

This morning we continue our meditations on Psalm 23. We do not need to be in the middle of a pandemic in order for this psalm to be a fruitful psalm to spend some time with. Psalm 23 has been a great blessing to God's people throughout the history in every conceivable circumstance. But in the current circumstances, it is a wonderful reminder to us that God is the Shepherd of his people and that he has given himself the task of taking care of his sheep with all that that entails. Whatever else this pandemic is, it is a time of uncertainty. It has disrupted our lives in a way that most of us have never experienced and we do not know how it will impact our lives going forward. Of course, we always live with uncertainty concerning the future, but given what we are going through at the moment, it seems especially appropriate to pay close attention to what God is saying to us in this beautiful Psalm.

The overall idea is the same throughout the Psalm. God takes care of his people. But the Psalm gives us various perspectives on that wonderful truth. It gives us a number of different ideas and pictures to help the truth of God's care for his people resonate more deeply in our hearts. There are many different perspectives in the Bible concerning what it means that God takes care of his people. And Psalm 23 itself has a number of different things for us to think about to foster our trust in God as we face not only this pandemic but all the challenges and uncertainties of life.

This morning we will consider verse 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." The whole Psalm is a wonderful expression of trust in God. Verse 4 is the pinnacle of that.

The words, "Even though" at the beginning of verse 4 are significant for its meaning. They convey the idea that the David trusts in God to take care of him even in the most difficult situation. David can't think of anything worse to go through than "the valley of the shadow of death." He is using the power of his poetry to describe the worst imaginable situation to be in in this life. And he is saying, Even there, I will fear no evil. This is something like what Job said in Job 13:15 when he said, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him;" That is a wonderful expression of trust in God. Job is saying, Even if God kills me I will still hope in him.

I can't help mentioning what Job says next even though it is not relevant to the point I am making. Listen to the whole verse Job 13:15, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face."

I love that about the Bible. Job is trusting in God and yet he wants answers from God. We have that in the lament theme in the Bible. In the end, believers must come to the place where they submit to God and be content, many times as least, without answers about why God does what he does. But the laments of Scripture give us permission to express our agonizing questions to God in the midst of suffering. And that is what Job is doing here. He eventually comes to the place where he puts his hand over his mouth, but getting there is a process and here in chapter 13:15 Job is still arguing with God about how God has treated him. This is a wonderful expression of a genuinely open relationship with God. "Though he slay me, I will hope in him;" That is his overall posture before God. And yet he has questions – "yet I will argue my ways to his face."

But back to our text, the point that David is making is that even in the worse imaginable situation – the most scary place – he will fear no evil. That is a beautiful expression of trust – no matter what happens.

Now the valley of the shadow of death. The experience that he is drawing on is that of a shepherd leading his flock through a dark valley. Apparently in the quest to find water and pasture for their flocks, shepherds had to lead their sheep through these ravines that were in deep shadow and therefore were dangerous places. They were gloomy and hot and very unpleasant. One of the scholars who has written on Psalm 23 has visited the area that David was writing about and he says that just walking through one of these valleys was a difficult task. He writes, “[M]y two-liter bottle of water was depleted halfway through our journey..... I had enough trouble dragging myself up and down those rocky hills. I cannot imagine the difficulty of herding a whole flock of sheep through the ‘valley of the shadow of death’” (p. 434).

So David is talking about walking along a very difficult path. The translation “valley of the shadow of death” is a legitimate one. You may note that the ESV has an alternative translation “the valley of deep darkness.” The commentators, of course, have involved discussions about the best way to translate the Hebrew text, but most of them end up saying in one way or another that the idea of “the valley of the shadow of death” is probably intended. This is poetry. The figure is that of a gloomy and scary place. That can describe all sorts of life experiences – including the ultimate dark valley – the dark valley of dying.

The point is that David is confessing that he will not fear any evil in the most scary and difficult place. He is basically saying, No matter where my shepherd leads me, I will fear no evil. And so he is covering every possible situation up to and including death itself.

Let’s think a little more about those words, “I will fear no evil....” David is speaking about not fearing in circumstances that normally make people afraid. Human beings have the ability to be afraid. We can anticipate danger or hardship and be afraid of what might happen. There are lots of situations in which fear is quite a normal response. And at some level it is a necessary response.

Now clearly this text is teaching God’s sheep not to fear, but that does not mean that we should not be concerned about things that threaten our wellbeing and take prudent action. For instance, it would be an improper response to the pandemic not to be concerned about it and take no precautions. That would be wrong on a number of different levels. Living wisely in the fallen creation means dealing prudently with threats and dangers. For instance, Proverbs 11:14 says “[I]n the abundance of counselors there is safety.” One way to avoid danger is to get advice. Trusting in God and not being fearful does not mean that we should not try to avoid danger by taking prudent action – which means being concerned about dangers and taking action to avoid it if we can.

