

July 12/13, 2025

**You Are With Me**  
*Everything We Need Series*  
**Psalm 23:4a**  
Pastor Ryan Harmon

So here is what I wish I could stand up here and proclaim, even promise to you this morning. I wish I could stand here and promise that if you give your life to Jesus, your life will be free of pain, free of trouble, free of heartache. I wish I could make that promise, but you and I both know I can't make that promise. Here's the promise that I can make. I can promise that in the midst of pain, in the midst of trial and struggling and suffering, when we find ourselves in deep darkness, the LORD, our Shepherd, will remain faithful. The question for us is whether, when we find ourselves in the midst of that dark valley, in that dark place, we will continue to follow His lead, whether we will extend to Him the trust that will allow us to walk through darkness and struggle with great confidence? That's what we want to consider this morning. Open your Bibles with me to Psalm 23, as we continue this slow reflection throughout the summer in this psalm. What do you think? Do you think you've memorized it yet? I bet you're closer than you think. So we say each week:

**The LORD is my Shepherd,  
I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside quiet waters.  
He restores my soul;  
He guides me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake.**

For five weeks now, and in these three verses, we've been reflecting on what a great comfort it is that the LORD is our Shepherd. In fact, the picture that's been painted week in and week out in these first three verses, has been a picture that is tranquil, that is calm, and that is comforting. The LORD is the One that leads us into a green pasture, along the quiet waters, tailored just to us. He's the kind of God, the kind of Shepherd that restores us. He brings us back, sets us on the right path, leads us, and puts His own name on the line. All of that is so comforting, and that is why, when we get to verse 4—the beginning of verse 4—our phrase that we're looking at this morning—it is a little bit disorienting, because the scene that we encounter in verse 4 is not one that stirs up peace, comfort, and tranquility.

You can see that our flannelgraph has changed. The green is gone. Verse 4 begins with two words that I really wish weren't in there. It begins with two little words: **Even though...Even though.** The reason I don't like those words is because the presence of those two words means that something is about to be said that is going to compromise or propose a reason to doubt what we've already affirmed. We've said, **The LORD is my Shepherd.** Everything is wonderful. And now: **...Even though.**

Imagine I said this to you, “Hey, you’ll never believe it. I found the best burger joint in town. You can’t imagine how good these burgers are. It’s crazy, *even though* it’s not real meat!” *(laughter)* What I said after the *even though* causes you to question what I said before the *even though*.

“I’ve got a friend that wants to take you to the airport. He’s an amazing driver. I trust him completely *even though* he’s been in 37 accidents! *(laughter)* That *even though* stirs up doubt; it causes you to question, and that’s just the point.

**He guides us in paths of righteousness**

**For His name’s sake.**

**Even though (Even though what?) I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**

(\*NASB, Psalm 23:3b, 4a)

He guides me, **even though** things seem pretty bad...**even though** it feels as though I’m in a tight spot...**even though** I look around my world and I see reasons that are justifiable to be concerned. See, **the valley of the shadow of death** is a dangerous place. It’s a frightening place. It could literally be translated *the valley of deep darkness*. Not just darkness, but deep darkness. It’s an ominous place. It’s a place you don’t want to find yourself. None of us do. But the question is, “When we find ourselves in a place that feels like the **valley of the shadow of death**, what will we do?” Will we continue to extend trust? Will we continue to follow our Shepherd?

