

Psalms 23:4

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[0 : 00] Turn back to Psalm 23 on page 458. It's great to be back in this psalm again. We've been dipping into it a little bit over the summer.

And we've seen the Lord described as shepherd. And then the Lord as restorer. And tonight we meet the Lord as comforter.

The shepherd leads David. And the question that we need to ask with any leader or with any companion is are they good in a crisis? Do they hang around?

As we've joined David in his journey with his heavenly shepherd, up until now much of it actually has been a positive journey, hasn't it?

It's all been still waters, green pastures, lying down, feeding, restoration. But we know and he knows that life is not always like that.

[1 : 07] And halfway through this psalm, the path that David has led along takes a very dark turn. It closes in on David.

And the experience becomes very menacing, actually. There is a crisis. And I want to focus in on verse 4 tonight. Let's read that again.

Being led by the shepherd, where does David find himself?

The valley of deep darkness or of shadows. How does that feel? Well, maybe we don't know what that feels like, literally.

There are too many city lights around, aren't they, for us to know what pitch black darkness is like. But actually, many of us know it experientially. There's a crisis.

[2 : 16] A path. Which is darkest in the greatest crises of all. Death. David is suddenly enveloped, isn't he, by the darkness of the crisis.

Particularly thinking of the moments of his death. The moment that we will all face one day at the end of our lives. Francois de la Rochefoucauld, I think I've got that right.

Said that neither the sun nor death can be looked at steadily. Maybe it's the verse in the people's songbook that actually we find hardest to sing, isn't it?

In the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Really? We don't even look at death.

Steadily. And yet here is David looking straight at it. He is facing it. And he is not afraid.

[3 : 19] Because in the darkness, he finds the one who floods the valley with light. He knows the shepherd. Firstly, he knows the shepherd leading him in the shadow.

The shepherd leads me in the shadow. Society hides it away. Or tries to sweeten it. We don't talk about it, do we?

We make light of it. We use euphemisms. He or she, they've gone into the next room. They've passed on. We try to ignore the darkness of death.

Like a shadow. It casts itself over us. I don't know if you saw Wimbledon earlier in the summer. On that kind of famous shot of centre court.

If the sun is out, you get that shadow, don't you? That kind of starts in the corner. In the top right hand side. And then if it's a long match, the shadow moves slowly.

[4 : 22] Over one side of the crowd. And it slowly approaches everybody, doesn't it? And before the people know it, half of the court is covered in the shadow.

Then the players. And soon at the end of the day, everyone is under the shadow. And this shadow of crisis of death is a shadow that we are all touched by.

Without exception. Paul says that the shadow of death has reigned ever since the time of Adam.

And to come under the shadow is to come under its power.

The power of death. To be held by it. What is it like to walk into this shadow? When David speaks about death, we see that actually he is far more in tune with the awful reality of it.

You can just tell by some of the words that he uses to describe that experience. Words like valley. Shadow. Fear.

[5 : 34] Evil. But just as the psalm starts with leading, it continues with leading. If God is my shepherd, we might ask, why have I arrived here in the shadow?

But it's not that the shepherd has lost his way. David is sure that God is the shepherd leading all of the time. And even now, the Lord has wisely brought me to this point of walking in the shadow, he says.

He has led me here. At this point. In this way. The surroundings have changed around him. He's not next to the still waters or the green pastures.

But the shepherd leads on. And so David knows that death is not just a matter of fate or of bad luck. He is led there at the right time. A time chosen and appointed by God. He says in another psalm, Psalm 139 verse 6.

[6 : 47] Your eyes, God's eyes, saw my unformed substance in my mother's womb. And in your book were written every one of the days that were formed for me.

Before he was ever born, God had a plan for his life. And surely that includes the day of David's death, doesn't it? David is not passive, just waiting to kick the bucket.

It is the picture of the Christian who walks steadily and confidently towards death. We can approach it. And we can advance towards it.

Not in fear, but in safety. Following the path ordained for us. Knowing the safety of the one who leads us in the shadow. We so often want to guess, don't we?

Or to plan. We worry about when and where. John Flavel said though that his providence is wiser than you are.

[8 : 11] And he navigates us through the dark ravines as well as the green pastures. And both of them have their place in his loving direction in our lives.

It's been said that you are immortal until God says so. I kind of like that. It's not an excuse to be reckless with life, is it?

It's precisely because God leads us to the point that we shouldn't take the process into our own hands. Whether we spend all of our lives trying to prolong our lives.

Or we fly fast and loose with life. It's the first thing to remember in those fearful moments. That we are not there by chance or by accident.

