgraze a specific pasture. But if you wanted your sheep to prosper, you took them through those dark valleys and subjected them to potential dangers and threats. It was just part of the deal like it or not.

OK, so let's try and understand the spiritual analogy David made here. Dark valleys represent all of the difficult circumstances we experience as followers of Jesus in this life. Not just death and dying, but any major disappointment, any massive discouragement, or any heart wrenching dilemma life throws at us. Walking through dark valleys spiritually is a necessary part of following Jesus. Most of us are programmed to believe that God only wants us to experience the easy, the pleasant, and the beautiful in life. We have a hard time getting our faith around the idea that going through spiritually dark valleys could ever be God's will for us. We resist the truth that Jesus, the good Shepherd, considers a dark valley experience to be a "right path"

for us spiritually speaking. But, the fact remains. My Shepherd leads me through dark valleys intentionally, not accidentally.

What? Why on earth would Jesus, the good Shepherd, do this? I can think of at least three reasons. First, it's necessary to develop spiritual maturity. Growing spiritually is often thought of as getting to "higher ground" – getting to a higher, more elevated place in your personal relationship with God. Followers of Jesus sometimes talk about "mountaintop experiences" that result in big steps forward in your spiritual life in some way. We believe wrong ideas of how that gets accomplished. It never happens on its own. Nobody gets "air-lifted" to higher ground spiritually. As with literal sheep, so with spiritual sheep – God's people. You only get to higher ground by walking through dark valleys with Jesus, your good Shepherd. Literally and spiritually, you can only ever get to a mountain by way of a valley. Many of those dark valleys are anything but pleasant. They can be very hard and very scary. But along the way, Jesus uses those dark valley experiences to create spiritual stamina if we endure in and through them. Jesus put it bluntly, "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." (Jo. 16:33 NLT) So, the question is not whether you and I are going to have dark valley experiences in life, but how will we react to them? Will we give up following Jesus and sink into despair or self-pity? Or will we follow the good Shepherd like obedient sheep quietly and calmly facing every adversity?

Second, it's necessary for learning how to trust God regardless. I'm constantly amazed how much that matters to God. Once you get through some dark valley spiritual experience, it provides an opportunity to look back and reflect on God's faithfulness. That was so true in David's life. His predecessor, King Saul, became jealous of David and tried to pin him to the wall by throwing a spear at him. Then for several years, Saul chased David all around Israel trying to kill him. David had to hide out in caves just to stay alive. But God protected David from Saul's murderous plans. He only learned the wonderful truth of God's protection as a result of that dark valley experience. There's a principle there that's true for you and me. It's in the dark valley experiences of life that we learn God's grace is sufficient. The great Christian leader, Paul, had something in his life he called "a thorn in his flesh." It was a dark valley of some kind. He asked God to take it out of his life, but Jesus, the good Shepherd, had an interesting response. "Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor. 12:8-10 NLT)

Third, it's necessary for being a blessing to others. Only those who have been in life's dark valleys and walked through them with Jesus close by them can provide you and me the right kind of comfort and encouragement when we walk through our own dark valleys. Someone who has walked through the dark valley of cancer and survived can provide better comfort to someone walking that same valley today. Someone who has walked through the dark valley of divorce and survived can provide better comfort to someone walking that same valley today. Someone who has walked through the dark

valley of losing a loved one to death and survived can provide better comfort to someone walking that same valley today. That's just the way it is. Life will cut some deep valleys into your life and mine. But if you give those dark valleys to Jesus trustingly, He can make them a channel whereby others receive the blessing of God's water of life. God's grace can flow through your dark valleys into other people's lives. He can and will make you a blessing to others if you want to be a blessing.

I was reading again the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis this past week in my personal devotional time. I was struck how Joseph's experience illustrates v. 4 so well. His life was filled with dark valleys. He was born into maybe the world's most dysfunctional family ever. Joseph was his dad's favorite son, but he was one of 12 brothers born to four different women. The family was full of favoritism, jealousy, immorality, and even idolatry. It was a mess! Just being born into that family qualifies as a dark valley. Joseph's brothers hated him so much they actually sold him as a slave and told their father, Jacob, he'd been killed by a wild animal. A dark valley. As a slave in Egypt, Joseph became the manager for his rich owner's home and business. Joseph resisted his owner's wife's invitation to have an affair. Then, as revenge, she accused Joseph of attempted rape. Joseph was thrown into prison for several years. Punished for doing the right thing. Adversity as a direct result of integrity. A dark valley. God gave Joseph the ability to interpret dreams. He correctly interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's officials and asked one of them to help him get out of prison as compensation. The official conveniently forgot Joseph who languished for two more years in prison. A dark valley. Then Pharaoh had dreams no one could interpret. His official finally remembered Joseph who was summoned to an audience before Pharaoh. He correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and got put in charge of Egypt – second only to Pharaoh himself in terms of power and influence.

Here's what's remarkable to me about Joseph's story. God never explained even one of Joseph's dark valley experiences to Joseph. He never said to Joseph, "Look, I know what's happening to you is terrible, but here's My plan and purpose." He just expected Joseph to trust in Him regardless. And Joseph never despaired and gave up on God. He never assumed God had abandoned Him. His dark valleys apparently resulted in amazing spiritual maturity. And at the end of the story, we see God using Joseph as a channel of His blessing to his own family. Through Joseph, God rescued his entire family from starvation. One of the most remarkable human statements in all of the Bible is uttered by Joseph when he said to his worthless brothers, "Am I God, that I can punish you? You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. No, don't be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children." (Gen. 50:19-21 NLT) My Shepherd leads me through dark valleys intentionally, not accidentally. A second great truth...

