

"4R: PSALM 23 FOR TODAY (#3): FINDING GOD IN THE VALLEYS"

(Psalm 23:4, NRSV)

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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 8-28-22]

--I--

1. **[11am ONLY]** Read Text: Psalm 23:4 (NRSV) and Pray.
2. In January 2006, my wife Trish and I were living with our 13-year old daughter in east Cobb County. We had just moved to a new church that we really loved, & life was good.

A--A routine medical exam that month showed something abnormal in one of Trish's breasts that called for a biopsy.

B--Knowing that her family had a history of benign masses, we didn't really think anything of it, yet scheduled the biopsy, nevertheless.

C--The day arrived and Trish went through the procedure well. But after it was over, the doctor came out and gave us the news: the mass was cancer.

D--We were devastated -- she was only 40 years old, and we weren't prepared for this!

3. Well, perhaps you've had something like that happen to you... life is good and you don't have hardly a care in the world, when out of the blue an accident, tragedy, or bad news sends your world crashing in.

A--When unexpected things happen, what do *you* do? Where do *you* turn for help?

B--Well, these are just some of the questions I think we find addressed in today's scripture as we continue a series on the 23rd Psalm in which we're unpacking four spiritual practices (all beginning with the letter "R") that are found in a phrase-by-phrase study of this famous chapter.

C--And today's text in Verse 4 reminds us of the power of God's *comfort* and **REST** in the midst of life's challenges and difficulties.

[9am ONLY... Listen to its words: "*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod & your staff-- they comfort me.*"]

--II--

4. Look at how it begins: "**EVEN THOUGH...**" ...& then it lists some challenging things.

A--Now, notice: it *doesn't* say "IF", but "*even though*" (e.g., "*when*") we go through them.

1--It's saying that success in life doesn't depend on us necessarily *avoiding* life's hardships and difficulties, but on us learning how to *get through* them -- 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

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/Jesus will walk with us.

B--So, today's verse starts by acknowledging words that I once heard when I was growing up that I've never forgotten: "*If life is a bed of roses, then sometimes we have to sit on the thorns!*" ²

5. And the most popular form of the next phrase actually fleshes this out more: "*Even though* **I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH...**"

A--Now, depending upon how we translate the original Hebrew, this phrase could be translated either just like I just read it (i.e., "*the valley of the shadow of death*"), OR as today's NRSV translation renders it: "*the vale/valley of deep darkness.*"

B--And *both* renderings teach us something about the nature of God's comfort and rest.

6. For example, when we experience some sort of loss, the "*valley of the shadow of death*" is probably more appropriate (which is why we read it this way usually at funerals).

A--Those of you who've been in that valley after losing someone you loved probably had times when you wondered if you'd *ever* get out, because all you could see on either side were the great mountains and hills of sadness and grief, and all that you could see in front and behind you were the empty spaces of loneliness and heartache.

B--But notice that this verse only calls it the "*valley of the shadow of death*" -- Donald Grey Barnhouse was one of America's great 20th-century preachers. And after his wife died of cancer, he talked to his three young children about it, and 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.*" ...To which quietly Dr. Barnhouse answered, "*Your mother has not been overrun by death, but by the shadow of death. And that is nothing to fear.*"

7. Of course, there ARE other times in life that we can probably relate *better* to the other rendering -- when we feel like we're going through a "*vale/valley of deep darkness.*"

A--How many of you remember the popular 1970s 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--Oh, 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 -- most of us have probably experienced something like that at one point or another.

8. ...Which is why good news is found in the next phrase... **"I FEAR NO EVIL, FOR YOU [meaning God] ARE WITH ME."**

A--So notice: this verse 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! ³

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. ⁴

C--That's certainly what Trish and I experienced after her cancer diagnosis.

1--Yes, she went through surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments, but God walked with us *through* it, & she's now been in remission for 16 years!

2--And for us, at least, the *primary* way that God revealed that He was "*with us*" was through the love, care & support of *others*--especially in our church.

3--Many of you have experienced this, too, which is why the small groups of our church (like Disciple Bible Study, Sunday School classes, music groups, and men's and women's ministry groups) are so *vital*ly important.

4--It's in these groups that God works through the participants to love, care for, support and gives us REST through whatever it is that life throws at us.

5--So, if you're not in a small group (or want to be in an *additional* one), this may be precisely *how* God wants you to experience His REST for your life.
(*sign up for Disciple BBS or "Tell Your Story" or GriefShare today*)

9. So, what about today's last phrase: **"YOUR ROD AND YOUR STAFF, THEY COMFORT ME"**?

A--Well, 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--So, in this verse, the "*rod and staff*" are metaphors both for God's protection *OVER* us, and of God's guidance *OF* us as He walks through life *WITH* us. ⁵

C--Over the years in my *own* Christian life, I've found that God both protects & guides *me* through the relationships I've developed with others in and through the small groups of which I've been a part -- my weekly covenant group is one example: my covenant partners help me hear God's direction (and at times even His discipline).

--III--

10. So, I don't know what difficulties or troubles you might have brought with you to this in-person or virtual space today: the lack of a job? financial difficulties? a troubled marriage, challenging family relationships? an addiction? grief or loneliness? or something else.

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

B--No. Through the relationships we can have with other people of faith, we can face them knowing that God is with us... to walk with us and help us get through them; to comfort us and gives REST for our souls.

C--Are you experiencing God's presence and REST for your life today?

11. [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 comfort and REST, if we will but claim it. In Jesus' name, Amen.*"]

12. [Suggested 11am 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 Heard by Brian as a young boy from a Trappist monk while on a church Sunday School class field trip to the Monastery of the Holy Spirit (Conyers, GA) in the 1970s.

³ 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.

⁴ In 1919, author Annie Johnson Flint wrote a famous poem that says this very thing:

*"God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flowerstrewn 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."*

[--Flint, poem "God Hath Not Promised", By the Way: Travelogues of Cheer (1919)].

⁵ 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). As we face challenges that we don't know how to handle, as we allow the Lord to protect and guide (and even *discipline*) 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."