

Our Source of Certainty in Uncertain Times (Part 4): The Lord Protects Us

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[0 : 00] Where have you most often heard the 23rd Psalm read publicly? Funerals, right? That's where I have most often heard it.

That's where I've most often read it publicly myself as a pastor. I've read the 23rd Psalm at funerals far more than any other passage of Scripture.

And there's two main reasons. I think it's probably the most comforting chapter in all the Bible. Plus, it's probably the most well-known chapter in all the Bible.

I think it can be comforting at a graveside, at a funeral service. But we all know when the funeral's over and people go back home, the grief process does not end.

In fact, a lot of times that's when it really gets started in earnest, isn't it? Well, I think taking the 23rd Psalm home with you can be a real comfort if you're a Christian and your loved one who just died was a Christian.

[1 : 11] Verse 4 is especially comforting during a time of grief, isn't it? Look at it. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Psalm 23 is about as appropriate a passage of Scripture to help people during a time of death and grieving as anything you'll find in the Bible.

That's really not why David wrote it. When David sat down and penned these words, he was describing how God is our faithful shepherd who always guides and protects, takes care of us who are his sheep.

And he does it in good times. He makes the good times better. He does it in the hard times.

Sometimes the way he works is just to help us to get through it.

In all likelihood, as David was writing and he got to this, what we call verse 4, the thought of death was not in his mind.

Chuck Swindoll points out that the phrase, the valley of the shadow of death, is more literally translated, the valley of deep darkness. Several translations call it the darkest valley.

[2 : 39] The New International Version is a good example. Look at it. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. David is describing how God protects us as we go through any kind of dark valley experience in our lives.

Now certainly, a lot of times death is one of those dark valleys. And when you go through that difficult time when a close family member or friend dies, look to the Lord for comfort.

To give you what you need for that day, for the next week, to just be able to move on.

Sometimes the death of a loved one, it changes us. We never go back to life the way it was, but we must go on to the way life now is.

So the Lord can help us, comfort us in a time of death, using this psalm and the promises here. But I think the Lord also uses it as we face death.

[3 : 57] Most people have at least a clue that death is somewhat close. By that, what I mean is, most people don't die unexpectedly.

Most people, they either have some kind of, you know, illness that's leading toward death, or they're getting to the age where their health is just declining in general, and they know you don't live forever.

As we anticipate death, we need to just accept it, talk about it, prepare for it as best we can as Christians.

As Christians, death is not something to get excited about, be giddy about. I'm not talking about that. But death as Christians, it should not be something that we are afraid of, refuse to talk about,

and seriously prepare for.

If we're Christians, we know that the Lord Jesus has died, been buried, but arose. He's the first. He's our example in that sense.

[5 : 20] He, in John 14, talks about going to prepare a place for us. So as Christians, death's coming. We need to think about it.

We need to pray about it. We need to talk to our family members about it and let them know that we are ready. We're prepared if we are, or get prepared if we're not.

But most dark valley experiences that we experience, we go through, has nothing to do with death. Right now, in this room, among us, some of us are going through a dark valley experience, such as a health issue.

Yours, or maybe someone who you love, you're close to. Some dark valley experiences are very private and personal, and we don't talk about.

Some people battle through times of darkness in their life all alone, and that's not really healthy. Sometimes, the best way is to at least share it with some people that we're close to, we know, love us, care about us, will support us, pray for us, something like that.

[6 : 41] Some of the dark valley experiences that we go through, some of you may be going through right now. It's a relational valley. It's not a good time for you right now.

And then there's probably people in this room who are going through what you would call a spiritually dark valley. You're not close to God.

He seems very distant. Or you're just very distracted. You're having a hard time to really focus on talking to Him in prayer, listening to His Word.

There may be some people in this room, the truth is, your relationship with God is non-existent. And it's bothering you. Everyone goes through dark valley experiences at times.

And what I want us to do today is zero in on verse 4. And see how we can count on God to lead us and protect us all the way through the dark valley.

[7 : 47] Let's go ahead and read Psalm 23. Let's start from the beginning. And we're going to focus on verse 4. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. 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.

The first thing I want us to notice, the first part of verse 4. The Lord protects us as we go through dark valleys by His presence. By His being with us.

Look at it. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me. That is probably the main point of verse 4.

[8 : 46] Let's think about this. The Lord sometimes leads us into the dark valleys. We don't stumble into them. We don't run to them on our own. The Lord sometimes actually leads us into the dark valleys.

Commentators describe how shepherds had to routinely move sheep from one place to another. And it makes sense. You can't, especially with sheep, you can ruin a field, ruin a pasture.

Eat it too close to the ground. And so shepherds in David's day, sometimes they would have to move sheep through valleys, surrounded by mountains, that limited or basically eliminated a lot of light.

