

**“Mountains, Valleys, & Caves: David In the Valley of Death”**

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**Psalm 23**

**February 14, 2022**

**Psalm 23**

**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.**

**He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.**

**3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.**

**4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

**5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**

**6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

We're in what is arguably the most famous text in the entire Bible, Psalm 23. I suspect most of you in here can quote at least part of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. This is a Psalm of King David and it starts out with this imagery that we see all throughout the Bible, old and new testament: The Lord is my Shepherd.

And the implication of that is that we are sheep. And that's not a compliment! And yet over 500 times in scripture this shepherd/sheep imagery is used to describe us as sheep and the Lord as our shepherd. And that's not really a thing any of us want to be called if you think about it. Nobody gets a tattoo of a sheep. You get a lion or a wolf. No I put a sheep on there because I just wanted to remind myself of just how helpless I am. Nobody does that!

Yet you look at our lives and we're stressed like sheep. And sheep are stressed because they are nature's victim. They have been finely tuned to be eaten by literally anything. They are prey for literally every natural predator: lions, bears, hyenas, small dogs, large birds. Insects! Sheep have been known to be so bothered by flies that they'll beat their head against a tree until they hurt themselves. When the stress comes, sheep can't protect themselves. They have no claws, they don't have teeth that can bite, they can't even run fast.

They can't protect themselves. And they can't provide for themselves! Sheep will dehydrate and die feet from water because they can't see it. Or they'll drink polluted water that other animals have defecated in. And what's crazy they will keep drinking it until it kills them. You'd think at one moment they'd be like "Does this taste crazy to you George?" And they'll just keep going to polluted streams for their provision until it kills them.

I look at that and I see us. There's so much anxiety and pain and loss and brokenness in our world today and for so many of us we are just lost and helpless sheep. And we're in desperate need of a shepherd. Because so many of us are craving more peace, more direction, more hope, more encouragement. We're lost and we're in need and our answer is in verse 1: **(SLIDE) The Lord is my Shepherd, I SHALL NOT WANT.** Doesn't that sound appealing? I shall not want. What is it that you're craving more of? Where is it in your life that you feel a lack of fulfillment?

Whatever it is, I think we can boil it down to loss. Our theme today is loss. A lot of people think of death when they think about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm because it's such a common passage to read at a funeral. And any kind of loss is really just a small death. So you're craving more money or success, that's a financial loss that you have. You're desiring a significant other or maybe just stronger friendships, that is relational loss that you're experiencing. Maybe you are craving more status at work, that's a social loss that you're enduring. Maybe you're a member of a church that has a beloved pastor of 29 years who is retiring. That's a big loss! Despite the excitement around Pastor Andrew and his family coming, we also grieve losing Pastor Tom as our senior pastor. Every one of us experience losses on a weekly basis. Loss and anxiety and brokenness is woven into the human story. And that's why these words from David are so powerful: The Lord is my shepherd; I SHALL NOT WANT.

The reason I love hearing these words from David is because he was a guy who knew the ups and downs of life. See we just think of David as that hero who slayed the giant, Goliath. But David was a guy who lived on the run for 15 years while Saul was trying to murder him. David was a guy whose daughter was raped and 4 of his kids died prematurely. And one of them tried to steal the throne from him. He had to lead his country through a 3-year famine. He knew the twists and turns of life. And yet during that he was able to declare: The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. I hope this morning you are able to leave this place reciting those words and believing them to be true for your life.

And the reason that is so important for us is because all of us are going to experience pain and loss in our life, much like David did. I mean I hope I'm just pointing out the obvious but there will be many times in life in which you find yourself walking through a valley. We love the part of the text that says he leads me beside cool waters. He takes me to green pastures. That's what we make the adorable greeting cards out of right? Little sheep on the pasture, that's the Lord, he's just leading me to that pasture. But did you notice the text also says "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Nobody sends that greeting card! The Shepherd's got me in the valley!!!! And he's coming for you next!

Pain and loss are a reality of this life. And I see pain and loss fleshed out primarily in two ways (**WHITEBOARD**). First is unnecessary pain. Unnecessary loss is pain that comes from our compromising choices. It is completely avoidable. It could be a loss of money

because we chose to break the speed limit. It could be the loss of a relationship because we chose not to invest in it or we hurt the other person. David experienced tremendous loss because of his decision to have an affair with Bathsheba. There are all kinds of unnecessary loss that we experience because of decisions that we make that could have been avoided.

But there's also unavoidable pain and loss. This means you didn't do anything to deserve it. You can't really do anything to avoid it. It's coming for you whether you want it or not. Loved ones get sick, cancer happens, natural disasters devastate. The reality is there are probably 100s of people in this room who feel like they are in the midst of a valley. If you're willing to be vulnerable for a moment, I just wonder if there's anyone in here this morning who feels like they're in the midst of a valley or maybe you've experienced some loss recently? I hope the first thing you realize is that you aren't alone.