### **MY SHEPHERD INVITES ME TO FIND COMFORT IN HIS PRESENCE, NOT IN MY CIRCUMSTANCES.**

Most of the time, we want to find comfort and peace in good, favorable circumstances in our lives. That's understandable. When you're not having to slog along in some dark

valley, you just feel better about your life. But the good Shepherd of your life and mine has a different agenda, a different perspective. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” (Psalm 23:4a NRSV) At the end of the day, the good Shepherd wants us to find our comfort in Him – in His presence - not in our circumstances. Some people think – and some even teach – that God always wants to deliver us from bad or painful circumstances. For example, there are Bible teachers and followers of Jesus who teach and believe what has sometimes been called a “health and wealth gospel.” God never wants you to be sick. God never wants you to experience poverty or financial reversal. God never wants you to experience a dark valley in life. Every dark valley is a satanic attack. Your good Shepherd never leads you through a dark valley in life intentionally. None of that is true.

In fact, it contradicts God’s Word. It contradicts Psalm 23 where we’re told some dark valleys in life can be part of the “right paths” the good Shepherd wants us to walk through. Not all of them, to be sure. Some dark valleys are the result of our own stupidity and sin. Those aren’t dark valleys the good Shepherd has planned for us. But not every dark valley in life is the consequence of our own stupidity or sin. Many dark valleys happen to followers of Jesus who are living godly lives. Over and over again in the Bible, we’re told to put our security, our comfort, and our sense of ultimate safety in a good God, not in good circumstances – in a good Shepherd, not in good situations.

Here are a few examples. Moses told the people of Israel, “When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God... is with you.” (Dt. 20:31 NLT) In another psalm, David wrote, “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread?” (Ps 27:1) Through the prophet, Isaiah, God said this to His people, “Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.... Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” (Is. 43:1-2, 5 NLT)

I’m told sheep are fearful and skittish by nature. Like us, it doesn’t take much to terrify them. What calms sheep down more than anything else is being able to see their shepherd in the pasture with them - being able see their shepherd leading the way through some dark valley. David learned the hard way that when he came to those dangerous, dark valleys in his life, he didn’t have to be afraid, because the Shepherd of his life was with him and would protect him. He learned that great spiritual truth not because of an absence of dark valley experiences in his life, but instead of God’s presence and protection right in the midst of them. When you find yourself in some dark valley, you’re invited to find hope, to find peace, and to find freedom from the chains of fear and anxiety in this simple fact: Jesus is with you. Like a good shepherd, David realized God was with him in any and every situation, in every dark trial, in every dismal disappointment, in every distressing dilemma. The good Shepherd is not just walking in front of you leading the way, but walking right beside you as you stumble along. That’s where you and I ultimately find confidence, inspiration, comfort, and joy.

What we need is a new definition of courage. After all, what kind of courage does a sheep need? It certainly doesn't need courage to fight its enemies on its own or in its own strength. Courage will not help even the biggest sheep defeat the smallest wolf or mountain lion. No, a sheep needs courage to trust its shepherd. Even when it sees a dangerous predator nearby, it looks up and sees the shepherd and it goes back to grazing. That takes courage! What kind of courage does a follower of Jesus need? We don't need courage to fight our own battles in our own strength. The Bible tells us our real enemies – our greatest enemies - aren't even flesh and blood. They could easily destroy us if not for the presence of Jesus, the good Shepherd. No, courage for you and me is learning how to trust in Jesus, the good Shepherd, more.

What dark valley are you walking through this morning? Is it the loss of your job, cancer or some other life-threatening disease, divorce, excessive debt, broken relationships, the death of someone you love, or even your own death? If you are one of Jesus' flock, you are not walking those dark valleys by yourself. You are not alone. Perhaps you've been abandoned by family and friends, but never God. Don't measure the size of the mountain. Instead talk to the One who can move it. Don't carry the world on your shoulders. Talk to the One who holds the universe on His shoulders. Don't be terrified by the darkness of the valley you're walking through. Talk to the One who can lead you through it. That's real courage for real sheep. God made a wonderful promise to one of His sheep, Jacob. "What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go.... I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you." (Gen. 28:15 NLT) That's a promise all of Jesus' sheep can claim for ourselves.

Dr. Gardner Taylor was a highly regarded pastor and preacher back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He passed away in 2015. He told a story from when he was preaching in Louisiana during the Depression. Electricity was just coming into that part of the country, and he was out in a rural, African-American church that had just one little light bulb hanging down from the ceiling to light up the whole sanctuary. He was preaching away, and right in the middle of his sermon, all of a sudden, the electricity went out. The building went pitch black, and Dr. Taylor didn't know what to say, being a young preacher. He stumbled around until one of the elderly deacons sitting in the back of the church cried out, "Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!" Can you still see Jesus in the dark? Sometimes that's the only time we can see Him – as we walk through some scary, dark valley of life. Are you ready for some good news today? Whether we can see Jesus, the good Shepherd, in the dark or not, He can see us in the dark just fine. May we find comfort in His presence and not in our circumstances.