

# No Fear in Death's Valley

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**Bible Text:** Psalm 23:4

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## **Covenant of Grace Protestant Reformed**

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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.<sup>1</sup>

The verse we are going to consider this morning is verse four, Psalm 23 verse four.

“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.”<sup>2</sup>

As we celebrate the sacrament of communion or, as we have been in the last year or so, we have been looking at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm verse by verse and this morning we come to verse four. And the subject of this verse is death. This morning we remember the suffering and the death of Jesus Christ. He has given us the sacrament of his body and blood as a perpetual remembrance and reminder of his suffering and death.

And one thing that death reminds us of is this, that we all face death. We all must die. That is not a popular subject. People don't want to talk about that. People are afraid of death. The reason that man is afraid of death and afraid to speak of the subject to death is that death is the wages of sin and every man knows that. Death brings us before God the judge. Death is the result of and the consequence of sin. And the reality of sin and the reality of eternity and the reality of God the judge and the reality of heaven and hell are all connected to this important subject, death.

As believers, though, we don't avoid speaking about this. This is real. Hebrews chapter nine verse 27 tells us that:

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 23:2-6.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 23:4.

“...it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”<sup>3</sup>

God has made an appointment for every one of us to face him on the day of our deaths.

Ecclesiastes chapter seven verse two says this.

“It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting.”<sup>4</sup>

Think of that. Death and the subject death and the experience of death and going to a funeral home and burying the dead is better than feasting and partying, because the living will lay it to heart. That is hat Solomon says. It has a sanctifying purpose.

So this morning we look at this subject, death. But we don't do it in a morbid way. That is why the world, another reason why the world is so afraid to speak of death, because this is the end. This is the end of life as they know it. This is the end of what they enjoy. But for us death is not the end. Death is victory. Death is the beginning of something newer and greater.

You go on in this psalm and verse six he says:

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”<sup>5</sup>

And then what?

“...and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”<sup>6</sup>

This is our hope beyond death. And so we don't speak of it as something, a morbid subject, but there is triumph. Death becomes the servant of the child of God. Death becomes the doorway and the gateway into heaven. Death is defeated and there is comfort for us in death.

“...thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”<sup>7</sup>

And so this morning we want to look at these beautiful words in Psalm 23 verse four.

“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.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 9:29.

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:2.

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 23:6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 23:4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Our theme will be: No fear in the valley of death. Let's notice three things. First, the amazing confession and then, second, the special care of the shepherd and then, third, the spiritual benefit for us, the spiritual benefit of considering the subject of death.

When the psalmist speaks of walking through the valley of the shadow of death, he is speaking not abstractly of the subject of death like we might do sometimes when we look at the Bible's teaching on the subject of death, but he is speaking about it from a very personal experience point of view.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”<sup>9</sup>

He is talking about his walk, his experience and his experience is that death is like a valley. Now when he speaks of a valley here you shouldn't have mind a river valley with large fruitful plains on either side of it, green pastures, but you should think of a valley in a rocky gorge, a narrow pathway between two steep cliffs. That is the idea here of a valley. Those were the kinds of valleys that were very common in the sheep country in Palestine. Maybe you have walked through a valley like that before and it is a place where you look up and there is just a sliver of light. And there is mud and rocks at your feet and the trail is there for a while and then the trail is gone because it is swept away by a river or a creek and there is the threat of flood and there are some plants and vegetation, but maybe they are poisonous and there are some animals, leeches and other things. It is a chilling place to be. And when you are in such a place you want your hike to be done. Let's get out of here.

And the psalmist says that is what death is like. The experience of death, maybe your own death or the death of a loved one is like that. It is claustrophobic. You want to escape. It is oppressive. The valley of death is narrow. And so you experience it this way.

There is nothing about pleasant about death. That is the point here that the psalmist is making when he calls it a valley of the shadow of death. Literally it is death's shadow gorge.