But we cannot avoid danger all together. Many things are completely beyond our control. There are many dangers in this life – even for us who until recently lived in one of the most secure places in the world. We can

get sick with a deadly disease. We can lose our job or become unable to work. We can get in an accident. We can lose a loved one. Our house could burn down. The economy might fall apart making it much more difficult for us to get the things that we need. As human beings living in a fallen world, there are all manner of ways that we can suffer loss.

But David is saying that even though he should have to go through a very dark valley – even the valley of the shadow of death, he will fear no evil.

What does he mean here by evil? He does not mean that he will not suffer. He does not mean that he will not experience hard times. He means rather that he will not be afraid that anything will ultimately harm him. He is acknowledging that his Shepherd may lead him through some very dark places, but because he trusts the Shepherd to take care of him, he will not fear.

There is an element of submission here. David is submitting to the possibility of being led through the valley of the shadow of death. He is thinking of himself as a sheep being led by his Shepherd and he is acknowledging that the Shepherd may lead him through a very dark place. There is an element of submission to the leading of the Shepherd. Not fearing in a difficult situation involves submitting to the will of the Shepherd trusting that the Shepherd knows that he is doing and trusting that the Shepherd is leading him down that path for a good reason. Trusting God and submitting to his will in our lives go hand in hand.

And notice that David is expressing his commitment not to fear. He says, “I will fear no evil.” He is not saying that he will not be tempted to fear. He is not saying that not fearing will be easy or automatic. He is committing himself to “fear no evil.” He has made a decision ahead of time that even though the Shepherd leads him through the darkest valley he will not fear. He is saying ahead of time how he is going to respond when he has to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It is a decision that he makes ahead of time.

Now he does not speak here about how hard it will be to follow through in his determination not to fear. But in another psalm David does open up about his struggle with fear. In Psalm 55:4-5 David sings a different tune, “My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.” So when David in Psalm 23 says that he will fear no evil even in the valley of the shadow of death, he is not being arrogant and ignoring just how hard it is not to fear in fearful circumstances. And the Bible in general never says that trusting God in hard times is easy. The Bible deals very realistically with our sinful weaknesses and God’s people are always living by grace because they are never everything that they should be – including not being fearful when hard times threaten.

And yet there is this commitment that David makes. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.” We should not be discouraged if we find ourselves fearful when we are threatened by pain and hardship. David’s expression here does not mean that not being fearful came easy to him and that he never fell into being fearful. But this is his commitment. This is his determination. He had decided ahead of

time that he will not fear even though God should lead him through the valley of the shadow of death. It does not mean that he will follow through perfectly on his commitment, but he knows intellectually that he has no reason to fear because God is his Shepherd and so he is determined to live in a way that is consistent with what he knows to be true.

I want to bring in the disciples of Jesus at this point. They show us what we are often like in our weakness, but also Jesus' patience with them. Remember the story of Jesus in a boat with his disciples. Jesus is asleep in the boat. A huge storm comes up. It looks like the boat is going to sink. Jesus goes right on sleeping. The disciples are terrified. And in Mark's account of this story, the disciples say something astonishing, but something, I think, that we can all relate to. Mark 4:38 says, "But he [Jesus] was asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'" From our perspective looking in on the story, what the disciples accused Jesus of is shocking. Jesus had come to give his life for them. No one cared for them as Jesus did. And yet I'm sure that we can identify with the disciples as well. Objectively we know that God is in control and that he is our Shepherd and that we have no reason to fear - ever – and yet we do fear – we do feel sometimes that God is far away and does not care about our suffering.

Thankfully, we have the disciples in the Bible. Their weakness and Jesus' patience with them is a great encouragement for us. But still Jesus does rebuke them. After he exercised his almighty power in calming the storm, Jesus said, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" So we have the reality of the weakness of our faith, we have the patience of Jesus in not rejecting his disciples, but we also have his rebuke and his call to faith.

And we can see David's commitment not to fear in that light. This is not something that any of God's people can do flawlessly. We all are afraid when we should be calm and confident in God's care for us. And yet David's example here calls us to make the same commitment that he does in this text. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." We know that that will not be easy and that we will not do it perfectly, but this is what the Lord is calling us to do in this passage and many other places. We are to take ourselves in hand. We are to think of the reality of God as our divine Shepherd and we are to determine to live with the confidence and trust that no matter what happens to us, our Shepherd is going to take care of us. He is caring for us even in the dark valleys of our lives.

The last part of this verse tells us why David commits himself to fear no evil even though he may have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. "[F]or you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me." Of course, the whole Psalm is about why David has no reason to fear in any situation. But in verse 4 he specifically mentioned the fact that the LORD is shepherd is with him.

The fact that God is with his people is a pervasive theme in the Bible. It means that the people of God always have God's attention – that he is actively involved in their lives – that he is exercising his power and wisdom for their true and eternal wellbeing – that he is there for them. This idea is inherent in the picture of the

shepherd taking care of his sheep. But in verse 4 David mentions it explicitly and we are to understand what it means by thinking of some of the many places that the Bible speaks of God being with his people.

