

**A SONG IN THE DARK**  
**A SERMON AT SPRING VALLEY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**7 FEBRUARY 2016**

SCRIPTURE TEXT: PSALM 23 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)

A psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need;  
    he lets me rest in green meadows.  
He leads me beside peaceful streams;  
    he renews my strength.  
He guides me along right paths,  
    bringing honor to his name.  
Even when I walk through the darkest valley  
    I will not be afraid,  
        for you are close beside me;  
            Your rod and your staff protect and  
            comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me  
    in the presence of my enemies.  
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.  
    My cup overflows with blessings.  
Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me  
    all the days of my life,  
and I will live in the house of the LORD forever.

(—the stanzas have been modified)

How many of us have at least once in our lives been near death or threatened with serious, permanent disability? Let's actually see hands. How many of us have felt, at least once in our lives, that we were walking through a very dark valley, where it seemed that nothing was left for us but weeping and sorrow? Are some of you brave enough to raise your hands now?

If you haven't had these experiences yet, you probably will someday. For walking through dark valleys is a common—indeed, nearly universal—human experience. As Job put it: human life “is few of days and full of trouble” (14:1).

Can anything help us in these times? I know of nothing better than Psalm 23. Here David, Israel's sweet singer (see 2 Sam. 23:1), has given us a song to sing in the dark, a song that can give us hope, comfort, and strength.

The Boy Scout's motto is, Be prepared! Life-threatening health crises and deep valleys of emotional anguish tend to ambush us; they are usually upon us before we have had time to prepare—unless, that is, we have prepared in advance by having already begun carrying with us an antidote to abject fear and despair. There are some things we can do now to help us then.

Since the fall of 1996, Psalm 23 has always reminded me of

lying on a cart in Central DuPage Hospital awaiting an angiogram to determine how badly I had damaged my left internal carotid.

Cindy and I had been told, two evenings before, when we were at a dinner party hosted by a husband and wife who were both M.D.s, that my headache and drooping left eyelid were almost certainly not, as I had thought, the result of some virus that would soon disappear. They were worried the eyelid could be a sign of Bell's Palsy or something worse—and so they urged me to seek a diagnosis immediately.

Cindy and I had returned home and in spite of its being late I called David Gieser, a Wheaton College trustee who with his brother, Richard, ran Wheaton Eye Clinic. David was concerned, but not alarmed, and suggested I come in early the next day to see Jeff Hague, their crack neuro-ophthalmologist.

Jeff listened to me describe my symptoms and I could see the pennies drop. Providentially, he had attended a conference the week before where they had a session on the ophthalmological symptoms that would accompany carotid damage, which you may know are the main arteries supplying blood to our brains. As soon as I finished, he said, "I think you've damaged your left

carotid, and so I need to put cocaine in your eye. If, then, your eye doesn't respond to the cocaine over the next half-an-hour as it usually would, we can be pretty sure that you've done something to the carotid to damage the nerve running up alongside it.”

A half-an-hour later, the eye was unchanged, and Jeff called Central DuPage Hospital to tell them that he was sending me over for an immediate MRI to confirm his diagnosis.

The diagnosis was delayed because one part of our carotids doesn't show up on MRIs because a bone blocks us an MRI from imaging it. But Jeff's diagnosis seemed likely, and so, a day later, I was back in the hospital, lying on that cart waiting for an angiogram that would image the carotid behind that bone. Because Cindy worked in the X-ray Department and the doctors knew us, they went out of their way to do everything they could for me. They knew—and by now Cindy and I knew—that if Jeff was right, then my damaged carotid was leaving me exposed to a stroke that could kill me or damage my brain so badly that I would never think normally again. And so Dr. Baker, Cindy's boss, had called Dr. Su, who was on vacation, and asked him to come back immediately to do my angiogram, since Dr. Su did them best.

And so there I was, lying on that cart, waiting for Dr. Su and his team to finish prepping the room for my angiogram, knowing there was a fair chance I could die or suffer a debilitating stroke. At the college, word had gotten to our president, with whom I was close. He called the hospital and got them to bring a telephone to me so that he could tell me that he and his team of administrators and trustees were praying earnestly for my protection and full recovery. I could tell the news had shaken him. And of course I was shaken. In fact, I remember praying that if I were to have a serious stroke that it might kill me so that Cindy wouldn't have to nurse me for the rest of my life.

I've been in other life-threatening situations, and I've always felt it is my duty, in those situations, to remain calm as a way of showing that I'm trusting our Lord. Psalm 23, in the old Authorized Version, enabled me to do that that day. I had memorized it when I was five or six, and so now I was repeating it over and over to myself as I lay there:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his  
name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of  
death, I will fear no evil:

for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they  
comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine  
enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of  
my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

This psalm of Israel's sweet singer became my song that day, giving me hope, comfort, and strength: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me" and, no matter what happens to me right now, surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and, whenever you take me home, I will dwell in your house for ever. That day, that hour, Psalm 23 was my song in the

dark, enabling me to hear, even though I could not see, our Great Shepherd as he was guarding, guiding, leading, and comforting me.

