Psalm 23:4 *Walking With the Shepherd: Through the Valley*

***Dark Valleys***We are in a series of sermons called “Walking with the Shepherd” based on Psalm 23. Psalm 23 is one of the most popular passages in the Bible. Each week we are reciting it together. So I invite you to look to the screen and **read it with me now:**

**1**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
**2**    He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
**3**    he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
    for his name’s sake.
**4**Even though I walk
    through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
    for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
    they comfort me.

**5**You prepare a table before me
    in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
    my cup overflows.
**6**Surely your goodness and love will follow me
    all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
    forever.

There are six verses in Psalm 23, so we are doing a six week series, a sermon based on every verse. This is our fourth week, so today we are looking at **Psalm 23:4**:

**4**Even though I walk
    through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
    for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
    they comfort me.

After the opening verse, this is probably the most well-known part of Psalm 23. You hear it quoted in movies and television quite often. Whenever they need to show a funeral service, with cast members gathered around an open grave, this is often the Bible verse that gets read. Of course, many of us know it better in the **King James Version:**

**4**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death…

There’s something gloomy, even spooky about this line. It evokes precisely the emotion I believe it is intended to evoke: discomfort, unease, even a sense of dread. Modern translations have moved away from the King James phrasing not because it is inaccurate, but because it is wordy. In the original Hebrew, “valley of the shadow of death” is just two words—“vale of shadow” or “vale of darkness”. And yet the word for “shadow” is built of the word for “death.”

Now, we are flatlanders. We don’t have a ton of valleys to look at. And most of our experience of valleys probably invokes peaceful images. I think of Julie Andrews singing about the sound of music while looking over flower dappled meadows in Alpine valleys. The church I pastored before this one was called Pleasant Valley. It wasn’t really much of a valley, even by Iowa standards, but it was very pleasant. So, without this verse, I’m not sure we would associate valleys with shadows or death.

But for David, this description would have been highly accurate. As a shepherd, David was very familiar with the valleys and crevasses that ran up the Palestinian hillsides. **This is a stock photo**, I’m not sure if it is Palestinian or not. But this would have been similar to David’s experience. And you can see how walking through a Valley like this would be uncomfortable. You can see how there would be dark shadows, even on the brightest. And if you were in it, you would never be able to be completely certain about what was behind the next corner. It would be an ideal place for predators—either animal or human—to hide in ambush. And if you were in one of these valleys when a cloud burst somewhere higher up the mountain, you can see how it was a potential death trap for sheep and shepherd as floodwaters came rushing down.

With this picture in mind, then, you can see the association between valleys and death. You can see how the valley becomes, for David, a metaphor for difficult times.

We often think of this verse in association with life’s final moments. This becomes a sort of death bed metaphor. And it is certainly appropriate for that. But I don’t think David means it for just that. I think David is referring to all sorts of experiences in life that feel difficult, that seem harmful to us, things that stress us out or keep us awake at night.

I can think of several episodes in David’s life that he might have considered a dark valley. Even the first story we get about him, when he is first introduced to us, is the story of Samuel coming to his father’s house to anoint one member of the family as the next king. It’s a big moment, and yet his own father didn’t think he was important enough to call in from the fields. Think of that, for the rest his life he had to live with the knowledge that his Dad lined up his brothers for the prophet’s inspection, and left him out. The fact that he was still the one chosen could only go so far in wiping that fact out. That would have been a dark valley.

Or, again, after he slays Goliath and saves Saul’s kingdom, the king actually reacts with incredible jealousy. He becomes Saul’s son-on-law and then the king spends the next decade or so trying to kill him. Even worse, because he is destined to become king himself, he does not dare defend himself. Because he knows that harming the king sets a bad precedent for the way his own reign might go. All those years on the run and dodging spears and hiding in caves would have been a dark valley.

Some of David’s valleys were self-inflicted. One of his lowest moments came when he was confronted over his affair with Bathsheba and the conspiracy he carried out to have her husband killed. His first child with Bathsheba died in infancy, even though he pleaded with God to spare the child’s life. That was a dark valley.

The end of his reign as king was also marked with family dysfunction and a coup d’état led by his own son. Again he found himself on the run, hiding in caves. He only got his crown back when his son Absalom was killed by his own men. That would have been a dark valley as well.

The point, then, is that David is painting a picture here of life’s adversities. The valley is a metaphor for things that cause us anxiety, things that trouble us. Whether it a recently diagnosed illness, or the illness of someone we care deeply about. Stress over jobs or relationships, or even the active opposition of someone who is out to get you. Guilt over poor choices we have made, or regret for personal failures. The valleys in our lives are the things that keep us awake at night. The things that we stew over and worry about.

