

The Valley of The Shadow Of Death

In Memory of Billy Hamilton

By Rev. Stephen Hamilton

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Bible Text: Psalm 23:4

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I'd like to draw your attention this morning to the 23rd Psalm. This is a portion of Scripture that I am quite certain is well known to most if not all of you. Psalm 23 is probably the most familiar to God's people out of all the 150 in the Psalter. It's usually one of the first Scripture portions a child ever learns at the beginning of life and at the same time, it's very often the last portion quoted to or by a saint of God drawing near to the end of life. This is a passage of God's word that is regularly read at the bedside of a sick person. I have done so many times myself in my ministry and it is recited often at many a funeral service.

The Psalm sets before us the beautiful picture of the Lord as the Shepherd, the Shepherd who guides and directs and leads his sheep while the Scripture, even the book of Psalms, emphasizes the truth that God's people collectively are the sheep of his pasture. For example, in Psalm 100, it uses the collective pronoun "we" are his sheep, yet this Psalm is more personal. It is the individual believer who is seen in this relationship with his Lord. It begins, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want," and the personal pronoun is employed throughout. You see the references there to "me" and to "my" and to "I." It is not only true that the Lord is *a* Shepherd or even that he is *the* Shepherd but for God's child, the great assurance is this: the Lord is *my* shepherd.

Now, one of the features of shepherding in the Eastern culture is the way in which the shepherd leads his sheep. He walks ahead or in front of the flock to search out the best paths for their feet and the luscious and greenest feeding grounds. The Shepherd is seen here as leading the sheep in green pastures. You see that in verse 2, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." The word really is "in pastures of tender grass." He leads the sheep to these lush feeding grounds because he is their Shepherd and the word "shepherd" could also be translated "feeder" or "pastor." That's what a true pastor is, a shepherd, a feeder of the flock.

In Psalm 23, therefore, the Shepherd is seen as one who feeds his sheep but who also leads the sheep and as the sheep follows his Shepherd, he is led beside the still waters into the green pastures and in paths of righteousness. But you'll notice in the fourth verse

that the Shepherd also leads his sheep into the valley of the shadow of death. The sheep is not always on the hilltop enjoying the clear and bright sunshine, sometimes the Shepherd leads through valleys where there is no sun shining and where there are terrors and dangers aplenty and the constant threat of molestation from wild beasts of prey. And that's the subject of verse 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." You'll note that up to this point in the Psalm, David has been speaking of the Lord and of his guidance and his providing but here as a sheep, so to speak, he is speaking to the Shepherd and he said, "For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

If I can speak personally here and I know you will excuse that, my experience in recent days has been that for that sheep being led through the valley of the shadow of death and I have witnessed my father and indeed other believers being led by the Shepherd through the dark valley of the shadow. In the very same facility where my father was being cared for, in the next room was a Christian lady, a friend, and that lady in there, I had the joy of ministering to her as well as to my own dad. I visited her in fact, for the last time there just on Wednesday and I heard yesterday that she went to be with the Lord, led through the valley of the shadow of death. The subject of death has been very much on my mind for obvious reasons but I can also testify to the leading of the great Shepherd, his guiding and providing in such a time and so I want to direct your attention today to these wonderful words of the Shepherd's Psalm, especially those of verse 4 and while I'm preaching to my own heart, I'm also preaching from my own heart to your heart and I trust the Lord will bless our meditation. I want to dedicate this message to my late, departed father, William, known better as Billy Hamilton who has gone to be with Christ which is far better.

