

Psalm 23:4 // Through the Darkness

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Thanks, Catherine. Let me add my welcome to Jack's. And mercilessly, the hall this evening isn't quite as stuffy as it was last week.

But as I see one or two of you, Jamie and Stephen, are parched perilously close to the open windows. They would do well to take heed of poor Eutychus in Acts 20.

If you know the story, Paul preaches late into the night, and Eutychus nods off and falls right out of the third story window. And the authors of a book on preaching aptly named *Saving Eutychus* warn, What took Paul many hours of preaching to achieve?

[1 : 46] Near fatal napping takes most of us preachers only a few minutes with a well caffeinated, unrested crowd. Well, thankfully, we're not three stories up this evening, but let's pray and ask for God's help that we would keep awake to the truth that he wants to press into each of our hearts this evening.

Let's pray together. Father, would you give us attentiveness this evening to your word as we zoom in, as we focus in on verse 4 of this well-known and well-loved psalm.

Would your Holy Spirit impress on us the deep and profound truths contained in this verse?

For we ask it in the name of your precious Son, the Lord Jesus. Amen. When shadows fall, when life goes dark, what's your instant when life goes dark?

Do you fight, flight, freeze, hide? Imagine the phone rings with some terrible news.

[3 : 09] What's your first response? Well, that's the moment I had last weekend on holiday. The night before I was due to head home, Alice and I were standing on the balcony of our parents' flat, looking out across the sunset over the fields.

And enjoying the tranquility there on that last night on the Saturday there. Then out of nowhere, our peace was shattered by the piercing cries of our son.

Only a week earlier, we'd been in A&E; with him after he'd fallen from height, head fast onto a concrete floor. So when I heard his screaming again, my stomach dropped.

And pumped full of adrenaline, I bolted down the stairs three steps at a time and found my son in my brother-in-law's arms, blood streaming from his head.

My father-in-law was already on the phone to the ambulance, and I feared the worst as I scooped up my son into my arms. What happened? I demanded.

[4 : 18] Apparently, he'd been struck in the head with a metal implement by his three-year-old cousin. And I wish I could say that my first reaction was Psalm 23, come.

It wasn't. Let's just say in that moment, I didn't have the words of Psalm 23, verse 4 imprinted on my heart. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil.

Well, thankfully, we realised quite quickly that it looked much worse than it was, and we were able to stand the ambulance down. But if I could rewind, if I could run down those stairs again, I'd want those words from Psalm 23, verse 4 on my lips.

Because when the phone rings of terrible news, when life goes dark, and darkness descends and shadows fall, how do we respond? Sometimes we blame God.

Sometimes we blame ourselves. Sometimes we simply freeze in fear. Psalm 23 offers a better way. And today we'll see two things from verse 4.

[5 : 31] Firstly, the darkness of the valley, because the valleys will come. And secondly, the comfort of the companion, because in the valleys you don't walk alone.

Let's start with the darkness of the valley. Valleys come in all shapes and sizes. Not all valleys are scary places.

Some are picture, postcards, holiday spots. You can think of Yosemite Valley in the States, or Buttermere in the Lake District. Or just ask the Welsh.

They'll wax lyrical about their beloved valleys. And Cian's welling up just at the thought of them though. But valleys can also be dark and scary and dangerous.

And David paints for us a picture of that. Even though I walk through the darkest valley. A picture of intense danger and threat.

[6 : 36] And you'll see in the footnotes that it can also mean the valley of the shadow of death. And east of Eden, death casts its long shadow over us all.

And we feel it most in times of loss. In times of grief or disappointment. But we can picture this, can't we?

A narrow gorge. Jagged rocks. Sheer drops. The terrain itself is perilous. Maybe you saw on the news this week. The coroner's report came out into the death of the teenager, Jay Slater, who died in Tenerife.

An accident, they concluded. He'd fallen into a steep ravine. That's the image David wants us to feel. That threat.

The shadows of the valley. Perfect hiding places for wild animals or thieves lying in wait around every bend. If you've ever hiked in Glencoe, you might know the Lost Valley.

[7 : 41] Sometimes known as the Hidden Valley or something else in Gaelic which I can't pronounce. But it's a dramatic raised valley where back in the day the Macdonald clan, Aelie's ancestors presumably, are said to have hidden their stolen cattle.

