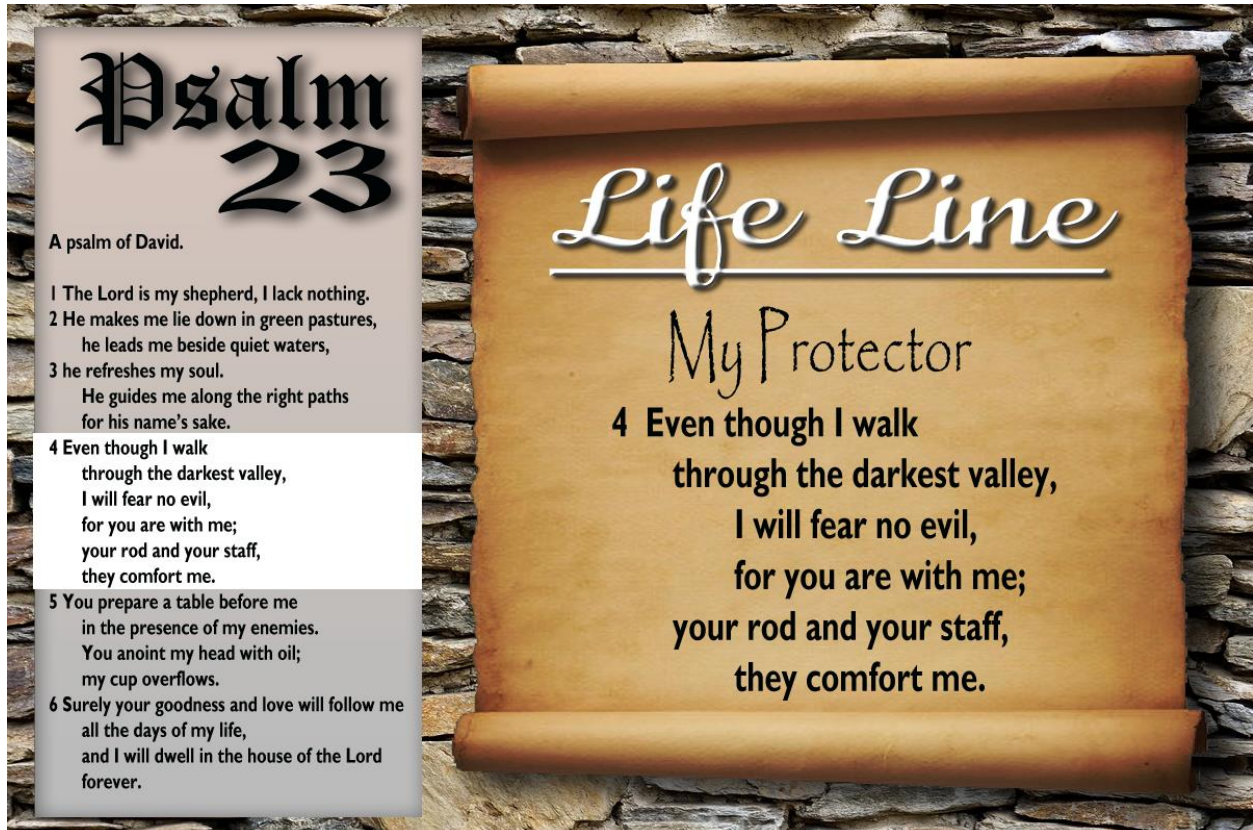


November 14, 2021

23rd Psalm

“My Protector”

Intro: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XeZySFA0kc>



Psalm 23:4

4 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.

Special Music: Psalm 23

Lize Hadassah Wiid

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge3uvXjet_c

OUR CANDLE

Why fear we now the shadows?
Matterless shades of gray
Dancing against our hallowed walls
Vestiges of things not seen
Giving pause to our spirits
Nightmares to our dreams.
The shadows beacon us
To wayward thoughts
And unformed images.
They lie in wait
Nestled in darkened corners
And the recesses of our minds.

We need not give in
To baseless fears
And shallow wisps.
We hold high our candle
The light of Christ,
Fingers of brilliant light
Brighter than 10,000 suns.
Driving back the darkness
Into the foul crevasses
From whence it came.
God's flame eternal
Our sword against the night,
Our shield in the presence of death

Christ at our side
Enrobed in the Creator's light
Casting fears away
Turning shades of night
Into days of joy and peace.

I've been to some pretty scary places, and I have also been in some scary situations. Sometimes, I was justified in being afraid. Other times I was afraid without reason, even though the thoughts of potential harm were very real to me. I was afraid to run the Runaway Mine Train at Six Flags when I was growing up. I was afraid when a person pulled a knife on me in high school. I was afraid when someone intentionally ran over me with a motorcycle.