But now, understand he doesn't have in mind only death itself. He is not speaking here just of a funeral, but this is the experience of his life. He says, “I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” And so there are all kinds of things in our lives that remind us of death. We are not born to live here in this earth forever. Our life is not a perpetual pleasant existence here on the earth, but there is a sense in which we are born to die. We lie in the midst of death. Our life is nothing but a continual death and there are all kinds of things in life that remind us of that. You think of a hospital or a nursing home. The shadow of death is cast over such places. You think of disease and sickness as it comes or a sudden car accident or doctor's reports. And death's shadow is thrown over every aspect of our life. You think of the frail old body of a man or a woman who were once young and robust. And you see, death's shadow casts itself over our lives. We begin to feel the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

aging of our body in our teenage years. And we only get older and older as death casts its shadow over our lives.

And so this is a reality and it is not a pleasant reality. It is not a joyful experience, but now when we speak of death and the experience, the walk through the valley of the shadow of death, understand we should not only think of physical death, but there is also a spiritual death that casts its shadow over every aspect of our lives that spiritual death is sin. And sin in its power is at work in us and this becomes the struggle of the experience of every believer, every child of God as they go through the is life. They are constantly in the struggle with sin and its results, the old man of sin rising up against us. And the stronger our faith, the greater this struggle, the greater the tempter comes against us.

This, too, is all a part of the experience of death. There is always this struggle. And so, again, this is not just the end that we are talking about there, but the walk, the experience, from a physical and a spiritual point of view. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

And yet the psalmist says:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”<sup>10</sup>

That is an amazing statement. Notice he doesn't say, “I will experience no pain.” He doesn't say, “No evil will come to me.” If you pass through a valley you think of a shepherd now leading his sheep through a chasm or a valley. There are threats that come there. David speaks of killing a lion and a bear who threatened his flocks. And so there are evils that will befall us. There are evils that come to us in this valley. Just think of the day you hear a doctor's report of the pain and suffering that you see in a hospital or a nursing home or sitting in someone's living room and their son, a 16 year old boy, was killed in a car accident that morning or you get a phone call and a friend was eight and a half month's pregnant and she was scheduled to have her baby delivered that week and they found out the baby died. She has to go in. These are dreadful, drastic experiences that... devastating experiences that the children of God go through. The psalmist doesn't say, “I won't experience any evil or any pain.” But he says this, “I won't fear. I will fear no evil. I won't be afraid when the evils and the realities of death come to me. Then I won't be afraid.”

That is different than saying they won't come to me. What is fear? What is it to be afraid? It is to be overcome by a terror and a dread that makes it impossible for you to go on. It paralyzes you and, again, the sheep are going through the dark gorge, maybe from one field to another field and they are going through is dark chasm and there is a lion in front of them and they stop in their tracks. They fear.

The psalmist says, “I will fear no evil.”

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

In the valley of the shadow of death, when the death confronts me, I won't be afraid. I won't be afraid of the doctor's reports. I won't be afraid when the phone rings. I won't be afraid when war comes. I won't be afraid in the face of persecution and the threats against my life and the life of my children. I won't be afraid.

And you say, "How can that be?"

You are driving your car down the road and someone comes and pulls out in front you and in fear you jam on the brakes. How can you say, "I won't be afraid?"

It makes me think of the amazing confession of the three friends of Daniel when they stand before Nebuchadnezzar. You have that in Daniel chapter three. They had refused to fall down and worship the image of Nebuchadnezzar. And Nebuchadnezzar was the world emperor and he can't understand that they dare to not listen to him. So he gives them a second chance and they still won't fall down when the music plays. And so in Daniel chapter three he becomes angry with them and they answer him in verse 16. They say to the king:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter."<sup>11</sup>

The mean, we have thought this through. We are not being care free.

"...we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king."<sup>12</sup>

They are not saying God will deliver us from the fiery furnace. They say, "He is able, but he will deliver us from your hand, King Nebuchadnezzar."

"But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."<sup>13</sup>

And they understood very clearly the consequences. They were going to be thrown into the fiery furnace, but they didn't fear. They faced death, but they didn't fear. That is what the psalmist saying here.

"...through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."<sup>14</sup>

Now not just the threat of deaths because of persecution, but any threat, any experience, any part of this walk through the valley, disease, death itself, death of a loved one, a doctor's report, the attacks of Satan, the guilt and the weight of sin, the struggles and the striving. I will fear no evil. How can you say that? How can we say that?

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel 3:16.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel 3: 16-17.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel 3:18.

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 23:4.

