

I Shall Not Want For Courage

Psalm 23:4

Pastor John Miller

We're going to do what we do each time, until we finish our series, and that is to read all of Psalm 23 together out loud.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

As we follow the Good Shepherd, we soon discover that all of our needs are met. The theme of the psalm is found in verse 1: "The Lord is my shepherd..."—and because the Lord is my shepherd—"...I shall not want," or Kenneth Taylor, in his paraphrase in the Living Bible, renders that, "I have everything that I need." I love that. "The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything that I need." And we have discovered the areas of need that the Lord meets. We've discovered that He provides us rest, verse 2—"He makes me to lie down in green pastures." We've discovered that He provides restoration, verse 3—"He restores my soul." And we've discovered that He provides me right or righteous paths to follow, verse 3—"He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake."

Now this is the transition we need to catch here. When I am in the green pastures, when I'm beside the still waters and when He's leading me in the righteous paths, sometimes those right paths—those righteous paths—lead into a deep, dark valley. It's just as much in the will of God in the green pastures and by the quiet streams as when I'm going through or passing through the valley of deepest darkness. I want you to notice it in verse 4. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil..."—why?—"...for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."

The phrase "the darkest valley" or "I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" is a Hebrew idiom for dark and difficult and bitter experiences of life. All things that make us afraid are included in that Hebrew idiom, "the valley of the shadow of death." David's not just talking about dying, which is typically how we view that statement, because it says "the valley of the shadow of death." But in the Hebrew the word "death" does not even appear there. The phrase in the Hebrew is "deepest, darkest valley." Does it include death? Yes. That's one of man's great enemies and one of our greatest fears. So it includes death, but it's not exclusive to death. It's talking about the deep, dark, difficult and dangerous and discouraging valleys that sometimes we find ourselves in. Even in the bitter experiences of life. When we pass through this time, we do not need to fear or be afraid.

Now I want you to picture the scene. The problem is that when the sheep are in the winter, cooler months down in the valleys, as springtime arrives and summer begins to come, the shepherd has to take the sheep through the canyons up into the higher altitudes where the grass is greener—you've heard the expression "the grass is greener"—and it's cooler. So in the hot, warm summer, the shepherd needs to lead the sheep through the canyons, up into the higher hills, to the green pastures.

So what's the problem? The problem is the sheep are timid and fearful. The natural path to get to the mountain tops or higher plateaus in the summer months goes through the canyons, and the canyons are dark, difficult and steep. Sometimes there are shadows that are being cast. Notice it's "the shadow of death." So we have to pass through these difficult times.

Sheep are not only defenseless and timid, but they lack good vision. They don't really see very well. The older I get, the harder it is for me to see. I was telling the doctor that I needed a longer arm so I could hold my reading out and see it better. He said, "You're getting old. You need glasses." I said, "Get behind me, Satan!" I'm kidding; I didn't say that to my doctor. Remember when you were about 40 and the doctor said you needed glasses and you're crying and freaking out? Heart trauma. That's a valley of deepest darkness. So sheep can't see very well, so they need to have the shepherd near them. They need to hear his voice. And there are all kinds of predators and dangerous creatures that hide in the canyons and in the rocks, and sometimes there's flash flooding and it's very scary and dangerous. The timid sheep need the presence of the shepherd to pass through these canyons. That's the imagery there; as the Lord is leading us along those righteous paths, and those righteous paths go through deep, dark valleys. But we don't need to be afraid, because the Lord is with us.

We, too, pass through dark valleys. They are just as much the will of God as the green pastures and the still waters. We love those earlier verses, you know: the green pastures, the still waters—the waters of rest. Oh, that's so awesome. We picture that in our minds. But now we're in a deep, dark valley, and it's scary and there are shadows and we're afraid.

The first question I want to ask about verse 4 is this: "Why does our Good Shepherd allow us to pass through the dark, difficult and dangerous valleys?" In other words, why does God allow sorrow? Why does God allow pain? Why does God allow suffering? Why do we have to go through the difficult, dark periods of our lives? The list could be quite lengthy, but I've reduced it to three categories.