And made it a literal dark valley that they traveled through to get from one pasture to another. Last week we looked at how the Lord leads us in paths of righteousness or right paths.

In verse 3. What I want us today is to think about sometimes as the Lord leads us through the right paths, it goes through a dark valley.

[9 : 59] Look at the two verses together. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. And then the very next verse. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me.

You're the shepherd. You're with me. You are leading me. And we know that God works in the life of all of us who are His children to make us more like Jesus.

God works in us to cause us to develop Christ-like character in all that we do. Well, God knows what we need, when we need it, for that to happen.

For an example, sometimes we need a place of rest, a place of, a time of peace.

And so verse 2, talking about the green pastures, the quiet waters, God provides that. That's what David's talking about. Sometimes we need to be restored because we've sinned or we're just all stressed out.

[11:02] Verse 3, He restores our soul. But there are times when we need to go through the dark valley. And James Boas explains why. Look at this. It is in the valleys with their trials and dangers that we develop character.

When do you grow the most spiritually? When do you draw closer to God? When all is great? When you're just relaxing in the green pastures? Or when life is difficult?

You're in a dark valley. Sometimes God has to put us on our back in the dark places to cause us to look up and seek Him, doesn't He?

Remember what we saw last week? Why God does everything He does? For His name's sake and what that means. God always works for His glory and our good.

Both. And that includes when He leads us through the dark valley. If you're in a dark valley right now, understand.

[12:08] God is at work for His glory. But even in a terrible situation, God is also at work for your good. That does not mean that the situation's good, but that God is working for good.

The Lord leads us into the valleys, but He never leaves us there. Look at this. The Lord leads us through dark valleys. That's literally what the verse says. Even though I'll walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

The Lord always leads us through a dark valley to a better place. The Lord leads us through a dark valley, just like the shepherd led the sheep through narrow passes, dark valleys where there were predators, wolves that could easily get them, more easily get them.

To get them to a better place, a better pasture, a new pasture. Think about this. Your dark valley, whatever it might be, it's not final.

It's not your final destination. It's not where you're going to be forever. Now sometimes we stay in the dark valley longer than we want to.

[13:19] You may be going through a time of you're just really down, discouraged, depressed. It's been going on for a while and you're tired of it.

It's lasting longer than you want it to. Or there's a relationship in your life that's just strained, maybe even ripped apart. And you're thinking to yourself, is it ever going to get better?

Sometimes our lives are changed when we go through the dark valley. Sometimes we go through a dark valley and it is such a traumatic experience that we are never the same.

We come out of it, but we're different. We think differently. We just look at life differently. Sooner or later, God will lead us through the valley and to a better place.

It may be that the Lord will deliver you through, out of your valley soon. Pray that He will.

[14:30] Maybe He'll heal you or your family member. Maybe He'll bring healing to that relationship. Maybe the dark cloud that you're living in emotionally, He'll lift it.

You'll see the blue sky soon. I don't know and you don't know. All we can do is be faithful and follow the Lord as He leads us through the dark valley.

Here's something we have to accept. It may be that the Lord, the only way He's going to get you through that dark valley, deliver you from it, is to take you to heaven.

That is a painful reality. Life does not always turn out like we want to. Blue skies sometimes just don't appear for some people.

I believe the Lord led both my parents and Lisa's mother through the dark valley of dementia into heaven where He restored their minds to a higher level of knowing and experiencing life than they had ever known.

[15:50] I really believe that. And those of you who are experiencing that or have a family member, dementia, Alzheimer's, it's one of the darkest, hellish valleys anybody can go through on earth.

And the only way through and out of that valley is death. And in those kind of situations, death is a blessing. Death is an enemy.

It's never been, wasn't a part of God's original plan. But death sometimes, for a Christian, becomes our friend. It's the way out of the valley.

It's the way that the Lord Himself delivers us. And we need to understand that and accept that. The Lord leads us through our dark valleys.

But best of all, the Lord stays close to us throughout the time we are in the dark valley. Note the reason why David's not afraid as he goes through the dark valley.

[16:55] He says, I will fear no evil for you are with me. He says, I will fear no evil for you are with me. He says, I will fear no evil for you are with me. He says, I will fear no evil for you. He says, I will fear no evil for you.

He says, I will fear no evil for you. He says, I will fear no evil for you. Being close to him. Think about it. David felt the Lord's closeness so powerfully. As he went through this dark valley, or he describes going through a dark valley, that he starts talking to God in verse 4.

Whereas up to this point, he's just been talking about God. In the first three verses of Psalm 23, David talks about his relationship with God. The Lord is my shepherd.

He makes me lie down. He leads me. He restores me. But when you get to verses 4 and 5, he's talking to God. Look at this. You are with me.

No, he. You are with me. Your rod and staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. In this week's newsletter, I pointed this out and quoted John Piper's explanation of why David and we do things like start talking to God.