And the thing is, the bad news in this verse is, **we will all walk through valleys.** Jesus said, “In this world, you will have trouble” (John 16:33). The book of James says that we should consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds (James 1:2). Not if we face trials, when we face trials. It’s going to happen, we are going to walk through valleys.

But the good news of this verse, the hopeful thing in this verse, is that when we walk through valleys **the Shepherd promises to walk through those valleys with us.** We are not left alone to deal with trouble and trials. The Good Shepherd is guiding us even in life’s darkest moments, and so we can be confident.

So what do we do when we find ourselves in a valley? Let’s look at this great verse, line by line, and find 4 things we should do in the midst of life’s valleys. Four ways to lean into the shepherd even as life gets hard.

***The Story Doesn’t End Here***First, I want to encourage you to **keep walking**. If you find yourself in a valley, keep walking. Don’t stay there. Move to the other side.

Let’s put **Psalm 23:4** back up, and let me call your attention to an important word. That word is “through.” “Even though I walk through the darkest valley.” The picture is not one of stopping and living in the valley, but moving on through. It’s a picture of a journey, with something better on the other side.

You might be asking: “If the Lord is a good shepherd, and he’s guiding me through life, then why does he take me into dark valleys? Why does he put me in those kinds of situations?”

But this is actually very much in keeping with shepherding practice. Remember that **picture I showed you?** The point of travelling the valley is not so much getting from one side to another, as getting from the bottom to the top. Valleys like this would have been the best paths to get from the bottom of the will to the top. These valleys were how shepherds brought their flocks up to the better summer grazing at higher elevations.

So as dark and gloomy and at times scary as these valleys could sometimes be, they were the best way for the shepherd to get his sheep to better places. And that’s God’s intention for us as well. He moves us *through* the valleys. It is by way of the valleys that we travel to higher ground with God.

But the key is that we keep walking. That we realize that the story is not going to end here. That we keep our head up and our eyes on what lies ahead.

And for the Christian, this is true **even if your valley is going to lead to physical death**. Even if the diagnosis is terminal, and it’s time to realize any further treatment is futile. Even if the ER personnel have done all they can for your loved one, but the injuries were simply too severe. Even if you’ve lived a good long life, and now you are about to slop away quietly in your sleep—for the Christian we must remember that death is a Valley we pass through, not one we stay in forever.

Donald Grey Barnhouse was the pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and one of the more famous preachers in America in the 1940s and 50s. His wife died at a young age, leaving him a single father. And has Dr. Barnhouse was trying to help his little girl—and himself—process what had happened, he was one day struck by inspiration.

He and his daughter were driving one sunny day when they came to an intersection. As they were stopped, waiting for their turn to proceed, a large moving van pulled up beside them and, in doing so, blotted out the son. Struck by the sudden change from light to darkness, Dr. Barnhouse asked his daughter if she would rather they were run over by the truck, or by its shadow. The daughter replied, of course, that she would much rather be run over by the shadow, because the shadow could not hurt them.

“Exactly,” Dr. Barnhouse replied, “and that is what has happened to your mother. It was only the shadow of death that went over your mother. She's actually alive ⎯ more alive than we are. And that's because two thousand years ago, the real truck of death hit Jesus. And because death crushed Jesus, and we believe in him, now the only thing that can come over us is the shadow of death, and the shadow of death is simply our entrance into glory."

When Jesus died on the cross, there were two men who died with him, both career criminals. One of the criminals got caught up in the attitude of the crowd, and mocked Jesus. But the other recognized something special in Jesus, and realized He actually was who the crowd only thought he was pretending to be. So, in the last moments of his life, this criminal put his faith in Jesus. **Luke 23:42-43:**

**42**Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

**43**Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

For this newfound believer, death became a valley leading to paradise. He didn’t stay in the valley, but he kept walking through it to the other side.

If you find yourself in a valley, keep walking. The shepherd will lead you through it. He’s not going to leave you there.

***Leave it on His Desk***Second, I want to encourage you to **name your fear**. If you are going through a valley, name what it is that is bothering you; and then give it to God.

In **Psalm 23:4**, David says “I will fear no evil.” Even though the valley is dark and ominous. Even though there is great potential for evil, David says he is not going to be afraid. Not because there is nothing to be afraid of, but because he has given his fear to his shepherd.

I want to encourage you, as you face your valleys, to give a name to what it is that is bothering you. We live in a high-anxiety world. We hear about anxiety all the time, and we ask people to pray for our anxiety. But anxiety is not our problem. It’s the things that are bothering us that cause us to be anxious. It’s the stressors that are keeping us up at night.

