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Facing Our Fear of Dark Valleys

Psalm 23:4

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Psalm 23 (NRSV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 my whole life long.”

Today I would like to share with you about **facing our fear of dark valleys**. What kind of circumstance or situation is a dark valley? The death of a loved one or the fear of our own death; a serious illness, the loss of a job, economic hardship, family strife, a divorce – each of us can think of more.

To fear these experiences is understandable. Like Woody Allen said,  
*“I’m not scared of dying. I just don’t want to be around when it happens.”*

What seems unfortunate are the ways the media emphasizes experiences that cause and generate fear so that Americans feel less safe.

The swine flu situation being the latest thing. Gavin de Becker, author of *The Gift of Fear*, puts it this way: “Television in most major cities devotes up to 40 hours a day to telling about those who have fallen prey to some disaster and to exploring what calamities may be coming next. The local news anchor should begin each evening’s broadcast by saying, *“Welcome to the news; we’re surprised you made it through another day. Here’s what happened to those who didn’t.”* Each day, we learn what new studies reveal: *‘Cell phones can kill you;’ ‘The dangers of debit cards;’ ‘Contaminated turkey kills family of three. Could your family be next?’*”<sup>1</sup>

I believe the media bears substantial responsibility for creating a national climate of fear through its choice of subjects on the news, talk shows, and prime time programming. If you put on a television in the evening, on the majority of the shows there is violence – it seems like there are about 15 different Crime Scene Investigating

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Anderson and Rich Miller, *Freedom from Fear*, pages 119-120

Shows to figure out how all the folks who have been murdered on TV died. I don't watch much TV programming because I don't like the images and the values.

One thing that has changed in my life over the years is that I like country music a lot more than when I was young and it is primarily because there are some great images and values in some of the songs. Reba McEntire has a song called *I'll Be* that truly sounds like a contemporary psalm. It can be heard as the Shepherd God speaking to you when you are in a dark valley. It says in part,

**“When darkness falls upon your heart and soul.**

**I'll be the light that shines for you.**

When you forget how beautiful you are

I'll be there to remind you.

When you can't find your way,

I'll find my way to you.

When troubles come around,

I will come to you.

I'll be your shoulder when you need someone to lean on.

Be your shelter.

When you need someone to see you through.

I'll be there to carry you.

I'll be there.

I'll be the rock that will be strong for you.

The one that will hold on to you.

When you feel that rain falling down.

When there's nobody else around.

I'll be.

And when you're there with no one there to hold.

I'll be the arms that reach for you.

**And when you feel your faith is running low.**

**I'll be there to believe in you.**

When all you find are lies.

I'll be the truth you need.

**When you need someone to run to**

**You can run to me.”**

Those words convey in a beautiful way what God does for us when we're facing our fear of dark valleys. The presence of our Shepherd delivers us from our fear of evil as we journey through life, even through the dark valleys on the way to new pastures. God is there for us to lean on, to help us find our way.

God believes we can get through the valley and will never lie to us, even about the difficulties we face. God will be a rock for us, God will hold onto us, when we walk through dark valleys. God will be the sun when our heart is full of pain in the dark valleys of life.

One of the most important truths in the fourth verse of Psalm 23 is that we don't stop and we don't stay in the dark valley, whatever it is. We are **walking through**.

*"Though I **walk through** the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."* Even in death, when Psalm 23 is used at a funeral, we are affirming that the one who died is passing through to a more exalted life with the Lord.

Note also the change in the language in verse four to more intimate expression, from, *"the Lord is my Shepherd, he makes me lie down, he leads me"* to **"you are with me."** In the book of Deuteronomy, God warns us that the human tendency in times of prosperity, health, and safety, is not to think as much about the nearness or the importance of the Lord. God's presence may not seem as needed or urgent. But when we are in a dark valley, the fact that God is near is even more important.

Who will be with us in every situation, in every dark trial, in every dismal disappointment, in every distressing dilemma, God says to us, *"I'll be."*

Imagine with me that David wrote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm near the end of his life.

I can picture David thinking back over the experiences he had, particularly the many dark valley times. The Bible is very honest and open in sharing that even a man after God's own heart like David, walks through many dark valleys.

I want to share four of the valleys from David's life from the time of his youth to mature adulthood from the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

#### **The first is the Valley of the Fear of Death in 1 Samuel 17.**

This is the story of David and Goliath. David was the youngest in his family, he had three older brothers serving with King Saul in the war against the Philistines. *"David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep."* David would bring his brothers food and his father news from the front. When David hears Goliath's threats he asks, *"Who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"* His oldest brother Eliab gets mad at David and says (sounding like an older brother), *"With whom have you left those*

*few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle.” David (like a typical younger brother) says, “What have I done now? It was only a question?”*

David can't fight Goliath in Saul's armor; he has to face the giant his way – with a sling and five smooth stones. In the valley of the shadow of death, David learned how to face down a giant – with courage and confidence in the living God. 1 Samuel 17:45-47, “But David said to the Philistine, *“You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. <sup>46</sup> This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, <sup>47</sup> and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand.”* When we are able to face our giant fears with courage and confidence in God, we can walk through the valley, knowing God will be there with us.