Scholars debate about whether or not David is referring here to an actual physical place, or whether this is just an extension of the metaphor, or whether it’s just describing any number of valleys or difficult places in the Judean wilderness that a shepherd has to lead the sheep through. Those who believe it’s an actual place believe it refers to a long valley in the middle of the Judean countryside, a wilderness that is five miles long, a five-mile long valley that, at the deepest point, at the base where the sheep and the shepherd would walk, it’s only twelve feet wide, with large canyon walls on either side. You could just imagine the fear that would stir up, the concerns that would even bring to the surface for a shepherd. This could be a place where bandits or robbers would love to hang out. They could ambush a flock and shepherds in that spot. It also would be the kind of place where predators could trap a flock of sheep very easily or be the kind of place that if there would be a sudden torrential downpour in the middle of that wilderness, it would quickly get washed out. It could threaten the life of the entire flock. This was a dangerous place. Now, whether it’s referring to this actual location or a number of different valleys that would have been dangerous in the wilderness, the truth is David is saying something very real about our life and what we tend to do when we encounter deep and dark valleys. When we find ourselves in a difficult spot, when we feel overwhelmed, when we start to feel almost claustrophobic, because it feels like the world is folding in on us, our natural tendency, as humans, is to begin to question the one who led us there and question the competence of the leader.

That’s what we do in our natural human inclinations. And thinking about that, it took me back to one of my first years on staff here. Janae and I joined a mission team that went to Paris, and we were visiting a church-planting team in Paris that was doing the work of trying to initiate new churches there. We got there and we were jet-lagged. Of course we’re tired and we’re hungry, and the missionaries decided the best thing to do with that first day was to stick us in their very hot, very stuffy apartment, and just talk to us for a long time. It was very miserable. Then they fed us, but they fed us couscous, and couscous is the worst! *(laughter)* It’s like sawdust. It was a long

afternoon. When we were finished, we were all thankful, but we were still hungry. We were tired, but we were hungry, and we were in Paris, so we wanted to venture out and find a restaurant. Someone offered to lead and we made our way out into the city. After multiple stops on different metros, we came up out of the subway, and it's raining and it's about 33 degrees, so it is miserably cold. We're hungry, and there is no restaurant in sight. And in that moment, my wife exclaimed, "Where are we going? And does anyone know what they're doing?" She'd had enough. I was early on staff, and so I did say to her, "Hey, I don't want to get fired just yet, okay?" (*laughter*) When we are in the **valley of the shadow of death**, our heart wants to cry out, "Where are we going? Who brought me into this place, and do they even know what they're doing?" That's the temptation.

I'm so thankful our Bible includes phrases like this. The Bible is so honest. You know, a lot of public opinion is that the Bible is just all sunshine; it's just a fairy tale. That's not true at all. The Bible is brutally honest. It looks reality directly in the eye. The Bible acknowledges the presence of evil, the presence of suffering in the world, the presence of death, and then staring straight in the eye at the reality of those things, it offers hope. It offers a way through. So the question is, "When we find ourselves in the midst of these valleys that we are naturally going to find ourselves in—life including these valleys of the shadow of death—what are we going to do?"

Well, the first thing we have to know is we can wish them away all we want, but they're not going to go away. In fact, I am quite confident that our Shepherd is so competent and so good, and He loves us so much that if there were a way through life that didn't include the valley of the shadow of death, He would have taken us on the detour. But we have to walk through it...we have to walk through it. One commentator said there is no detour. There's no emergency exit. The only way is to continue to press forward. So, in a fallen world, how do we walk through these deep, dark valleys?

As I was thinking about the reality of the valleys and the way they can take shape in our life, I kind of concluded that there are two types of valleys. I think the first one isn't necessarily what Psalm 23:4 is referring to. But I'm going to tell you about that one, because I think we often mistake it for the valley that David is describing here. The first valley—the place where we start to feel stuck sometimes—in fact maybe very often for some of us—is a struggle of our own doing. Our own decisions have led us into that moment. We've stepped off the path that God set forward and we've ignored what He has said. We've chosen to stop listening to the Shepherd, and we've chosen to go our own way. Then we find ourselves in the midst of a great deep darkness. And when that is the case, it probably is better to think about Psalm 23 verse 3: *He's the One that brings us back. He's the One that sets us back on the right path.* It's important that we acknowledge that those valleys occur, and the call in those moments is to repent. It's to surrender once again to the Lord.