Today, when I think of this psalm, I think of it in the New Living Translation. When I read this translation for the first time a couple of years ago, I was struck with how well it captured many of the elements of the Hebrew text that I had learned, since 1996, lay hidden in most translations. And so I have two goals this morning. The first is to urge you to memorize this psalm so that you will always have a reason, directly from God's word, to assure yourself of the hope you have within you (see 1 Pet. 3:15). The second is to highlight some of the usually hidden depths of its meaning.

As you came in today, you should have been handed a transcription of this psalm. This transcription uses the words of the New Living Translation but takes the stanzas of the psalm to be different than it gives them. We shall work from this transcript.

In modifying the stanzas, have I just done something I shouldn't do to the text? No. The original Hebrew text didn't in-

dicating which words went with which as a single stanza, and if you compare the ESV, the NIV, and the NLT, you'll see they disagree about the stanzas. What I've done is suggest that each stanza contains a claim and a picture. That suggestion follows the lead of several of the best commentators.

So now for the details that show some of this psalm's hidden depths.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need;  
he lets me rest in green meadows.*

In Hebrew, it seems this first stanza should probably read, "My shepherd is the LORD" rather than "The LORD is my shepherd." Why? Because the psalmist is not so much making a statement about God as he is making a statement about himself, about whose care he places himself under, about whom he trusts. He is declaring that out of all of the persons or objects he could trust, he entrusts himself to the God of Israel.

Moreover, since he is entrusting himself to this God, he is satisfied. He can rest, for he knows that God has literally, right

now, supplied him with all he needs. This probably has two aspects. First, having God is to have all that any human being ever really needs. He alone and all by himself is our full portion. “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:26). But, secondly, the Good Shepherd also looks after each of his individual sheep, continually supplying each of them with everything they really need. “The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing” (Ps. 34:10).

Even after we have declared, “My shepherd is the LORD,” we sometimes need to remind ourselves that no matter what we *want*, he is continually making sure we “lack no good thing.” We can rest from our ceaseless striving, because he is caring for us.

And now we comes the first stanza’s picture, its emblem of the way the LORD is continually caring of us. As a shepherd, he knows how to find the lush green meadows, the rich, abundant, fresh grass refreshed by the morning dew (see Deut. 32:2). He seeks these meadows out for our good as his people. In both quantity and quality, this shepherd provides each member of his flock with all that he or she needs.

Does “he lets me rest in green meadows” refer primarily to God’s provision of our physical and biological needs? No. It refers primarily to our deepest needs, our spiritual needs. When I was lying on that cart at Central DuPage, I could not have truthfully said that I knew God was going to take care of all my physical and biological needs. His will might have been for me to perish. But I did know it was his will, right then, to meet all my spiritual needs.

Throughout the Scriptures, God is presented as the Great or Chief Shepherd who feeds his flock by commissioning under-shepherds to lead and teach them. And so our Lord commanded Peter, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:16). And Peter in turn instructed the church’s elders to shepherd God’s flock, exercising oversight and serving as examples (see 1 Pet. 5:1-4). “As grass [is] food for the sheep, the word of the LORD . . . [is] provision for the ‘hungry’ spirit.”<sup>1</sup> We do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. God, the Great Shepherd, lets us rest in the green meadows of his church, where we can feed on his word.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1 (1-41)* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 561.

*He leads me beside peaceful streams;  
he renews my strength.*

In this stanza, the picture or emblem comes first, and then the straightforward claim.

In Scripture, clear, peaceful water regularly stands for that which cleanses and renews. God invites everyone who thirsts to “come to the waters” (Isa. 55:1) and he is himself “the fountain of living waters” (Jer. 2:13). The blessed man is the one who delight’s in the LORD’S law and thus is like a tree planted by streams of water that consequently yields fruit in season and has lush green leaves (see Ps. 1:1-3).

Here the waters to which the shepherd leads his flock are restful waters. They serve purposes beyond merely slaking a sheep’s thirst. They are still, quiet places “for cleansing and refreshment,” places where shepherds washed their sheep’s wounds and cleansed their soiled spots. “Throughout the Old Testament tempestuous waters speak of distress . . . , but calm waters for washing represent spiritual cleansing (cf. Lev. 11:32; 16:4; 17:15; Num. 19:7; and Exod. 30:18). The point is that the

LORD cleanses people from sin and provides spiritual refreshment and renewal from the chaos of life.”<sup>2</sup>

“He renews my strength” translates the picture into plain prose. As Allen Ross observes,

The verb [for renews or restores] . . . is a common verb . . . [that] is used in 1 Kings 13:6 for the “restoring” of a withered hand; . . . in Isaiah 52:8 for the “restoring” of the captives to their land; in Isaiah 58:12 [for] . . . the “repairing” of [Jerusalem’s] walls, and in Daniel 9:25 for the “rebuilding” of a ruined city. It therefore bears the idea of returning something to its original state. David’s words are general enough to mean that the LORD restores him to his proper spiritual and physical condition by forgiving him and renewing him (see Pss. 32 and 51).<sup>3</sup>

Shepherds in the ancient east led their flocks to water at least once a day. We who are God’s people can expect him to renew us daily so that we may maintain adequate spiritual strength.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 562, for both quotations.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

*He guides me along right paths,  
bringing honor to his name.*

Even as God nourishes and renews us, he does not neglect to advance his ends. We, as his flock, are not left to wander aimlessly, physically and spiritually fed and watered for no good reason. As he nourishes and renews us, God is also guiding us towards our ultimate, glorious destiny, leading us in “the tracks of righteousness”<sup>4</sup> so that we grow in godliness and are heading towards our final home where we will forever be with him.

