

Daily Devotional, May 7, 2020 Even in the Darkest Valley

In the last devotional, we learned that God provides for us in order to uphold His name, His glory, to show us what it means for God to uphold His promises so that His name will be exalted. We cannot in our own power, do it alone. We therefore thank God each day for our provision.

Now, In verse 4, David moves in a slightly different direction. He shuffles from faith in the ways God provides to faith in the ways God protects. Here he tells us, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley (the valley of the shadow of death), I will fear no evil." This is a most fitting statement for those who are about to go to war. Hebrew is an extremely symbolic language. Rather than say, "God got mad" it says, "God's face grew red." In calling someone patient, the Hebrew would describe it, "His nose is long." It is a most unusual, yet pictorial language. I want you to understand that, so you will not find it so totally strange when it describes death.

For the Jews "the darkest valley" or "the shadow" was their way of expressing the deepest, darkest place. Surely, that dark place includes death, but notice its movement throughout the Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, He's doing all these great things, He's leading me in paths of virtue." And even if the Shepherd is going to lead His sheep through an extremely dark place where predators might live, an area where there is the possibility of the sheep being attacked and killed, in this dark, dangerous place, David says, "I will fear no evil."

Now first understand this: the presence of danger, even of death, does not mean that we are on the wrong path, that we have been led in the wrong direction. It is quite easy in situations like this, whether it be physical or mental harm, individual or communal, to think that God does not care for us anymore, that He has given up His will for us. It is also easy to think that God has somehow lost control. It is easy to think in difficult situations such as we are experiencing today, "Well, I guess it's all up to me now, isn't it?" Did you know that it was Benjamin Franklin who once said, "God helps those who help themselves." This is the person lacking in faith who looks into the valley of the shadow of death and responds in fear.

In the midst of pain, and especially in the midst of the dangers in life, our faith demonstrates that God is still my Shepherd and He is still taking me to a better place. He is still leading me in paths of righteousness and if that brings me into the valley of the shadow of death, I am not going to throw my faith out the window and say, "Somehow God no longer cares." That is the stream of thought in this Psalm, that I will stand fast in faith.

In one commentary on Psalm 23, the author asked the question, "Why does God sometimes lead us through the valley of the shadow of death?" The answer given was: to take us to a *better place*. Our response of faith must be to still believe that God is God, and that God knows what He is doing while we are on the journey. And that there is a far better place that lies ahead.

We next move to the middle, or heart of the Psalm in the second half of verse 4 where David tells us what all of this is truly about; David tells us why he believes so strongly that God will protect him. Again, notice that he shifts pronouns from "he" to "you," from a semi-personal to a directly personal language. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley (the valley of the shadow of death), I will fear no evil." Why? "For *You* are with me." This is the crucial statement that David wants to make in Psalm 23: David relishes the very presence of God in his life. It is out of his strong faith that God is always with him, even in the darkest valleys, that David is able to speak with conviction about his God who will not only provide for him but will also protect him.

Now David says, "*Your* rod and *Your* staff they comfort me." The rod is the shorter, heavier device used for fighting off animals. The staff is the longer, more slender shepherd's staff that would be used for guidance of the sheep, such as collaring or prodding a little. (Not to be confused with the garden instrument used to hang potted plants from!) David is thankful that God has a club to beat his enemies over the head with. David is thankful that God has a staff to give direction and guidance to the sheep. But that is not the heart of the Psalm. The heart of the Psalm and what gives David his greatest assurance is

his knowing by faith that *God is with him*. This is at the heart of what gives Psalm 23 such a personal nature.

We discover this same nature in an earlier Psalm of David, in Psalm 16, verse 11, in which David makes this declaration to God: “*You make known to me the path of life; You fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*” David is a man of faith, a man who is after God’s own heart, who understands that at the very core of his faith is a God who is present with him, at the very core of his conviction, at the very core of his relationship God is there personally, and in His presence there is fullness of joy. *That* is the heart of Psalm 23 and *that* is the heart of King David, the very presence of God. It is because of that faith that everything else in him moves and has its being.

Prayer: Knowing that through faith I find my protection in you, may your Holy Spirit strengthen my conviction and grow in me the heart of hearts that David had beating within him. May I continue to be nurtured through your Holy Word so that I may have no fear of the known or unknown, believing that you go with me on every path to every place, whether those places are bright or dark, shadowy or colorful. Always bless me with your presence as I journey in your peace. With the indwelling of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit I pray, Amen.