But you also need to know that your tendency in the midst of pain and loss is to try and control it. Look with me at v.4, David says: (SLIDE) **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.** It says "even though I WALK." Doesn't that sound interesting? That he's walking. Like he's not even in a hurry, he's just taking his sweet loving time in the valley of the shadow of death. That's not how we tend to deal with pain. When we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death we want our verse to read: "Even though I am RUNNING for my life through the valley of the shadow of death. Even though I am doing my very best to claw my way out of the valley of the shadow of death." That's how we want our verse to read. Because we want to get away from pain and loss as quickly as possible. And so we try and control our pain.

And I think there's 4 ways we try to control our pain in the midst of the valleys of life. **(WHITEBOARD)** Some of us try to numb our pain. We numb it by drinking too much, spending too much, we numb it with prescription pills, maybe starving ourselves or harming ourselves. We numb it with things like pornography and other destructive habits that only bring momentary feelings of relief followed by brokenness and heartache.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> way we deal with pain is we try and suppress it. So what we do is we try and busy ourselves. We pack our calendar full. We work really late even at the expense of our families. So that we never have to think about what's really going on in our hearts. We avoid talking about it or sharing it with a trusted friend or pastor or counselor.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> way we deal with it is we fake it. And we're all pretty good at that right? We show the world "I'm good." How are you doing today? I'm good. Even though you're terrible and your world is falling a part around you. No, I'm good. In the meantime, our souls are decaying.

The 4<sup>th</sup> way we deal with pain is we embody it. What I mean is we make it our anthem and our rallying cry. We make ourselves the victim and it's everyone's fault but ours. And it manifests itself in bitterness, anger, and resentment toward the world and maybe even toward loved ones.

You can do one of those 4 things, but we need to realize that after we do any or all those things, our pain will still be there. There is a better way. Look at the text: (SLIDE) **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.** Here's the better way. When you find yourself in the valley and if you're not in it now, it will come one day for you. When you find yourself in the valley, the better way is to realize that your good shepherd is in the valley with you. Leading you, caring for you, comforting you, providing for you. And he is committed to walking every single inch of your valley with you.

And the beauty is that our good shepherd, Jesus Christ, never wastes pain. Do you realize that? He never wastes a drop of hurt, pain, or grief. He can take pain that seems pointless to us and make it productive. That's what makes God so amazing. That he can take pain that the world says is pointless and evil and he can make it productive. (SLIDE) **Romans 8:28 says it best: We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.** I promise you that if you cling to your shepherd you will actually begin to see an ever increasing amount of intimacy with him. And isn't that what we all desire? More intimacy and connection with Jesus?

Look at what David says. He says: I will fear no evil for you are with me. Now here's why I find that interesting. What word does he use in the first 3 verses of our Psalm? He uses the word He. He makes me lie down, he leads me, he restores me. But then we find him in the valley of the shadow of death. And he says I will fear no evil. Why? For YOU are with me. Do you see the movement there toward intimacy? It's as if David's valley has been a breeding ground for intimacy with his shepherd.

He's moved from he to you. Because he knows that his shepherd is in the valley with him. I promise you that if you cling to your shepherd, don't be surprised if you see God move in ways that you would never get to see him move if everything in your life was just working out how you wanted it to. Don't be surprised if you get to experience him providing for you and giving you unexplainable joy. Even during loss and pain.

I have experienced this so many times in my life, but one of the most powerful ways was years ago when Mindy and I had just reached a really hard time in our marriage. You can go through all of the premarital counseling in the world and it can never prepare you for just how hard marriage is. Marriage is like most really amazing things in life, for them to be wonderful and joyful, it almost always takes hard work.

So like most couples we just hit a really rough patch in our marriage and we weren't even sure if we were going to survive it. We were both so broken, but it was through that brokenness and that vulnerability that God did an amazing work in both of our lives. Through the pain and the loss, God drew us close to him and over time helped us draw closer to one another. And we would both tell you that our marriage is so much stronger and more joy filled now than ever before. And we would both point to that really low season in our marriage when it felt like things were going to fall apart.

God does some of God's best work in our lowest moments. Maybe some of you in here can relate and you're struggling in your own marriage. Or maybe you've recently experienced the loss of a loved one or the loss of a relationship or financial loss that has you on the brink. I promise you that if you cling to your Shepherd, you will find new levels of intimacy with Christ and with others.

So our pain can bring us to new levels of intimacy with Jesus, but we can also have new levels of influence. Let me show you what I mean, look at v.5 (SLIDE) **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.** This is interesting that it says you prepare a table before me. Where? In the presence of my enemies. Isn't that an interesting picture? But here's the deal, anytime God prepares a table, it's usually a feast. And it's always joy and laughter. And here's what that means: it means no matter what is coming at you right now, God can still have joy waiting for you in the midst of your enemies. In the midst of your loss and pain. And a lot of times that joy comes from God giving you greater influence in the midst of your pain. God wants to take your pain and turn it into your platform.

Are you willing to believe that your greatest impact and influence in this life might actually be what comes of your life because of what God does in the valley of the shadow of death? We see this kind of thing all the time in our Celebrate Recovery ministry. (SLIDE) All of the leaders in that ministry are men and women who experienced tremendous loss and brokenness earlier in their lives, but through that pain, God has now given them an incredible platform to help and to lead others. That is helping others follow Jesus at its finest! When we can take our pain and loss and turn it into a platform for the advancement of the Gospel!

