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The Necessity of the Valley

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Michael Staton | November 26, 2024

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. —Psalm 23:4

Stormy weather is a reality of life. This is especially true in my home state of Oklahoma, or

"Tornado Alley," as it is affectionately called. Even our NBA team is the Oklahoma City Thunder! Many of us live in states with volatile weather and recognize the signs of a coming storm. If you spend any time in Oklahoma, you may recognize that when conditions are favorable for a tornado, the actual colors of nature take on a different look. There is a warning in nature of things to come. But then again, there are other days when a storm strikes with no such warning. Blue skies and bright sunshine can instantly give way to darkness, heavy winds, and rain.

Our God does not forsake us, even in the storms of life. In times of turbulence and uncertainty, we can look to Scripture for guidance, comfort, and practical instruction to keep us near to our Shepherd, our fortress in the storm. Our Lord is faithful.

Many of us can recite the 23rd Psalm and perhaps, in its familiarity, have become desensitized to its incredible truths. Yet, when we read it with fresh eyes, we become more aware of the comfort and, at times, the warnings it provides. The fourth verse of Psalm 23 is unique because of the sudden and tangible change of mood we see in the first few phrases. Like an abrupt spring storm, the first three verses of comfort and hope quickly give way to darkness, uncertainty, and danger.

I wonder if this resonates with you as it does for me. Church life can be unpredictable. We are imperfect leaders guiding imperfect people as best we can. But sometimes, the valley appears as if from nowhere, and suddenly, our task becomes more difficult. This is the purpose of the written Word. Our ultimate Guide and Shepherd longs to give us the resources necessary to fulfill what He has called us to do as we care for His people. Through the faithful pen of David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Lord warns us that there is not always going to be happiness and ease in our journey, but He also gives us hope in His faithful example that we might, in turn, lead others through even the deepest of valleys.

Even though I walk through the valley...

David understood the reality of the valley in more ways than one. While it is true that he was

an actual shepherd leading a flock through valleys in search of water and places to graze in his youth, the valley had a personal meaning to him as it likely does to you and me. We all know that in adulthood, David was pursued by the shadows of his own making. When he wrote of valleys, he knew the reality of the evils of this world, the pain and needs of others, and the imperfections of his own heart.

David knew from experience that the valley provided ample water and nourishment for the sheep but also presented unique dangers. Since the valley was a good source of food, many animals were drawn to it, some of which were predators that could threaten and injure the sheep. Also, storms could fire up quickly and unexpectedly in the lowlands, bringing floods and poor visibility. The valley was a necessary stop on a shepherd's route, but it was not always easy.

None of us will get through this life without valley moments. Yet, wouldn't you agree that these are the times when spiritual growth is the most evident? We must be careful to lead faithfully through these unexpected and unwanted seasons.

Even though it seems this world thrives on drama, most people prefer a life of peace by still waters, certainly not drowning in a flood. Regardless of what we want, time spent in the valley has its benefits if we are honest. These heart-breaking seasons tend to be when we pray the most fervently. The challenges of life cause us to run to our Father.

Though often painful, time spent in the valley proves to be a valuable tool in the hand of our loving Shepherd.

So, no, it is never our preference, but we learn so much about caring for the flock and what

God desires of us in those times of uncertainty. Sometimes, we discover our people are hurting simply because we live in a fallen world. Other times, we gently guide those entrusted to us through a mess of their own making, calling for repentance and welcoming them back into the fold. We likely pray more fervently for others in the harrowing days than we would otherwise.

These times grow us, too. The valley forces our response. We are reminded in these times of walking with others through their pain that our hope in life and death is God alone. Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, gives these words of encouragement, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Notice the verb in this portion of Psalm 23:4 is *walk*. When the days of trouble come, it is not the time to lie down, give up, retreat, or faint. We encourage others to walk. We keep walking alongside them. Practically speaking, we remain fervent in prayer, faithful in our times together as God's people, and hungry for the Word. In the moments when life seems the most difficult, we lead others to the Shepherd. It is not the time to become weary in ministry. Keep walking! He is moving. He is leading others through you.