**A second valley David walked through is the Valley of Revenge and Dealing with Difficult People in 1 Samuel 24.** David had played music for King Saul when the king was troubled and David won great victories for Saul on the battlefield. How did Saul repay David's service? By feeling threatened and seeking to kill David! At one point, David and the men who are loyal to him are hiding in a cave in the wilderness of the Engedi, being pursued by King Saul and 3,000 of his best soldiers. They didn't have port-a-potties or rest areas in those days so King Saul went into a cave to relieve himself (1 Samuel 24:3). It was the very cave in which David and his men were hiding. David's men said, *“This is the moment we've been waiting for, we've got Saul.”* David crept forward and cut off the corner of Saul's cloak, but he wouldn't allow his men to kill Saul. 1 Samuel 24:8-17 tells us what happened. “Afterwards David also rose up and went out of the cave and called after Saul, *“My lord the king!”* When Saul looked behind him, *David bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance. <sup>9</sup> David said to Saul, “Why do you listen to the words of those who say, ‘David seeks to do you harm’? <sup>10</sup> This very day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you into my hand in the cave; and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, ‘I will not raise my hand against my lord; for he is the Lord's anointed.’ <sup>11</sup> See, my father, see the corner of your cloak in my hand; for by the fact that I cut off the corner of your cloak, and did not kill you, you may know for certain that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you,*

*though you are hunting me to take my life. <sup>12</sup> May the Lord judge between me and you! May the Lord avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you. <sup>13</sup> As the ancient proverb says, 'Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness'; but my hand shall not be against you. <sup>14</sup> Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom do you pursue? A dead dog? A single flea? <sup>15</sup> May the Lord therefore be judge, and give sentence between me and you. May he see to it, and plead my cause, and vindicate me against you."*

*<sup>16</sup> When David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" Saul lifted up his voice and wept. <sup>17</sup> He said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil."*

Some of us know what it is like to give of ourselves, to perhaps even risk our lives, or shed our blood, sweat, and tears for someone as David did for Saul, only to have that person turn on us. When we are in the valley of dealing with difficult people, we have a choice as David did, between revenge and retaliation or reconciliation. Walking through that valley, God will lead us on the path of reconciliation.

**A third valley David walks through is the Valley of Sin in 2 Samuel 12.** David lusted after the wife of Uriah, one his most loyal soldiers, forced her to commit adultery, and then arranged Uriah's death to cover his own sin. We all face dark valleys at certain times in our life, but perhaps the darkest valleys of all are those that we enter because of our own poor judgment, mistakes, selfishness, greed, anger, and sin. **These valleys are among the worst because the Good Shepherd doesn't lead us into them, we stumble into them ourselves.**

Unfortunately when we go into the valley of sin, we don't just take ourselves because our sin impacts the lives of others we drag into the valley with us. David's sin cost Uriah his life, Bathsheba her husband and her dignity, led to the death of a seven-day-old baby, and threatened the stability of the nation. Maybe our sin doesn't have quite as broad an impact, but whenever we enter the valley of sin, we never go alone. Our sin always hurts other people as well.

**A final valley David walks through is the Valley of Rebellion and Grief in his Family in 2 Samuel 15.** David's son Absalom plotted against his father for four years in an attempt to seize power. There are few heart aches greater in life than to be rejected and rebelled against by a member of one's own family. Eventually, Absalom's rebellion was crushed and David's son was killed. When David heard the news, he *"wept; and said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

Some of us have walked through the dark valley of rebellion, rejection, and grief in our own families and we know how important it is to trust that when those closest to us aren't there, that God promises us, *"I'll be."*

Doctor John McNeil was a well-known preacher in a previous century. He told this story, "When I was a lad in Scotland I used to work late and in order to get home I had to walk a long distance. I had to go several miles through a little village and then through a narrow canyon where criminals and thieves were known to hide.

This particular Saturday night I walked as fast as I could. My heart was pounding in my teenage chest, for the night was as black as a wolf's jaw. Not a star was shining. The moon was dark. There were no lights in the sky. I rounded a bend in the road in the most desolate, the most forsaken, and most frightening part of the whole canyon. Suddenly there was a call in the night! For a moment my heart stopped. The call came again **and it was my father's voice**. He was coming out to meet me at the worst part of the canyon.

*"John! It's your dad!"* he said.

In a moment his large hand was on my shoulder and his heavy feet were falling at my side. I was home right then and there!"

Even in the darkest valley we need not fear, because we know who will meet us and who will be there, the Lord has promised, *"I'll be."*

As an older man, reflecting back on all the dark valleys he had walked through with the Lord's help, David wrote a song of thanksgiving for how the Lord had delivered him from the Philistines, King Saul, his own sin, and even enemies in his own family. He said, (2 Samuel 22:2-4),

*"The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,*

<sup>3</sup> *my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,*

*my shield and the horn of my salvation,*

*my stronghold and my refuge,*

*my savior; you save me from violence.*

<sup>4</sup> *I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,*  
*and I am saved from my enemies."*