Number one, God allows us to pass through the dark valleys to purify us. In Job 23:10, Job says, "He knows the way I am taking. When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold." You talk about having trials; in one day when Job woke up, he lost everything that he had. The only thing he had left was his wonderful, encouraging, supportive wife. She said, "Honey, why don't you just curse God and die." "Thank you, sweetheart. I needed that word of encouragement." Job was having a bad day; he was going through a deep, dark valley. But Job said, "The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." I love that statement of Job's. Job stayed faithful in trusting God through that deep, dark valley. And Job came out of that

deep, dark valley like gold refined in the fire.

Now here's the picture. It's used throughout the Bible. God puts us in the crucible of affliction, and He heats up the fires of trial and testing so that the impurities—the dross in our life—come to the surface. As a goldsmith would skim off the dross until he could look in the crucible and see a perfect reflection of his own face, knowing that the metal had now been purified, so too God wants to purify us of the dross of sin, selfishness and pride. There are so many things in our lives that God needs to purify: the dross of self and the flesh.

So God will allow us to be put in the crucible of affliction for the purpose of purifying us in order that we might come forth as gold. That goal is that we would be like Christ, like the master. The Lord wants others to see the reflection of Jesus Himself in our lives. So He allows the trials to purify us. Someone said,

When through fiery trials, your pathway shall lie,

My grace, all sufficient, shall be your supply.

The flame shall not hurt you; I only design

Your dross to consume and your gold to refine.

I love that. God's not going to hurt you; He'll never harm you. He's refining you.

The second reason God allows the valleys in our lives is to perfect us. So you might say, first, to purify us—some would say “to correct us,”—and secondly, to perfect us. In Romans 5:3, Paul says, “Tribulation works patience.” Have you ever prayed for patience? Don't do it. I'm kidding. The word “patience” means “steadfast endurance.” It's not just talking about a passiveness or a complacency. It's talking about a steadfast, strong endurance. The word was actually used when you were in a strong wind. You're walking on a windy day and you had to lean into the wind to make progress. Have you ever been walking against strong wind, and you're kind of leaning into it as you walk? That's what the word “patience” was used for. It means “steadfast endurance,” so even though the winds are blowing contrary, you're able to persevere, you're able to continue. So God wants to work in your life to purify you and, secondly, to develop patience or to perfect you and make you more like Jesus Christ. He purifies us and He perfects us. And when I say “perfect us,” I mean bring us to maturity.

Here's the third category, and that is to prepare us for service. So the valleys are allowed in our lives. The list could be a lot longer, and there are a lot of other reasons why God allows His people to suffer. Why do bad things happen to God's people? Here are three reasons: He wants to purify you, He wants to perfect you and He wants to prepare you for service.

I believe that the older I get and the longer I'm serving the Lord, the more convinced I am that God prepares us for what He calls us to do. I believe that all of life is preparation for sometimes just a few years of ministry. Do you know that your life is not just about you? Sometimes it's

about others and the effect your life can have on others and generations to come. But in my mind lately, I've been thinking that the older I get, I just pray that God has used me to be a blessing to my generation; that I can serve my generation, and then the Lord take me home if He tarries and then someone else God will raise up. I just want to be faithful. But I also want to be a blessing to my wife and my children and to my grandchildren. I believe God uses the valleys—the difficulties and the hardship—to prepare us for service.

Now David, who wrote this psalm, actually knew what it was like to go through deep, dark valleys. Remember when he had to hide in the caves from King Saul? God had called him to be king, but he didn't see any evidence of that. He was sitting in a cave. He's running and hiding with his mighty men. Then it reaches its culmination when they are living in the city of Ziklag. David and his mighty men are hiding from King Saul. They go off on one of their raids, and when they come back, the whole city is burned to the ground, and all their wives and all their kids and all their things are gone. That would be like coming home from work and your house is burned down, and someone kidnapped your wife and your kids.

So David began to grieve and weep, and the Bible says he wept with his men until there was no more strength in them. And to make matters worse, David's own men turned against him, and they blamed him for the problem they were in. They wanted to stone David to death. But there's a really amazing statement made at this point—this low, dark, discouraging time in David's life. The Bible says, "And David encouraged himself in the Lord his God." David turned in the midst of the darkness, and he remembered God's promises. "Never doubt in the dark what God has spoken in the light." He remembered God's presence, and he began to experience God's peace. He gained new direction for his life. So they suited up and they went out and they overcame and they conquered. They got their wives and their children back.