There is a beautiful example of this in the first chapter of the book of Joshua. Moses has died. Joshua had been chosen by God to be his successor. The people of Israel were on the brink of the promised land. But they were going to have to fight to take it and you will remember how when the 12 spies had scouted out the land, years before, the majority had concluded that it was impossible for Israel to conquer the people living there.

So Joshua was facing what looked like an impossible task. He was facing a challenge that would certainly tempt him to be afraid. But the Lord reassured him by reaffirming that he would be with Joshua and the people of Israel. Joshua 1:5-6, “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them.” A few verses further, verse 9, God says to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” So Joshua is being told not to fear because the Lord would be with him and never leave him.

Joshua is a type of Christ. And when we think of Jesus, he is with his people in a better way than the Lord was with Joshua. For in Jesus, God became a man to be with his people in a more intimate way than he ever had been with his OT people. Jesus is the fulfillment of the name “Immanuel” which means “God with us.” Jesus came to be with us in such a profound way that he is united to his people. He is one with us in such a profound way that he took our sins upon himself and transfers his righteousness to us. Jesus – as Immanuel – God with us – came to permanently be with us as both God and man – to become one of us.

Jesus being with his people is an incredible comfort in the midst of the dangers and challenges of life. The story that I already mentioned, of Jesus in the boat with his disciples in the middle of a storm is a wonderful picture of how Jesus is with his people in the midst of the storms of life. He calms the storms, not by making all difficulties go away, but by assuring his people that he is with them in those storms – by giving them peace and confidence in his care and guidance of our lives. One of the last things that Jesus said to his disciples before he ascended into heaven was, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” He said that to comfort them. He had just given them the great task of making disciples of all nations and the great comfort and reassurance he gave to them was the promise that he would be with them.

So when David in our text says that he will not fear any evil because God is with him, he is reflecting a theme that is pervasive in the Bible. God is with his people. That is fulfilled ultimately in Jesus. And because of that there is no reason to fear. That never means that there will not be hard times to go through, but it does mean that those hard times do not mean that God has abandoned us. That is David’s point about walking through the valley of the shadow of death. He realizes that there will be dark valleys. He realizes that one day he will

have to walk through the valley that leads to death. But the reason that he is committed not to fear any evil is that he is confident that God will be with him in those dark valleys.

In the last part of the verse David says, “your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” The rod and the staff are for guidance and control of the sheep and for defense from predators. The result of the presence of the Shepherd with his sheep is that he protects them from danger, and he guides them with his rod and his staff.

We looked at guidance last week when we considered how the Shepherd leads his sheep in paths of righteousness. By his word and by the way he orchestrates the circumstances of their lives, the Lord our Shepherd guides our lives so that we flourish as he leads us to the promised land. Along that way there are many dangers and the shepherd is there to protect the sheep from those dangers.

If we look at all of this in the light of the whole storyline of the Bible, the truth that makes sense of it all is that God’s care, guidance, and protection of his sheep has to do with their true wellbeing as he defines it. The Bible makes it clear that what matters most in life is our relationship with God and our growth in holiness and Christlikeness. The great dangers that we face are not the things that threaten our this-worldly comforts and pleasures, but spiritual dangers of temptation and worldliness and idolatry. God does give us many blessings that are enjoyable, but when it comes to what he is most concerned about for our wellbeing it has to do with our wellbeing in the light of eternity. What matters most are the things that will matter when we have to stand before God at the end of our lives. And what matters most even in this life is not how comfortable we are, but how much we are like Jesus.

Jesus says in Luke 12:15 “Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” The great concern of the Bible is not that we have easy lives, but that we have holy lives. The greatest threat of all is sin and where sin leads. Jesus came to save us from our sins. He came not that we might be rich in this worldly comforts but that we might be delivered from our sins and enabled to live lives of righteousness that are pleasing to God.

And it is only when we conform our desires and passions and priorities to what God teaches us is most important that we will be able to experience the comfort that Psalm 23 is designed to give. In 1 Timothy 6:11 Paul says to Timothy, “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness....” Those are to be the things that we pursue first in our lives. And sometimes God uses hard times in our lives to help us to grow in these areas.

And to the degree that our desires are in sync with God’s priorities for us - to that degree we will also be able to live without fear - trusting that everything that God is doing in our lives is designed for our spiritual growth and is preparing us for the ultimate blessedness of being with him in the age to come.

If we trusting in Christ, we have nothing to fear. Jesus has taken the sting out of death by conquering sin and by rising from the dead. Jesus has given his all so that we may be saved from our sins and he is committed to

applying that salvation to us all the way to its fullness which will happen when we leave this life to be with him. The more we are in tune with what Jesus died to give us, the more we will be able to live without fear.

We do not experience this in perfection in this life, but through Christ we can experience the beginning of it and following David's example we can decide that "Even though [we] walk through the valley of the shadow of death [we] will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me." David did not do this perfectly either. But still he was determined to "fear no evil." And what a wonderful thing it is that what God is calling us to do is such a wonderful way to live. So let us seek then to grow in fearing no evil. This is one of the ways that we honor God and experience the comfort of his care and love.