

I Will Fear No Evil

Psalm 23

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Bible Text: Psalm 23:4
Preached on: Sunday, May 16, 2021

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Our text this morning is Psalm 23:4.

4 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.

Dear congregation, last time we left the sheep restored by the good shepherd. The sheep, we noticed, wander and the shepherd is the one who restores. We saw, too, the place where he restores them. He brings them back, he restores them to the paths of righteousness, the only safe place. Not the only easy place but the only safe place, and isn't that a lesson that we all need to learn again and again? The safe path may be and very often is very difficult, and here in this Psalm, in this confession of faith, the sheep have been in the green pasture. They've been beside the still water. They have been restored to the paths of righteousness. But you notice at this point in the Psalm and in the experience of David, the experience of the sheep, you notice some changes, some very significant changes. And again, that's the way, isn't it, in the Christian life? There is change. Certainly there are things that never change. The good shepherd is always leading, that never changes, but there are changes in the experience of the sheep. The Christian can say, "I am in a place now that I was not before."

Things have changed and it can happen very quickly. What we see here in verse 4 very clearly, a change of location. We're not in the green pastures. We're not beside the still waters. We're in the place here where David calls the valley of the shadow of death. Now we're not saying that David has left the path of righteousness. He hasn't. No, but the path of righteousness or the paths of righteousness have taken him down into this valley. The paths of righteousness, the way to the celestial city include descents as well as ascents.

So there's a change of location and with that change of location, there comes a change of mood. If the still waters pictured rest and contentment, then this picture gives thoughts of fear and terror. It's a frightening picture. If the green pastures spoke about the plentiful provision, then this picture seems to speak about everything being taken away. And again, that's true in the experience of one of Christ's sheep. You sing about it often in the Psalms. You sing about it in Psalter 240, Psalm 88.

"Thou hast brought me down to darkness,
'Neath Thy wrath I am oppressed;
All the billows of affliction
Overwhelm my soul distressed.
Full of troubles and affliction,
Nigh to death my soul is brought
Helpless, like one cast forever
From Thy care and from Thy thought."

So very clearly with the change of location comes a change of mood.

There's a third change here, do you see? It's a change from speaking about the shepherd to speaking to the shepherd. Verses 1 through 3, David speaks about the shepherd, who he is and what he's done. "The LORD is my shepherd. He maketh me to lie down. He leadeth me beside still waters. He restores my soul." This is what he is doing. But do you see in verses 4 and 5 that David shifts to now speaking to the shepherd? "I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; they rod, thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table. Thou anointest my head with oil."

So it's one thing to speak about religion, it's one thing to speak about the good shepherd, it's another thing to speak to him. And for God's people, certainly it is a wonderful thing to speak about the good shepherd. God's people love it when they gather together with other Christians, with other of the sheep of Christ, and they speak about the things of God. That is a wonderful blessing. "Then they that feared the Lord spoke often one to another. Come hear, I'll tell all you who fear God what God has done for my soul." These are blessed times to speak about the good shepherd but we must also speak to the shepherd. We must call out to him in prayer. We must cry out to him even though it's like the bleating of a sheep.

We call out to him and the question, then, right at the beginning here, is simply do you do this? Or maybe if I would turn the question around and say does the good shepherd know you? He says, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them." Well, how does he know them? And no doubt there are many ways that he knows his sheep. He loves them. He's seen them before. He loved them before they ever loved him. He spoke to them before they ever spoke back to him. But surely it now includes this: they cry out to him. They speak to him. They look to him. In the time of danger, their eyes are fixed on him. And when they don't know where to go, they are listening to him. They speak to him and he says of them, "I know them." Does the shepherd of the sheep know you?

Well, here in this text, then, we come into this deep and dark valley and there is a great enemy here. Now children, maybe this reminds you of another valley that David was in. Remember there was another time when David was a lot younger, that he was in a valley and there was a great enemy there. On one side of the valley on this hill, there were the Philistines. On this side of the valley on this other hill, there was the army of the Israelites. And in the valley, there was this great giant, giant Goliath, and David had to go into this valley and he had to fight. Well, David is speaking about another valley here and

it's a deeper valley, and in this valley there is a greater enemy than Goliath. This is the valley of the shadow of death and on one side of the valley at the beginning of the Psalm there is this hill that speaks about the green pasture and the still water and the leading of the good shepherd, and at the end on the other side of the Psalm in the final peak, as it were, there is the house of the Lord forever. But in between the leading of the good shepherd and the house of the Lord forever there is this deep valley with this great enemy and it's called the valley of the shadow of death.