It's interesting because from that chapter to the very next chapter in the life of David, he is being called back to Jerusalem. King Saul has died, and David is being called back to be the king of Israel. Have you ever heard the expression, "It's always darkest before the dawn"? That's often true. David is at his complete lowest. His men were going to stone him to death, but he turned to the Lord. "He encouraged himself in the Lord his God." How would the story have ended if David hadn't done that? I would have said, "And David was stoned by his own men in Ziklag, and he would lie under a pile of stones." Instead the story changed, because David said that he turned to the Lord, and trusted in the Lord and he "encouraged himself in the Lord his God." So it is often darkest just before the dawn.

I believe that God is preparing us for ministry. Moses was 80 when God called him to his public ministry. All of his life was preparation for that one time when God would call him to release the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. I believe that God allows this. 2 Corinthians 1 says that He allows us to go through sorrow, suffering and pain and hardship so that we can become compassionate and sympathetic and minister to others.

What I do quite often when someone comes to me and says, "I was just diagnosed with cancer," is I'll find someone in the church who has gone through something similar. "You see that

person over there?—that guy in that red shirt?—talk to him. You go tell him I sent you to him.” Because they’ve been through the same thing. Someone comes up to me and says, “We’re really struggling in our marriage,” and I say, “You see that couple over there by that door?” I tell them their names. “You go talk to them. They’ve gone through the same marital problems you have, and God has helped them and God has strengthened them.” “Oh, I’m out of work. I just lost my job.” “You see that man over there? He’s been out of work, and God’s provided for him. I want you to go talk to him.”

Do you know that God’s actually equipping you and preparing you to be used? You go, “I don’t want to be used. I just want to be comfortable. Don’t send anybody to me, Pastor. Please.” We used to sing years ago Make me a blessing. Out of my life may Jesus shine. You know, if God’s going to use you, God’s going to first break you, because He’s preparing you to be used by Him. So don’t despise those times when God is breaking you and making you; He’s preparing you. And I believe that many times those deep, dark valleys are simply preparation for ministry He’s calling us to.

So when you’re in a deep, dark and difficult valley, you can say with David, “For I will fear no evil.” I want you to note what he says there. He doesn’t say, “I will feel no evil.” He says, “I will fear no evil.” He doesn’t say, “I will experience no evil.” We do go through difficulties and hardships. But even though we do, we will not fear or be afraid.

The second question we need to ask is: “Why is it that David said he would ‘fear no evil’? Why is it that I can go through these deep, dark valleys and not be afraid?” Let me give the reasons to you from the text. First of all, we have His presence. I want you to notice it in verse 4. “How is it you can say, David, ‘I will fear no evil’?” The answer is in verse 4: “For thou art with me.” “You are with me.”

David is now talking to the Lord, not about the Lord. There is a little distinction here I want you to see; you shouldn’t miss it. Notice it in verse 2: “He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters.” Verse 3, “He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness.” So he’s talking in the personal pronoun there in the third person; “He” “He” “He.” But now that he’s in a deep, dark valley, it’s “You” “You” “You.” So this is what happens in the psalm: he goes from talking about the Lord to talking to the Lord. He begins to actually talk to the Lord. You can talk about Jesus when you’re by the quiet streams and you’re feeding in the green pastures, but when you’re in the deep, dark valleys, you start talking to Jesus.

Years ago I was kidnapped at gunpoint in Los Angeles. Every time I go to L.A., I say, “Let’s go, but don’t get kidnapped.” I was actually kidnapped at gunpoint and held hostage for several hours, had a gun to my head and thankfully the Lord protected us—I was with three other pastors—and He kept us. But I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to be shot and carjacked. They did let us out of the car and took our car. They took our car and drove off, but they threatened to kill us. So I know what it’s like. My prayer life just took on a whole new dimension. I had never prayed so earnestly, so sincerely, so fervently, so heartfelt as in that moment. “Oh, God!!”

Not too many years ago I experienced a stroke, and I was put in the hospital in ICU. I literally didn't know if I'd ever preach again. I didn't know what my condition would be or what the outcome of that situation would be. I was on my back. I would say that was one of the most—if not the most—humbling times in my life. To have a chaplain come in to encourage me; it's just so humbling. But it really revived my prayer life. I began to talk to the Good Shepherd like I'd never talked to Him before. And it's in those deep, dark valleys, in those moments, that we encounter Him and experience Him. We have His presence. It was John Bunyan, the man who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* from a prison in Bedford, England, who wrote, "In times of affliction we most commonly meet with the sweetest experiences of the love of God." The Lord is with us. We need to fix our eyes on Him.

