

The Twenty Third Psalm
(Study #6)

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Introduction

1. Verse 4: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me."
2. Along with John 3:16, this may be one of the two most familiar and beloved verses in the Bible.
3. The picture it paints:
 - (1) The close of our lives.
 - (2) Green Pastures, still waters, sunny paths and peaceful resting places along the journey; with a dark valley near the end.
 - (3) This picture was hanged in our minds long ago; when we first learned to lisp these words of comfort.
4. My first-remembered poem:
 - (1) A poem in scroll letters, enclosed in a beautifully-sculptured frame, with an ornamentally-decorated background; which hanged in the home of my uncle and aunt.
 - (2) The anonymous poem:

"Death our dearest ties may sever,
Take our loved ones from our side;
Bear them from our homes forever,
O'er the cold, dark rolling tide.
But in that happy land we'll meet them;
All our loved ones gone before;
And again with joy we'll greet them,
There where parting is no more."

- (3) At the bottom of the poem, the scripture reference was:
Psalm 23:4.
5. Across the past 3000 years:
- (1) Vast and overwhelming changes have swept over the earth.
 - (2) The world has been made over.
 - (3) Old nations have degenerated, rotted and perished.
 - (4) New continents, clans, tribes and cultures have been discovered.
 - (5) New religions have encircled the earth, flourished, and faded into oblivion.
 - (6) Men have walked on the moon, and soared into outer space.
 - (7) But the picture of the valley of the shadow of death still hangs in the halls of our memories, and these words of comfort are still available to all who sorrow and suffer.
6. A fact, and a probability:
- (1) The fact: These have been the final words of countless dying believers.
 - (2) The probability: These will be the final words of some of us.
7. Now, with the melancholy notes of this verse echoing in our memories, we turn to the soul's final passage beyond the valley of the shadow of death. the

1. The Valley

1. The valley represents one of the many vivid and variegated scenes of the pastoral life in the Old Testament.
2. Some of the bright scenes:
 - (1) The faithful shepherd leading his flock.
 - (2) The flock trustfully following the shepherd.
 - (3) The green pastures.

- (4) The still waters.
 - (5) The peaceful places of rest.
 - (6) The playful and frolicking lambs.
 - (7) The protective mother ewes.
3. Some of the dark scenes:
- (1) Without warning, the trail suddenly turns downward.
 - (2) The winding, twisting and labyrinthine path drops toward the canyon floor.
 - (3) One side of the path is a sheer and yawning precipice of rocks.
 - (4) Far below, the roaring and foaming waters of the river are laced and torn by fierce rocks.
 - (5) The zigzagging path finally ends in a deep and dark gorge.
4. The gorge:
- (1) The gorge is overhung with rocks, briars, brambles and gnarled trees.
 - (2) Here it would be dark, even at the brightest noon.
 - (3) The gorge is infested with the dens and lairs of angry and ravenous beasts.
 - (4) It echoes with their bestial screams as the sheep pass by.
 - (5) The air is fraught with a paralyzing sense of danger and death.
5. Such is the valley of the shadow of death:
- (1) Through which our Good Shepherd once walked alone.
 - (2) Through which he now leads his flock.
 - (3) Through which the unbroken and unending column of homeward-bound pilgrims have passed, and are now safe in the sunshine on the other side.
 - (4) Through which multiplied masses are now passing; every hour of every day.

- (5) O, indeed! "We are going down the valley one by one!"
6. We have not yet reached the valley; we still feast in the green pastures and rest beside the still waters.
7. But the valley is out there; waiting for us; and we are approaching, and will pass through.

II. Some Valley Pictures

1. The valley is lonely:
- (1) The path is peopled with countless pilgrims, but each of us must make our way through the valley alone.
 - (2) Again: "We are going down the valley one by one, with our faces toward the setting of the sun."
2. Our special helpers along the way:
- (1) The catalyst of fear: "I will fear no evil."
 - (2) The presence of God: "Thou art with me."
 - (3) The comforters: "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."
3. Every stop of the journey has been trodden before us:
- (1) By Jesus: "He became obedient unto death." (Phil. 2:8)
 - (2) By countless generations of wayfaring pilgrims who passed this way before us.
 - (3) By thousands of unknown pilgrims; day, after day, after day.
4. The Good Shepherd of the dark valley:
- (1) "Was despised and rejected of men."
 - (2) "Bore our grief and carried our sorrow."
 - (3) "Was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities."

- (4) "Trod the winepress alone."
- (5) Walked alone through the dark valley of the shadow of death.
- (6) "Poured out his soul unto death" for us.
- (7) Loved us, and died that we might live.

