

Through the Valleys

John16:16-22, 32-33

Recite first 4 verses of Psalm 23: The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.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.

Though I walk through the valleys. We live in a part of the country where we don't see a lot of mountains and valleys, but any of you who have done much traveling know there are some beautiful parts of the country where you can both up some pretty steep hills and descend into some pretty deep valleys. I remember taking a vacation with Joanna's brother, Dave in New Hampshire, in his motor home and we decided to try to drive up Mt. Washington. I wasn't sure if we were going to make it...as our speed slowed down to a crawl. But we finally made it to the summit. Of course the challenge coming down the mountain was to make sure we didn't burn out the brakes. One of my favorite drives is through the mountains and valleys of West Virginia. So many climbs and descents on interstate 79. Life is like that. Mountains and valleys, ups and downs. Times of celebration and great joy. Times of despair and great sorrow.

Shepherds in Palestine lead their sheep through mountains and valleys. As part of the shepherding process, there is a journey the shepherd takes with his sheep which is dependent on the season. In the summer, the good shepherd will take their flocks onto distant ranges. And the sheep will move along slowly feeding in various grazing areas, gradually working their way up the mountain. Then at the approach of autumn when the early snow settles on the highest ridges, the flock is forced to lower elevations. They gradually descend until they back to their ranch home for the winter. Its quite a process...going up and down the hills, up the mountain, down into the valley. It would certainly be an experience that David, the shepherd, would know first hand. You remember how the prophet Samuel came to anoint David as King over Israel. He was not at home, he was out on the high hills tending his father's flock. It is this David who would write: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

Can you picture David with his flock of sheep, making that journey through hillside and valley. There would be many dangers for sheep, the rushing rivers, rock slides, poisonous plants, dangerous predators, terrible storms. It was the shepherd's responsibility to keep his sheep safe from harm, to guard them from

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whatever dangers may confront them. And so he carries a rod and a staff. John Heinz asked me what was the difference between the rod and staff? Some commentators say that this is hard to determine because the Hebrew words are sometimes interchangeable. Others feel that the rod was more of a club, to be as a weapon against a sheep's attacker. David as a youth described his use of the rod to King Saul "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him" (1st Sam 17:34-35). So rods were sometimes used as weapons of defense or offense and sometimes simply as a walking stick. Or it was sort of like a scepter, a symbol of authority or discipline. The staff on the otherhand was the crook, used to guide the sheep, keep them on the right path. In any case the shepherd's rod and staff were used for protection and safety for the sheep. It is knowing that our Shepherd is seeking to protect us, keep us safe, guide and lead us, it becomes such a source of comfort for you and me. You and I go through the mountains and valleys of life. Sometimes we speak of our spiritual journey as pressing on to higher ground. But to get to the higher ground, you often have to get there through the valleys. If you've ever travelled up a mountain you know that you don't drive straight up. There are winding roads and there are hills that go up and down as you work your way to the top. It is the way the shepherd leads his flock, gently, but persistently up the paths that wind through the valleys. And some of those valleys can get pretty dark, and when a sudden storm approaches, it can become very frightening and even life threatening for the sheep. And the flock needs that comforting presence of the shepherd who is with them, who guides them, who protects them.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. When was the last time you heard those words. These words are often quoted when someone is near death and perhaps in the very service of death and resurrection at a funeral. And certainly, they have great meaning to those times when death is near or we face the loss of someone we dearly love. But the valley of the shadow speaks not only of those times in our lives, but also anytime we feel a shadow cast over us...when we can't feel the warmth of God's love shining on us. Life can have its very trying experiences, its periods of heartache and pain.

Some of you may be familiar with the name Catherine Marshall. She was a wonderful Christian author who wrote such classics as Christy, which became a television series. There was an occasion in Catherine's life when she felt as if the

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flame of God's love had gone out. It started with the sudden death of her infant grandchild. She called it the dark night of the soul. In her journal she described it this way: "Inside I am dry and lonely, unable to accomplish anything, really, just going through the motions of life, barely able to do that. It is more than a dry period. I've been through those before and did not lose the Presence. This is darkness. Deadness. Awful in the way it numbs you, makes you cold and indifferent. You do the very things, say the very word, you know you should not. Frightening!" (Light in My Darkness, p. 176.) But she did not give up. She kept praying. She kept doing everything she could to stir up the fire. Eventually in her journal she wrote the following: "A feeling rises up inside me that little trickles of praise are now running together, merging, beginning to form a small river of praise. It began mechanically, yet now has increasingly the feel of spontaneous emotion. Slowly but surely my mind is being cleansed. Rich, beautiful, positive words are taking over, chasing away the negative ones. I am being filled with Your light. Lord Jesus, how radiant and glorious is the light of Yours!.... Suddenly I felt the living presence of Jesus. What joy to have this again in my life!" (Light in My Darkness, p. 221).