We may be sure he will do these things because they bring honor to his name. In fact, I think that David is celebrating God’s leading him in these righteous tracks not primarily because these tracks benefit him, but because for God to do this brings honor to God’s name.

*Even when I walk through the darkest valley  
I will not be afraid,  
for you are close beside me;*

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<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, 563.

*Your rod and your staff protect and  
comfort me.*

Yet on our way, these paths sometimes pass through distressing and dangerous places. David, as a shepherd and as a military man, knew this. Read his story in the Bible's historical books. In his lifetime, he often found himself in distressing and dangerous places. He knew what it was like to be out in dark, convoluted valleys, where wild animals and fierce enemies lay in wait to surprise and slay him.

Up to this point in this psalm, David has been describing in the third person what the Great Shepherd does for him as one of his sheep: "My shepherd is the Lord . . . ; *he* lets me rest in green meadows. *He* leads me beside peaceful streams; *he* renews my strength. *He* guides me along right paths, bringing honor to *his* name." Referring to God like this may imply no more acquaintance with God than if we were to refer to some famous person we have never met as "he." But now, as his path through life turns deathly dark, it is no longer enough for David just to know *about* God in this way. He needs to know more than merely that God is in fact a good shepherd who will feed, water, and

guide him as one of his sheep. Now fear would overwhelm him if all he had to go on was a third-person description of what God, as a good shepherd, is doing for him. He must now feel God present and close beside him if he is to continue walking in the “tracks of righteousness” that God has shown him to be the right way.

And so now it is as if he hears God’s voice declaring “I will be with you,” as God declared to Jacob at Bethel and to Moses in the wilderness (see Gen. 28:15 and Exod. 3:12). God promised Jacob that he would be with him and keep him wherever he went and that he would never leave him until he had done for Jacob all that he had promised (see Gen. 28:10-17). He was with Moses until his dying day. And he is supremely with us, his New Testament children, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, who was born of the virgin Mary and named Immanuel—that is, “God is with us” (see Isa. 7:14). And this same person, Jesus Christ, Immanuel, has promised us that he will be with us always, even to the end of the age (see Matt. 28:20).

“Even when I walk through the darkest valley I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.” Here David declares—or, we might say, *resolves*—that he will not be afraid, no matter

how dark the valley, because his Shepherd is close beside him. He addresses God as *you*, in the second person, because he, like Moses, is in effect speaking to God face-to-face (see Exod. 33:11).

“Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.” The God who is walking close beside him is right there, at David’s side, to protect and comfort him. A shepherd carried a rod attached to his belt, John Goldingay tells us, “as the weapon with which to attack animals and thus protect the sheep.”<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere in Scripture, it “is the object with which the Davidic ruler is to break up the nations (Ps.2:9).” The shepherd’s staff is his means for keeping his sheep in order and moving. Both implements imply that God is with his sheep not merely to bring them emotional comfort, but to actively intervene for them as they move along this often difficult and dangerous way.

*You prepare a feast for me*

*in the presence of my enemies.*

*You honor me by anointing my head with oil.*

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<sup>5</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1 (Psalms 1-41)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 351. The remaining quotations in this paragraph are from the same place.

*My cup overflows with blessings.*

The picture changes. God is no longer portrayed as a shepherd providing his sheep with food and water as he guides them through a sometimes dark and dangerous world. David is no longer a sheep being herded from place to place. God is now a gracious and generous host, thoughtfully laying a table for a guest who, even while his enemies surround him, is bidden to stop and eat.

This is no hasty meal. David sits as his host anoints his head with perfumed oil, oil which symbolizes prosperity and happiness (see Eccl. 9:8 and Ezek. 16:20). It comes as part of a royal treasure (see 2 Kings 20:13). Then his host hands David a cup filled with the finest of wines and bids him drink until he is fully satisfied. Mere water is no longer his lot. David's life is now filled with every good thing.

*Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.*

David has now had a glimpse of what God has always had in store for him. God’s goodness and unfailing love—the word is our old friend, *hesed*, which signifies God’s covenantal kindness to his people that he exercises for their everlasting good. This goodness—“which promotes, protects, produces, and enhances life (s.v. Ps. 34:8)”<sup>6</sup>—and this unfailing love will not merely follow David all the days of his life, they will *pursue* him with all of the vigor of a most implacable enemy, but they, unlike David’s enemies, will pursue him to overtake him, to ambush him, to surprise him with overwhelming, inconceivable good.

What good? The only completely satisfying good, the good of dwelling with God and with God’s other children in God’s own house forever and ever. There our worship will be our joy, which will know no end.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 568-69.