

“THE GOOD SHEPHERD (#3): THE LORD OUR COMFORT”

(Psalm 23:4)

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[PROP NEEDED: (#1) “Never Alone” Video; (#2) Stephen Ministry Video]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 8-16-09]

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1. Read Text: Psalm 23:4 and Pray.

2. **[WATCH VIDEO “Never Alone” (SermonSpice.com); use only 0:00-0:40]**

A– What do you do when tough times come in life? Who do you ask for help? Where do you turn for comfort?

B–These are some of the questions we find answered in today’s scripture as we continue a series on the 23rd Psalm and how it teaches us about the nature and character of God, our “Good Shepherd.”

C–Specifically, through each phrase of this verse we find the image of God who brings COMFORT to us, especially when we’re experiencing times of difficulty and challenge.

–II–

3. Verse 4 begins “**EVEN THOUGH...**” ...and then lists a series of bad things.

A–Notice: it *doesn’t* say “*IF*”, but “*even though*” (e.g., “*when*”) we go through them.

1–He’s saying that our success in life is at least partly dependent on our ability to get through life’s hardships and difficulties – that how we face the *hard* things is as important as how we face the *good* things.

2–In the words of one author: “*Real Christians are like tea -- their real strength is not revealed until they get into hot water.*”¹

B–So, today’s one verse starts by acknowledging that if life is a bed of roses, then sometimes we have to sit on the thorns!

C–It doesn’t pretend that by following God/Jesus we’ll be free from struggle or difficulty, but that “*even though*” we go through them, God/Christ *will* walk with us.

4. And the next phrase fleshes this out even more: “*Even Though* **I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH...**”

A–Depending upon how we translate the original Hebrew, this phrase could be rendered either just like I just read it (i.e., “*the valley of the shadow of death*”), OR as “*the vale/valley of deep darkness.*”

B–And both renderings teach us something about the nature and shape of God’s comfort.

5. For example, when we experience the death of someone we love, the “*valley of the shadow of death*” is probably more appropriate (which is why its read this way at funerals).

A—And anyone who’s ever been in that valley after losing someone you loved probably had times when you wondered if you’d *ever* get out,...

1—...because all you could see on either side were the great mountains and hills of sadness and grief,...

2—...and all that you could see in front and behind you were the empty spaces of loneliness and heartache.

B—But notice, Psalm 23 only calls it the “*valley of the SHADOW of death*” – *not* death itself!

C—[Death Vs. Its Shadow]

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was one of America's great 20th-century preachers. After his wife died of cancer, he talked to his three young children about death, and he asked them, “*Tell me children: would you rather be run over by a truck or by its shadow?*”

Of course they answered, “*By the shadow, because it can't hurt you.*” Dr. Barnhouse then said quietly, “*Your mother has not been overrun by death, but by the shadow of death. And that is nothing to fear.*”

6. Now, there are other times in life, though, that we can probably relate better to the alternate rendering – times when we feel like we’re going through a “*vale/valley of deep darkness.*”

A—How many of you remember the 1970s hit-TV show “Hee-Haw”? Growing up as a young boy I remember seeing one of their regular skits in which two men were lamenting about all the problems they had in life: “*Gloom, despair, and agony on me! Deep, dark depression, excessive misery; If it weren’t for bad luck I’d have no luck at all; Gloom, despair, and agony on me!*”

B—Do ever feel like that? ...You try to take a “day at a time,” but then you have days that it seems like a whole *week* hits you at once?! ...

1—...No light to guide the way; No “light at the end of the tunnel” (or if there *is* one, you’re just praying it’s not a train!)

2—It may not be the valley of the shadow of *death*, but the “*vale of deep darkness*” sure can feel dark and cold and scary, nevertheless – and we’ve all experienced that at one point or another.

7. And that’s why good news is found in the next phrase... **“I FEAR NO EVIL, FOR YOU [meaning God] ARE WITH ME.”**

A—You see, this scripture is NOT promising that if we follow God we won’t experience pain or suffering or trouble in life, because Christians aren’t exempt from these. ²

B–But it IS promising not only that God will be with us as we walk *in* these valleys of trouble, but also that His paths will always lead us *through* them, rather than ending *in* them.

