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Talk: Peregian

Passage: Psalm 23 v4 – No Fear

This is the third in our sermon series looking at the riches of Psalm 23

A Psalm where David shows us the faithfulness and love of God for his people

And, as in many other parts of the bible,

We have the metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep

I love this quote from W Phillip Keller

a Christian author who also spent some time as a shepherd

This is from a book called “A Shepherd looks at Psalm 23 “

It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep. The behaviour of sheep and human beings is similar in many ways. ...Our mass mind (or mob instincts), our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance. Yet despite these adverse characteristics Christ chooses us, buys us, calls us by name, makes us His own and delights in caring for us.

Even with that less than flattering description of sheep

Isn't it wonderful to be one

When, as Mark showed us in week 1,

David's shepherd is also our Shepherd

And when we serve and follow Jesus we lack nothing.

Gavin developed this further last week

When he told us about how good it is to live with God as our Shepherd

Living in green pastures with quiet waters, where our souls are refreshed

Following the Shepherd along good paths

Verses 2 and 3 paint such a beautiful picture don't they

Lush green pastures

Sweet refreshing water

But then we get to vs 4

Gone is the quiet, serene, pastoral imagery.

Gone are the bright and lush colours.

We are now in a valley,

A valley that sounds pretty grim and dire

Wow! What a transition!

But any experienced shepherd reading these words

would find this transition quite normal

Quite expected

Because the reality is that sheep need to be led to different places in different seasons

When the summer heat begins to burn off the grass in one place,

a shepherd will move his flock in order to find another suitable area for grazing.

And the seasonal shift to a new pasture

would typically involve travelling through valleys.

Certainly this would have been the case around Bethlehem

Where David grew up tending his father's flocks.

Moving sheep through valleys is what a good shepherd does.

Now, growing up in the UK

I have an idealised view of what a valley is like

Lush green all year and usually with a river running through it

I'm still thinking about green pastures and still waters

But that's nothing like the type of valley around where David came from

Stony, dry areas with very little vegetation

Threats of flash floods, or rock and mud slides,

Predators - maybe lions or bears or wolves,

just waiting for a tasty lamb dinner.

Imagine being a sheep without a Shepherd in this type of environment

Little food available

Very limited watering holes

A dark and hostile environment

A flock of sheep in a valley like this – they'd be petrified wouldn't they

Because without a Shepherd, death would be pretty much a certainty.

So, what about us?

We live on the beautiful Sunshine Coast

So there aren't many dry and barren places around here

And yes, while dingoes present some threat to sheep

That's hardly something that affects each of us

as we go about our day to day lives.

And yet I'm sure, like me, you also have at some stage known what it feels like

to be in the depths of a dark valley.

Financial worries

Work problems

Family break-ups

Cancer

The sudden loss of someone we love

Or maybe some well-grounded fears about what's happening in our world –

The world's a scary place, isn't it

There's so much to be frightened about?

And last week's message about the shepherd guiding us to a wonderful place

Can feel hard to hold onto when we're in our own personal dry and barren valley

Does this mean that our shepherd has failed us?

If my life isn't a green pasture with still waters then has he somehow let me down?

Or is it my fault – do I deserve to be in the valley.

Because I've strayed off the righteous path into sin

Well of course that happens sometimes

Sheep do stray

But a sheep doesn't willingly walk into a dark valley

So the only reason it would go there is because the shepherd led it there

But why would a good shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep

Lead a lamb into a valley filled with danger and death threats?

There's only one possible answer: "To get to some better place!"

The path through the valley

is also one of the righteous paths along which God leads

On our way to new pastures

So yes, in our lives the reality is that there will be valleys

Some deeper than others

Some we've been through already and others lie ahead of us

But still, as we go through these valleys, it can be hard to understand or accept

that this is a path of righteousness

that it's a path our Shepherd wants us to go down

And so we fear don't we

We fear that maybe we won't ever come out of this valley

Or we fear that we won't be able to survive the hardship and the pain

So, what do we do with these fears?

Well it's probably not a good idea to deny them,

Or to pretend they're not there.

There are passages in the bible

Where at first glance it may appear that the writers are counselling us to do just that.

But actually they aren't.

In most cases when the Bible says "Fear not",

it goes on to give us a *reason* for not being afraid

a reason connected with God.

Luke 12:32: *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom."*

Isaiah 43:1 *"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine"*

And in our Psalm this morning

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Yes, from time to time we will have reasons to be like frightened sheep

But we have a Great Shepherd

and when we trust and follow this Shepherd

we have good reasons to put aside this fear

The first reason

Well - we're not on our own in this

Look with me at vs 4

Look at the change of language here

In verses 1-3 David has been talking **about** the Shepherd

He leads, **He** refreshes, **He** guides

But in verse 4 David switches to talking **To** the Shepherd

You are with me

Your Rod and Staff

David has been in some pretty deep valleys himself

Think about what we studied last year in 2nd Samuel

David had constant enemies throughout his life

Even his family conspired against him

Yet he knew that God was always with him

You are with me he says in vs 4

And when we are in those deep dark valleys

He's with us too, he's walking right beside us.

