

The Good Shepherd IV

In the Valley of the Shadow of Death (Go To Meeting)

Steve Durham—May 20, 2023

Today we're going to continue our study in Psa. 23. We are at verse 4 and it's a very well known chapter, probably one of the best known chapters in the Bible. The world quotes it a lot. Verse four is probably the one Scripture they remember very well.

Psalm 23:4: "Yea, 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."

It certainly is a comfort when we know that Jesus Christ is there as our Good Shepherd to take care, watch us, guide us, lead us and comfort us. It's one of the most often quoted verses. It's read at funerals, and in the mind of many people, v 4 pictures death.

But that's not entirely correct. The actual phrase, while it does refer to death somewhat, does not entirely or directly refer to death. Rather the difficulties and the dark situations that all of find ourselves in from time to time as we go through life's journey.

As we walk this path once we've been called we seem to have a little bit more than the world in some areas. But that's all for our training and for our perfection in bringing us to be developing Holy Righteous character, as God wants us to do.

So, the words "...shadow of death..." in Hebrew it's one word—'tsal maw-veth'—meaning *the valley of the deepest darkness!* There are some trials that we go through that are like this. This is referring to the really deep, dark situations that we find ourselves in. We certainly do have that.

Yesterday I had to make a decision on my time, it's been a very busy week, I was working on this sermon. I got a call from a member in the Muncie area that her husband had been moved from intensive care into hospice, and they aren't giving him much time. I had to make a decision: what do I do with my time?

I went up there, and God always takes care of things. So, I went up there and spent some time with her and the family. But they're going through *a valley of deepest darkness!*

Others have called this valley 'a valley of deep gloom. If you don't have the hope that we have, it is deep, it is dark, it is gloom! It seems that despair sets in and depression. You look going down

the Interstate, or you're going to a mall and you sit and look; people are just plagued with this. They're plagued with this lack of hope. That's what Jesus Christ is going bring to this world, and we are part of that—*bringing hope!*

Psa. 23 has a lot to do with our walk personally as sons and daughters of God. This is an actual valley in Palestine. It's called the Wadi Qelt. Wadi refers to ravine. The Wadi Musa is the river or ravine of Moses, and in the spring it fills up with water and these Wadies run with water and become rivers or streams.

So, the Wadi Qelt, the Valley of the Shadow of death is an actual place. It leads from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea, quite a long way. It's near Bethlehem on one end, and Jericho on the other end. It's a very narrow and dangerous path and it goes through the mountain ranges, a very rough path with predators. There are shadows in it. The sun at certain points will hit down in to bottom of this valley and there's a shadow that's cast. Predators lurk in the bushes and wait. Robbers and thieves are in there.

This was an actual path that Jesus Christ took on the last week to get to Jerusalem. He came through the shadow of the valley of death. So, Christ when through that, as well. This is a path that Christ took. It's interesting that He walked that before us, as we walk through it, too. He's already been there, so He knows the way.

The shepherds would travel through the hills and valleys of the areas of Palestine on their yearly circular track that they took with the sheep. They would travel there with the sheep from Judea to the hills of Galilee and through canyons, deep and narrow trails. There again, infested with dangers: robbers and predators that lurked there. The shepherd had to be on guard! The sheep trusted that shepherd because he knew his way; so they followed him.

There were many dangers in this area for the sheep; many dangers, but the shepherd was there with them. The Valley of the Shadow of death is not a dead end. It's not a cul-de-sac. It has a beginning and an end, just like our trials do. There's a beginning and an end, and we walk through it. The sheep are not afraid because the shepherd is there. They don't walk through it by themselves. The shepherd goes in front of them, and they follow him

as he walks through the Valley of the Shadow of death.

While it doesn't mean death, it doesn't exclude death. That is another deep, dark situation in which we find ourselves. It's appointed all men once to die, then the judgment. So, everyone has a time-stamp on them. We talked about that yesterday in the hospital. She has a lot of hope. Even though we're grieving, we grieve when we lose someone. We as Christians, sons and daughters of God, we know the hope, the light at the end of the tunnel, the light at the end of the Valley of the Shadow of death. It's very bright for us!

Let's start at the beginning of Psalm 23:4: "**Yea...**" what does that mean? *It means yes!* What it is, it's a transition between the three verses before and now this darkness, this dark area. The transition from light into the darkness of the Valley of the Shadow of death that they're about to enter.