I want you to notice some things in verse 4 with me today. In this text, mention is made of a dark passage. It's called "the valley of the shadow of death." We know that the holy land is described as a land of hills and valleys and that's where David was a Shepherd and I'm sure that as a Shepherd, he experienced oftentimes different experiences: hilltop experiences, valley experiences. Everything was not always for him plain sailing. But David had a mind here in this text, one of the dark valleys in the terrain from which he led his own sheep. David was a shepherd himself. He knew very well the ways of sheep and he also had a shepherd's heart and he was familiar with the task of a shepherd and what he's doing here in Psalm 23 is speaking about what God was to him, what he had been to his own flock as a shepherd, David realized God was to him. What David did for his own sheep, the Lord did for him as his Shepherd and sometimes as David well knew, the shepherd has to lead his sheep through dark places and, therefore, this phrase can be applied to a believer's distresses. Believers have distresses. They have troubles. They have trials. We are not immune to the afflictions that come upon other men and there are specific and special trials that believers have that other men do not have. But we think about a believer's distresses, on the way to glory, we have dark valleys to pass through. There are trials. There are times of distress. The Lord Jesus said to his disciples in John 16:33, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." In the world ye shall have tribulation. It's something that's going to happen. You will have trials. You will have troubles. In Acts 14:22 it says that there were those who

were, "Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must," notice that, the imperative, "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."

Now, the sheep are not keen on dark places but they have got to go through them to get to that place where their Shepherd is leading them and so it is in our lives. If you turn with me to 1 Peter, the first epistle of Peter in chapter 1, it speaks there of our salvation and of the great hope that we have of an inheritance incorruptible in heaven but of this salvation, Peter says in verse 6 of chapter 1, "Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations," and manifold temptations simply signifies different kinds of trials or many trials and tribulations. The word "heaviness" is used there. It really signifies "sadness or sorrow; dejection of mind or depression of spirit." Ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations or trials. It really means being under the load of a trial. You're bearing that heavy load and we know that there's always a purpose in the dark passages of life. They are deemed necessary in God's purpose for us and it is the Lord who decides, by the way, if we need this or that trial. That is why verse 6 there talks about, "Though now for a season, if need be," and it's not for you to decide whether you need this in your life or not, it's God who decides and it is he who has decided when those trials come upon you that it is needed. God knows what we need and when we need it.

If I could speak of my dad, he had many trials to face in his life, not just in later life, much of those things to do with his health. It did seem especially so in recent years but he had tremendous trials to endure, not least the trial of losing his eyesight virtually. He had advanced macular degeneration. It seemed to get very much worse until even in his latter days when it looked as though his eyes were wide open, he was actually asleep. He'd become virtually blind. That was a great trial to him. The passing of my mother about 18 months or so before him was a severe trial to him and yet his attitude at that time was, "We will just have to face it." Those were his words to me, "We'll have to face it." And he did with great courage, with great fortitude, by the grace of God. But I want you to notice that trial and trouble is only to return to the words of Peter "for a season." Do you see that? Wherefore you greatly rejoice, though now for a season. That's a limited period of time, not forever but for a season. The sheep has to walk through the valley, "Yea, though I walk through the valley," the Psalmist says. He doesn't stay in the valley. He's passing through the dark passage. He's not staying in it. He will come out of it eventually and, therefore, we can say, "Yes, there are distresses to face in life as a Christian but don't allow the distresses to get you down because God will bring you through them and you will look back on it all with the light." Hebrews 12 reminds us in verse 11, "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." God, I would say to you always has an afterward. There is always an afterward. And with the writer of that lovely hymn, we can say,

"I'll bless the hand that guided, I'll bless the heart that planned
When throned where glory dwelleth in Immanuel's land."

Sometimes we'll understand. I believe this phrase can also apply to a believer's death as well as a believer's distresses. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Every single one of us here will have to walk this dark passage unless the Lord Jesus comes for us first because, you see, it is appointed unto man once to die and people live as though they're never going to die but the reality is that death awaits us all. We're sure of it. They always say don't they, "Two things that you're sure of in this life: death and taxes." Well, death is even more sure than taxes. You can't escape death. You can dodge the taxman if you're so inclined and you feel like going to prison but you can't dodge death. It will come. It's appointed. The book of Job says much about the frailty of life and says much about death and I read in Job chapter 10, in the closing verses, verses 20 through 22, "Are not my days few? cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little, Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death; A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness."