I've mentioned before that I backpacked Europe after I graduated from college, which was really fun. But the problem was that I had no money. I had worked at a camp all summer, and camps generally don't pay real well, but I decided to do it anyway, because I thought at the time (and again I'm not affirming this thinking); I'm telling you this is the foolishness of my thinking. I thought that's what credit cards are for...someone else's money. (*laughter*) So I went to Europe, had a great time, brought one or two souvenirs, and came home with a really large credit card bill! I felt like I was under water; I was burdened by the weight of that debt. Now in that moment, I

needed to acknowledge that wasn't a valley of the shadow of death that I had to walk through. I made that choice. I racked up that debt. Now in that moment, it was absolutely critical that I turn to the Lord. I turned to my Shepherd and said, "Lord, I repent. That was stupid. Thank you for receiving me. Give me guidance as I seek to get back on the right path." The Lord met me there in that moment. There are valleys that we find ourselves in that are valleys really of our own choosing, and the call in those moments is to repent, to surrender again to our Shepherd.

There are other valleys though, valleys that come upon us and we find ourselves in that are not of our own choosing, things like cancer...death...suffering. We have a staff member walking through just an incredible journey with ALS. No one chose that. It's a product of the fall. That kind of sickness and deterioration of a body, or things like rejection, divorce, loneliness. These valleys that we find ourselves in that feel absolutely crushing cause us to question whether we are actually on the right path. So the question is, "How should we respond when we find ourselves in those moments?" I think this is a point where we need to take the words of Psalm 23:4 quite literally. We need to remember that David said, **"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord leads us through it."** Often, when we find ourselves in these places that are so difficult, we start to believe that this is forever. It will never be other than this. This is my final destiny. I'll never have any hope; I'll never be able to breathe. But we need to remember that we are following the Good Shepherd through the valley of the shadow of death, but the valley is not the destination. We continue to follow Him. We press through, listening to His voice as He leads us through the valley. He doesn't make us remain in that valley forever.

The second thing we remember comes in the second part of the phrase. David talked about how he could walk through that valley, and he could do so with great confidence because of who he was following. The second part of that phrase in verse 4 says this:

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil,**

I walk with great courage. Why? Well, it's not because the valley has disappeared. It's not because our circumstances have changed.

**I fear no evil, for You are with me;**

When we find ourselves in those valleys, it starts to feel like it will never end, and it starts to feel like we are absolutely alone. And here David reminds us we are not alone. We are with the faithful Good Shepherd, the One who promises to be with us, to lead us on. And because we are with Him, we can walk with courage.

It's interesting that in the beginning of verse 4, a shift occurs that is easy to miss. I've missed it for years. It's easy just to read through this psalm and miss the change that occurs for David in verse 4. Up until this point in verses 1 through 3, David has affirmed a number of things that are absolutely true of who God is, but he's affirmed all of them in the third person, referring to God in the third person. So he says, **"The LORD is my Shepherd. "He" makes me lie down. "He" leads me. "He" restores my soul. "He" guides me in paths of righteousness."** But here, in the first part of verse 4, as David finds himself in the valley of the shadow of death, David shifts from

the third person to speaking directly to God and says, **“Even though I walk through the valley of shadow of death, I fear no evil...**not because the LORD is with me...but instead He turns to the LORD and says, **“You” are with me.**” A personal prayer. It’s as if in this deep, dark place, this place where David feels all alone, and he feels like the suffering is never going to end, the struggle is never going to end, he turns from affirming what is true, to speaking to the One who is true.