In the movies you hear, like in the movie Jaws, da da da, the shark is coming. Everything is bright and cheery and then you have this deep music that comes. Well, they're getting ready to go into the shadow of death! Prior to that, in the first three verse of Psa. 23 we had a tranquil and peaceful picture of a shepherd caring for His sheep daily.

Christ is the Good Shepherd caring for the sheep, providing for all their needs. The still crystal waters that the sheep go to, He takes them to cool—not rushing—water, protecting and caring for them. He gives them green grass, not briars and thickets and things that will harm them, and food at the appropriate time. Then they go and lay down, and he restores the sheep physically and emotionally, giving the sheep rest. He rejuvenates and the restores their soul! Just like Christ does for us.

He leads the sheep in the paths of righteousness, safe passage, just like our Shepherd does for us.

In verse 4 David is transitioning the scene to a more sober and serious event. Life's dark times and difficulties. But he's reassuring us that the Good Shepherd is still with us, even in these difficult times as we walk in the Valley of the Shadow of death.

Notice that this verse in the middle of Psa. 23. So, there is light at the end of the tunnel and we're going to come out of that, and we're going to see that. So, it is a thoroughfare that we go through. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

Again, we have these in life, ups and downs, dark and gloomy times. Sometimes we don't understand why. I refer you to the note of encouragement that CBCG sent out:

{<https://www.cbcbg.org/images/books/A-Note-of-Encouragement-Coulter-May-15-2023.pdf>}

Read that over and over again when you find yourself entering into a dark time. It can be anything, but that's a very good basic encouragement that we have, that we hope and hang onto.

As we got through it we don't get stuck in it. There is a way out, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. It's a path that we walk through just as the shepherd and the sheep went daily in their journey.

"...though **I walk through...**"—which indicates *moving on, passing through* to a more positive and brighter place! To abundant life, and eternal life, and Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life as the Good Shepherd. He leads us through. *The eventual end is eternal life in the Kingdom of God!* That's what we're shooting for. Knowing that that is there as we go through:

"...**the Valley of the Shadow of death...**"—

These situations that we find ourselves in are temporary! The grief is temporary. What it does is teaches us. Christ suffered to learn obedience and perfection. We do the same! *We become perfect!* Through suffering, following the example of Christ as our Good Shepherd. We rely on Christ to get us through. He's been there before!

"...**I will fear no evil...** [Why?] ...**for You are with me...**"

Let's look at the word *evil*. What are we not to fear. We can go into a big, long discussion about fear, doubt, worry; those are the tools that Satan uses to drag us down, to bring us back into the darkness.

There is no fear with the Spirit of God, and with the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. But the word *evil* is 'rah'—more than just the moral evil that we read about. The things are listed in Gal. 5; it's more than that! It's:

- distress
- despair
- depression
- misery
- calamity
- trouble

In Psa. 23:4 the whole point is that it removes our fear knowing that we have a Good Shepherd that has gone through this before and we will see that He has a rod and staff that comforts us.

We live under the shadow. What do we live under? *We don't live under fear! We live under the*

shadow of the Almighty; He's the protector! Under the wings, the shadow of His wings, and that protection like a mother hen takes her chicks and brings them under her wings.

We're going to read all the way through Psa. 91 because I think understanding that it's the 'protection chapter.' But if we look at in light of 'the shadow of death'; think about it in that respect.

Psalm 91:1: "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

We're with God when we have that relationship and we're under His care. He casts a shadow on us of protection, care and love, all the things that we need.

Verse 2: "I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in Whom I will trust.'"

That's what the sheep do with the shepherd! They trust him, because he's capable and been there before. They have experience with him providing all these things. They know that he's going to take care of them in these dark times.

Verse 3: "Surely He will deliver you from the fowler's trap and from the destroying pestilence."

In the last couple of years we certainly know what that is; what that can do. I think we're going to see some more of it. So, know that God can deliver us.

Verse 4: "He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge...."

At these times, trust in God, go to Him and seek Him out. We should be doing that daily; it's called supplication, with fervent prayer!

"...His Truth shall be your shield and buckler. You shall not be afraid... [that's what it does, it removes fear] ...of the terror by night..." (vs 4-5)

In the darkness you can't see what's coming and it causes terror; don't worry about it, don't be fearful, God is right there!

