

(Devotional #4) Psalm 23: The Secret to a Happy Death
The Psalm of the Great Shepherd

Opening Scripture Reading:

*They cried out to the LORD in their trouble;
He saved them out of their distresses.
He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
and broke their bonds apart.
Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness,
and for His wonders to the sons of men – Psalm 107:13-15*

In studying the first three verses of Psalm 23, we have learned that the LORD Himself provides for His people in good times and in bad times, just as a shepherd provides for his flock. Furthermore, we have seen that the constant care of our Shepherd is the source of a host of wonderful blessings.

In our last two devotionals, the focus has been on *the Secret of a Happy Life*, which we experience by following the Great Shepherd. Today we turn to the second observation made by John Phillips and consider *the Secret of a Happy Death*. Now it may seem odd to think of ‘death’ and ‘happy’ together, especially in a time when the Coronavirus, and the great loss of life it causes, is all we hear about on the news. But Psalm 23 looks beyond our human fragilities and promises that *even in death, we can trust our Great Shepherd*.

Verse 4 – “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff – they comfort me.”

Notice how verse 4 is connected to verse 3. The paths of righteousness down which the Shepherd leads us are not always full of sunshine and light. Sometimes they are dark and fearful. We are never promised there will be no evil, but with the Shepherd as our guide, we can rest assured we do not need to fear evil.

There is no question this verse has brought comfort to many as they or a loved one have faced the stark reality of death. And this is fitting – for God gives the believer special Grace at the time of death. But when David wrote, “*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*, he was not dying. So why does he refer to “*the Valley of the Shadow of Death?*”

The phrase ‘*the shadow of death*’ is a single Hebrew word: (*tsalmawet*). There are two theories regarding the origin of this word:

- (1) The first argues that this is a compound noun made up of the Hebrew words for (a) ‘Shadow,’ (*tse*) and (b) ‘Death’ (*mawet*), which would render the translation we all know.
- (2) But perhaps more likely, *tsalmawet* may be derived from an Akkadian word that means: ‘Deep Darkness.’ *In fact, this is quite likely.*¹

If this is right, then the translation would be: “*Yea though I walk through the Valley of Deep Darkness, I will fear no evil.*” I believe this is a better translation. It applies to all forms of human distress, suffering, fear, and even death itself, and it is consistent both with the context of Psalm 23 (*David was not dying but he was in great danger*), and it is consistent in meaning with approximately twenty other occurrences of the term in the Hebrew Old Testament.

¹ *Tsalmawet* occurs approximately 20X in the Old Testament with this exact meaning ... ‘Deep Darkness,’ implying ‘Great Danger’ (cf. Job 10:21 and Jeremiah 2:6 for examples of this use of *tsalmawet*).

A walk through this dark valley is inevitable (*we all must do it*) ... and we may visit this valley more than once in our lives. The fact that this verse is not limited to ‘*a deathbed-application*,’ does not weaken its ability to comfort us in the presence of death – Instead, the fact that it applies to more than just the death experience means we can count on our Great Shepherd any time we face difficulties, not just at the time of death.

In the context of this Dark Valley, I want you to recall the words of the psalm we read at the beginning of our first devotional: “*The LORD is my LIGHT and my Salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Whom shall I dread?*” – *Psalm 27:1*

Verse 4 begins with a temporal conjunction. This means it has to do with time and motion, so a better translation is: “*Even when I walk in Deep Darkness*” – *Even then My Shepherd walks with me.*” David is asserting that even in times of the most intense pressure and stress – when things are as bad as they can get – even then we can know the reality of the Presence of the LORD. For the Great Shepherd never leaves His sheep.

Therefore, “*I will fear no evil*” because “*Thou art with me.*” Some people become so fearful of life that they prefer death. I believe there is a very important lesson taught by this verse: ‘*No matter the situation, we never should prefer death over living in the Will of God.*’

Fear is a negative emotion, and many today are paralyzed by the feelings it creates. With the news cycle’s never-ending focus on COVID-19, the ever-increasing death toll, the stress on first responders, the need to ‘Social Distance,’ the disastrous impact on our economy, the loss of jobs, and the cloud of uncertainty under which we are living, it is no wonder so many are filled with fear. Notice David did not say, “*there is no evil,*” only that the presence of the Shepherd enabled David to overcome his fear of evil. As a result, fear did not dominate and control his choices.

What David wants us to understand, in the very depths of our hearts and souls, is this: ‘*Whatever your emotional need may be, and however long it has lingered within you, when the LORD is your Shepherd, He is more than sufficient to meet all your emotional needs.*’ He does this by His continual presence, and by His power and grace.

Shepherds carry two implements that are ‘*tools of their trade*’: *a Rod and a Staff* – Many commentators have argued that the rod was used to chastise the sheep, when they did something of which the shepherd disapproved. But this is not consistent with the context. Both the rod and the staff are used ‘*to comfort*’ the sheep, not to chastise them.

The rod was used to destroy the sheep’s enemies, in other words, to protect the sheep. The rod was a weapon of power, and in the psalm, it represents God’s Power – the awesome Power of Almighty God. How powerful is God? He is Omnipotent – He is All-powerful. This is how He is depicted in Psalm 62:11 – “*Power belongs to God.*” Both in life and in death the sheep are protected by the Great Shepherd.

With his staff, the shepherd restrained the sheep from wandering, hooked their legs when necessary to pull them out of holes into which they had fallen. With it he pulled away branches and brambles, when the sheep got entangled in a thicket ... and with his staff, he beat the high grass to drive out any snakes that might be there. The primary purpose of the staff was to guide (*and when necessary*) to rescue the sheep.