I know this to be true

because I can remember vividly that he was right beside me

three years ago when I was in one of those dark valleys

Many of you will remember this

and I thank you for your love and support as Phil & I I walked through this dark valley

In October 2015 Phil had a heart attack

5 days later my mum, in the UK, suffered a major head injury as a result of a fall,

Sadly she never regained consciousness and died after 10 days

On the way back from her funeral,

on my own, half way through the long journey back from the UK,

just as I was boarding the 13 hour flight from Abu Dhabi

I developed classic heart attack symptoms

Yes, it turns out I had a heart attack as well

Phil and I share everything

So, 13 hours of feeling very very crook

And I didn't tell any one

because I just wanted to get home.

So I was on my own in dealing with this

Except that

I have never been more certain of God's presence

And never more certain that whatever happened it really would be OK

Because I believed and trusted in God's promises

I knew that He was with me on that flight

You know, we can always be in close relationship with God

But I think we seek to be closer to him

We are more aware of him walking beside us

When we are in those deep valleys

Just as for David, so too for us

This is how we can be fearless when we are in dark valleys

Joshua 1:9 Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

Isaiah 41:10 Fear not, for I am with you

And in Matthew chapter 28 Jesus promised *“I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

There is no valley, no matter how dark or how deep

that you need to go through on your own

And when God is with you there's really no reason to be afraid –

because it will be OK, whatever happens.

And it's not just God's presence that we can draw on

We can trust him to guide us and protect us as we go through these valleys.

David refers to the typical tools that a shepherd would carry

The rod and the staff

In most shepherding cultures,

whether it be in Asia or Africa or Europe,

traditional shepherds have always carried these two items:

The rod was a short but thick stick, mainly used as a weapon against predators,

Although it was sometimes used to discipline stubborn or wayward sheep

- and boy are there times when God needs to hit me over the head with a rod.

The staff is the one I think we're all familiar with

the longer, thinner stick with the hook or crook at one end

Now the straight end of the staff was used to guide the sheep

And the hooked end was typically used to pull a sheep from danger,

from the edge of a cliff or when it got stuck in thick and thorny bushes.

What David is emphasizing here, by utilising these images,

Is that God's faithful guidance as our Shepherd

always includes his faithful protection.

David will "fear no evil" because God is with him and God will protect him.

God will not allow lasting harm to come to His sheep.

He allows trials, but they won't overcome.

He allows sorrow, but joy will always win out.

There may be difficulties in the valley,

but God will always bring His sheep safely through to eternal life.

Isn't that the promise we cling to this morning?

Remember what Jesus said in John 10:

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 will snatch them out of my hand.

Nothing anyone or anything can do to us

will ever jeopardize our eternal safety in the Good Shepherd's care.

This is how we get "through" the 'valleys':

we turn away from fear and we embrace faith...

faith in the promise that God is with us,
and that he will always guide and protect us.

But there's another reason we should have no fear

Our Shepherd has been there before us

Good, experienced Shepherds don't lead their flock into an unknown valley.

They've already scouted the ground.

They know what dangers lie ahead.

Jesus knows the valleys we face.

He was tempted.

He was attacked.

He was betrayed.

He suffered.

He died.

He's been to all our valleys before we get there

He can lead us to green pastures— we just need to follow him

So even though we face our own valleys,

we have a great shepherd who is always with us

and who will guide and protect us no matter what

But 'm not quite finished yet

Because I want to go right back to the beginning of verse 4

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley”

Verse 4 isn't talking about all the valleys we may face in our lives

It refers specifically to the darkest valley

And in fact I think the version that many of us are more familiar with is more helpful here

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”

This is the deepest, darkest valley of all,

The one where death casts its shadow

and it's the one valley through which we all must walk.

There are no exceptions,

no exemptions for any of us.

And, if death means what many people today think it means

The end of everything

Then it really is something to fear isn't it

Because it's so final and without hope.

But for us, with Our Good Shepherd, this is a valley merely with the shadow of death

Let me read to you something that I came across as I was preparing for this morning

I'm not sure who to attribute it to because I came across a few different versions

I don't even know if it's true,

but nevertheless it may help how we think about what the shadow of death means

It's a story about a pastor whose wife died very suddenly

They had two young girls

And he was struggling to find a way to put into perspective their mother's sudden death

To help them understand how Jesus changed the meaning of death for all who follow him

In fact it was when they were driving to her funeral

They stopped at a traffic light.

It was a bright day, and the sun was streaming into the car.

Then a truck pulled up next to them,

and the shadow that came with the truck darkened the inside of the car.

He turned to his daughters and asked,

"Would you rather be hit by the shadow or by the truck?"

One of them responded, "Oh, Daddy, that's a silly question!

The shadow can't hurt you. I'd much rather be hit by the shadow than by a truck."

And he then explained to them that it was as if their mother had been hit by a shadow.

It was as if Jesus had stepped in the way in her place, and it was he who had been hit by the truck.

Jesus took the full force of the evil of death so that we would not have to face it

So, yes we will all one day walk through this valley of deepest darkness

The valley of the shadow of death

But we should not fear the evil of death

We just have to walk through its shadow

Knowing that we have our Shepherd by our side,

guiding and protecting us all the way

Leading us to that wonderful place

Where we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Let me pray. Heavenly father, help us to see ourselves as sheep, always seeking to follow you our Shepherd, recognising that we are totally dependent on you for our guidance and our protection. As we struggle with our own personal valleys, may we know you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly all the days of our lives. Amen