We talk all the time about how we want to be people that don’t just affirm what is true, don’t just profess the right things, but we become people of deep belief. When you believe something, you’re ready to act upon it. It’s part of the reason we’re walking so slowly through this psalm this summer. We want to be people who can say we don’t just know these words; we *live* these words. We believe these words. We breathe them. They’re woven into the very fabric of our being. It’s important to profess the right things, to affirm the right things, to affirm what is true. The first step in our relationship with God is to take in what is true and to affirm it, to say, “Yes, that is absolutely true!” So if someone would come to me and say, “I have a Bible quiz for you. Is it true that the Lord is your Shepherd, and because He’s your Shepherd, you lack nothing?” I would say, “Absolutely that’s true. I affirm that 100% is true. In fact, I know precisely where David says that. He says that in Psalm 23 verse one. I can turn to the place in the Bible where he says that.” That is great. That is a good first step.

But I think we would all acknowledge that often in our lives, when trouble hits, when we find ourselves in the deep, dark valley, we start to act in ways that maybe profess or testify that we believe something else. If you look at my credit card statement, would it say that the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need, or would it say there are a lot of things that I think I need that I can’t afford actually. Look at the addictions that we have, or how upset I get when I don’t get my way. Or how much anger starts to take over my life during these moments where we encounter circumstances that aren’t what we want. And when we encounter those moments, do we act? Do we act on the belief that the Lord is my Shepherd I have everything I need? See, the truth is there are corners of my heart within which I’m still wrestling to believe that with every ounce of my being. I love that moment where the man comes to Jesus, and Jesus says to him, **“Do you believe?”** Do you remember what he says? He says, **“Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”** I want to believe it more than I do right now.

If we want to be people that move from professing the right things, which is important, but move into a place where we believe them more and more with a deep belief, the valley is absolutely critical. On the map of our life, **the valley of the shadow of death** is the location of deepening belief. It’s the place that we move from affirming, to deep conviction; from professing, to authentic belief. We move from talking about God and saying what is true, to talking directly to Him. We find ourselves under the weight of those circumstances. We cling to Him, and we experience Him in a brand-new way. And what happens is, as we walk through that valley, we encounter Him in a way we never have before.

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.** Now, for David, the presence of the LORD stirred up great confidence, because he knew the character of the LORD. He knew precisely who he was following. And not only was He good, but He also is competent. He could lead David through the darkest valley.

But of course, if we aren't following the Good Shepherd, we can't make that claim. In fact, if we're following the wrong person, then their presence with us in the midst of a dark valley might stir up more fear, more insecurity. Someone who doesn't know what they're doing will certainly lead us astray, even more than we already are. It's the quality of who we're following that allows us to say, "I fear not. I will be okay. I walk with great courage."

So a question for each of us this morning is that as we live our lives, as we walk through the inevitable valleys of our life, "Who are we following?" Are we following someone that is able, following someone that has the wisdom to guide us through those valleys? Are we following someone that inspires courage, dispels fear because of how good they are, how able they are, how strong they are? Here's the promise I can make if we are following the Good Shepherd, if we are following the Lord. "Even in the darkest valley, we can walk through it with great confidence, knowing that He leads us. He will lead us through, and He will stay with us every step of the way, and He will grow our faith as we follow Him in the midst of that valley." That's a promise I can make.