And what David tells us in this verse as he, as it were, charts out the path, the pilgrim's progress, as he charts it out, in verse 4 he is saying that true faith gives the believer great courage to overcome the greatest of dangers. True faith gives the believer great courage to overcome the greatest of dangers and so here we want to look, firstly, at the dangers the Christian faces on his journey home and, secondly, the faith that overcomes the greatest of these dangers. The dangers the Christian faces on their journey home and the faith that overcomes the greatest of these dangers.

Firstly here, the dangers the Christian faces on his way home. David speaks of walking in the valley of the shadow of death. One writer, Philip Keller, who was a former shepherd in a nice book he has on this Psalm, points out that this picture is a picture of the passage that the sheep would make from the lowlands where they would be in winter to the high pastures where they would go in summer, and to get from the lowland to the high pasture, they'd have to go through this valley. And these valleys were certainly places of danger. You have wild animals like bears or wolves or something like that, that hide in the broken canyon walls. Storms can sweep through this valley. Floods can fill this valley. The sun doesn't shine very well into this valley and that's why there's shadows and maybe one of the greatest dangers in this valley, then, is the danger of fear and what that does. So the picture, then, is clear, it's a place of danger. It's a place where you easily become very afraid.

Well, that's the clear picture, this valley of the shadow of death but people have often taken this to speak about death itself or the act of dying. Spurgeon, for example, says that this verse has been a dying pillow to thousands of the saints of God, and there's really no doubt that the death of a believer, that this text applies to the death of a believer in a very special way. This text very clearly can be and has been used as a dying pillow to many of Christ's sheep but we think it's true that this valley, the darkness of this valley casts its shadow farther. Yes, it includes the act of dying and death itself but this has a very wide shadow that it stretches. Hebrews 2:15 speaks about those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. The Apostle Paul can speak about how he was in deaths often. This shadow, as it were, he says, "often crossed my path."

So really this valley is a place the believer can walk through many times in their pilgrimage. Really it's any place where death casts its shadow, and what a long shadow it casts. And some people say, "Well, it's only the shadow." And there is truth, as we're going to see, and there is encouragement in this. It is the shadow but you can't say to someone who's in this valley, "Don't worry, it's only a shadow," as though you were saying, "It's only a dream," because to the person in this valley, this shadow is very real.

"Who is there among you," Isaiah says in chapter 50:12, "Who is there among you who fears the Lord, who obeys the voice of his servant," who is one of the sheep and, "who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the LORD and stay upon his God." So the shadow can be a very scary, a very alarming thing to the people of God.

But this valley, then, is really anywhere where death casts its shadow, so it includes all the miseries of this life, the miseries that have come because of sin. Because of sin, death has come. Because death has come, misery has come. And so all the miseries of this life, all the things we don't want to experience in this life, in a way is the casting of the shadow of death upon us. So even something like sickness reminds us of how weak we are, reminds us that we're not going to live forever, we're not as strong as we thought we were. Or persecution, when there is intimidation and there are lions, as it were, lurking in the walls. Or old age and all the infirmity that comes. Or loneliness. Or pain of body or mind. Or the death of a loved one. Or a time when the power of indwelling sin seems so strong, when unbelief rises like a great monster and you say, "My sin I ever see. Who will deliver me from the body of this death?"

The Southern Presbyterian minister, John Jetterdo(ph) says, "A guilty conscience makes cowards of us all." A guilty conscience makes cowards of us all. Some people boast about what they're going to say at the judgment seat. "I'm going to tell God this." But you see, when conviction of sin goes into the conscience as it surely will do, at that time it will shut every mouth and it will make cowards of us all. Nobody will boast before the judgment seat of Christ.