There is no other way to navigate the valley but to keep walking as we follow the leadership of the Lord.

It is helpful for us to read verse four in the context of verse three. Consider that verse three says, "He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake," yet immediately following this statement, the path leads to the valley. Has God forsaken us? Does the presence of the

valley mean we have been steered away from the paths of righteousness? Did we miss something, and are we leading everyone in the wrong direction? As Christian author David Gibson states, "No, the valley of the shadow of death, the days of deep darkness, do not mean we have left the paths of righteousness; in fact, they are where the shepherd's paths of righteousness are sometimes located."¹

We must discourage those we lead (and ourselves!) from thinking the days in the valley mean the abandonment of the Shepherd. The same One leading beside still waters is the One that guides each of us through the valley. Our Shepherd hasn't gone away. He stays by our side and teaches us that the road through the valley is a necessary part of the path of righteousness.

...of the shadow of death...

The shadow of death can be thought of in two ways. In one respect, it speaks to days of pain, grief, and loss. For all of us, there are moments in life—sometimes days or even longer seasons—where the sun does not seem to shine. It is human nature to assume that days of darkness or troubles in our ministries signify that God has forgotten us. Or, at times, believers may blame themselves for wandering away, feeling unworthy to return to the safety of the fold. Oh, how our enemy would love to lead the sheep to such a wrong conclusion! We must be diligent to seek and find those who are wounded.

We know that our faith does not exempt us from the struggles of this world. Believers lose their jobs, get sick, and have broken relationships. We are not immune from disease, disappointment, or death. Christians can lose their possessions to natural disasters or wicked schemes just like anyone else. Yet God is with us and still leads us through these valleys. There are times we must care for others even as we ourselves have heavy burdens on our hearts. We journey on.

The shadow of death can be understood not just as the possibility of tribulation but also as the inevitability of death. Unless the Lord returns beforehand, our bodies will one day die. For Christians, this is nothing to dread, but it is a reality that should drive us to live with

eternal purpose. This world is not our home; we are merely traveling through it. We know our time on earth is temporary. We must remind ourselves and our brothers and sisters in Christ of these truths:

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. — Psalm 90:12

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. — James 4:14

The first part of verse four provides two points of emphasis on which we should meditate: earthly trials and bodily death. Our Shepherd is with us even in the valleys of life, even when we may lose something precious to us. But also, in death, we are not alone; we still have the nearness of our Shepherd. For those of us who pastor, leading families through the death of a loved one is painful. Yet, there is hope in that pain.

Donald Gray Barnhouse served as pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He once told of driving home with his children after his wife's death and burial. His children were utterly grief-stricken, and he was searching for a way to bring them comfort. A large moving van drove by, and as it passed, its shadow swept over the car. He turned and asked his children, "Would you rather be run over by a truck or by its shadow?" The children said, "Well, of course, Dad, we'd rather be run over by the shadow. That can't hurt us at all." He explained, "Did you know that 2000 years ago, the truck of death ran over Jesus...in order that only its shadow might run over us?"²

We face death, we comfort others facing death, and we carry the burden of families who have lost in death, but because of Jesus, we only face its shadow. Maybe the valley of the shadow of death for you is a season of suffering in your personal life, yet you are still responsible for leading others. Remember, we are imperfect leaders guiding imperfect people.

There will be storms, dangers, and trials for you and for them. We will face our own struggles, and we will be called upon to lead others through sorrowful times in their lives as well. In these moments, the death and resurrection of our true Shepherd is our comfort and hope. What is our hope in life and death? It is the salvation of our God! Always.

References

[1] David Gibson, *The Lord of Psalm 23: Jesus Our Shepherd, Companion, and Host* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 61.

[2] Erwin Lutzer, *One Minute After You Die* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1997), 61.



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