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Psalm 23: Your Comfort and God's Protection

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Protection**

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Psalm 23: Your Comfort and God's Protection

Philippians 2:12-18

Psalm 23:4

When we read Psalm 23, I suspect that our attention is riveted on one phrase: *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil.”*

I confess that I lean toward the older translation of *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”*

Robert Alter, the great Hebrew scholar in his recent wonderful translation of the Hebrew Bible, says it this way: *“Though I walk in the vale of death’s shadow, I fear no harm, for You are with me. Your rod and your staff, it is they that console me.”*

No matter which way you say it; it’s easier said than done, isn’t it?

But then, you look at who wrote these words. He said it because he had done it, David, who walked into the valley facing Goliath. He is simply telling us the truth of his own life.

And maybe not even that valley, there was the dark valley of the shadow in which he faced the evil of his own sinful affair with Bathsheba and then ordered the murder of her husband, or the valley of the shadow when he faced the armed rebellion of his son Absalom.

We all have walked, are walking, will walk through those valleys, in the midst of the shadows...and it’s more than simply the reality of the moment of death.

Some of us have walked through dark valleys this week, and all of us know someone in a dark valley, valleys of sickness, grief, uncertainty, depression, fear.

And some have not been able to come out of the darkness. The darkness has taken hold and they can't find their way back to the light.

This is the picture David paints with his words of a shepherd leading his flock through narrow and dark gorges on a twisting and winding path, shadowy fears of finding a way out.

It is a place where wild beasts lurk, lions and tigers and bears, where bandits prowl and lie in wait to assault those who walk that path.

In short, it is a place of danger. It is the real world of David the shepherd, the real world of David against Goliath, the real world of David the powerful pitiful king, the real world of David the despairing parent.

The question is not about whether it happens. It does.

Let's be clear about what this verse does not say.

It does not say, "As I walk through the dark valleys, I will not be touched by evil; your rod and your staff will fend off any pain or suffering or bad things happening to me."

No, the psalmist is very much to the point: "I will fear no evil...your rod and your staff comfort me."

And that word 'comfort' carries the sense of consolation in times of grief.

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It's not a matter of protecting us from the evil or preventing the evil from happening; we all walk that valley.

What David is talking about for us is that God hears us as we cry out; God is near us as we walk on.

The thread that connects, that holds it together between 'fear' and 'comfort' is David's affirmation of faith: "You are with me."

This is the root of Paul's affirmation of faith as he walks through his own dark valley, writing from prison in his letter to the Philippians, "For God is at work in you..." and he knows it is true for him, too.

God's protection does not encircle us in plastic bubble wrap but embraces us in a powerful personal presence that penetrates our darkest moments with that peace that passes all understanding.

This Psalm is God's promise, as David knows the truth of it, no matter what the old hymn says, we do not walk that valley by ourselves.

"For you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

And I've heard all the sermons about the rod and the staff, how they were used as weapons to defend against and beat off all of the wild animals.

But more often than not, as the shepherd leads and cares for the flock, the rod and the staff are used to keep the flock together, to guide them on their way, to touch the sheep and let them know that the good shepherd is present.

The theme of this past week's Barefoot School says it so well, a summary statement of our text: "Life is wild. God is good."

And what they learned this past week that when life is wild, when we walk through those fearful valleys, we need to be aware of what they called "God Sightings."

Many of the children spoke of nature, birds and rainbows, but one little boy had a name for a God sighting, "My Mom!"

The truth of this verse is that God is always with us to give us strength, to give us courage, to assure us that the divine presence is always bigger than, stronger than the circumstances surrounding us.

And if ever there was a God-sighting, a good shepherd whose heart reflected the nature of God, his name was Fred Rogers, Presbyterian minister, gentle neighbor to the world.

Mr. Rogers' neighborhood was where we knew we could and our children and grandchildren could walk without fear, finding comfort in his words and presence and gentle embrace.

Anthony Breznican tells of a time back in 1996 when he was a student at the University of Pittsburgh, in his words, "...struggling, lonely, dealing with a lot of broken pieces within myself...rudderless."

And if that's not tough enough, his grandfather had just died, the one person he could really talk to about this dark valley he was in.

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He said he was walking out of his dorm room one morning and heard the TV playing in an empty common room, the familiar music of his childhood: “Won’t you be my neighbor...”

He watched the full show of this rerun, and says it was like a “cool hand on a hot head”, and he left feeling better.

Then, several days later, he got in the elevator at the Student Union. The doors opened, and there in the elevator was Mr. Rogers himself.

They nodded at each other, rode down in silence, but when the doors opened and as they stepped into the lobby, Anthony turned to Mr. Rogers and stammered out, “Mr. Rogers, I don’t want to bother you, but I just wanted to say thanks.”

Mr. Rogers smiled at him and said: “Did you grow up as one of my television neighbors?”

Then Mr. Rogers said, “It’s good to see you again neighbor” and opened his arms, inviting this young man, walking in a shadowy valley, in for a hug.

But the story doesn’t end there.

They made small talk as they walked out of the building, but just before they got to the door Anthony told him how he had been helped when he really needed it by his recent viewing of the Mr. Rogers’ episode.

And as Mr. Rogers opened the door to leave, Anthony blurted out, “So ... thanks for that. Again.”

He says “Mr. Rogers nodded and let the door shut. Then he unbuttoned his coat and motioned to the window, where he sat down on the ledge.”

Mr. Rogers asked him, “Do you want to tell me what was upsetting you?”

So he sat and told him his story: how his grandfather had just died, was one of the few good things he had, now he felt so alone, so helpless.

He says that Mr. Rogers began telling him about his grandfather, how he still missed him, still wished he was there when he needed him.

“You’ll never stop missing the people you love,” Mr. Rogers told him.

They talked some more, and at the end, Anthony says he told him ‘thank you’ again, probably for “about the 13th time.”

He apologized if he made Mr. Rogers late for wherever he was going, but Fred Rogers just smiled and said in his slow, gentle, neighborly voice, “Sometimes you’re right where you need to be.”

All I know is that when I have been in that dark valley and fear shadows every step of the way, it’s not a matter of ‘counting my favorite things’ or counting our blessings.

What really matters is that we are seen and heard and know that we are deeply loved.

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When we're in that valley between the fearful evil and the need for comfort, we do look up and say, "You are with me." And then we can look down and around and all around us and have a God-sighting, to feel God's promise and presence especially in who is next to us, right where they need to be for us that when life is wild, God is good.

Or to put it another way: There are so many people who are hanging on by a thread, and maybe you are that thread where you are right where you need to be to bring light and love and comfort to any and all who walk in their darkest valley.

Men, women, especially children, who are caught in the deep valleys of life gone wrong, and this Psalm is their psalm as much as it is yours and mine.

You know this. You believe this.

And now, maybe more than ever, is when we need to live this for those people who feel so alone, so helpless, in the 'vale of death's shadows' who need a God-sighting, for you and me to be where we need to be.

Alden Solovy, in a recent prayer he wrote, offers this:

*Bless those who dedicate their lives to human rescue.
Grant them the fortitude to battle in the name
Of the unknown, the unseen,
Those who cannot be forgotten.
May the work of their hands never falter,
Nor despair deter them from their holy calling.*

Should that not be our own calling: human rescue for all who walk in the valleys of the shadow of death?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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