C–In 1919, author Annie Johnson Flint wrote a famous poem that says this very thing:

*“God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways, all our lives thro’;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
God hath not promised we shall not know
Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;
He hath not told us we shall not bear
Many a burden, many a care.*

*God hath not promised smooth roads and wide,
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;
Never a mountain, rocky and steep,
Never a river turbid and deep.*

*But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labor, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.”*³

8. Perhaps that’s what the writer meant by his last phrase in today’s verse: **“YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF, THEY COMFORT ME.”**

A–Remember that for a Shepherd in the field, a rod and staff are essential tools.

1–The ROD is used to fight off wild beasts and other predators – it’s a tool of protection and defense.

2–The STAFF, on the other hand, is used to guide and direct the sheep when they get stubborn and try to go the wrong way – it’s a tool of discipline and direction.

B–And in the same way, the “*rod and staff*” remind us both of God’s protection *over* us, and of His guidance *of* us as He walks through life *with* us.⁴

1–It’s true that we all face times and situations and circumstances which we have no clue how to handle.

2–But as we allow the Lord to protect and guide and even discipline us walk *with* us, if we listen closely, we’ll hear Him say, “*In handling the tough things of life, it’s not your RESPONSIBILITY! What matters is your RESPONSE to MY ability.*”

9. Now, I don't know what difficulties or troubles you might have brought with you to this place today: lack of a job? financial difficulties? a troubled marriage or family relationships? an addiction? grief? loneliness? or something else.

A–But I *do* know this: the promise of God in Psalm 23:4 is that *whatever* challenges you face, you don't have to face them alone!

B–No. We can face them knowing that God is with us... to walk with us, and help us get through them – to be “*The Lord, Our Comfort.*”

10. [PRAY: “*Lord, some of us today are struggling with valleys or vales of darkness, grief, depression, or loneliness. We’ve wondered how in the world we’d ever make it through. But today we’ve heard about your desire to walk with us through those places of fear and doubt, and to provide us protection and guidance along the way. Thank you that no matter what disturbing things we brought to this Sanctuary this morning, we can leave with the confident assurance that it is well with our souls because of your presence with us. Thank you, O God, that through your very presence, you give us peace and comfort. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*”]

11. One of the ways God gives us comfort is as we listen and care and minister to and with each other. This year, our church is becoming part of a world-wide lay caring ministry called Stephen Ministry that does just this.

A–I want to invite you to watch a short video that describes this new opportunity for you to be a part of a ministry that brings God’s comfort to others [WATCH SM VIDEO (3:20)]

B–If you’re interested in finding out more about how you can become a Stephen Minister, our two trained Stephen Leaders (Jackie Short & Jim Perry) will be at the doors with brochures, and you can also come to one of our two “no strings attached” “Stephen Ministry Information Sessions” either this afternoon at 2pm, or next Wed. evening, Aug.26

12. [TRADITIONAL CLOSING: UMH#377, “It Is Well With My Soul”]

ENDNOTES:

1. Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990).
2. Last week we learned in Verse 3 that God will lead us along “right paths,” but it never says that those “right paths” will be carefree and always “lit up.” No. Sometimes even *God’s* “right paths” lead us through “vales of darkness” and through “valleys of the shadow of death” – not that God *causes* the darkness or the shadows, but He knows that the best and surest and safest path to the other side is actually *through* them.
3. Annie Johnson Flint, poem “God Hath Not Promised” in By the Way: Travelogues of Cheer (1919).
4. Author Joni Eareckson Tada once put it this way, “[*We*] don't have to be alone in [*our*] hurt! Comfort is [*ours*]. Joy is an option. And it's all been made possible by [*our*] Savior. He went without comfort so that [*we*] might have it. He postponed joy so that [*we*] might share in it. He willingly chose isolation so that [*we*] might never be alone in [*our*] hurt and sorrow” (Joni Eareckson Tada, cited in the magazine Christian Reader, Vol. 32, no. 2).