It's interesting in verse 3 that He goes before us: "He leads me." But in verse 4, He's beside me. And it's interesting that David didn't say, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for I have a Visa card." "I have a Master card." "I have a large nest egg; I will fear no evil." "I have friends in high places." "I have parents who will loan me the money." He didn't say that. He says, "It's the Lord Who is with me." And he knew that the Lord being with him was all that he needed. "The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything I need." You know what you need when you're going through a deep, dark valley? You need the presence of the Lord.

Us older people whose kids are older and grown—don't you miss having your kids little when you got to hold their hands? Don't you love the feeling of a little hand in yours, and you're holding their little hand? Well, grandkids. All the grandparents go, "Praise the Lord!" The other day I was just holding my granddaughter's hand in a crowd, and that was the best thing I had ever done. "Aww!" It felt so good just to hold her hand and to have her close to me to know that she was safe.

You know, that's the same thing when we go through the deep, dark valleys; we just need to be able to reach out. He's not leading me. He's beside me. And I need to reach up and hold His hand, and I need to hear His voice and I need to sense His presence, because it's dark, and it's scary and there are shadows, and I'm worried, and I don't know what the future holds.

So the Lord allows us to go through those times, but we know that, first, He gives us His presence and, secondly, He give us His protection. Notice it in verse 4: "Your rod and Your staff they comfort me." What are the rod and the staff? The rod was basically a club. Sometimes they would use a root ball, and they would sand it down and smooth it down. It would be a heavy stick of wood with a root ball at the end of it. The shepherd could use it as a club. The shepherd didn't use the rod on the sheep. Sometimes we get the idea that He takes us into the deep, dark valley to beat us up. "Yea, though I walk through the valley, Thou clubest me there." No. The rod wasn't for the sheep; it was for the enemy of the sheep. It was for the predators. It was for the animals who would come to harm the sheep. And it brought comfort to the sheep to see that protecting rod. The staff was the shepherd's crook. He would use that to catch the sheep and to bring them back onto the path. And when he would bring them into the fold at night, they would pass under his crook, and he would count them. So it brought them great

comfort.

The Lord is not only with us, but He will also keep us. He's not only with you; He's protecting you and keeping you. In Isaiah 43:1-2, the prophet Isaiah says, "But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, 'O Jacob and He that formed thee, O Israel, fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by thy name. Thou art mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee. And when you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon you.'" Now I know that Isaiah is prophesying about Israel, but I do believe that it applies perfectly to us, the church. We, the believers, have the Lord to protect us. He said, "I'll never leave you nor forsake you." He surrounds us with His care.

Number three, we need not fear because we have His provision. And I'll only touch on this because it's our text for next time. But notice it in verse 5: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. You anoint my head with oil. And my cup runs over." That's awesome! So "Lord, Your presence, Your protection and Your provision. God, You're providing for me. You're filling my cup to overflowing."

Jesus said in Matthew 6:25, "Don't worry. Don't be anxious." In verse 26 He said, "Consider the birds of the air. They don't toil. They don't gather into barns. They don't labor. But your Father in heaven feeds them." Have you ever been to In-N-Out? Seen those French fries laying around? That's divine providence for the birds. You mark my words; you check out those birds at those fast-food places. They are fat. A big, old, honkin' French fry they're carrying around. Take it home; they could live a month on one of those suckers. I have to buy them; they get them for free. It kind of bums me out. God provides for the birds.

God also provides for flowers. Jesus said, "Not only check out the birds, but check out the flowers. They don't toil. They don't spin. Yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these lilies." Have you seen the flowers along the freeways and roadsides? How beautiful they are right now? Remind yourself when you drive by those flowers that God clothes those flowers, so God will take care of you, "O yea, of little faith." Someone put it in a little poem:

Said the robin to the sparrow,

"I should really like to know,

Why these anxious human beings

Rush about and worry so."

Said the sparrow to the robin,

"Friend, I think that it must be,

That they have no heavenly Father,

Such as cares for you and me.”

The truth is that we do have a Father in heaven, and He does promise to take care of us and provide for us, so we don't need to be afraid or fear; God's provision is here.

And fourthly and lastly, in verse 6, we have His promise. He says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” And we'll see when we get to verse six in a few weeks, that He abandons all the metaphors and the imagery—He's not a shepherd, He's not a host—it's just “goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” That is the promise of heaven. God has promised not only to be with you, not only to protect you, not only to provide for you, but He has promised to take you to heaven when you die. That's good news; all this and heaven too.