The power of indwelling sin feels like a great shadow of death upon us, times when the devil is near and temptation is so strong and your song turns into Psalm 17, "My enemy grown strong in pride would take my life away. A lion lurking by my side, most greedy for its prey." It's a very wide shadow, isn't it? Ebenezer Erskine has a sermon on this text and he includes this. He speaks about people who are stricken with fear about their own weakness and insufficiency for the work God has calling them to do. God is calling to work, he's calling to work whether it's at home or in the church, and the sense of our own weakness and insufficiency becomes like a great cloud over us, a great shadow that's come over us. Moses felt it. "O my Lord, I am not eloquent," he says. "I am slow of speech. I am slow of tongue." Jeremiah says, "I can't speak. I'm a child." Or you think of the cause of Christ in the land and it can be like a cloud, the shadow of death coming over when you see religion and the worship of God like Eli saw with his sons going into the hands of wicked men. You tremble for it and there's this shadow that comes over.

So the point here is that the shadow covers all kinds of situations, all kinds of misery, but whenever you're in this valley, whenever there's this darkness, there's this danger, it's the place where you are tempted to panic and that's a terribly dangerous thing spiritually because when you panic, you become very irrational. When you panic, you try to take matters into your own hands and really there is nothing more dangerous or perilous for anybody than to take matters into their own hands. At a natural level, we understand it. In a time of great difficulty, we look for the quickest way out. You think you see a way out of the darkness and you think you see a way into the light, out of the situation, here's the

solution, and you begin to take matters into your own hand. But here's the danger in the valley of the shadow of death, the danger is this: if the way out of the valley is the way off the paths of righteousness. That is the greatest danger, that if the way out of the valley is the way off the paths of righteousness, that is the greatest danger.

Remember Christian, children, in "Pilgrim's Progress"? He's going along. It's like he's in this valley. Of course, he speaks about two different valleys, the valley of humiliation and the valley of the shadow of death, but he's got this burden on his back and, oh, how he wants rid of this burden off his back, this burden of sin and of guilt and of shame. And he meets this man, Worldly Wiseman, and he tells him, "Well, here's the solution. Over there, there's this Mount Legality and you can go there and the burden will come off your back. There's a man there who knows how to take it off." And he sees a way out, he sees a way to get this burden off his back but the problem is that the way out of this situation is the way off the path of righteousness and only brings greater terror and greater trouble to Christian.

You think of Jacob in the Bible. Wasn't this the sin of Jacob? He kept trying to take matters into his own hands and he kept wandering off the paths of righteousness to do it. He's been promised the blessing, he's been promised the birthright, and he knows it belongs to him and yet he sees his father, Isaac, going to give the blessing to Esau and so he takes the matter into his own hands but he does it by going off the path of righteousness through deceit. He pretends to be Esau. He tricks his father and through deceit he earns the birthright and the blessing but what follows is this life of deceit both to others and then back to himself. He saw a way out of the problem but it was a way off the path of righteousness. That is the greatest danger in the valley.

But this valley of the shadow of death while it casts its shadow really over our whole lives, it certainly includes death itself, the last enemy. I was reading a sermon by an old Scottish minister in the 19th century and this valley of the shadow of death and there's a whole sermon in that in itself, but I just want to give you the points, the five points that he had in this sermon. He says of this valley that there are many ways to descend into this valley. Some people go into it when they're young, some people when they're old, some people through sickness, some people through accident. There are many ways to go into this valley, point 1.

Point 2. We must all descend into the valley. There are many ways into it and we're not sure which one we're going to go down but we will go down into it. We must all descend into this valley. You say, "Well, I feel great. I feel in good health. I don't feel like death is close." Well, we must all descend into this valley.

But point 3 was: your descent into this valley may be much closer than you realize. Your descent into this valley may be much closer than you realize. You may be on the edge of it, so might I. We don't know.

Fourthly, your journey through this valley must be made alone. The Psalmist doesn't say "though we walk through the valley," it says "though I walk through the valley of the

shadow of death." There's a loneliness about it. Your friends and your family that have been with you in life all the way to this point, they can't die with you. We all die alone. He was born, he lived, he died, Genesis tells us of the early patriarchs.

