

## INTRODUCTION

Now as we continue our series in the Psalms and in particular this mini series of Psalm 23 and as we turn to verse 4 and begin to look at it in detail we are turning to a verse that many people have received great comfort from especially believers.

Many Christians in their last hours of life have had this verse read to them and have found in it great comfort it has given to them grace and strength to face mankind's greatest fear, death.

I say it is mankind's greatest fear for although death is not the taboo subject it once was it still causes mankind to fear, there are **not many** that look forward to death. When we get older and get closer to that day when God will take our life from us many people try to put death to the back of their minds.

Even Christians who have no need to fear death often fear the way that they may die and there is nothing wrong with having genuine concerns about the way that we might leave this world. We all need to recognise our fear of death and take great comfort from this verse if we are indeed believers in the Lord Jesus. The bible describes death as our great enemy and our last enemy. Before we consider this verse in detail and as we are now turning our attention to the last three verses of this Psalm, which will take us the next few weeks to consider. Let me first of all set the context for these verses before we look at each verse in more detail and in particular the one we are looking at today.

### 1. THE CHANGE OF EMPHASIS

Now we need to see a slight shift in emphasis in these verses. In verses 1-3 the Psalmist was talking about the Lord as the Shepherd and as his personal Shepherd in particular.

This is seen by the use of the personal pronoun "I" "me" and "my". It is wonderful to be able to talk about the Shepherd in those terms; it's great when people can really say the Lord is "my Shepherd" and really mean it. The Psalmist has been talking about three things mainly.

He has been talking about recognition. He knew the Shepherd but more importantly the Shepherd knew him (v 1). It was as a result of this fact that the Psalmist goes on to talk about how his Shepherd satisfies him and then restores his soul when he wanders and guides the Psalmist throughout life. But when we come to verse 4 onwards the Psalmist changes from talking **about** the Shepherd to talking **to** the Shepherd.

Now it is wonderful to think that we can talk to the Shepherd because of the relationship that we have with him as highlighted in the first three verses,

What a privilege it is to be able to talk to this Shepherd, just think about what he did in order to be our Shepherd he became one with us. We read in Hebrews chapter 2 that the Lord Jesus had to be made like his brothers in every way in order that he might be able to make atonement for the sins of his people (v 17).

Jesus was divine and human all at the same time; he came to identify with his sheep so that his sheep could call Him "my Shepherd."

As a result we can talk to him as one who understands because he became one of us. Now anyone can talk to this Shepherd, you don't need a university degree or you don't have to be good at expressing oneself, we just need to talk to him simply in everyday language because he

understands. But you can only do this when you know the Lord as your Shepherd personally. Do you know the Lord as your Shepherd?

Have you ever come to a point in your life where you have asked him to be your Shepherd realizing that he came into this world to pay the price for your sin by dying for you personally. If you have then I urge you to apply this Psalm to yourself and know the gracious Shepherding of your life by the Lord himself. Turn to him in prayer and talk to him simply about the things upon your heart for he understands.

Speak to him about the things that concern you and worry you. Speak to him about the things that you are powerless to change. Speak to him about your dreams and hopes and expectations. He is your Shepherd; he has died for you so speak to him in prayer. You know just as in our own families there is something wrong if a child doesn't talk to his Father.

There is a barrier, a hindrance that needs to be dealt with. It is odd if communication does not take place in a family setting. But yet how much more odd is it when God's people, His sheep do not talk to their Shepherd. Perhaps there is a barrier that is hindering communication. The barrier is always on our side for the Shepherd wants us to speak with him. Perhaps there is sin that we are holding on to and needs to be dealt with and put out of our life so that communication can be restored.

We have a Good Shepherd who is willing to forgive and to restore your soul. But it may be that although you are familiar with this Psalm you are not familiar with the truth of this Psalm. You don't know the Shepherd as your personal Shepherd, you know nothing experientially about what he can do for you and although you try to pray you know that you are not getting through.

Then turn to him today admit that you are a sinner in great need of God's mercy and grace and ask him, no plead with him to become your Shepherd, I can assure you one thing. He will answer that cry for help and will be your Shepherd and will be everything to you that this Psalm says he will be. So that you will not only be able to talk about this Shepherd but will be able to talk to this Shepherd and pour out your heart to him and know that comfort that he brings to his sheep. He will hear you and will understand your situation; your feelings, difficulties and hang-ups and he will be your help and guide as you live in this world for him. So turn to him today. Now let's get back to our verse.

## 2. THE PICTURE DESCRIBED

This verse seems to describe a picture that was common for Shepherds in David's day. At the time when winter was ending and when the spring rains had come on to the mountains and the grass had begun to grow the shepherds in Israel travelled with their sheep away from the plains to the mountains.

They were away not just for days or weeks but also for the whole summer they did this in order that the sheep could graze on the lush grass and could lamb on the mountains.

Now this journey was not easy it involved going through valleys, valleys that were often dangerous and difficult, valleys that would be in shadow as a result of the hot sun beating down on the mountain ranges. This was probably what was in David's mind as he writes this verse under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Now life has its up and downs and for most of us it has more downs than ups. We know what it is like to be in the valleys of life and the Hebrew word that is used can be rightly applied to the valleys of life as well as death. We know the valley of illness and a number of our own folk are

going through that valley at the minute. We can know the valley of family difficulties and many Christians have known the heartbreak of a wayward son or daughter.

There's the valley of pain and some of us know what it's like to live in that valley every day. There is the valley of financial hardship and again Christians have faced the stresses and strains of such a valley. There's the valley of bereavement and we all at some stage have or will experience such a valley as we lose a loved one.