I was afraid when I stepped off the bus at 2am in Shawnee, Oklahoma on my visit to Oklahoma Baptist University for the first time. There were no taxis, buses, Ubers, or Lyfts. Most of the streetlights were burned out and it was a very dingy, dark, and dank area. Nothing was open when I went to search for the only payphone in town. I was thrilled when I found it so that I could call someone from the school to come give me a ride.

I was afraid when I was working in the print shop on the cutting machine and the brake broke on the flywheel causing it cycle, almost removing both of my hands at the wrists. I was afraid when I began to lose my memory and was even more afraid when the doctor looked at me told me I had Alzheimer's. I've held the hands of loved ones as they passed. I am no stranger to shadows and darkness.

And I never told you this, but I was so very afraid when I was by myself in Midland and the cardio-vascular surgeon told me about my heart condition and that there was nothing he could do to help me, that I needed to get my affairs in order. I hadn't been here in Fort Stockton that long, and there was so much that I needed to do. I didn't want to leave things undone. It wasn't the first time that I had stared death in the face, but it was the first time that I felt so unprepared for

it. As I sat alone in my car in the hospital parking lot, I prayed about what my next step should be. The very worst part was the fear that I was about to let everybody down, including this church, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I had no problem meeting my Creator face to face. I am firmly cemented in my relationship with Christ and knew that he was with me on every step of that journey. But there were so many people counting on me, and I didn't want to disappoint them. My prayer was not necessarily to be healed, but simply to allow God's plan to move forward. I'll go when and where God calls me to go, even into death.

Whether we are talking about the King James translation, "the valley of the shadow of death" or the New International Version, "through the darkest valley" we are contemplating the same experience, the fear of the unknown, the anticipation of danger. And, yes, the possibility of death, even though that possibility is with us every moment of every day. Shadows themselves are not dangerous, but their presence implies that there is something ominous near us that we cannot see. We only see a representation of its presence. We have no way of knowing if it is something is good or bad. Just that it is there.

We also know that attacking that shadow will do us no good, because it is not the shadow that can harm us; it has no substance. We may as well be fighting with the air.

Both the Bible translations put this abstract fear in a dark valley, valley of the shadow of death, suggesting that it is the environment that causes us to fear, not something of substance. Why do we find fear in the darkness? Why is it that

we enjoy a walk in the park in the daylight, but we approach that exact same walk at night with trepidation? It is because the shadows hold an unknown element for us. When we think about what could be lurking in the shadows, our imaginations start to run wild. I'm not saying there is or isn't something in the dark that is out to get us. I'm saying that the possibility of something being there pushes our minds that towards dark and worrisome thoughts.

David had every reason to be afraid. He had enemies that were constantly trying to kill him. Being in a dark valley was a dangerous place for David, even when he was surrounded by men sworn to protect him. The possibility of losing his life was constant and real. The possibility of his men losing their lives as well was very real. Who knew what was hiding in that darkened and shadowy valley? It could be a lion, a bear, or a group of Saul's soldiers. Or, it could be nothing.

David's approach was, "I'm not going to be afraid. Being afraid doesn't do anything but make me anxious. God's got my back so there is no reason to fear."

Well, that's great for David. But how do we do that? How do we engage with the shadows of a dark valley without being afraid? How do we walk through the park at night and not be afraid? How do we listen to the bad news from the doctor and not get anxious?

David knew the only way to deal with it was to recognize that God never steps away, that God is always with us, even in the dark valley. God doesn't pick up creation's marbles and leave us just because the sun goes down. We forget the implication of verses 4 and 5 of Genesis 1

**God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.”
And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.**

God is not just the Creator and Lord of the light. He is also the Creator and Lord of darkness. Stories passed down through generations teach us that God is light and Satan is darkness. That is such a subjective lesson. We associate light with truth and darkness with deception. But in fact, God made both. He is the Lord of both. There is nothing inherently wrong with darkness, except what we believe the danger of darkness in our mind’s eye. It should bring us comfort to note that it takes light to create a shadow. Seeing a shadow means there is a light shining somewhere to create it. We also understand that same light can dispel the shadow. It is the positioning of the light that determines whether we see or do not see the shadow.

God knows that we associate the darkness with our fears and gives us a way to move out of that darkness and into the light where we can feel more comfortable. Most of us are not as anxious when we have enough light to see what is going on all around us. We tell ourselves that we can avoid evil if we can just see it coming.