But God has led us there. And so death for the Christian is no longer an untamed, wild force that exerts itself on us whenever and wherever it likes.

[9 : 14] Not when we have God as our shepherd. That's the first thing. He leads me in the shadow. He leads me in death. Secondly, David sees that God is with me in the shadow.

He leads me in the shadow. He is with me in the shadow. Just look at that verse again and see the closeness David senses here. And it's interesting, isn't it?

It turns out that when times are darkest, when the path is darkest, actually the shepherd is closest. As the sheep follow the shepherd, they probably get slightly behind from time to time.

You can imagine it. They fall back. And he sort of waits, wouldn't they, until they catch up. And maybe that's been the kind of scene in verses 1 to 3. See there, David speaks about the shepherd in the third person, doesn't he?

He makes me lie down. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He's over there and he's leading us in this direction.

[10 : 23] But then in the shadow, the person changes, doesn't it? Now he says, you are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me.

Now the shepherd stops. He no longer simply leads, but he escorts David. And he doesn't just talk about the Lord here, does he?

He talks to the Lord in the shadow. Walking with him, close to him. He walks side by side with David in the shadow.

He's not ahead, but with. He never leaves David. And especially in death, he is closest. Only the Lord can lead a man or woman through death.

All other guides at some point need to turn back. But the Lord is there when the traveller is alone. He's not further away when he's in the shadow.

[11 : 34] Quite the opposite. Now I'm not trying to be morbid or anything, but we can face this, can't we? We can think about this for a little bit. I don't know if you've ever imagined the kind of

death that we might die.

Maybe we imagine the kind of typical deathbed scene. And the people and the things that we want around us are there. And we look for support.

It can be a great encouragement to have friends and family there, isn't it? And that's good. I hope there will be someone there on the day that I finally die to read this scripture to me.

Those people and those things will be a great support. But only to a point. Christopher Hitchens said that instead of the false consolation of religion, which he equates with superstition, he said he places his trust in medical science and the support of friends and family.

And they are good things. But there will come a place on that path that they and those things cannot walk. When they cannot walk down the path that we will walk down, they will have to turn back at that point.

[12 : 58] And no other company will be enough at that point. But there is one who will be right there. The shepherd is with me in the shadow.

One writer said, it's not the presence of God, but the want of it that makes people sad. David perhaps says more than he knows here, isn't it?

This psalm finds its fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ, the good shepherd. And Paul can say, can't he, thinking of Christ and our union with him and the love of God that is poured out to us through Christ, that nothing, not even death, will be able to separate us from his love to us in Christ, who is with us, even in death, who is able to reach out to us and grab us there in resurrection power, who has been through the shadow himself before us.

And so he fears no evil. Notice in verse 4, he doesn't say there will be no evil, does he? But I will fear no evil. And that fear of the shadow, that fear of death, is something that dogs people all of their lives.

Hebrews 2 tells us that without Christ, people through fear of death are subject to a lifelong slavery. And it's there. The fear of death, it eats into our lives.

[14 : 34] We're consumed by the when, the how, the where. We spend millions staving it off. Subconsciously, we are afraid.

We are very afraid. And even before we have actually died, we feel a thousand deaths, as Spurgeon said, just fearing the one death.

Life is stripped of joy. In fear, some are dead, even before they die. But his presence overcomes the worst thing that remains, the fear.

I love how Cramner puts it in, Homily Against the Fear of Death. Cramner's homilies, you probably haven't read them, they're worth a read, written around the time of the Reformation, to bring Reformation doctrine into people's lives.

He wrote this, Thus is this bodily death, a door or entering into life. And therefore, not so much dreadful, if it be rightly considered.

[15 : 39] As it is comfortable, not a mischief, but a remedy for all mischief, no enemy, but a friend, not a cruel tyrant, but a gentle guide, leading us not to mortality, but to immortality, not to sorrow and pain, but to joy and pleasure, and that to endure forever.

The Christian view of death is totally different, isn't it? Such a different view. He leads me, he is with me.

And thirdly, thirdly and lastly, the shepherd comforts me in the shadow. He comforts me. What is it that can comfort, what is it that can take away the fear of death as David approaches it?

Well, we're told actually it's the equipment that the shepherd carries. It is your rod and your staff.

They comfort me, he says. The Lord is with me, leading me through, but what is so excellent about him as a leader and as a comforter is that he is an armed shepherd.

He is armed for the darkness of what lies ahead. So the rod, the staff, the rod, first of all, was the weapon of choice for the ancient shepherds.