The psalmist speaks here of the special care of the shepherd. His strength in facing death is not in himself, but his strength is in the shepherd. He says:

“I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.”<sup>15</sup>

The shepherd is with him. Now it is important to notice here that there is a shift here in who the psalmist is speaking to. Earlier in the psalm the first three verses he speaks of the shepherd’s care and he is talking to others. It is as though he is the sheep and he is boasting about his shepherd to other sheep. Things are going well in his life and he is taking really... the shepherd takes really good care of him and he wants others to know about it. But now he is passing through this shadowy gorge where his life is threatened and now he is not talking to the other sheep, but he is talking to his shepherd.

And, you see, that is the way it should be with us. When things in our life are going well, we don’t take the credit for that and we don’t boast about our achievements and our safety and our success. But we tell others with joy of what God is doing for us. And then when we go through the valleys, the dark shadow of death, when trials and troubles come our way, we should look to the shepherd. Too often we don’t. Too often that is when we start talking to other sheep and complaining, poor me. The psalmist doesn’t do that. Here is his strength, not in himself, not in others, but in the shepherd. He looks now to the shepherd.

“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.”<sup>16</sup>

In Psalm 46 verse 10 after the psalmist has spoken of the might of God in the creation, the majesty of God, the trembling of earthquakes and storms, the moving of the nations, war, troubles, he says in verse 10, “Be still.” And that is what the psalmist is doing here. Thought the valley of the shadow of death it is not a time to complain and go to everybody else, but it is a time to look to the shepherd. Now art with me.

He expresses here in the second part of the verse the special care of the shepherd and he does that in two ways. First, thou art with me and then, second, thy rod and they staff they comfort me.

Now, again, think of sheep. When sheep have their shepherd they are secure. They are together. They are safe. But when sheep have no shepherd they are scattered. And the psalmist is saying this. We have the shepherd with us. I have the shepherd with me. So I won’t be scattered. I will be safe. Now who is the shepherd? You go back to verse one and you see his name.

“The LORD is my shepherd.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Psalm

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 23:1.

Lord in capital letters is the personal name of God, the same Jehovah. Jehovah is my shepherd. And the psalmist means the God of unchanging covenant faithfulness, Jehovah is my shepherd.

If you go to Exodus three you see where God ... that this is where God reveals this name and reveals also the significance of this name.

The children in catechism class this week you had the story of the burning bush. Remember? The burning bush. Who was in the bush? The Lord. God spoke from the burning bush to Moses and he said, "My name is Jehovah. I am." And what was the burning bush? It was a picture of God's people being oppressed in Egypt, burning, going through the dark valley of the shadow of death. But though the bush was burned, it wasn't consumed because God was with them God was in the bush. And, you use, you carry that over here. This is exactly what the psalmist is saying. Jehovah is with me. And so the evils of death they won't destroy me. I will be like that bush burning, but not consumed, because the Lord is with me. I will fear no evil.

Who is the Lord? Jesus says in John 10:

"I am the good shepherd."<sup>18</sup>

Jehovah, the faithful covenant God has come in Jesus and he has come right into the valley of death with us. He has come and he has taken on himself the curse of sin. He has come to experience death with us in every aspect of it. We confess not only that he suffered but that he suffered the curse of death. He was crucified, dead, buried, descended into hell. Every aspect of death Christ experienced. He has come with us into the valley, but he has come with us into the valley to defeat death. And when we say, "Thou art with me," this is what we are saying. The one who is victorious over death, he is the one who is with us in the valley of death. Therefore all the evils of death we will not fear, because he has overcome them.

Paul talks about this for us in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and victory there of the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. Notice in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 16 he says:

For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

But now is Christ risen from the dead...<sup>19</sup>

He went into this valley, but he came out again victorious. And this one who has gone into the valley of death and now overcome it, comes back to be with us in this valley.

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<sup>18</sup> John 10:11, 14.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:16-20.

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin.”<sup>20</sup>

But sin has been overcome. The victory of the grave may seem to be victorious, but it is overcome. We fall asleep. This mortal shall be raised immortal. This corruptible shall be raised incorruptible. God has overcome. Christ has overcome. And this victorious shepherd comes back to us.

And that is what the psalmist expresses in the second part of his comfort here.