Jesus said it like this in John 14:1: “Let not your heart be troubled.” Don't let it be afraid. He said, “You believe in God; believe also in Me.” And then He used this expression: “In My Father's house...”—referring to heaven—“...are many mansions...”—or “abiding places”—“... and if it weren't true, I wouldn't have told you. I go to prepare this place for you....I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” What a blessing to know that God will take me to heaven when I die.

Do you have that assurance? Do you know for sure that when you die, you're going to go to heaven? If you trusted the Lord as your shepherd, you “put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee”—you are trusting Jesus Christ—you can know for sure that when you die, you will spend eternity in heaven. Your valley of deep darkness need not bring fear.

There is one last point I want to make, and that is that the deepest, darkest valley that we all have to pass through is death. When the King James translation says, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” I believe it's fine, because death is included. And it scares us; the thought about getting old and dying. What happens when I die? It is one of man's greatest fears. It is man's greatest enemy.

The Bible teaches in Hebrews 9:27 that “It is appointed unto every person once to die.” You know, you can't escape death. Another Scripture says, “What man is he who lives and who shall not see death? Who is he who can save his soul from the hand of the grave?” Good question. We're all going to die. Given enough time, most of us in this room right now are going to be gone. Are you ready to die? Are you ready to meet your maker? Are you ready to go into eternity? You know, you don't stop living when you die; you still exist. You either go to heaven or you go to hell. It depends upon where your faith and trust has been in this life.

The Bible also tells us that life is short. There are two things that are certain: the brevity of life and the certainty of death. The Bible says that “life is like a vapor of smoke that appears for a time and then vanishes away.” It's like a flower that springs up fresh in the morning and then is withered with the noonday heat.

But if you are afraid to die, I have Good News for you. Jesus Christ the Lord, Who is our shepherd, has conquered death. He has taken the sting out of death. You need not fear death. In 2 Timothy 1:10 it says, "Jesus Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel."

You say, "Well, Pastor John, how did Jesus do that?" He did that by dying for you on the Cross. God, the Son, came from heaven and was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and He lived a sinless life for 33 years. He spoke like no one ever spoke. He healed the blind, raised the dead, cleansed the leper, walked on water, calmed the storms. Then He went to a rugged cross that hung on a hill called Calvary, and He laid down willingly because He loves you and me. He died for us, gave His life willingly, voluntarily as a substitute on the Cross for our sins. The death of Jesus Christ was a substitute; He took your place and He died in your stead. Then He was buried, and three days later He rose again. "Up from the grave He arose." Jesus died for our sins, but He arose for our salvation so that we could be free. And He ascended back to heaven. He lives right now, and He is waiting for you to turn to Him and to trust Him for salvation.

Salvation isn't obtained by being good, going to church, getting baptized or changing the way you live. Stop doing bad things and God will let you into heaven. No. The Bible says, "By grace we are saved, through faith, but not of ourselves." The Bible says that salvation is "a gift from God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." When you stand before God on judgment day, you can't say, "Well, you should let me in because I went to Revival Christian Fellowship, and I endured John Miller's sermons. Anybody who'd listen to that boring preacher otta be let into heaven!" That's not gonna do it. But if you say, "I trusted Jesus Christ. I reached out and took His hand. I put my faith in Him. I believed in Him," then yes. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall never perish but have eternal life." You don't need to be afraid.

God wants to give you a gift today. You can be able today to say, with David, "I will dwell in God's house forever." If you're here today and you say, "Pastor Miller, I don't know if I'm saved. I don't know if I'm born again. I don't know if I'm truly a child of God." If there is any doubt at all about where you will spend eternity—do you know that when you die you'll go to heaven? Do you know that when you die you'll have eternal life? I believe you can have it right now as a gift from God if you'll open your heart and receive Christ as Savior. I'm going to give you an opportunity to do that right now. I don't want anyone to leave this service without being given an opportunity to trust Jesus. And all your fear of death can be gone, and you can have the hope of eternal life. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life, and if anyone lives and believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." So if you've never trusted Jesus, right now you need to receive Him as your Savior, as your Lord, and He'll forgive your sins and He will give you the hope of heaven when you die.

Let's bow our heads in a word of prayer.