And fifthly, it is a journey that you will make but once. It is a journey you will make but once so it tells us about how final and therefore how solemn death is. You can't, as it were, come back and try again a second way.

It's final, death, and that certainly here in the Psalm, the valley of the shadow of death, and we have to be honest and say death is a fearful thing. It would not be normal to have no fear of dying because we were made, we were created to live. God made man upright, Solomon tells us, Ecclesiastes 7. And you look at the grave and you look at the disintegration of the body, and it's an appalling thought. And you think about being taken away violently from ones you love. It seems so cruel. You think of the loneliness of the journey. It's a miserable thought. We can't dress it up. Then you think about the judgment seat that meets you on the other side and who would not tremble at the thought of that judgment seat when all the thoughts and words and actions of our whole lives are set before the brightness of the face of God?

Are we ready for this change? Are you ready for this change? Are you ready for this valley? Are you ready to go there without fear? Now that question ought to jolt in your mind. You just said who would not be afraid of death, and now I'm saying are you ready to go there without fear? But that brings us here to look, secondly, at the faith that overcomes the greatest of these dangers. It really is such an other-worldly confession. Who makes a confession like this?

"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." And I want to look at several words here that take away or at least greatly reduce the fear. The first word is "shadow." Now we've looked at that already. We've confessed the shadows are frightening. None of us like shadows. We like the light. Children love to see the morning because it's bright and so do we who are older. The shadow can be scary but it's still true, isn't it, the shadow can't harm you. The shadow of a snake cannot bite you. The shadow of a dog cannot bite you either. The shadow of a gun cannot shoot and kill you. The shadow of death cannot therefore touch the child of God.

And there's something else, is there not, about a shadow. Wherever there's a shadow, what must be close by but light? This valley of the shadow of death is not the place that the Bible describes as the place of outer darkness. That's a description of hell. Also in the Bible it describes hell as a place of utter darkness, a place where there's no flicker of light, a place where there's no shadow whatsoever because there's no light whatsoever. But here there is the shadow of death and it's telling the sheep that's walking here there must be light close by. Heaven is close by. The light of heaven is shining across the path.

So the shadow of death is telling the believer the morning is coming. The morning is close. And the believer even in this valley, then, can sing, "I wait for God, my soul doth

wait, my hope is in his word. More than they that wait for the morning watch, my soul waits for the Lord." So shadow, second word, "walk." It doesn't say run. He doesn't say sit. This isn't the place to sit. The green pastures and beside the still waters was a place for a time he or she could sit, but here there is a walking and it suggests, does it not, a calmness, a settledness, a resolve of purpose? He's walking. Really, it's a beautiful description of the whole Christian life. Remember Enoch who walked with God? Remember Noah who walked with God? Remember the Psalmist who says, "My walk will be with thee"? And here in the valley they are still walking and they're walking because they are more conscious of what they don't see than what they do.

That's what faith does, faith is more conscious of what you cannot see with your physical eyes and what you do. By faith, we understand that the worlds were created by the word of God so that things which were made do not come by things which appear. It's simply saying this in Hebrews 11:3, the word of God which you cannot see, made the things that you can. The world that you see with your physical eyes was made by this, the word of God that you cannot see. So what is more real, the world that you see or the thing that made it? The thing that made it is more real and that's what faith sees then. Faith is laying hold of the word of God, the thing that it doesn't see but is nevertheless more real, even in the valley and maybe especially in the valley of the shadow of death.

So I walk through the valley and so I will fear no evil but notice the word "through" as well. "Yea, though I walk through the valley." It doesn't say, yea, though I walk in the valley, or around the valley, or above the valley, but through the valley. But it's telling you that just as surely as you went into it, so surely you will come out of it. And again that speaks to all the trials of the life of the believer. We often say, do we not, of a difficulty, this too shall pass? But isn't it true of the Christian, that of all the troubles they have, this too will pass. All the trials and death itself, this too will pass. This is not the end. This is not the final chapter. I think sometimes we think that way when we bury a loved one. We think of them as being in death and in the grave and in the ground, as though this was the final thing. But it's not. It's more biblical, is it not, to think of them going through death? Or light affliction, the believer could say even in this valley of death is but for a moment. What is it in comparison to the endless ages of eternity that stretches out before them in God's house forever?