The shepherd’s staff represents God’s grace. Have you ever been trapped? At some time in your life, were you caught in something from which you could not free yourself? But then God’s

Grace delivered you? Perhaps He reached into ‘one of life’s many thickets’ and pulled you out ‘the brambles’ to safety. Grace happens when God gives you what you don’t deserve. Grace happens when God is good when you are bad. Grace happens when God loves you when you don’t deserve to be loved.

Our Shepherd is Jesus. And it is human nature to want to see our protector – yet we cannot see Jesus physically while we are living in this world – But it doesn’t matter. The entire Eleventh Chapter of Hebrews tells us that faith is greater than sight. “***Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen***” – ***Hebrews 11:1***. David never saw the LORD, but the reality of their relationship was even greater than Peter’s when Peter was walking on the water with Jesus². Seeing Jesus physically didn’t help Peter at all – and when faith failed, Peter sank³. But in contrast to Peter, Daniel in the Den of Lions had faith in the LORD he could not see⁴. And the Shepherd stood side-by-side with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace⁵, and his Rod and his Staff protected them.

David wants you to know there will be emotional highs and there will be dark shadows ... danger. But even in the seasons of the darkest shadows...God in his love for you has a plan and a purpose for your time in the valley...God always is bigger than your need.

Verse 5 – “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”

Who or what is our enemy? Our enemy is anything that threatens our sustenance and security. Living in the 21st Century is a dangerous adventure! We might even say, ‘*Life itself is dangerous*’! Enemies abound – car accidents, plane crashes, hurricanes, tornadoes, terrorist attacks, suicide bombers, financial upheavals ... and the newest pandemic. It is dangerous to be alive – life can kill you ... or at the very least, bring about depression. David wants us to know that in this type of environment – in a time of danger – our Shepherd is with us to protect us.

It also is the responsibility of the Shepherd to feed the flock. But in none of the previous verses has the subject of feeding the sheep arisen. In verse 2, the Shepherd led the sheep to green pastures – but that was to rest in the grass – a metaphor for resting by faith in the Great Shepherd. But now it’s time to eat.

It is interesting that the table is prepared and set before David while he is still in the presence of his enemies – Apparently, he is still walking through the dark valley – No Scripture has told us that his trials and tribulations have ended – in fact, his enemies are still ‘*in his presence*.’

While still in deep darkness, David is (1) ***Comforted by the Shepherd***, (2) ***Protected by the Shepherd***, and (3) ***Fed a King’s Meal by the Shepherd***.

In the Bible, a banquet or feast is a symbol of fellowship and communion. David’s enemy is still present, but the enemy is not David’s problem – the Shepherd will deal with the enemy (***remember, he has a rod***) – Circumstances need not interrupt fellowship with the Shepherd.

“Thou anointest my head with oil.” In the time of David, this was part of the hospitality that was offered to guests of the home. The oil was fragrant and was a welcomed luxury after a long, dusty journey had come to an end – ***[When you have time, read Isaiah 61:1-3 to better understand this***

² See Matthew 14:22-33

³ See Matthew 14:30

⁴ See Daniel Chapter 6

⁵ See Daniel 3:19-30

tradition] I don't ever recall being anointed in this way as a guest, and I've never done it to a visitor in my home – the practice simply is not done today – So perhaps we should simply recall that in the New Testament, oil was symbolic of the Holy Spirit – *in fact, the word 'Christian,' in addition to associating us with Christ – means 'anointed ones.'*

"My cup runneth over." The Table is set, our heads are anointed, and our cups are overflowing. This is a picture of ***'blessings in excess'*** – And it is a picture of a mature relationship with Jesus Christ over a lifetime. It is not a picture of a life without difficulties, but a life well-lived, a life of blessings in excess. It also is a glimpse of heaven.

'My cup overflows' means I have more than enough. God knows how to give in abundance, and no matter what our situation may be – He provides for us right where we are ... now.

The Shepherd is a great giver of gifts. He lavishes his bounty upon us. Haddon Robinson once said: *"With him the calf is always the fatted calf, the robe is always the best robe, the joy is unspeakable, and the peace passes understanding. There is no grudging in God's goodness. He does not measure his goodness by drops like a druggist filling a prescription. It comes to us in floods ... (and) if only we recognized the lavish abundance of his gifts, what a difference it would make in our lives!"*

- For our sin, there is abounding grace – Romans 5:20-21.
- For our service and giving, there is abundant grace – 2 Corinthians 9:8.
- For our suffering and hardship, there is sufficient grace – 2 Corinthians 12:9.
- For our relationships and struggles, there is abounding hope – Romans 15:13.
- And for all the trials, tribulations and tests of faith (*even pandemics*) you face, there is abounding joy – 1 Peter 1:8.

Revelation 19:9 reads: ***"Then he said to me, blessed are those, who are invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb."*** Here the metaphoric roles are changed. In this context, Jesus Christ now is the lamb – but He is the sacrificial lamb, who has won victory over death – and He is hosting a feast for us in heaven. ***This is the reason even death can be a time of rejoicing.*** Fear is a thing of the past, and joyful fellowship with the Lamb of God, Jesus, our Great Shepherd, is our future. ***This is the Secret of a Happy Death*** ... because death is not our final destiny. We need not fear when we walk through that dark valley, for the Great Shepherd walks beside us, even when that valley ends in physical death.

"One thing is certain. When the final storm comes, and you are safe in your Father's house, you won't regret what he didn't give. You'll be stunned at what he did give you. (Traveling Light, by Max Lucado, page 138.)