[17 : 01] Held in the right hand, it was used as a weapon to strike off animals that were enemies of the flock. David used one in 1 Samuel 17.

He tells Goliath, tells Saul just before the Goliath battle. He says, 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, delivered him out of his mouth.

If he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears. These shepherds are not shrinking violets, are they?

They're not sitting around kind of cuddling lambs the whole day. There is a tenderness, but there is a tenacity, isn't there, and an aggression and a power and an arm.

The Lord is powerful against death. He has the right weapons to defeat death. And in a wonderful way, David gets comfort from seeing that the Lord is armed in this way.

[18:09] He has a firm grip on the rod to strike down death, to defeat it, to render it powerless. death has lost its sting.

It cannot ultimately bring harm to God's people in the valley. Not because of anything that they have done or David has done, but because he takes comfort from the shepherd's armoury, from his work. The Lord is mighty in battle, mighty to save. His rod comforts him. And then there's the staff as well. We might call it a crook.

It's the staff to keep the sheep near and hook them in. Even here, with such danger around the shepherd, he knows, doesn't he, we're still prone to wandering off.

We're still prone to temptation, to losing faith, to heading down the road so that we shouldn't be going down. But with the shepherd, the crook, discipline, it means security.

[19:17] He keeps us close with his staff. David is completely dependent on the shepherd. Even his ability to stay with the shepherd is the responsibility of the Lord himself.

That's the comfort of knowing in those last moments when our bodies give way and our minds fail. It's not how much we hold on to him, is it?

But how much he will hold on to us. His staff comforts me. I will fear no evil. Even if our life is taken away suddenly or we don't have time to prepare, the shepherd is prepared, isn't he?

And it's the right time and it's the right place. He leads me in death. He is with me there. And his power comforts me there. It's part of the Psalter, Psalm 23.

It's a song or a prayer to be sung by all of God's people. So it's open to every one of God's people, isn't it? It's not just King David.

[20:27] It gets us to maybe change our thinking on the experience of the Christian in death. Of the evil and darkness of it which is real.

I love the way that the New Testament speaks of the Christian who has died falling asleep.

Paul uses that phrase, doesn't he? They have fallen asleep in the Lord. That is how I think we should think of death as a Christian.

To fall asleep is to have our senses taken away, isn't it? for a time, for a season but then to wake up the next morning and to feel more fresh and more alive than we did the night before.

That is what it is to die as a Christian, to fall asleep. And there should be in the Christian life a kind of ambivalence towards death actually.

[21:33] As we sung this morning, no guilt in life, no fear in death. This is the power of Christ in me. From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny.

Paul expresses it, doesn't he? To live is Christ and to die is gain. Christian ambivalence towards death. To think of the departing and to be with Christ he says is far better.

And yet he wants to hang around, doesn't he? He wants to stay and serve and work. He faces death and he says well it would be good to be alive but it would be great to be with Christ.

That's the feeling of verse 4. And so that image that we had at the beginning tonight of the shadow approaching us on the tennis court actually that is not how death is for the Christian.

it's not that the shadow approaches us on the tennis court and we sort of just sit there passively.

Actually in God's providence we are led and we walk towards it in his planned path with confidence.

[22:50] We steadily approach the shadow because the shepherd leads us there at the right time. we are not running away from the shadow or even just standing still just waiting but we are boldly moving towards it and we can face it.

We can face the darkness and in the darkness we can see the light the light of the shepherd's providence and his leading the light of his presence of the comfort of his armoury and as we dwell on the Lord Jesus Christ we see that light most clearly don't we?

Matthew in his gospel quotes Isaiah about the Lord Jesus Christ the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light and for those dwelling in the region in the shadow of death on them a light has dawned.

We realise actually don't we for there to be a shadow there must be light and where the shadow is deepest the light is strongest for the Christian the Lord is closest in the deepest shadow the wife of a missionary in Bombay Mrs Harvey was dying a friend said to her that he hoped the saviour would

be with her as she walked through the valley of the shadow of death if this she said is the dark valley it has not a dark spot in it all is light she has during most of her sickness bright views of the perfections of God his awful holiness she said appeared the most lovely of all his attributes at one time she said she wanted words to express her views of the glory and majesty of Christ it seems she said that if all of the glory were annihilated and nothing left but his bare self it would be enough it would be a universe of glory and as the shadow moves maybe it's nearer to some of us we feel it maybe in our bodies we might feel like it's a long way from us but it is cunning isn't it and without the shepherd it is a fearful and evil place but the Lord is David's shepherd who leads him and is with him comforting him even in the valley of the shadow of death and that that is a universe of glory let's pray together