It's as we are going through these valleys that we need to know our Shepherd and it's in these valleys that our Shepherd shows his Shepherding skills as he cares for us protects us and strengthens us and encourages us.

But in our verse the translators think that here the Psalmist has one particular valley in mind a valley that everyone who has ever been born has to face, it's the darkest valley of all. It's the valley of the shadow of death, but for the Christian that valley of the shadow of death needs to hold no fears, and the words of this verse show that fact.

### 3. LOOK HOW DEATH IS DESCRIBED

a) **Walked through the Valley** - Those sheep walked through the valleys because they had to in order to get to the lush grass on the mountains. For the Christian, death is a walking through the valley to get to heaven. Notice the Psalmist doesn't say that he is walking in it but through it and there is a world of difference. To walk through something is to walk towards the exit of it and that is what death is like for the Christian.

We leave this world and walk through death into an eternal home with God Himself. In the New Testament death is described for the Christian as falling asleep (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). When we go to sleep at night we are worn out but we wake up refreshed and for the Christian death is like that. We fall asleep in Christ and we wake up in His lovely presence.

There is something else that we should notice. Even though the believer walks through this valley it is not the valley of death that the believer walks through but it is the valley of the shadow of death. A shadow never hurt anyone. Children love playing jumping on shadows because they know that that shadow can never hurt them but who that shadow belongs too certainty can.

So there is a whole world of difference between the substance and the shadow of that substance i.e. dog and its shadow the shadow cannot bite but the dog can. Therefore the Christian does not know the full power of what death can do, for death in its fullest sense means eternal separation from God in hell. But we who are trusting in Christ only experience the shadow of the valley of death we only experience the earthly experience of dying.

But as the bible teaches once we leave our bodies then we are at home with the Lord. Therefore for the Christian death has lost its sting it has lost its power because of Christ who has died to overcome death and to remove its sting for the Christian. We no longer need to fear death for death is only a shadow for the Christian. If however you are not a Christian if you are not trusting in the Lord Jesus for salvation then death for you is a fearful thing.

For death is not just the physical aspect of dying; but it is also spiritual and eternal death. It is spiritual and eternal death in hell forever. That is to be feared but you too can turn to Jesus and have the sting of death removed and know that when you leave this world through death it will only be a shadow experience for you because you will go home to be with the Lord.

There is something else here as well that we should notice. You only get a shadow when there is light shining and for the Christian Christ is that light we may have to walk briefly through the

shadow of death but we will walk right through to the light of Christ, walk right through into his glorious presence.

Now even though death is not a pleasant experience to look forward too we do not need to fear it and that is the point that the Psalmist makes next. He does not fear the evil of death, but how can he say that? Why is he so confident?

Because he knows that the Good Shepherd is with him. As those sheep moved through the valleys to the mountains I'm sure that they got a lot of comfort from knowing that the shepherd was there with them. For the Christian when death comes the Good Shepherd goes with us and brings us safety through the valley into his eternal presence.

Perhaps for some of us because we are older we do think about death occasionally and I wonder do we have a sense of fear in our hearts when we think about it. If we do and we are true Christians then draw near to your Shepherd. Let him assure you that when that moment of death comes he will be with you and will take you through the valley of the shadow of death and take you to his eternal home, which he prepared for you personally.

Finally the Psalmist acknowledges that because the Shepherd is with his sheep then they will experience the staff and rod of the Shepherd. I am told that Shepherds in David's time carried a Shepherds crook or staff and a club are probably what the Psalmist David is thinking about here. The staff was used to lift up one of the little lambs when it tried to run away from the Shepherd.

He would put the hook end of his staff round the lamb's neck and gently lift it up into the Shepherd's arms. This is why the Shepherds crook was so long. Perhaps it was used to hook the sheep out of a pit that it fell down etc. The club was used to protect the sheep when wild animals came and tried to attack the sheep especially during lambing time. So for the Christian this is how our Shepherd deals with us in life and death. As we walk through the valleys of life we will know his gentleness as he picks us up time and time again. We know his care of us as when we have fallen into a pit and there seems no way out along comes our Shepherd and lifts us out into his arms of love and care. There are times in the valleys of life that we know the rod of God's discipline correcting us and putting us right and he does it out of love for his Sheep and for our ultimate good.

O we don't find those experiences pleasant but like all discipline it is what we need and shows just how much our Shepherd loves and cares for us (Hebrews 12:4-6)

That rod carried by the Shepherd was also used for protection and our Shepherd protects us from anything or anyone that seeks to ruin us or destroy us. Therefore we can be assured that the Shepherd who has cared and protected us through the valleys of life will care and protect us in our moment of death.

There is no point in having a Shepherd who only helps us in life but who is unable to do anything about the enemy of death. But our Shepherd can carry us through death into our eternal hope and home. He is able to do so because he came into our world and died in order to deal with all our enemies. He deals with sin and Satan and finally death through his own death and resurrection. Therefore all that turn to this Shepherd will also experience His victory by having our sins forgiven and the control of Satan in our lives overthrown. Finally Christ's victory will be applied to our deaths so that death loses its sting for the Christian and becomes only a shadow. It is not to be feared by the Christian for death leads us home.

Are you looking forward to going Home; to being with your Shepherd for all eternity? I trust you are but for some of us death still is to be feared. It still has a sting for it will mean eternal separation from God in hell. That, my dear friends, must be feared. But O we have a wonderful

Shepherd who wants you to come to him and seek his grace and his mercy so that you will be able to say the Lord is my Shepherd.

If you do that then you will know his gracious Shepherding hand upon you in life and vitally when it comes to death you will know his presence with you leading you to your eternal and heavenly home.

O turn to the Shepherd so that death will hold no fear for you.

Amen