Well the psalmist David knew what it was to walk through a literal valley of deep darkness where predators prowled, where danger lurked around every corner.

But our valleys, they're a little bit different, aren't they? They look a bit different. Valleys come in all shapes and sizes. Today the shadows fall in different ways.

We're more likely to feel that darkness when life doesn't go to plan, when things don't pan out as we'd hoped or expected or desired, when relationships crack, when our health fails, when work goes belly up, when grief is unbearably heavy.

And for some of you here this evening, you've been trudging through that valley for longer than you care to think.

[8 : 59] And it feels endless. You can feel lost, disorientated, embattled, overwhelmed, disheartened.

It's hard to see your way out of the darkness. For some of you that's the case. But for all of us here this evening, we simply don't know what's round the corner.

We don't know what curveballs will come our way. We might not face literal valleys. But when we hit rock bottom, the metaphorical valleys are just as real.

We might not face lions or wolves, but we do know the same fears, the same anxiety, the same clawing uncertainty, the same vexing question, how on earth am I going to get through this one?

But before we rush to answer that question, look carefully and notice where the psalmist is walking.

[10 : 15] Through the valley. However bleak it might seem just now, the valley ain't the destination. It's not the end.

I know it doesn't feel like that when you're in the valley, but it's true. And before we get on to how to get through, I think we need to feel the shock of verse 4.

So let's back up and rewind a verse. Look at verse 3. He guides me along the right paths. The Lord my shepherd guides me along the right paths.

But then verse 4. Even though I walk through the darkest valley. Do you see it? We can be so familiar with this psalm that we miss a surprise.

Sometimes. But sometimes, sometimes the right path is the valley. Sometimes the right path that the Lord himself is leading you on goes straight through the darkest valley.

[11 : 31] Have you ever thought about that? We assume that the right path is safe and easy, well lit, conforming to the latest health and safety regulations.

But Psalm 23 doesn't let us think like that. Sometimes the right path is right down in the valley. That doesn't mean you've taken a wrong turn, necessarily.

That doesn't mean that God has abandoned you. Far from it. If we're honest with ourselves, isn't that often how we think?

Something bad happens, what's our instinct? Blame God. Why would he do this to me? Or perhaps more likely, more often perhaps, we blame ourselves.

What did I do to deserve this? We rack our brains and retrace our steps and think, what on earth have I done wrong? Where could I have gone differently to have a different outcome?

[12:41] But Psalm 23 says something very striking. If you find yourself in the valley of deep darkness, it's because your shepherd has led you there.

And as David Gibson writes in his book, *The Lord of Psalm 23*, God leads us to pain as purposefully as he leads us to pleasure.

Let me say that again. God leads us to pain as purposefully as he leads us to pleasure. For his name's sake.

And we can't always get our head around how that is going to glorify God. But we can take comfort in the reality of it. There's a strange comfort in that.

It's not a surprise to him that we're in the valley. He's not caught off guard. All our ways are known to him.

[13:48] Now that's not an easy lesson, is it? It's not an easy lesson. But if God isn't in charge of the valley, then how can we be sure that he's going to get us through the valley?

And by the way, this isn't new. As David Ivan reminded us last week, there are echoes of Exodus all over this psalm. Through the walls of the parted Red Sea, with the Egyptian army hot in their heels, God shepherded his sheep for safety, for his name's sake.

Through the wilderness, he led them to the land of promise. And our good shepherd has walked this valley path himself. Jesus' life led him through the darkness, through the suffering, through the deepest darkness of all, through his death in our place on the cross, through the valley of the shadow of death.

And gloriously, out the other side, to resurrection life. So if we follow Jesus, that's the pattern.

That's the pattern we can expect and anticipate. Suffering now, and glory later. The valleys of this life come in all shapes and sizes.

[15:10] Bereavement, grief, depression, trauma, abuse, betrayal, and abandonment.

Many of us live in its shadows. But, if the shepherd has led us into the valley, he certainly hasn't left us in the valley all alone.

And that's what changes everything, secondly. So Psalm 23 has three great statements of faith.

Last week, we looked at the first in verse one, I lack nothing, because in Christ I have all I need.

Next week, we'll look at the third, I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. But this evening, we come to the one right in the middle, I will fear no evil.