The valley of the shadow of death. Dad used to say even in recent times that he was not afraid of dying, it was the flitting that worried him. That's a good old Ulster word, flitting, which refers to people moving house. Somebody is going to pack up and move to another place and we say they're flitting and so my dad was just simply saying, "I'm not afraid of dying, I'm just afraid of the process. It's how I get there. It's what's going to happen in the intervening period." And that was something that he thought about but, you know, he need not have worried because the Lord carried him through in peace and there are many dying saints who have been comforted by the words of verse 4, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." Now, obviously death is not called the last enemy for nothing. That's what the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 15, the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. Death is a sobering thing. It's a solemn matter to face up to and it's perfectly natural that we say that we have some foreboding when it comes to the matter of our death, even as believers. Each person who dies actually dies alone. Though hundreds might expire at the same moment in time, each one passes over alone. You will die alone though surrounded perhaps by family and friends as my dad was. The valley of the shadow is dark and it's lonely but yet in truth, for a Christian, there is nothing to fear. There is nothing to fear because the Christian, the child of God will not stay in the valley but as the verse indicates, will pass through the valley. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

And then upwards to glory. This was uppermost in Paul's mind when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5 about his earthly house of this tabernacle being dissolved. He was speaking of his own body and how that you have to leave this earth and it's a bit like taking a tent down and moving on. He said, "We have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." He spoke a little more about that, verse 4 about mortality being swallowed up of life. Then he says in verse 6, "Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him." Now, you see those words "present and absent" and the words in verse 6 "at home." Those words in verse 6 "at home" are the same in the

Greek as the word that's translated in verses 8 and 9 "present." So first 8 could be read like this, "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord." At home with the Lord.

I have to say that one of the hardest things for me this past couple of weeks has been staying in my dad's home. It was my mother's home as well, obviously, and there are a lot of her things still there. All the dishes are hers. All the stuff in the house, it's hers. The ornaments, everything, belonged to them both. His clothes are there. His shoes are there. All his little bits and pieces are there and it's really hard to look at those things and to think that he's not there. But the supreme thought that was in my mind this last couple of weeks was that this was their home but now it's a house. It's not a home, it's a house because they're gone to their real home, their final home. At home with the Lord.

What a wonderful thing it is to realize that sudden death is sudden glory. That's what Paul was teaching here in verse 6 of 2 Corinthians 5. We are confident, knowing that whilst we are at home in the body, we're absent from the Lord but in verse 8, we're willing to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. You look in that verse as closely as you can for purgatory and you'll not find it. You'll not find limbo in that verse. You'll not find any kind of other third state but it's absent from the body and immediately it's present with the Lord. That's the way it is for the believer. Sudden death is sudden glory and to return to the Psalm, you look carefully for David, it was not, you will note, the valley of death that he would walk through but the valley of the shadow of death. Oh, what a comfort there is in that. The valley of the shadow of death. You see, death to God's child is but a shadow for Christ has actually faced the substance and triumphed over it for us. That's why in the Bible you read of people like Lazarus or people like Stephen that they fell asleep. That's why it talks about them also which sleep in Jesus though God bring with them. It's not talking about soul sleep which is a heresy. It's talking about those whose bodies are asleep in the earth but they are with the Lord.

But that analogy is a beautiful one. When David had served his own generation by the will of God, he fell asleep. He just went to sleep. Nothing to fear in that. You know what it's like when you fall asleep. It happens before you know it and it's like that for the child of God and for David it was not the valley of death that he was passing through but the shadow of death. Jesus has abolished death for his people. Listen to these words, Hebrews 2:14-15. What has Christ done? It says, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." The Lord has abolished death and brought life and immortality to life through the Gospel, 2 Timothy 1:10. Do you know what death is like? It's a bit like a bee that has had its sting removed. Once that bee has stung a person, it has no more power to hurt others and Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 and in verse 55 used that analogy of a sting when he said, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Christ was stung by death but now there is nothing to hurt his child in it.