On the scale of dark valleys, I will admit to you that this moment I'm about to share, is not the deepest, darkest moment of my life, but it was one within which the Lord taught me something about Himself. The same episode I already told you about, where I was in Europe backpacking for a month. I don't know what I was thinking, but my friend and I didn't arrive on the same day. I arrived a day before him and these were the prehistoric days before phones that could guide you everywhere, so you had to carry paper maps. And it was before the days where the internet was so robust that you could reserve all of your hostels or hotels before you arrived in a country. And so we just showed up. I just showed up in London. I knew nothing, didn't know where I was going to sleep, didn't know what I was going to eat, didn't know how we were going to get to the next country we wanted to go to. I was carrying this big old backpack that looked like I should be in the Rockies, but I'm walking through modern London, and everyone is looking at me, thinking I look like a fool, and I did. My buddy is coming the next day, and soon it became very clear to me that I could not find a place to sleep, a hostel. I couldn't find one for the life of me; I guess I thought I was going to stumble upon it. And as I sat in that moment, I suddenly felt very alone. I knew no one; I knew nothing. And, in fact it became quite clear to me that on that island, and in fact on that entire continent, there wasn't a single person who knew my name, and I was desperately alone. So in that moment I wandered over to a park, and I sat down with a group of homeless men. I actually thought to myself, "These might be my roommates tonight." (*laughter*) This might be where I stay. In that moment, I turned to the Lord and I began to pray. It was just so interesting to me, it was such a teachable moment for me, that as I began to pray, and as I closed my eyes and I turned my mind to the Lord, what I realized in that moment is, I was turning my mind to One who knows me inside and out, has walked with me through a number of trials, the One with whom I've been acquainted with and I've had multiple conversations with over the course of many years. And even though I'm sitting here in the middle of London, and I don't know a soul...no one knows my name...He does, and He is near. And in the midst of that moment, He didn't reserve a hotel room for me; He didn't provide a map, but what He did provide for me was the comfort of His very presence, the knowledge that He was with me, that He knows me, and I'm not alone. And in that moment, what I found is that I became filled with hope. Hope is the anticipation that things are going to be okay, and fear, fear just went away. Fear is the anticipation that harm is going to come. It's right around the corner.

What are you wrestling with this morning? What is the valley that you find yourself in? This morning I want to say to you that wherever you find yourself, what I know that you already know is that you should profess—but sometimes it sinks in a little more when someone else says it to us—so I just want to say clearly to you that if you find yourself in a deep valley, you feel absolutely stuck and alone, I want to say to you that the Lord is going to lead you through it. The valley is not forever and He is with you. He knows exactly what you're going through, and He is with you. And because He is with you, you can walk through the valley with confidence and courage, knowing that He is right by your side.

David experienced that throughout his life, encounter after encounter in the wilderness when he was a shepherd, and then certainly when he was waiting to be king. Then when he was king, encountering multiple trials, multiple struggles, he saw the Lord show up for him over and over again, and that fortified his belief in exactly who God was. Everything that David experienced—everything that's outlined in Psalm 23—all of it is available to us as God's people, to be a lived-in reality, the confidence that he speaks of. And in fact I would suggest to you that we have an advantage that David didn't have. You see, we as people on this side of the Incarnation, on this side of the cross, we have deep, experiential, intimate knowledge of the One who is the Good Shepherd.

Last week, Bryan talked about John 10, and how in John 10, Jesus says, “***I am the good Shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.***” And that's precisely what Jesus did. That's the One that we follow, the One who died for you and for me, and then whose life was brought back again, raised from the dead, so that we might walk with Him now and forever through life's green pastures and also through the valleys of the shadow of death, with Him by our side every step of the way.

We have an advantage David doesn't have. We can look at Jesus' life, and we can see Psalm 23 illustrated over and over again, certainly by what Jesus experienced, but also by the way that He led His disciples and led others. Jesus' life stands as an illustration of how exactly God is with us. It's what He taught. As John 10 moves into 11 and 12, we eventually find our way into the Upper Room. That series of chapters in John is just so beautiful because it so wonderfully demonstrates the way that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He gathers His disciples into that room. He washes their feet, just caring for them. He proceeds to talk to them about all that's about to transpire. He assures them about everything He's taught them before but also lets them know what's about to happen. Here He stood on the eve, certainly of the darkest of dark valleys, the night that He was betrayed, and what He did is, He cared for them. He led them. He loved them.