So it's a shadow, you walk in it, you walk through it rather, and then, fourthly, there's the rod and the staff. Now I tend to agree, by no means an expert here, that this is one stick with two functions, the rod and the staff. At one end, there's something more like a hook, at the other, it's something more like a club. And some will say, well, the club is for the animals, for the wild beasts, to scare them away or to hit them away, but the hook, the staff is for the sheep, it's to protect the sheep and to pull them back if they're straying over here. It's a long staff and you can pull them back in and keep them close by your side. Although I tend to think, too, that there is the rod, the discipline for the sheep as well but anyway, the key point is this, that whenever there's the rod and the staff, there's comfort. Even if it hurts, it's comfort. It may hurt the sheep a little to be pulled back out of the ditch but then it's out of the ditch and it's back on the path.

And there's something comforting to the sheep feeling the rod and the staff when they can't see the shepherd because of the darkness perhaps, yet they feel the rod and they feel the staff and this is the conclusion, "Thou art with me. The shepherd is here. The good shepherd who led me in the green pasture, the good shepherd who made me lie down in the still waters, the good shepherd who restored my soul since I was in my youth all the way to this time. The same shepherd, I feel his rod and his staff and they comfort me."

Isn't this the way Job was in chapter 23? Job could say, "I don't see Him but I know He's there. Oh, that I knew where I might find Him. I looked for Him," and he says, "but I can't perceive Him. On the left hand, on the right hand, I can't see Him. I can't behold Him. He's hiding Himself. He's hiding Himself." But then he says in verse 10, "But He knows the way that I take. He knows where I am. He knows the path I walk. He knows the way that I take and when He has tried me, I will come forth as gold."

So the great comfort in all of this, the greatest comfort is this, "Thou art with me." Stephen, as we read, saw that. There was Stephen and there were his persecutors and there were the stones and there were the teeth that were gnashing on poor Stephen. But there was the good shepherd. There he was as he looked up and he saw the good shepherd standing with his rod and his staff ready to, what? To receive him. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," he says. And he did.

That's the confidence the sheep have in this valley. They know that Christ is there, the Christ who defeated death, the Christ who does not come into this valley like one who has to fight a new battle. Christ doesn't come into this valley to, as it were, crush the head again. He's already crushed the head. He's already defeated the Goliath of this valley. He went into it himself and he goes in with a multitude of his flock and unlike human shepherds who no doubt are afraid that some of their sheep might be lost, this shepherd says, "They will never perish and nobody will pluck them out of My hand."

And the reason that Christ, the good shepherd, has this confidence is that he has taken away the strength of death and the strength of the law which gave death its power. Christ, the good shepherd, went into this valley, he's been here before, and he did so carrying all the sins of all his sheep. "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way." And the Lord has laid on the good shepherd the iniquity of us all. He went into this valley and he bore our sins, Peter says, in his own body on the tree. He gave his life for the sheep. He died in this valley once and he died there as the sin-bearer for the sheep, and what that means for the sheep is they cannot die the same way he did. They cannot die as sin-bearers because the sin has already been dealt with, the sin has already been taken away. They cannot die with the curse of the law upon them because the curse of the law was exhausted on the shepherd.

So they come into this valley and they say, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law because He was made a curse for us." And better than that, better than what they say is what God has said. God is saying, "There is therefore now no condemnation." God is saying, "Who will lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" It is God that justifies. It is Christ that died, he rather that has risen again.

Why does a believer have to die, then? Don't we often think about that and ask that question? If all the sin has been taken away, why does the believer have to die? Likely one reason is this: because the death of a Christian magnifies the super-abounding grace of God. It magnifies the super-abounding grace of God. It's easy to boast, it's easy to confess when things are going well but it's not so easy in the heat of the battle, is it? Isn't that what Satan said to God about Job? "Job, You've given him everything. You've put him on a hilltop but put him into this valley, put him into this deep, dark valley of the shadow of death, he will curse You. The faith will fail. His confession will fail. His strength will fail." And what do you hear Job saying in the valley? "Thou He slays me, I will trust in Him. In all this Job did not sin with his mouth and he did not curse God." It magnified the of God. So it's true of every believer, though tried and tempted, though harassed by Satan and their own conscience as they approach this last battle, when everything to the outward eye is failing, when their strength is failing, when their beauty has failed and gone, when doctors are failing, and family and friends are failing, and their flesh and their heart faints and fails, do they not magnify the super-abounding grace of God when they say, "But God fails me never"?