Now that's a bold claim, isn't it? I will fear no evil. I have nothing to fear. To be walking through the darkest of valleys and to be able to say I will fear no evil.

[16:23] This isn't putting on a brave face. I was starting to read a novel at the airport last week and one character facing death herself reassured herself with these words.

I'm not afraid of death. You can't dread what you don't experience. The only death we experience is that of other people. That's as bad as it gets.

Well, that's what a lot of people think, that's what a lot of people talk about death. A bit of bravado, hoping there's nothing beyond this life to fear.

But when David says, I will fear no evil, he's not gritting his teeth and hoping for the best. He's not British. This isn't a stiff upper lip.

He's saying you can walk through real darkness and not fear it for one simple reason. You, Lord, are with me.

[17:34] And as I've been sitting with this psalm over the psalm, I've remembered my dad singing it over me when I was little. And at bedtime, I was supposed to get back to sleep after a bad dream.

He'd put me on his shoulder and he'd take me up and he'd sing this psalm to me from the old Scottish psalter to the tune Crimmond, almost as a lullaby.

And back then, obviously, I wouldn't have had a clue. I wouldn't have grasped the depth of the meaning of the words. But I do remember feeling safe. And that's the picture.

the valley is still dark, but you don't fear because of who is there in it and through it with you.

And did you notice the subtle shift in verse 4? For the first time in the psalm, David stops talking about God and starts talking to God.

[18 : 38] So just look with me again at verses 1 to 3. He makes me lie down. He leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths and darkest valleys. But now verse 4. I will fear no evil for you are with me.

Faith isn't just knowing about God. It's knowing him personally. It's turning to him. It's trusting him. It's speaking to him in prayer. It's listening to what he has to say to us through his word.

It's knowing he's right there beside you through it all, through thick and thin. And notice, God's presence doesn't remove the valley.

Knowing that God's with you doesn't magic away the circumstances, but it does remove the fear. Psalm 23 doesn't deny the darkness and the shadows.

[19 : 41] it says, because God is with me I shall fear no evil.

I don't have to face it alone. So let me pause and ask you what are you afraid of right now? your health, your finances, your future, your failures.

Whatever it is, hear this truth. Jesus is with you. He's got you. He knows you by name.

He's right there with you through it all. And as David Gibson points out in his book, the whole Bible is summed up and contained in these four words. You are with me.

[20 : 43] Just think about the story of the Bible. In the Garden of Eden and God walking with Adam and Eve in the garden. At the burning bush he promised Moses, I will be with you.

In the wilderness God came to dwell with his people in the tabernacle. In Jesus God came as Emmanuel, God with us.

Before leaving, Jesus promised, I am with you always to the end of the age. And the book of Revelation ends with the dwelling place of God is with man.

The whole Bible in a nutshell. It starts with God with his people. It ends with God with his people. And everything in between, God is making a way to be with his people.

But here's the thing. Lots of us, lots of Christians believe this in our heads. But functionally, in our lives, we don't often grasp this truth and take hold of this truth for ourselves.

[21 : 51] we think, sure, God is with the church, he's with his people in some kind of abstract sense, but he's not really with me.

I don't feel it. And sometimes we even disqualify ourselves from it. We say, I've blown it. I've failed him too badly this time. Surely God can't be with someone like me.

But the gospel says, Jesus doesn't base his presence with us on what you've done. He is with you because he is the good shepherd who knows his sheep.

He is your shepherd and he is with you, even in the valley, especially in the valley. And you and I probably think of shepherd and it sounds gentle and sedate on us.

We might picture some guy chilling on the hillside on some green and pleasant land. But for David who'd actually been a shepherd, it was nothing of the sword. Being a shepherd was hardcore.

[23 : 02] So when David went to King Saul and told him why he could face the mighty Goliath, how did David commend himself to Saul? Well, in 1 Samuel 17, if you want to turn now, it's on page 289.

In 1 Samuel 17, what qualifications does David give? 1 Samuel 17, verse 34.

David says to Saul, your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. In other words, I can defeat Goliath because I'm a shepherd. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep, I went after it, struck it, and rescued the sheep from its mouth.

When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it, and killed it. So this isn't a hobby. He's not some kind of weekend farmer in the home counties.