So if you are feeling anxious, figure out what it is that is causing you to feel that way—name it—and then give it to God. Here’s what the Apostle Paul says, **Philippians 4:6:**

**6**Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Present your requests to God. Go to the shepherd and say: “This is the thing that’s keeping me up at night…” Put it on his desk. Let Him take responsibility for it.

Kyle Idleman points out that this verse doesn’t just tell us to pray about our anxieties and fear, it also tells us how to pray. We are supposed to present our requests with thanksgiving and petition. Idleman writes:

Have you ever tried to pray about your anxiety, then, a few minutes in, you feel the anxiety increase? You think to yourself, *This isn’t working.*

That’s because in our prayers we often tell God about our anxieties, but never get around to telling our anxieties about God. When our prayers are filled with thanksgiving, we are telling our anxieties what we have to be thankful for. Anxiety has a way of blinding us to God’s blessings, but thanksgiving opens our eyes. It’s a proactive way of attacking anxieties.

When are prayers are filled with [petition], meaning that we make our requests known to God, we are telling our anxieties that God is on our side and can carry the weight.

David models this for us in his psalms. If you read through that book, you’ll notice how there is often a shift in his prayers. He might begin by talking about the reasons he has to be anxious: his enemies are chasing him. His life is in danger. The guilt of his sin is too heavy.

But then there’s a shift. It happens in virtually every psalm. David stops telling God about his anxieties and stars telling his anxieties about God: God can defeat my enemies. God can rescue me from danger. God can take away the guilt of my sin. So many psalms being in the doldrums and end in worship. (*Don’t Give Up*, p. 101)

Name your fear. Present your requests to God. And look what Paul says **will happen next**:

**7**And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Don’t just tell God about your anxieties, but tell your anxieties about God. We don’t need to be afraid. When we leave it on God’s desk, we know He can handle it.

***The Valley of Vision***Third, I want to encourage you to **stay with the Shepherd.** If you are going through a valley, stick close to the Shepherd. See what He has to teach you.

One of the noteworthy features of **Psalm 23:4** is that it is at this point that David switches from talking about the Shepherd in the third person to addressing him directly in the second person: “You are with me.”

Prior to this, it has been “he” and “his.” He makes me lie down. He leads me beside quiet waters. He guides me in right paths. For his name’s sake. But now, it is “you.” You are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Scholars agree that this is intentional. Usually, your writing teacher would tell you it is bad form to switch pronouns like this. But at this critical juncture of dread and foreboding, God switches from somebody David talks about to someone David talks directly too.

He needs his shepherd to be close now more than ever. He is leaning into the Shepherd now in ways he never would when the pastures are green and the waters are quiet.

And here’s a truth that we may not always want to accept, but which is born out again and again in the Bible and the history of the church: “The people of God typically experience the preciousness of God more in seasons of privation — in hardship or need — than in seasons of prosperity.” (Jon Bloom, *God is More Precious in the Valley,* <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-is-more-precious-in-the-valley> )

It is often the valley that draws us closer to Jesus. It is often the valley that teaches us the deepest lessons of faith.

In your bulletins, we put a card that contains a poem. It’s called “The Valley of Vision” and it’s written by an English pastor named Arthur Bennet. Bennet was a simple country parson who made it his life’s passion to study the writings of the old English Puritans. He edited many of their writings into a book of meditations and poems called “The Valley of Vision”, which has become popular in the last several years as a devotional. And this poem is the opening entry in the book. It’s all about how the low places in life are teachers about the highest things of God.

I wanted you to have the whole poem so that you could see the connection to Psalm 23. I want you to have it as reminder, in the midst of your darkest valleys, that they are opportunities to soar in faith. I want to encourage you to hold onto it, put it somewhere you are likely to see it when life is dragging you down.

But I especially want to call your attention to the middle part, **the part that begins:**

Let me learn by paradox
that the way down is the way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.

If you are going through a valley right now, what might God be trying to teach you? Are you willing to learn? How can this valley become a place of vision for you?

***The Lord Your Protector***Fourth and finally, I want to encourage you to **trust in the Shepherd.** Keep walking. Name your fear. Stay close to the Shepherd. And now, trust in the Shepherd. Have confidence that your Shepherd is capable of defending you.

Back to **Psalm 23:4**, notice the line about the Shepherd’s rod and staff. This is basic equipment for a Shepherd. To this day, in the Middle East and North Africa, shepherds will go out simply with a rod, a staff, and a small lunch pouch and water bag. The staff is what we think of as a shepherd’s crook, the curved stick that the shepherd uses to guide his flock and pull back those in danger of straying.