Andrew Gray, a young minister, if I remember right, he was in his early 20s when he died and he came to die and he said, "Is this the last enemy, this smiling friend?" How do you explain that? And surely in this valley of the shadow of death, nothing, nothing else makes it so abundantly clear to a watching world and universe but the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses from all sin. There's that believer and as death approaches, all the sins of a lifetime, as it were, come before him or her, the sins of nature, the sins of youth, the sins of middle-age, the thoughts and all the accusations with Satan and their conscience pile up before them, a massive amount of sin and guilt and transgression, and now what's your hope? As you stand on the threshold of an endless world, an eternity in everlasting glory or in everlasting woe, what's your hope? What's your plea? And the good shepherd comes to the sheep and says, "I am the good shepherd. I have given My life for the sheep. I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have died to take away all your sin. I have obeyed to clothe you with a perfect righteousness." And there's the poor, trembling sheep of Christ in the valley and the sheep says, "That's it. It is enough. Nothing else for me, nothing more for me. Nothing less for me. That's my hope, the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth me. Yes, even a sheep like me from all sin, from a lifetime of sin." And the dying sheep grabs hold by faith of the shepherd's staff, leans upon that and with one movement of the shepherd's rod, enters into everlasting glory.

Doesn't it magnify the grace and the power of the blood of Christ to save? What must angels say when they see this? What must devils say when they see this? What must a watching world say when they see this? Must they not say what power there is in the blood of Christ? Must they not say what grace there is in Christ? What infinite mercy there is in him. What infinite strength. What infinite love. What a shepherd is here who can take a sheep like that who was so far away in the mountains of vanity and wandered and strayed throughout their whole life long, but can take a sheep like that and make

them spotless before the throne of his glory with exceeding joy. What shepherd is this?
"They will never perish, neither will anyone pluck them out of My hand."

I close by asking you who is your shepherd? Who will shepherd you through death's dark veil? Yes, who will shepherd you in this life? You need a shepherd for this life but who will shepherd you through that last great valley of deep darkness? As I read scripture, I find two shepherds. My dear unconverted here without Christ as your shepherd, who will shepherd you? Psalm 49 speaks about the fact that everybody dies. Psalm 49 says about the person who trusts in their own wealth, that there's something in their thought, verse 11, I believe it is, their inward thought. It's not something they say, it's something that's deep inside them. Their inward thought is this, "I will live forever." And you live that way. You make lands and you get businesses and homes and you call your business and your home and your life by your own name with this idea, "There's something in me that says I'm going to live forever. I can see the death of everyone else. I can envisage the funeral of everyone else but I don't think about my own. I don't see my own." That's their inward thought. Their trust is in their own wealth.

Listen to what Psalm 49 says about them in verse 14. They are like sheep, "Like sheep they are laid in the grave," Sheol, "Death shall feed on them." The word "feed" there is the Hebrew word for "shepherd." Death will shepherd them. If you die without Christ, death will be your shepherd through this valley. You have no reason not to be afraid of death but how eternally, infinitely different for the believer, for the one who trusts in the good shepherd because Psalm 49:15 goes on and says this, "But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, He shall receive me." He will take me. That's what a shepherd does to a sheep. Remember Enoch walking with God and then it says in Genesis 5, "He was not for God took him." The same word. Stephen when he was dying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit and He took him." In the middle of death with all its terrors, in a moment the good shepherd stretches forth his rod and his staff and receives you to himself and takes you home. Even treading the valley, M'Cheyne could say with this faith,

"Even treading the valley of the shadow of death,
This watchword shall rally my faltering breath;
And when from life's fever my God sets me free,
Jehovah Tsidkenu, my death song shall be."

"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." Amen.

Let us pray.