As that moment moves on and we get to John 16, Jesus began to talk to His disciples about how things were going to change. Things were going to get very difficult. He began to talk about how His presence wouldn't be with them. And of course this was incredibly challenging to them. This was fear inducing to them, because they had been with Him constantly for three years. He was the one that they were with. He was the Shepherd, always near. I think Jesus was the kind of person that when things were going poorly, when He walked in the room, everything calmed down. When they were struggling with things, they were filled with confidence when Jesus walked in. That's who He was. And here they had the habit of being with Him constantly, and now, here He is saying,

“But it’s going to change soon.” That’s just what He says in John 16, verse 5. Listen to His words. He says:

**But now...** (Let me add a little commentary.) But now, after you’ve been with Me constantly, after you’ve been constantly encouraged by My presence with you; you’ve seen the abundance of power; you’ve seen the provision that I’ve given you...after all of what you’ve done for three years...)

**“But now I am going away to the one who sent me, and not one of you is asking where I am going. Instead, you grieve because of what I’ve told you.”**

(\*NLT, John 16:5-6)

That grief makes perfect sense to me. The sheep are being told by the shepherd, “I’m leaving.” That’s terrifying if you’ve ever found yourself thinking that the valley that you’re walking through would just be so much easier if Jesus were right by your side with His arm around you, Jesus’ physical presence near to you, just like this picture here. I found myself thinking that over and over again, “Jesus, if You were here, this would be easier.” And it’s because of what He says next, that always blows my mind. As He continues, He gets to verse 7 and He says,

**But in fact, it is best for you that I go away,**

Every time I have the thought that it’d be better if He were right here, I read this passage, and I just am reminded I’m wrong. Jesus says it’s best for you that I go away, and here’s why.

**...because if I don’t, the Advocate won’t come. If I go away, then I will send Him to you.**

It is better that I go away, because then I will send my Holy Spirit, the Advocate. That’s better for you because it’s My presence with you, always empowering you. The Holy Spirit is going to be sent to you, and the Holy Spirit has a job. Here’s His job: His job comes in verse 13:

**When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth.**

Last week, Bryan talked about how the Lord is the One that *guides us in paths of righteousness*. And here Jesus says it’s better for you that I go away, because when I do, I’ll send the Holy Spirit, and when He comes, He will guide you. **He will guide you into all truth** and show you the way to walk. It’s better that He goes away, because then His presence will come, come in the form of His Holy Spirit, always with us. Whether you gave your life to Jesus yesterday, or you gave your life to Him sixty years ago, in that moment God gave His Spirit to you, His Holy Spirit, His empowering presence, and it will never leave. And that means that no matter what we are walking through, we can affirm, we can say, we can deeply believe, “I will never be alone.” The Lord is near, and because He is near, I can walk with courage.

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.** The Lord being our Shepherd and belonging to Him, it doesn’t guarantee that trials, that the dark valleys will disappear. What it does guarantee, and what we can count on, is that in the midst of those dark valleys, He will lead us on. He will lead us through, and He will be near to us



every step of the way. He will never leave us. He will never forsake us **through the valley of the shadow of death.**

As Jesus closed His time with His disciples, I think He referred to something like that in His own words, these struggles that we have, the struggles that we walk through. He said at the end of John 16, in verse 33 He says,

**“In the world you will have trouble, you’ll have tribulation. (Then he says,) But take courage. Fear not, be filled with confidence, for I have overcome the world.”**

We are followers of the Good Shepherd, the One who laid His life down for us, the One who promises to lead us, the One who is able to lead us through the midst of the valley of the shadow of death. And He promises us that He will be with us every step of the way. He’s given us His Spirit, and because of that, we can be people who can know that we can walk with confidence. We can also know that as we walk through those valleys, He will deepen our very faith.

*Our Father, we do turn to You, acknowledging when we are in the midst of those valleys, often, Lord, we become overwhelmed. We start to turn our eyes away from You. So, Lord, help us by Your Spirit, the Spirit of truth, remind us of what is true, that You have promised to never leave us, never forsake us. Because of that, we can walk confidently through the darkest of times, knowing that You will lead us through and that our eternal destiny with You is good and is beautiful. Give us confidence we pray. We pray these things in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

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