Now, you think about a shadow. Can a shadow hurt you? Can a shadow hurt you? The shadow of a fearsome animal might frighten you but it can't hurt you. A dog's shadow can never bite you and the dark passage of death cannot separate the child of God from his Savior and his Lord. The Bible puts it like this in Romans 8:38, "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Yes, there is in this portion a dark passage in view but there is also a definite peace and that definite peace is in these words, "I will fear no evil." You know, so many folks today live their lives in fear. Man's hearts fail them for fear. Some people are tormented by fear. They live in constant fear of dying, for example, and some of them will stifle their fears and just try never to think about it and put it on the back burner but then it will eventually become an issue for them. Fear is a terrible thing, however, and the Bible says that fear hath torment. Yet I want you to notice in this Psalm 23 that the Psalmist did not fear any evil, even the prospect of death itself, because he knew the love of his Shepherd. 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love."

Why should a Christian be afraid to die, tell me? Why should a Christian be afraid to die? Perhaps you would say it's the obvious thing, it's the fear of the unknown because, frankly, none of us have ever done this before. It's the fear of the unknown, isn't it? One of the martyrs, I believe it was Thomas Bilney, was facing the prospect of being burned at the stake for his faith and he looked forward to that prospect with some trepidation and in his prison cell, he took a candle and he held that lit candle under his finger until he could smell the flesh burning and he couldn't stand it anymore. It hurt and he thought, "If I can't stand a candle on my finger, how can I ever go through with being burned alive at the stake?" But then a fellow prisoner in the cell who was also a Christian, encouraged him with this truth, he said, "Thomas, God will not give you dying grace until you require it." You don't need grace to die until you're dying and so the story goes that the great man died in victory and triumph the next day. Without fear, without trepidation, he went to be with his Lord.

I think of another Psalm just a few on from the one that we're looking at, Psalm 27 and verse 1. He says there, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" And in verse 3, "Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear." Christian, you need fear no evil, even in death, for the Lord will give you his peace. My father witnessed to a relative from his deathbed, "I am ready but you're not." Are you ready? And he was ready. In truth, my dad had been ready since February 26, 1956 because on that day as he often said through the years, he wept his way to Calvary.

I have a letter here I want to share with you. It was just sent a few days ago to my sister, my oldest sister, and the lady who wrote it said, "I was very sorry to learn of your dad's passing and I extend to you my most sincere sympathy. Of him we can truly say, 'Absent

from the body, present with the Lord.'" Then she gave her apologies for not being able to come to the funeral because she was going to another funeral that day. But she said writing to my sister, Olive, "I well remember the night your dad was saved in the loft." This was a little hay loft converted for Gospel preaching by a farmer in the area. My dad went to meetings there and she said, writing of that day on February 26, 1956, this is not a young lady, she said, "It is still so vivid in my mind. He was sitting close to where I was, wearing a dark raincoat, a dark overcoat. There was an appeal made at the end of the service, anyone wishing to commit his life to the Lord was to raise their hand. Your dad signaled his desire to be saved. The meeting closed with prayer. As we all left our seats quietly and made our way to the door, your dad remained seated waiting to be counseled. I remember walking out, deeply moved by what had taken place. I was quite young at the time and not saved. However, it didn't end there. A short time later your mom got saved and then one night your mom and dad were asked to share in the meeting." I can visualize them both getting up into the wee pulpit in the loft with their two little girls to sing, my older sisters. Can you remember that, Olive, or were you too young? "All this left a big impression on me and some time later I too asked the Lord to save me. Like many others, I can thank God for every remembrance of your mom and dad," and I can tell you when I got that letter just a few days ago, it really blessed my heart because not only did dad talk about that night many times but there was a lady who was there at the same service and witnessed it take place. But the most important thing is that his name was written in heaven and thank God, my dad passed away in the knowledge of sins forgiven and he could have sung as he often did in his life,

"There's a light in the valley of death now for me,
Since Jesus came into my heart;
And the gates of the City beyond I can see,
Since Jesus came into my heart."

Ungodly men have a lot to fear from death. Hell and judgment lie just beyond the portal of death. But there is nothing for the redeemed to fear. He has a definite peace. "I will fear no evil." Psalm 46, the first two verses it says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea." When you have the peace of God, friend, you don't need to be afraid. The Bible says in Isaiah 12, verse 2, "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation." I've read many of the lives of Protestant martyrs and Scottish Covenanters martyred for their faith and how impressed I have been about their calmness in the very face of death. They had peace in that dark valley and so can you.

