

## **Psalm 23 sermon course – the ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’**

There are 66 different books, collections of poems and songs, letters, chronicles of history and other writings in our Bible. They were written and gathered together by at least 40 different writers over a period of some 1,500 years. To gain a good knowledge and understanding of the Bible is not a matter of focusing on what are known as ‘proof texts’ ( they’re the ones that usually begin with ‘the Bible says’). It’s more a matter of grasping the gradual understanding of the nature and character of God on the part of many searchers after truth, developed over hundreds of years of trying to tune their minds into the mind of God, and all of that subjected to the nature and character of God as we understand it through what we have learned about the nature and character of Jesus, as recorded and transmitted to us through the Gospels, the Jesus whom we believe actually to be God incarnate. So what Jesus is, God is, so to speak.

So the ‘proof text’ approach to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, for instance – “Psalm 23 says ‘the Lord is my Shepherd’; therefore The Bible says God is a Shepherd; therefore God is a shepherd” will not do, certainly not for me. The Bible does not say ‘God is a shepherd’. One of the Psalms, the one we call the 23<sup>rd</sup>, as well as a significant number of other writings sprinkled throughout those 66 books expresses an awareness and understanding of God, by people such as David whom we think may well have written the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, that God treats us in much the same way as a shepherd treats his sheep. I say ‘his’ simply because in the days when most of these books were written you would rarely find a female shepherd. Today, of course, you would find many, especially if you watch Countryfile or live in Yorkshire. Jesus himself referred to himself as the ‘good shepherd’, and what Jesus is, God is.

A good shepherd, for example, finds green food for you where there are mostly rocks and scrub; he’ll find decent, still water for you to drink so you don’t have to put yourself in danger trying to catch water that’s rushing down the rock face from a raging waterfall.

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The shepherd will also know that there are going to be times when you're going to have to go through some pretty daunting and challenging passages, perhaps narrow valleys with steep, rocky sides letting in very little light and probably hiding wild animals like wolves and lions that can only really survive by catching you and tearing you to pieces. In Hebrew they're called 'valleys of tzalim'. Valleys of shadows.

You can almost hear the shepherd's calming and encouraging voice saying "Don't worry now, it's going to be alright, I'm right here with you. Don't let your heart be troubled."

Shepherds are like that. God is like that, if my understanding of the Bible and its grasp of the nature and character of God is correct. Jesus is like that. "Don't let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God? Believe in me."

Think back to the 'dark valleys' you've been through. I have asked quite a number of people recently what have been their 'dark valleys'. There's quite a list:- job-loss, debt, failure, guilt, depression, illness, injury, breakup of relationships, death of loved ones, fear of Covid, actual Covid. I expect yours is in there somewhere. You might not have been much aware of it at the time, but when you look back to it can you now see that the Shepherd God was there all the time saying "it's ok, don't be afraid, I'm right here with you – don't let your heart be troubled"? My guess, from my own experience, is that he was saying it through people as much as through any inner conviction on your part – through doctors and nurses; through family and friends; through neighbours and Church people. Yes, he was there alright.

Of course, the darkest shadow to be thrown over us is death. We do all go through the valley of 'tzal-mabeth' as the Hebrews used to call it, the valley of 'the shadow of death'. It's a sobering thought, though not necessarily a depressing one, that the moment we're conceived we begin a biological process which inexorably and inevitably leads towards biological death. "In the midst of life we are in death". And throughout that process something is being formed and developed which surely is much more than just a biological thing – a human person! You, me, our parents, our children, people who mean so

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much to us in life and who themselves play a large part in what we are becoming.

Our biological death, no matter how dark its shadow over us now, surely cannot be the end of that incredible process, the sheer miracle of human life.

We do now talk a little more about death than we used to in my younger days. When I was teaching I did once receive a circular from my Education Officer strongly advising that we should not introduce the topic of death into our teaching more than was absolutely necessary – a bit tricky when you're teaching about the major world religions and the way they mark those great occasions of life, birth, marriage and death! His fear was that pupils would be unnecessarily upset about recent bereavements. Conversations I had with a number of bereaved youngsters made it clear to me though that I was right to resist his requirement! We were even able to share some of the humour that can help soothe the sting of death. There's the gravestone of a hypochondriac which simply reads "I told you I wasn't well!"; or there's Woody Allen's famous quote "I'm not afraid of dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens!"

But, of course, it's no joke when it does happen.

When it's a sudden, totally unexpected, shocking death – the kind where someone you love goes out one day and doesn't ever come back; or dies in front of you in the home; or dies despite being rigged up with air pipes and electrical contacts in an intensive care unit after catching Covid, who knows where from, it's certainly no joke. People who have been through that kind of trauma have been on record as saying it was like a physical attack on their own body, a shock that stops you even thinking rationally, as life-changing as if you'd been the one who'd been through it.

When the death has been expected, anticipated, whether because of old age or long term illness it can be very tempting for well-wishers to say something like "Well, at least you had time to be prepared for it." I'm afraid it's not really like that. You go through it twice, first when you become aware that it's going to happen and again when it actually does happen.

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No, I'm afraid death is very much a shadow of darkness, no matter how well prepared we might be for it or how strong our faith is that death is not the end, that there is life of the person despite biological death. Jesus, who called himself the Good Shepherd, knew that shadow of death. He cried at the death of his friend Lazarus.

Yes, God, if we are right in believing that God became flesh in the person of Jesus, God, creator and sustainer of the universe, cried.

Later on he went through that shadow of darkness again at the thought of his own death. We're told that he sweated blood whilst praying with his friends in the garden of Gethsemane as he realized what he was shortly going to have to go through. I know that his particular death which he was anticipating would be a brutal and terrifying one, but then none of us knows what our own death is going to be like. So don't ever feel guilty about being afraid of death. It is perfectly natural, part of our biological condition and there's good precedent for it.

But death is not the end – not your death, not mine, not our loved ones. As well as saying that he was the Good Shepherd; as well as saying “Don't let your hearts be troubled; you believe in God, believe in me”; he also said “I am the Resurrection and the Life!” Many things may be said at funerals, mostly comforting and helpful I hope! But the most important words are read out at the beginning of any standard funeral. “I am the Resurrection and the Life says the Lord” – and if I'm right in believing that whatever Jesus is God is, then God is Resurrection.

Yes, we do all have to go through the valley of tzalmavet, the valley of the shadow of death, our own and all of our loved ones. But the Shepherd God is able to say “Don't let your hearts be troubled; it's alright, don't be afraid” because he knows that however dark that valley may seem in our eyes it leads towards the light that he can see clearly at the end even if you can't - the green pastures, the quiet waters, the right paths.

It's all going to be alright – the Bible says!