One of our newest local ministry partners is an organization called Changing Lanes. (SLIDE) This ministry helps men and women who are addicted to pornography. I don't know if you know this or not, but pornography has become a pandemic in our country and it's a multi-billion dollar industry. Changing Lane's executive director, Brett, was mired in his own painful addiction for many years before God freed him from his addiction and then opened incredible doors for him to start a ministry that has now helped 100s of men and women find freedom from the disease of pornography addiction. It was through his pain and brokenness that God gave him an incredible platform and allowed him to have tremendous influence in the lives of many.

In 1980 Candice Lightner's 13-year-old daughter was tragically killed by a drunken driver. When we think about pain and loss, it's hard to imagine a greater pain than losing your child. And I know some of you know that pain. But do you know what she did? She harnessed that pain and loss and used it to exert tremendous influence by starting MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving. **(SLIDE)** Because of her loss she founded an organization that for the past 40 years has helped pass important legislation regarding drunken driving and has provided support and help to victim's families.

That's influence. And so many times it comes from our pain and our loss. I wonder if there are some in here this morning who God is trying to use for greater influence. I wonder who out there this morning has an incredible platform before you because of some pain and loss you have experienced? Don't shy away from that calling on your life because God can do something beautiful and amazing with you. When you find yourself on the roller coaster of life, you know what you can declare? I will fear no evil for my shepherd is with me.

Our hope in the face of loss and death and pain rests entirely on what Jesus did for us on the cross. All our hope relies on that man, Jesus Christ. Because the cross that was meant to kill became our victory.

If you are currently dealing with loss or maybe some other kind of pain and defeat in your life, I want to point out a key word from our text. There's a preposition in verse 4 that is pivotal for all of us who are experiencing pain, loss, and death.

**(WHITEBOARD)** Even though I walk THROUGH the darkest valley I will fear no evil, for you are with me. I mean who says that? Death is typically where all things stop, but not when Jesus Christ is your shepherd. He says we're going through it because I've got a house on the other side. So if I can encourage you in anyway this morning, I want you to find hope in the fact that Jesus Christ has conquered death. If you're looking for it in anything else... a relationship, status and success, money, sports. Even if it's a really good thing, you will be disappointed. Because all of those are fleeting and cannot ultimately fulfill you the way that Jesus can. And when we are connected to him, he will take us THROUGH whatever loss and pain we are experiencing, even death. Because our physical death is not the end.

Let me close with this: When I was a student at OU, I attended every single basketball game including many of their road games. So in 2016 when OU made the Final Four and it was in Houston, I knew that I had to go. So I called my friend Grant and I said: dude we've gotta go. And he said yea, we do, let me call my Dad. Well I knew that was a good thing, because Grant's Dad is kind of a big deal in Houston. Grant calls me back about 10 minutes later and says: Dad says he can get us taken care of. And I said, ok let's do it.

So we drive down together and we get to Grant's family's house. And Gary, Grant's Dad, gives us these lanyards that gets us onto the club level and he says hey I didn't get a

parking pass, but. And we were like “dude, I think we can take care of our parking, free tickets is amazing enough. And he says: no, let me finish. I didn’t get you a parking pass, but I’m going to tell you how to get in and park right next to the stadium. So he proceeds to give us very specific directions and he’s like yea this is going to take you around to the backside of the stadium and you’re going to start to see a lot of cones and street closed signs, but just keep going. He said: there will probably be a cop, but just tell him you’re with Gary Wilson.

And so we’re like, ok... I guess that will work. So we drive downtown, we’re following his instructions and it becomes very obvious, very quickly that we’re not in a place that people are allowed. And sure enough there are cones and there are street closed signs and yet a few 100 yards away is this private parking lot right next to the stadium full of Bentley’s and BMWs and jaguars. And sure enough there’s a cop and here we are rolling up in my sweet minivan and we’re like, man this is not good. And the cop says: Umm, gentleman did you not see the signs? And we said: Uhhh... we’re with Gary Wilson and he said to come here and that you would be expecting... And the guy cuts us off mid-sentence and says: I’m sorry, yes, please come right on in. And I’m like, Uhh yea that’s right!

So we’re parked like 10 yards from the stadium, we’ve got these lanyards that get us just about anywhere in the stadium, we’re hanging out with people drinking champagne and I’m just thinking: Daniel intrinsically doesn’t purchase the right to be here. The people weren’t saying: oh yea, that guy, he’s a pastor in Norman, he definitely needs to be here. NO, They didn’t respect me, they respected the badge and I got the badge from Gary Wilson.

I’m with him and so where he goes, I go. And that’s the Gospel. It’s not about what you did or what you didn’t do. It’s not about who you think you are or who you’re not. Jesus Christ said: I am the way and the truth and the life. Whoever hears my word believes in me, believes in him who sent me, and you will not come into judgment, you pass through death into life. All our hope in this world is our connection to that man, Jesus. Where he goes, I go. And so, when we look at loss in our life even when we look at death, we realize it’s something we’re going to pass right through. Because Jesus has conquered death and we’re with him.