[18:14] Look at what Piper says. I think the switch to the more intimate you, precisely when he enters the valley of the shadow of death, is a universal experience among God's people.

The crises of life draw us closer to God. We are more prone to talk about God when we're in green pastures. And more prone to cry out to God when we enter some fearful ravine.

If you're going through a dark valley right now, rest assured that the Lord is leading you. Look to him.

Trust him to lead you through it. But I want to encourage you to draw close to him right now by talking to him. Pray.

Ask him for whatever it is you need right now. If it's patience, ask him for it. If it's faith to trust him, ask him for it.

[19:13] If it's some kind of physical or emotional strength you just need for this time, for this day, ask him for it. We don't ever want to get to the place where we have not, as James says, we looked at last week, we have not simply because we just don't ask.

Ask God. Jesus assures us that he's always with us. And think about this. Jesus is God in the flesh. Jesus was asked, show us the Father.

Jesus said, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father. Well, Jesus promises. One of the last things he said to his disciples before he descended back into heaven. I am with you always to the end of the age.

No matter what, I am with you. And he is with us through his Holy Spirit. Paul found that the Lord is not only with us, but supplies what we need when we need it.

We've looked at this in some of the previous studies. Philippians 4.19. He wrote this just after he'd been talking about he had learned to be content when he had plenty and when he was in need.

[20:24] And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. It does not say that God will supply everything that we want.

And it does not mean that he will supply everything that we think we need. We've been talking about this throughout this series. God determines what we need. And he always supplies what he determines that we need.

That was Paul's experience. If you're going through a dark valley right now, when I'm going through a dark valley, I ask God for what I want.

I ask God for what I think I need. Sometimes God gives us what we want. Sometimes he supplies what we think we need because what we think we need, we do need.

But I don't ever want to not get something because I didn't trust God and ask him to give it. James is very clear. Chapter 4.

[21:32] You have not because you ask not. Or you ask and have wrong motives. Don't hesitate to cry out to God.

Talk to him personally as you go through the dark valley. Just like David gives us the example here. You know, when I like to talk to people, I like to talk about theology.

I like to discuss biblical things. I like to talk about the sovereignty of God. About God being all powerful and things like that. But when I go through a dark valley, I don't think about God's sovereignty.

I say, Lord, help me. I truly believe he is in control. But I don't just think about he's in control. Lord, help me.

Give me patience. Give me wisdom. Help me keep my mouth closed. Help me just know what to say. Help me. Lord, you please make it personal.

[22 : 38] The Lord protects us as we go through dark valleys by his presence. He leads us. He stays close by us. But David goes on to give us more comfort. The Lord protects us as we go through dark valleys by his power.

Here he talks about your rod and your staff. They comfort me. The Lord exercises his power. A lot of times in tangible ways to protect us.

I want us to look at, break this down like this. You can do it different ways. Here's the way I want to do it. The Lord protects us from our enemies. That was the purpose of the shepherd's rod.

And I think Chuck Swindoll explains this very, very well. So I want to use his explanation of the rod and staff. Look at this. He says, The shepherd's rod was a symbol of his power.

Actually, it was an oak club about two feet in length. It was used to defend the flock against wild beasts. The head of this rod was round, usually whittled from the knot of a tree, in which the shepherd had pounded sharp bits of metal.

[23 : 46] This heavy club could easily kill a lion or bear, threatening the safety of the sheep. Now, you think, I don't know about that.

David did it. We're going to look at a passage of Scripture where David explained how he took care of his father's sheep. He was a shepherd. He killed a lion and a bear. What he was doing, he was trying to prove to King Saul, I can fight Goliath.

I can defeat Goliath because by the grace of God, I have killed bears or at least a bear and lion. This is in 1 Samuel 17. In verse 34, But David said to Saul, Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep.

When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it, and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it, and killed it.

[24 : 55] Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear. This uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them because he has defied the armies of the living God.

The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine. David, maybe it was something miraculous.

Maybe it was more common in that day. But David was of such a physical stature, ability, that he could take that rod with metal bits in the end of it, and he could kill a lion or a bear that was trying to take sheep from his flock.

The Bible describes the use of weapons as legitimate tools for protection against enemies.

You know, if today's liberals had been active in David's day, they'd have protested him using that rod. They'd have said that the bear and the lion, they need that sheep.

[26 : 13] You're wrong to kill that lion and that bear. Wouldn't they? They do that today. I want you to see in this, the Bible describes the use of weapons as legitimate tools for protecting yourself and your stuff against enemies that try to hurt you and take your stuff.

We need to be real careful. A weapon that's powerful enough to kill a lion or a bear or a person must always be treated very, very carefully and cautiously.

That's a given. But weapons can be a source of both protection and comfort.

They are in the Bible. Even Peter and a few of the other disciples carried swords throughout the three-year ministry of Jesus. Jesus never made them lay them down.