Last week we talked about God as our shepherd and how our shepherd cares for each of us individually, providing for our needs, leading us on a path to allows us to rest when we need it. Today, we see that the shepherd carries the rod and staff to provide protection, including protection from things that we cannot see. But what else do the rod and staff provide for us?

Evidence. Evidence of God's protective nature for us. When we see that rod or that staff in our images of God, we know that God is providing protection for us, that God is showing us the nature of that protection. It's God's way of saying, "I've got your back. You do not need to fear the darkness. You do not need to fear the unseen. You do not need to fear the unknown. You just keep doing the work I require of you and know that you are protected."

The visible nature of the rod and staff of our shepherd brings us comfort. It allows us the opportunity to continue serving without constantly looking over our shoulders. It allows us to close our eyes and rest amongst the darkness and the shadows. The light from that protection can dispel the fear of darkness in our lives. It can bring us peace in the midst of our anxiety.

Jesus tells us in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Because the shepherd walks with us, we are provided with the light to scatter the darkness. We should embrace that.

I want us to think back to when we were kids growing up. Was there ever a night when we found ourselves afraid of the dark? As a solution, we found a flashlight, which we turned on under the covers to bring us some comfort. Why did we turn it on under the covers? Because we didn't want our parents to know that we were afraid of the dark, that they might not understand, that they might get angry at us for being awake, or tease us about how we needed to grow up because there was no reason to be afraid of the dark.

Jesus addresses this in Matthew 5:15. **“Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”** Why do we try to hide the lamp under a bowl? We don’t want our Creator to know that we are frightened and feeling helpless. We don’t want the people around us to know that we find comfort in that light. We are so caught up in our fears that we are unwilling to bring the light out from under the bowl. But, here is the thing about light. When we bring it out from under the bowl, it lights up the whole room, not just for us, but for everyone else in the room, too. We have the opportunity to expel the darkness not only for ourselves, but for everyone else around us as well.

But there’s the rub. In order for us to share that light, to end the darkness for everyone around us, we have to admit that we have the light, that we, too, were once in darkness. We need to accept how our precious Savior saw through our faults and brought us into the light, how God protects us and lights our way with a rod and staff, that the Creator of light also created the absence of light, known as darkness, that God dispels the shadows and darkness around us because God loves us. There is a need to realize that God is not angry with us for being up late, or being afraid of the dark. There is no shame in fear. However, our Creator is glorified when we remove the bowl and expose the darkness to the wonder of God’s light.

I am sad to report that there are those who prefer to live in the shadows and will not appreciate the light. The light not only shows the beauty of God, but also the ugliness of the scars of the world. Some people will prefer not seeing

those scars, must less let others see them. They find comfort in remaining hidden. We must not forget that when we expose those scars to the light, we do not do it to frighten, demean, accuse, or diminish the victims of those scars. When the scars are exposed, Christ allows us to bring healing into the lives of those victims while bringing them into a place where they can appreciate the love, grace, mercy, and warmth of the light of our Creator.

Only through the exposure to light will the scars be healed. Remember that when Paul was on the road to Damascus and saw the light of Christ, he became blind. This was not a punishment but an opportunity for self-reflection because Paul's scars, his sins, his failings, his shortcomings, were all exposed to that light. While Paul may have physically gone from daylight to darkness, he went spiritually from a world of dark and shadowed theology into a new birth of enlightenment. Paul could not see that his persecution of Christians was wrong. It was necessary to expose that darkness of his soul to the light of Christ in order for the healing to begin.

It is difficult to mend something that we cannot see. As Christians, we are called to minister to all who are in pain, all who are living in the darkness, all who are embarrassed by their struggles and their scars. It is one reason that we welcome all to the table, a place of light and acceptance, where we can sit and minister to one another without judgement or condemnation. The table of Christ is a come as you are, warts, scars and all, table of light. It is a table of transition and healing. It is a place to step into the presence of the Creator of the universe and find joy and peace. It is a place of acceptance and truth. It is a table where

we lift people into the light rather than push them back into the darkness. It is a table without fences or barriers. It is a table where Judas is just as welcome as much as any other person. It is a table where all people are welcomed as brothers and sisters, not servants. It is a table where everyone is blessed with a feast of wine and the bread, unconditionally.

I want us all to look for the darkness this week and where we find it, I pray we have the courage to lift our bowls of containment and expose the shadows to the lamp of Jesus Christ. May the darkness be lifted, and may His light fill our souls with God's presence. May people see the light in our eyes and know that they are welcome at the table of our savior.

AMEN

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