This is hand-to-hand combat with a bear. And it shows us why David takes comfort in the shepherd's tools. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

[24 : 13] The rod and the staff weren't simply there for decoration. And nor are they the same thing exactly. I used to assume that they were just two words for a stick. I was wrong.

They're actually different. They have different purposes. The rod was shorter. It's mace-like, often iron-tipped. It was an instrument of defence. The staff, that's your long, your typical curved shepherd's crook, an instrument of correction for guiding and pulling back the wandering sheep.

The rod protects from wolves and the staff protects from wandering. The rod protects from external threats and the staff protects from ourselves.

On my relative's farm in South Africa, they have two types of dogs. They have a ridgeback, which is a big dog, fast, energetic, agile.

Its job is to round up the cattle. It's like the staff. Now, the ridgeback is a big dog. It's a proper dog. But it is dwarfed. I mean, absolutely dwarfed by the two brubbles, huge South African mastiffs.

[25 : 33] They weighed as much as me back then. I guess I'd have the measure in them now. But they're the heavies. Their job is to guard the farm. They're the rod. And both are needed.

The sheep need protection from predators, but they also need pulling back when straying from the paths of righteousness. David says, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Because when you know that your shepherd has the rod, you know you need fear, no enemy. And when you know he has the staff, you know he'll pull you back when you wander because he loves you too much to leave you lost.

And by the way, while that is comforting for us to know and to take on board, it's not always comfortable in the moment for a sheep to be disciplined like that.

Now here's the thing, the comfort you feel in the valley will be directly linked to how close you stay to the shepherd. If you don't think you need him, you won't feel his comfort.

[26 : 42] But when you do, when you open your Bible and pray and talk with him, when you draw close in relationship to Jesus, when you spend time with other believers like that, fear starts to shrink because awareness of his presence starts to grow.

And so David can say with utter confidence, even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

Your rods and your staff, they comfort me. Because ultimately, Psalm 23 isn't about our bravery, it's about our shepherds.

And if the Lord is your shepherd, you will never, ever walk alone through any valley. If you're trusting in Jesus, you have nothing in this life to fear, not even death itself.

Let me tell you this story in closing. In 2004, I very nearly lost my brother Peter. And Peter is a runner, he still runs marathons today.

[27 : 59] Two hours 38 is his personal best, he's pretty fast. But back then he was into ultra marathons, the kind that make ordinary marathons look like park runs. And the year before he'd run the comrades in South Africa, that's 55 miles, a double marathon.

And in 2004, he went back and did it again, this time in reverse. It's known as the uprun, from Durban to Peter Maritzburg, the 55 miles plus the equivalent of climbing a Monroe from sea level in the baking heat.

It was a race that just about killed him. two days later, he ended up in hospital with kidney failure and from dehydration.

That at least was manageable and he was discharged. But the problem was there'd been a clerical error and the nurses had accidentally, inadvertently over-hydrated him.

And in trying to rehydrate him, he'd filled his body with too much fluid. And the fluid filled his heart and finally his brain.

[29 : 11] And he seizures three times, once in the medical centre, once in the ambulance, once in the CT scan in the hospital. Now, Peter was oblivious to all this going on, but for my mum who travelled out to watch the race, it was the darkest valley of her life.

she hadn't reckoned on watching her son die. Your son might not make it, they told her.

You'd better phone his dad. And this week, I asked my dad about that phone call back in 2004, what he remembered, how they walked through that valley of the shadow of death.

He said we prayed and we clung to that promise that whatever the outcome, whether Peter lived or died, God is with us.

That really is the heart of Psalm 23 verse 4. even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you Lord are with me.

[30 : 34] Brothers and sisters, you might be in a valley right now or one might come when you least expect it. When it does, you need to have these words imprinted and written on your soul because if the Lord your shepherd is with you, you have nothing to fear, not even death.

because you will never walk in the valley alone. Let's pray. I'm going to use some words from an ancient prayer of St.

Patrick that remind us that Christ is with us every step of the way. Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for this simple but profound life-changing truth that you are with us, that you have walked the valley before us so that we really no longer have anything to fear, not even death.

instead, we look forward with glad anticipation to life everlasting in your glorious presence.

[32 : 03] So would you help us to live our days on earth in light of that hope in your name. Amen.
wow, we're going to respond at