That is trusting God even in the dark valleys, that is believing you are going on to higher ground even when you cannot always see the way...because you know the Shepherd is with you. Ray Vander Laan in his book [Walking with God in the Desert](#) shares an important perspective on our walk through life's valleys. He says: "For many years I would plead with God for easier, safer, smoother paths when I passed through the rugged and difficult terrain of life's deserts. Sometimes my paths became easier; other times they were more difficult. Some of my Jewish friends opened my eyes to a new way to pray during desert times. They prayed for God to provide what they needed to walk whatever path (God) determined was best. They wanted his path, even if it meant a desert path.

You may feel like you are going through the desert this morning or you in one of those dark valleys. Those valleys in life...a disappointment, dealing with failure, facing a health battle, feeling frustration or discouragement. And what a difference it makes when we begin to see what we are facing as part of a road that leads us to higher ground. It may seem like a terribly rough pathway, but we discover that God is with us, we may feel like it's like the discipline of a

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shepherd's rod, or God simply guiding us with his staff, but however he leads us we come to see God is leading us to a deeper faith and trust in him.

The old Andrae Crouch song Through it All, says it well. "I thank God for the mountains and I thank God for the valleys, and I thank Him for the storms He brought me through. For if I'd never had a problem, I wouldn't know that God could solve them, I'd never know what faith in God could do." To discover God is with me in whatever I face, even when I walk through the valley, even if it seems like the shadow of death, I do not have to be afraid, for I know God is with me. I want to have confidence in the Shepherd's care. The Shepherd never promises to keep us out of the valley. Sometimes we will try to go around it or avoid it, but God's promise to us is to be with us through that valley.

We been hearing about and seeing horrific images of the wildfires in California. So many arces burned, homes lost. It was Joe Stevenson who found himself in similar circumstances near Reno, Nevada on a hot August day. He had just watched his wife and children leave to visit her sister for a week. It would be just him and his dog BJ and their 2 cats. Their home was out in the country, a home they had be working on for the last 12 years. Joe went to church that morning and it was that afternoon about 2:30 when lighting started a brush fire about 2 miles from his house. Joe was immediately concerned because any fire in August in that area was extremely dangerous since the vegetation was so dry. The wind was blowing our of the Southwest which was a good thing, so the fire was moving away from his home. Still as a precaution, he loaded a few belongings in the car, then got out the garden hose and began wetting down the roof and also the brand new deck that had just been added to the house. Others in the area were watching the fire too. Joe received several calls from people who said they would be praying for him. And then abruptly at 4:45 the wind swung around to the Northeast and the flames were heading straight toward the Stevenson's home. What had been a small brush fire was now a gigantic fire storm with a fall of flames 15 to 30 feet high and a half a mile wide. Joe knew in seconds it would be upon them. He screamed for BJ but there was no sign of her and there was no time to look. Joe and his neighbor, Tony ran for their lives. He remembers praying, the fastest running prayer of his life: "Lord, I put my house and everything in it into your hands" and somehow he managed to pray: "Lord, no matter what happens, I thank you for it and praise you." He jumped into his car, raced for the highway with the fiery monster behind him. When he got to the highway, he was able to get out of the car and just stare back at the flames and smoke. How do you react when everything you've spent 12 years dreaming of and working for is destroyed within seconds.

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Later that day at a friend's house, Joe was able to reach his wife and tell her that their dream house had burned to the ground. The threat of fire along the roads made it impossible to get back to Reno that night. Joe called a church couple who he knew could see his house across the valley. Their response came as a shock...Joe, we watched the whole thing through our binoculars. When we saw the flames change direction and head for you, our entire family formed a prayer circle and prayed for your safety and the safety of your home. And, Joe, we want you to know that it's still standing. Joe thanked them, but he didn't really believe them, maybe what they were seeing was the shell of the house, but he said I knew that nothing could survive that firestorm. But to his amazement what he found the next day was the fire had burned to within 10 feet of the house, the dog and two cats unharmed. Obviously answers to prayer don't always happen this way, but for Joe this whole experience had been a real test of his faith. For Joe it had been a dark valley, that God had brought him through and he found the comfort and peace of knowing that no matter what God was with him. Valley experiences may mean some very trying times, but through it all we believe God can lead us to higher ground.

When a shepherd leads his sheep through the valleys, he leads them to that higher ground along a well-watered route and to the places where the best grazing land can be found. You and I may be called to walk through life's valleys, but there is the sustaining, refreshing presence of God's Spirit along the way. In Jesus gave these farewell words to his disciples knowing they would face trials and adversity, valleys and even persecution. He says: "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have overcome the world! God is with us in all of life, even in the dark valleys...leading us to that higher ground. These are the words of our closing hymn. Let it be our prayer: "Lord, lift me up and help me stand, by faith on heaven's tableland, A higher plain than I have found. Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."