

## “Yea, Though I Walk Through the Valley...”

In the name of Jesus, our good and gentle shepherd, dear sheep of His pasture:

One of many things that convinces me to believe the Bible with all my heart and soul is Psalm 23. I marvel at how these six short verses tell the whole story of the believer’s life with God. Like the sheep in the Psalm each of us can brag: **“The LORD is my shepherd.”** Don’t call Him by some other Name – as if we let people call us “Pinocchio” or “Saddam Hussein”! There’s a reputation behind the LORD’s Name. Care of His sheep is front and center here. I want no other Shepherd besides the LORD!

As an educator, I marvel at how clearly and simply the LORD teaches children of all ages to trust in Him. Even though few of us have physically cared for a single sheep, this favorite “Shepherd’s Psalm” still communicates to us. But what if a real shepherd became a pastor, then wrote a book about this Psalm? One did. Philip Keller grew up in East Africa and learned the shepherding skill of David, the sweet psalmist and shepherd inspired by God to write Psalm 23. Keller later became a lay preacher and agriculture teacher, travelling all over North America and the world. His classic devotional book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, is filled with insights, very helpful also for the first half of verse 4:

***Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.***

Patty Jo was with us in the summers of 1991 and 1996, when we enjoyed a sermon series based on Keller’s book. Keller believes the Psalm starts at the home ranch and here in verse 4, traces the route of the shepherd leading his flock to the high country. Every spring they follow the melting snows until the heat of the valley is left far behind for the rich green pastures in the mountain meadows. But sheep could never find their way. In fact, we would not choose this way to reach the high ground with God. Our first parents proved it when they tried to hide after their rebellion. And the LORD God could have left them in their death of sin. Instead, He searched out Adam and Eve. He took away their fear with His promise that the Seed of the woman would crush the serpent’s head. The Psalmist King David was still 1000 years before Christ, but God repeated the promise of the Savior to be great David’s greater Son. Everywhere in the Psalms David praises God that the Messiah would come through his family line in the Jewish nation of Israel. And that’s why David could follow his Shepherd away from home to the high country.

We don’t have an expression for עַל אֲפֵסַי – **“Even though...”** (NIV) which sets forth the worst case scenario. The last place a sheep would go is some dark valley on the mountainside. But the Good Shepherd knows there is no other way to the top. Our Shepherd Jesus Christ is so good that He went this way ahead of us. He walked the dusty paths of life all the way to that cruel hill called Calvary. And there He personally passed through **“the valley of the shadow of death”** as He took our sin and guilt on His own innocent head. By His holy blood He washed our sins away. But that would have left us all as zeroes, without sin, yet still lacking the holiness and righteousness which God demands to get to heaven. That’s where the triumph of Easter means so much for us. By raising His Son from the dead, the LORD God tells us He declared the whole world, “Not guilty!” – righteous in His sight. **“No one comes to the Father except through me,”** our Lord Jesus says. **“I AM the Gate for the sheep.”** (John 14:6; 10:7)

Back on the ranch Philip Keller had an absentee neighbor whose hireling shepherd didn’t care for the sheep at all. When some crawled around the end of the fence and gorged themselves on Keller’s rich grass, the neighbor came with his shepherd’s knife, slit their throats and loaded them in a wheelbarrow. They were so bloated from such rich food they might have died anyway, but Keller noted that if they’d come through the gate into his proper ownership, he could have put them on a slow, steady diet to gain strength for the long mountain climb. Jesus knows how to feed His sheep on Word and sacrament.

Why go up the dark valley to the mountaintop? Because that's the smoothest grade for the sheep to slowly follow their shepherd. Modern highways still follow the valleys up to the summit. And in the dark valley is where the water flows for the sheep to find refreshment. It is also where the grass grows lush and green to feed the flock behind the melting snows.

Make no mistake. The dark valley is filled with danger. Flash floods can send a mountain of water crashing through everything in its path as happened in the late 1970's on the mountain valleys below Estes Park Colorado. A shepherd with his flock has to constantly be on the lookout for predators – mountain lions, wolves and bears – that know the best place to hunt is from the shadows. Stalked as we are by the roaring lion from hell, all our vigilance would mean nothing for skittish sheep that can't run fast enough or far enough or in the right direction to escape sin, death and the devil.

So what keeps the sheep safe and secure? How can you and I brag about our Good Shepherd in the worst place of life and say, ***“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil”***? There really is only one reason. The sheep is absolutely clear on this. ***“I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me.”*** We have complete confidence in our Good Shepherd not only because He has gone this way before, but because we hear His voice and see Him in the fields and on the dusty paths of life always with us. Especially in ***“the valley of the shadow of death”*** we hear our Lord say, ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*** (Hebrews 13:5) Knowing Jesus is near, what can I want beside?

But is the Lord's timing always right? Does He really know when it's best to take someone we love and cherish as a wife, our best friend, a sister dear to family and church family alike? My first questions about that came as a boy when a woman in our congregation with six or seven children was abandoned by her husband, then lost her oldest son. He was the son who stepped up and took care of his mother and the family. But the car he was servicing slipped off the blocks and crushed him. Our tiny church was so packed for his funeral I had to sit on the steps leading upstairs. But I'll never forget my father's sermon text from Isaiah 57. It helps answer our question for Patty Jo too: ***“The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.”*** (Isaiah 57:1f NIV)

There's no stopping off place along the way to be purged of extra sins as if the sacrifice of God's own Son wasn't good enough. When Jesus died, He said, ***“It is finished”*** (John 19:30), in grammar that still shouts of triumph that lasts to this day. To the dying thief on the cross beside Him Jesus said, ***“Today you will be with me in paradise.”*** (John 23:43) Shouldn't we just believe our Lord that He was sparing Patty Jo some deep sadness? Shouldn't we trust our Good Shepherd to know when the next ***“valley of the shadow of death”*** is where we need to pass through to the high country with God?

That's the key for each of us, dear friends. We're just passing ***“through”*** this vale of tears. For in the midst of life we are in death. I saw that when my license plate was stolen this week. Pulled over by a police officer, I got out of my car and noticed he had his hand on his gun. How did he know who I was and only a half mile from the DMV to replace my plates? Death stalks us everywhere and cares not a bit about accidents just because you're mourning the loss of your dear sister and friend. But we are just passing ***“through the valley of the shadow of death.”***

The only real question is who you are following? Climbing fences or trying to find your own way with worthless shepherds who only want your wool – what good are those compared to the good and gentle Shepherd sent by God? Trust in Him. Listen carefully. Jesus says, ***“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”*** (John 10:27f NIV) Patty Jo is there, held in our Good Shepherd's warm embrace, safe home at last! God speed the day for all of us in that blest reunion on high – for Jesus' sake.

Amen.