5. Love vanquishes fear:

- (1) "I will fear no evil."
- (2) "There is no fear in love." (I John 4:18)
- (3) No child ever needs to fear a parent who loves him, or her.
- (4) No wife ever needs to fear a husband who loves her.
- (5) "Perfect love casts out fear." (I John 4:18)
- (6) Nothing else will cast out fear.
- (7) An angry and blustering bravado won't cast it out.
- (8) Arguing against, ridiculing, deriding and denying fear won't cast it out.
- (9) Only love will cast out fear.
- (10) Our lower passions are subdued and vanquished by higher passions.
- (11) Example: A famished father's hunger is instantly forgotten if his child is lying at death's door when he reaches home.
- (12) And God has ordained that the higher passion of love will cast out the lower passion of fear.

6. The valley deepens the sense of God's presence:

- (1) Notice that David's "he" and "his" of verses 2 and 3 have become the more-personal "thou" and "thy" in verse 4.
- (2) In verses 2 and 3, David was talking about God.
- (3) In verse 4, David was talking to God.
- (4) There is always a vast difference between sunshine and darkness.
- (5) Illustration: A child, playing in the sunshine, will instantly run to its parents when thunder crashes, lightning flashes and stormy winds moan.

- (6) And when the dark storms of sorrow and suffering break over us, we instantly turn to: "Our Father which art in heaven..."
 - (7) And when we do so, death chambers become presence-filled chambers.
7. An illustration of life and death:
- A faithful and loving father labors through the day to provide a comfortable and safe home for his family.
- At the twilight, he closes the shop for the night, secures the windows and locks the doors. With relief and thanksgiving, he makes his way to his home and loved ones.
- The shop is empty, dark, silent and still through the night; but his voice sounds in the home circle, and hearts which waited for his coming are glad and grateful.
8. The valley of the shadow of death is one of earth's most consoling pictures and promises.

III. Some Lessons That Linger

1. The many morbid misconceptions of death which haunt our world have no basis of truth in the valley of the shadow.
2. What the valley is not:
 - (1) It is not an enduring situation.
 - (2) It is not a permanent position.
 - (3) It is not a continuing condition.
 - (4) It is not an abiding place.
 - (5) It is not the final experience.
3. What the valley is:
 - (1) It is an inevitable appointment.
 - (2) A rendezvous with destiny.

- (3) A test of courage.
- (4) A trial of faith.
- (5) An exodus.
- (6) A brief journey through a dark valley.
- (7) A passageway from mortality to immortality.
- (8) A transition from the terrestrial to the celestial.
- (9) A shadow of death.
- (10) A gateway to eternal life.

4. The homeward path leads through sorrow:

- (1) In the Bible, the word "sorrow" is far-reaching and wide ranging, and defies a quick or simple definition.
- (2) Among the 40-plus biblical words related to "sorrow" are: "Adversity", "affliction", "anguish", "grief", "heaviness", "mourning", "pining", "sadness", "tears" and "tribulation".
- (3) Derivative phrases from these words:
 - (a) "Grapes in a winepress."
 - (b) "A stone in the flesh."
 - (c) "A knife in the heart."
- (4) All of these words and phrases are singularly applicable to the emotions of losing a loved one to death.
- (5) We are crushed like grapes in a winepress.
- (6) We are mangled with the stone of death in our flesh.
- (7) We are wounded by the knife of sorrow in our heart.

5. The valley is a test of faith:

- (1) Can we trust God in times of trouble and trials, as well as in times of peace and contentment?
- (2) Can we trust God in times of great sorrow, as well as in times of great joy?
- (3) Can we trust God in the darkness, as well as in the light?

6. The valley is dark:

- (1) The darkness of separation.
- (2) It is hard to give up loved ones.
- (3) It is hard to give up fellow pilgrims.
- (4) It is hard to think of leaving this life.
- (5) But the valley as the shadow of death is out there, and the valley is dark.

7. The valley is only a shadow:

- (1) Jesus met the substance of death; we encounter only the shadow.
- (2) The shadow of a dog can't bite.
- (3) The shadow of a lion can't ravage.
- (4) The shadow of a giant can't kill.
- (5) And the shadow of death can't destroy the soul.

8. Darkness brightens the stars:

- (1) The darkness of the valley brightens the promises of God which hang like stars of first magnitude above the dark valley of the shadow of death.
- (2) The darkness of the valley brightens the star-promises which shine through the briars, brambles, overhanging rocks, gnarled trees, sorrow and loneliness of the valley of the shadow of death.
- (3) Hawthorne, in "Whispering Hope", expressed it in these memorable words: "If in the dusk of the twilight, dim be the region afar; will not the deepening darkness brighten the glimmering star?"

9. Darkness makes us follow more closely:

- (1) Sheep instinctively follow the shepherd more closely when the darkness has fallen, or when a storm is raging.

- (2) God's children instinctively draw closer to him when angry storms of sorrow and suffering are raging around them.
 - (3) When the bell of sorrow tolls for us, we totally agree with the unknown song writer: "Just a closer walk with thee."
10. From the summit of eternity, he shall look back across the valley of the shadow of death; not with a desire to return, but to behold in the sunshine the hazards through which the Good Shepherd safely led us in many dark nights of our pilgrimage.

Conclusion

And as we look back down the trail, we shall whisper up there as we have never whispered down here: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me."



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