The rod is the shepherd’s weapon. A rod, as I’ve seen it described, is more of a club than a stick. Typically, when a shepherd is young he will go into the bush and select a young sapling, dug from the ground. He would then whittle it down so that the bottom part—the root ball—would form a sort of cudgel, and the stick part would be molded to fit his hand. After completing it, a shepherd boy will spend hours practicing with this club, learning not just to swing it, but also how to throw it with incredible force and accuracy.

So think, again, about the story David told when he was trying to convince Saul to allow him to fight goliath. He went back to his days tending his father’s flocks, and he talked about how the lion and the bear would attempt to steal lambs away, and he would pursue them to get the lambs back. It wasn’t with a sling and stones that David described protecting the flock, instead, he described seizing the predator by the hair and striking it. What he’s talking about is using his rod. Clubbing those carnivores to death. (1 Samuel 17:34-37)

And now, David talks about passing through the valleys shadowed with death and trusting that his shepherd is capable of defending him. He finds comfort in the Shepherd’s rod. He knows that just as he protected his father’s sheep, so His shepherd is capable of protecting him.

John 10 is a passage of scripture I’ve referenced several times already in this series. It’s where Jesus identifies with the Shepherd of Psalm 23. In **John 10:11-13** Jesus says this**:**

**11**“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. **12**The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. **13**The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

There’s a difference between a Good Shepherd—the one who owns the sheep, the one who puts his name on the sheep—and somebody who is merely a hired hand. The hired hand is merely there for the paycheck. It’s a job, and if this job doesn’t work out, another will come along. So when the wolf comes along, the hired hand isn’t hanging around. The hired hand isn’t invested in the sheep, he doesn’t identify with the sheep; and so when the sheep get threatened, he reveals himself as a coward. The hired hand is not taking any chances for the sheep.

But the Good Shepherd is different. He’s putting his life on the line for the sheep. He’s going to take on the wolf and fight for those sheep. He’s going to take his rod and wade into battle.

Even if it means laying his life down. Even if it means letting the wolf bite Him rather than the sheep.

Jesus is referencing the cross here, of course. The next couple of verses He talks about laying his life down. Nobody takes it from Him, but He lays it down on His own authority. He’s going to the cross to fight the wolves of sin and shame and brokenness and disease and the fall, and He’s going to defend His sheep.

And so, the sheep, can know innately that the Shepherd has their back. When the sheep huddle up at night, and they are feeling vulnerable, they know that the guy with the rod and the staff is patrolling the perimeter. He’s not going to slumber or sleep, and so they can. There’s no reason for both the sheep and the shepherd to be awake all night.

So what about you? Can you trust your shepherd’s defensive capabilities? Do you trust Him to win your fight for you?

***Counting Sheep, or Being Counted?***You know, there’s an old strategy for getting to sleep at night…I don’t really know where it comes from or even how it is supposed to work… but if somebody can’t sleep at night, what do we tell them to do? Count sheep, right?

If you can’t sleep at night, you are supposed to count sheep. I’m not sure how that is supposed to work. When I’ve tried it, I always picture sheep in a long line, and then they come, one at a time, and hop over a wall in front of me. And then I try to count them that way. Usually doesn’t help me sleep, way to much action in my little mental movie.

I think maybe what you’re supposed to do is imagine a whole bunch of sheep in a pen and then try to single out each sheep and count it. That would probably be harder, more mentally taxing, and maybe that would help to put you to sleep faster.

There’s even a mattress company that has an ad campaign built around out-of-work sheep. The idea is that the mattress is so good, you don’t have any need to count sheep, and so now the sheep are wandering around like a mutton street gang.

But what if, instead of trying to count sheep, the next time you had a hard time falling asleep at night, you reflected on the fact that you are counted? What if, the next time you are losing sleep because you are going through some valley, instead of counting sheep you thought about the shepherd who counts you?

A few verses later in **John 10,** Jesus says this:

**27**My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. **28**I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.

The Shepherd calls you by name. He knows you. He’s chosen you. You belong to Him. You are part of His flock. And He says, “I care for you. I love you. I laid down my life for you.” Nails in His hands. Stripes on His back. A crown of thorns pressed down on His head. He gave His life, on the cross, for His sheep.

And now He says: “No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

The next time you have a hard time sleeping at night, remember: the Good Shepherd counts you. He numbers you in His flock. And He is strong, and He is skilled with a shepherd’s rod, and He is not going to let you go.

This song is based largely on Psalm 23. It’s a new song, one you may not be familiar with. We’re gong to put the words on the screen, but invite you to just listen as we sing it. It’s called “Highlands.”