They were armed. They were armed for protection. Peter, he used his sword in a way he shouldn't have. When Jesus was arrested, he cut off someone's ear who was trying to, who was there in the mob.

[27 : 45] Jesus told him, put it away. It's not time or place. But he had it. It was something that he was allowed by the Lord himself to carry.

The Lord protects us from our enemies. But that's not all. The Lord protects us from ourselves. One of the purposes of the shepherd's staff was to protect and rescue sheep. Swindoll points this out.

The shepherd's staff was his crook which was bent or hooked at one end. It provided the shepherd with an instrument for prying a sheep loose from a thicket, pushing branches aside along the narrow path and pulling wandering sheep out of holes into which they had fallen.

Like the rod, the staff was a symbol of the shepherd's power and strength. Sometimes we're our own worst enemies, aren't we? That's why we need the Lord to rescue us sometimes.

We need the Lord to rescue us when we wander away or rebel. We need the Lord to rescue us when we get stuck in situations we can't get out of on our own.

[28 : 50] But I want you to note the way David describes the effect of the Lord's power on us. the Lord exercises his power to comfort us.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort us. No one is exempt from going through dark valleys that are scary. That can make us just be all stressed out.

No one gets exempt from going through dark valleys that are truly dangerous. but as God's people we must trust him that he goes with us through that dark valley.

We can count on him to never leave us nor forsake us. The Lord will protect us and the Lord will comfort us. Alexander McLaren was a well-known pastor and writer in the late 1800s and early 1900s in England.

Well respected. Well, he tells a story about when he took his first job at the age of 16. The job was in Glasgow, Scotland, the city which was six miles from his home out in the country.

[30 : 18] Taking this job required him to go to Glasgow and live with the family that was going to employ him during the week. On the first Monday of his job he says his father walked with him to work.

When they arrived the father said, Alec, I want you to come home Saturday night as soon as you get off work. Well, McLaren says that he was immediately struck with fear when he heard his dad say that because there was a deep ravine between the city and his home out in the country.

And all his life he had heard stories about how it was haunted and that many people who had gone through it at night were never seen again. He said, I was afraid to go through it anytime.

I could not imagine walking through it alone at night. So he said to his father, you know, I'm going to be working all week. I'm going to be worn out when Saturday night comes.

I'm just going to stay on Saturday night and I'll be there at home first thing Sunday morning. But his father insisted, said, son, you've never been away from home before. These five days between now and Saturday are going to seem like a year to me.

[31 : 43] I really want you to come on home Saturday night because I'm going to miss you. And McLaren said when he heard his dad say it that way, he just said, okay, I'll be home.

He said all week as he worked that week, he was worried. All he could think about when Saturday night comes, I've got to walk home alone through that dark ravine.

Well, Saturday night came and he took off. He started out for home. But when he got to that ravine, he stopped. And he just looked and the road went down, black pitch, dark.

And he said, I just froze. I could not make myself go into that ravine.

And then his worst fear happened. He heard a sound coming from the darkness. And as he turned to run, all of a sudden, he heard a familiar voice.

[32 : 52] Alec. It was his dad. His dad had come to meet him and bring him home, walk with him home.

McLaren said, when we walked together through that dark ravine, I wasn't afraid of anything that walked, all because my father was with me.

When we go through life's dark experiences, we need to learn to look to our heavenly father for that kind of comfort.

comfort. And we need to understand that our greatest source of comfort is not a weapon, but it's a person, our heavenly father.

But I want to encourage you, don't wait until you're in the middle of a dark valley to draw close to him. Come to him now if you're not already close.

[33 : 52] I mean, if you are away from God, spiritually speaking, there's just no closeness, no real fellowship with him for whatever reason. Talk to God about it.

I mean, if it's just your hard heartedness, your sin, confess it and repent of it. It could be that your life is just so busy that you've just sort of drifted away.

Come back to him. Confess that. If you don't know God is your father because you don't have a relationship with Jesus as your Lord and Savior, admit that.

Call upon Jesus to save you now this morning. Don't wait until you're in the middle of a dark valley, afraid, not knowing which way to go to come to him.

The best way for all of us to live in this world and be prepared for the dark valleys is to stay close to him. And the best way to stay close to God is to talk to him on a regular basis.

[35 : 01] Pray. Just talk to him. Listen to him by opening the Bible and reading it. That's God's word. That's God speaking through the written pages and his spirit.

We are living in a tough world. A sinfully dark world. And even in the best homes, communities, even in the best personal life, we all have dark valleys.

But the message of this psalm is, this particular verse is, the Lord always leads us. He'll always lead us through us one way or the other. And the way to do it without fear is to be close to him.

Make sure that when you walk out that door this morning, you're walking close with the Lord. He'll make the good times even better.

And he'll get you through the dark times. Let's pray. Let's pray.