"...nor for the arrow that flies by day... [you can see that] ...nor for the plague that walks in darkness, nor for the destruction laying waste at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand; ***it shall not come near you***" (vs 5-7). ***What can man do to you? God is not going to leave you or forsake you!*** It's not going to

come near you.

Verse 8: "Only with your eyes you shall behold and see the recompense of the wicked."

We will also see on the Sea of Glass the vials poured out. He says that revenge is not for you to take, but it's for Him. We're not going to want to see that, but we're going to be glad to be there to see it.

I want to also make a comment about "...***it shall not come near you.***" That is if it's God's will there are things that will happen to us, because God wants that to happen for our character development, to understand the things that Christ went through. So, some of these things will happen to us, but it's for our perfection and development, though we may not understand that at the time. But that is what happens, and we wonder sometimes *why!*

Verse 9: "Because you have made the LORD, Who is my refuge, even the Most High, your habitation."

In John 17 it talks about we will be one with God the Father and Jesus Christ and they will come and live in us. We will be Their habitation, and They will be our habitation. They will live in us through the Holy Spirit.

Verse 10: "No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling, for He shall give His angels... (vs 10-11). *Each one of us has an angel that can handle 186,000 Assyrians; one angel!*

"...charge over you to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you up in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (vs 11-12). *That's a reference to the temptation of Christ!* What did Satan say to Him?

Verse 13: "You shall tread upon the lion and asp; the young lion and the jackal you shall trample underfoot. 'Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore, I will deliver him; I will set him on high because he has known My name.... [that's the hope that we have; we will be set on high] ...He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him [the Feast of Unleavened Bread pictures deliverance] ...and honor him... [we will be humbly and contritely honored some day for living a righteous life] ...With long life... [a lot of us are living longer than three score and ten] ...I will satisfy him, and show him My salvation'" (vs 13-16).

- Satan is the accuser
- he is the destroyer
- he wants to take us back into captivity, sin and darkness

- back into the ‘Valley of the Shadow of death’
- he wants to make a dead-end for us and not let us get out.

2-Corinthians 4:4: “In whom the god of this age **has blinded the minds of those who do not believe...**”—*the entire world is in darkness!*

But one day they will be in the Light, they will see the Light at the end of the ‘Valley of the Shadow of death.’

Christ sent Paul to the Gentiles; Acts 26:18: “To open their eyes, that *they* may turn from darkness to Light, and *from* the authority of Satan to God, so that they may receive remission of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified through faith in Me.”

That’s a wonderful promise! Christ—our Good Shepherd—gave His life so that when we find ourselves in the Valley of the Shadow of death, we have a way out.

Colossians 1:13: “**Who has personally rescued us from the power of darkness and has transferred us unto the Kingdom of the Son of His love.**”

We haven’t received the Kingdom (Heb. 11); but God calls things what they will be. In His mind we have, ***IF*** we stay the course!

Psalms 103:4: “Who redeems your life from destruction... [out of the Valley of the Shadow of death] ...Who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies.”

He’s a God of comfort and mercy! We go through that so that we can comfort others and be merciful to others. It’s the growth of Holy righteous character that we’re developing to the measure of the stature of Christ, our Good Shepherd!

The sheep do not have fear, they don’t have a concept of death. They’re weary of darkness, but not when the shepherd is with them. We only have to trust the Good Shepherd.

Psalms 23:4: “...**Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**”

The staff is long pole, maybe 7-8 feet tall with a crook on it at the end. In the Old Testament it talks about the walking stick, crutch or some kind of support. The shepherd is leaning on the staff for support. We can lean on the ***Staff*** for support as well; ***we lean on Christ*** and put our burdens on Him. He will accept it and make it ease for us.

You’ve seen guys on road construction, where you have several guys leaning on shovels and one guy is in the ditch digging! Or the farmer who is leaning on the rake. He’s kind of catching his breath, wiping his brow and looking for support, something to rest on.

Hebrews 4:9: “There remains, therefore, Sabbath-keeping for the people of God.” *That eternal life is a Sabbath picture!* It’s a rest for mankind.

So, the staff is to rescue the sheep from dangerous and difficult situations. He uses the crook to rescue them when they get off the path and slip down the hill into the bushes or on a ledge where they could fall. He reaches down with the crook of staff and pulls the sheep back up to safety with the curled end of the staff. Christ puts us back on ***the path of righteousness*** when we get off.