“...thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”<sup>21</sup>

Now the rod and the staff were instruments that the shepherd used. He used the rod for three things, to count the sheep, to correct the sheep and to defend the sheep. He would use the rod as a weapon against threats. The staff was a stick with a crook on the end of it which he would use to direct and guide the sheep if they were going across off the path this way or that way. He would hook them and pull them back on the path. And he would use it also for walking as he himself went along that path.

“...thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”<sup>22</sup>

Now what is it that is God’s rod and staff that do all these things for us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. God’s rod and staff are his Word and Spirit. We could say, “ They Word and Spirit, they comfort me.”

This is how Christ is present with us. He is present with us by his Word in the Scriptures and his Word proclaimed in the preaching of the gospel. We need those things. And he is present with us by the spirit to make them effectual, to apply them. He says to his disciples, “I will send the Comforter and I will be with you to the end of the world.” He is with us by these means. And they do all these things, the Word and the Spirit, correct. Think of the convicting work of the Spirit and the convicting work of the Word of God in the preaching and even as we read the Scriptures. They correct us.

The word identifies us, it counts us. The Word and the Spirit protect us. They guard us from evil.

“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”<sup>23</sup>

We lean on them. They are our guides.

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:55-56.

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 23:4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Psalm 119:11.

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 119:105.



This is the way that Christ comes back to us. The victor is with us by Word and Spirit.

And now in the valley of the shadow of death the Word and the Spirit are a special comfort and strength to the child of God.

I don't know when I first learned this psalm. Maybe I was very, very young. But I remember singing the words of this psalm when I was 16 years old at my grandmother's funeral. And they never meant so much as then. Thy word, thy rod and they staff, they comfort me. In the valley of he shadow of death God is with us by his word and Spirit.

Is it worth talking about death? Is it worth talking about death from the believer's perspective? Yes, it is. There is great spiritual benefit for us in doing this. Last week we talked about Job and his experience of death sitting in his house with 10 coffins. And think of the sanctifying purpose for him.

"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."<sup>25</sup>

"...the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."<sup>26</sup>

And in this verse, again, we see two important things. The experience of death for the child of God should give him the perspective of faith so that he doesn't look at the temporal, the here and the now, but he looks beyond to the eternal. And you see that here in the verse. There are two things that the psalmist says, first this. I walk though the valley of the shadow of death. What is he saying about death? The experience of death for the child of God is not forever. The tunnel, the valley, the dark shadow of death is but for a moment. Death itself in the blink of an eye is the doorway that brings us into the glories of heaven. And the walk through the valley of death which is this life is temporary. And it is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

The psalmist, when he speaks of the experience of death, doesn't despair, doesn't say, "Well, here I am and I don't know how I am going to go on." No, he looks at it and he says, "I am going through. I am passing through."

Again, a shepherd, why would he lead his sheep through such a dark treacherous trail in such a place? Because he is taking them from one green pasture to a river or a green pasture somewhere else. And that is what death is. It is temporary. He leads us through death into eternal glory.

And then notice one other thing. He doesn't speak of death, but he speaks of the shadow of death. There is a difference. There is a threatening person or something large and threatening, a threatening beast or animal, a lion or there is just the shadow of it. What can the shadow do? How long can the shadow last? The shadow is but for a moment.

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<sup>25</sup> Job 13:15.

<sup>26</sup> Job 1:21.

The shadow it says, yes, death is there, the beast is there, the threat is there, but he shadow itself it can't touch me. And that is the idea here.

And the psalmist looks at death. He sees it simply as a shadow, something that lasts a moment and then it is gone, something that is really not even material. How can this threaten me, a shadow? We are not scared of shadows. And this is death, it is just a shadow passing through.

So, you see here, the spiritual benefit.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”<sup>27</sup>

I look to the shepherd in faith.

“...for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”<sup>28</sup>

And this morning as we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's supper and remember the death and the suffering of Jesus Christ, we remember that he himself went through this dark valley and for him it wasn't only a shadow, but he experienced the full reality of death even the agonies and the torments of hell, the wages of sin, death eternal, so that we might be spared. This is our confidence this morning in this psalm. Amen. Let's pray.

*Father, we thank thee for the beautiful word of the gospel here in this psalm. We pray...*

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<sup>27</sup> Psalm 23:4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.