There is one other thought here though, and I want to leave it with you. It does mention here a dark passage. It also does mentioned here a definite peace but it also speaks about a declared presence. Why is it that he says "I will fear no evil"? Because of the next phrase "for thou art with me." For thou art with me. It was dark in that valley where the sheep had to walk but the Shepherd was there, his presence made all the difference and for the child of God, the valley of death's shadow will be dark but the Lord will be

present there. When I held my dad in my arms and he passed away from this scene of pain on Wednesday, the 7th of May at 7:40 p.m., northern Ireland time, I know the Lord was there. I didn't see the Lord. I didn't even feel the Lord but I know the Lord was there. He came for him and took him to heaven. I remember sometimes as a child we had not a big home but it had an upstairs and sometimes I had to go upstairs in the house when it was dark and as a small boy, I didn't want to go upstairs in the dark by myself so I would say to my mom or dad, "I want somebody with me. I want somebody to go with me," and so one of my sisters or maybe my mom or even my dad would go upstairs with me and I didn't even have to feel their hand, just to know that they were there beside me, it was all good. I wasn't afraid because I had somebody with me in the dark and, friend, when you face death's shadow, you'll want somebody with you and the Lord, your faithful Shepherd if you are saved, will be there.

It was said of John Wesley and his brother Charles that they used to visit dying saints all the time. Once John said to his brother after visiting an old dying Methodist, "Charles, our people die well," because he had just seen this old person go to be with the Lord. "Our people die well." Interestingly, when John Wesley himself came to die, it was the same, he died well. There is an account by a lady called Bessie Ritchie, an account of watching John Wesley's final days and hours and she states in this book, "Some of those who were most used to hear our dear father's dying voice would be able to interpret his meaning but though he strove to speak, we were still unsuccessful. Finding we could not understand what he said, he paused a little and then with all the remaining strength he had cried out, 'The best of all is God is with us,' and then as if to assert the faithfulness of our promise-keeping Jehovah and comfort the hearts of his weeping friends, lifting up his dying arm in token of victory and raising his feeble voice with a holy triumph not to be expressed, again repeated the heart reviving words, 'The best of all is God is with us.'"

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness," so it says in Isaiah 41:10. And you think about this: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," you can't have a shadow without a light shining somewhere. Isn't that right? It's only when there's the sunshine or the light that casts a shadow so there is a light even in the darkness. In order to cast a great shadow, there has to be a bright light shining above and so the Bible says unto the upright, there arises a light in the darkness. God will not leave you alone in the valley. Hebrews 13:5, "For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee," and many of us have proved this to be true, haven't we? When walking through the dark valleys of life, in times of affliction, the Lord has drawn near to us. In times of sad bereavement when death's shadow is quite literally upon us, the Lord was present.

I gave a tribute to my dear father at his funeral just as I had done for mom around 18 months or so before and some people said to me after both of those occasions, "I don't know how you did it," and I answered both times, "I do, the Lord helped me. The Lord was with me." And when we come to the hour of our death as one hymn put it, "We won't have to cross Jordan alone." Remember the great promise, Isaiah 43, the first two verses, "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When

thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." For thou art with me.

The hymn writer put it well,

"Sometimes our skies are cloudy and dreary,
Sometimes our hearts are burdened with care,
But we may know what ere may befall us,
Jesus is always there."

And God would say to you this morning, believer, as he would say to me, "Fear thou not for I am with thee." Now you will be able to say as David said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." Is the Lord your Shepherd? Do you know him as your Savior? Have you received him as your Lord and as your Redeemer? If you haven't, I commend him to you today. May you come to him for Jesus himself said, "Him that cometh unto me, I will in no ways cast out."

Let's pray.

Lord, we thank thee for thy word today, bless it to our hearts. We rejoice in its truth. We praise thee for its comfort. And I ask, Lord, that for each and every one of us it will be true as it was for David, that even when passing through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil because we have thy presence with us. Lord, bless thy truth to each one we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.