The staff is also a guide, helps guide the sheep along the rocky paths and hillsides making sure they stay on track, just like the Holy Spirit does:

Romans 8:14 “For as many as are **led by the Spirit of God**, these are *the* sons of God.”

In the darkness of the Valley of the Shadow of death, God is the Light for us to see and leads and guides us so that we don’t stumble and fall.

I remember a time when I was younger and going into the Mammoth Cave done in Kentucky. I could remember that we all walked way down into the cave and it got so dark. But the ranger had a light and we followed him. He showed us the path so we didn’t stumble.

He told us that he was going to turn the light off and told us to be real quiet and he turned the light off for a few minutes. The darkness was so eerie, it was so solid. You could feel the darkness; it was like a pressure. You couldn’t even see your hand in front of your face. There was a lack of sound that was sort of deafening; it sort of had a sound to it. I can remember the ‘sounds of darkness’ that Simon and Garfunkle sing about. I always wondered what that was, but if you go into the Mammoth Cave and you will see.

Those are sort of like the times the deepest darkness and the gloom that we run into sometimes in life, when we’re faced with certain things. But then he turned the light on and there he was and we could see the path again. That’s what Christ does! Christ is the Word and the Truth!

Psalms 119:105: “**Your Word is a Lamp to my feet and a Light to my path.**”

1 Peter 2:9: “But you *are* a chosen stock, a royal priesthood, a Holy nation, a people for a possession of God... [bought with the blood of Christ] ...that you might proclaim His *excellent* virtues, Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous Light.”

We’re called out of this world into the Light. Eventually we went out of the Mammoth Cave and into the light, and it took a while for our eyes to adjust. When the Father calls us, He calls us out of darkness into the Light of Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd, and our lives changed! We were given into His loving hands to be cared for, protected and guided by a royal, loving, gentle Good Shepherd.

Psalm 107:14: “He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their bands asunder.”

Isa. 61 is the very first thing Christ read in the synagogue when He began His ministry. His purpose at this time they He came on the earth:

Isaiah 61:1: The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me because the LORD has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor... [the Good News of the Kingdom] ...He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” ***Isn’t that coming out of the darkness, coming out of the Valley of the Shadow of death?***

Verse 2: “To preach the acceptable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.”

All of us need that! From time to time we all mourn! It’s one of the things that we do and is part of the human experience.

Verse 3: “To appoint to those who mourn in Zion, giving to them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the mantle of praise for the spirit of heaviness; so that they might be called trees of righteousness, **the planting of the LORD, that He might be glorified.**”

That’s what we are referred to as. We’re planted by the riverside, beside the water. God takes care of us and we grow in that.

Luke 1:79—*one of the reasons that Christ came*: “To shine upon those who are sitting in darkness and in *the* shadow of death, to direct our feet into *the* way of peace.”

John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you...”

He guides our feet in the way of peace, He is the Light unto our path. David knew that there was a

Light at the end of the darkest day.

Psalm 27:1: “The LORD is my Light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?... [no one; there’s nothing man can do to you] ...The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” *The staff leads us! Thinking back to:*

Psalm 23:2: “...**He leads me beside the still waters....**”

Verse 3: “...**He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.**” *The staff leads us into peace and restoration!*

Verse 3: “**He restores my soul...**” during dark times in our lives. *That’s what the staff does.*

Development of Holy righteous character is dependent on God’s staff to lead us gentle—He doesn’t push us—drawing us and leading us, showing us the way we should go. He’s the Way, the Truth and the Life!

The rod as we read in Psa. 91 is for protection. We used to hear ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’ and they used it to justify spanking and beating the kid. Of course, that’s not what it’s for. It’s not what it’s used for here. It’s a tool of protection and also a symbol of God’s love for us. God rod is for our protection, to defend the sheep against predators. The rod makes a weapon. Remember when David said, ‘I killed the lion and the bear.’ He was thinking of the rod that he had. It makes a weapon against those who would harm the sheep.

God goes before us to defend us from the enemies, Satan and the demons and the things that come at us. Sometimes we get ourselves in the valley of that shadow of death by ourselves. But Christ uses the crook at the end of the staff to pull us out.

The rod was used as a method of counting the sheep, as well. He would touch them on the head as they passed under. God is lovingly acknowledging each one of us as he does that. He count’s us as His own and part of His Family when we pass under the rod. It talks about sparrows; we’re much more than sparrows. He has every hair of your head counted. He knows you and made you personally:

- He knows you intimately
- He’s counting you
- He’s watching you
- He’s taking care of you with that rod
- we’re in His loving hands

The entire Psa. 23 shows that we are in His loving

care. Even in the Valley of the Shadow of death, the rod and the staff are in His hands to remind us of that. That He is faithful and pays attention to us. He listens and hears us when we cry. He's:

- always with us
- always protecting us
- always guiding us
- always offering us peace and rest

It's there and we just have to turn and obey, submit and yield. Love Him and build a relationship with Him! All of that is there for us.

This world that's in darkness will know the Light at the end of the tunnel; that Light that will break the bands of the wickedness that holds them in bondage.

The entire world at one time, in the future, will be brought in; all will be His sheep. All will be with Him sometime, probably in the near future. We will be there to assist Him on that ground floor.

Isaiah 9:7: "Of the increase of *His* government and peace *there shall be* no end..."

Verse 2: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great Light... [this is future when Christ comes and establishes the Kingdom] ...they who dwell in the land of the shadow of death... [that's what this world is] ...**upon them the Light has shined.**"

What an awesome Psal. 23 is for encouragement, but right in the middle of the Psalm it looks like a downer! But it's not! It's positive! We're going to go through those times, but the Shepherd is there to bring us out of it. He's always with us. When we come out on the other end, we come out better, closer to the character of God.

Psalms 23 is about a shepherd, Christ our Good Shepherd leading the sheep—us—to:

- good water
- rest
- care
- green grass
- comfort
- protection

Caring for every need as a good shepherd would do, ***and is doing for us, the sheep that He loves!***

Occasionally, life will have difficulties. All of us are going through them. We send the prayer requests out, and those are probably not even close to the number of things that are going on. It happens, and we're in the middle of that. Some of them are

dark, gloomy and dreary! They seem like life is ending and where is God? He's there with us!

When you're in the cave, you can't see your hand in front of you. But you know that the ranger is over there with the light.

When they do happen, and they will, the Shepherd leads us through the dark places in our lives and into the Light. When we are in Christ's hands and close to Him and His shadow, and we're trusting Him during life's deepest and darkest moments, ***remember that He is there!***

He's always there with us. He's gone through this before and He knows the way. Isa. 53 and Matt. 27 talks about the day that Christ died. Everything went black, dark, from 12-noon until 3pm, He was in the Valley of the Shadow of Death during that time. He's called 'a man of sorrows' in Isa. 53. The man of sorrows Who can lead His sheep through this darkness that He went through. He went through everything for our benefit.

He suffered for us! He's familiar with the dark places in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. But He didn't stay in that! He was resurrected and went before God and came back and then went back to the Father and He's there as High Priest, our Advocate, our Intercessor and Mediator for us. All we have to do is think, pray and it's just a thought away. That's all He is, just a thought away.

He's there to help us to come to the Holy of Holies, to crawl up on our Father's lap and talk to Him! Darkness never gets the last word. He leads us through the valley, and wherever that is in the darkest moment—maybe death, pre-death or situations that seem so bad—we know that Christ has been there already.

He's defeated Satan! He says that 'Satan has nothing in Me.' He led captivity captive, and He did it in our place so we could follow Him. **No matter how low we get, remember that He was there before us!**

Scriptural References:

- 1) Psalm 23:4
- 2) Psalm 91:1-16
- 3) 2 Corinthians 4:4
- 4) Acts 26:18
- 5) Colossians 1:13
- 6) Psalm 103:4
- 7) Psalm 23:4
- 8) Hebrews 4:9
- 9) Romans 8:14
- 10) Psalm 119:105
- 11) I Peter 2:9

- 12) Psalm 107:14
- 13) Isaiah 61:1-3
- 14) Luke 1:79
- 15) John 14:27
- 16) Psalm 27:1
- 17) Psalm 23:2-3
- 18) Isaiah 9:7, 2

Scriptures referenced, not quoted:

- Galatians 5
- John 17
- Hebrews 11
- Matthew 27
- Isaiah 53

Also referenced:

Note of Encouragement from Fred R. Coulter

{<https://www.cbcg.org/images/books/A-Note-of-Encouragement-Coulter-May-15-2023.pdf>}

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