

Dear Friends,

We live in an age and culture that accepts only shortcuts to better things. Tell someone that they must work long and hard, endure difficulty to reach a worthwhile goal, and they will find endless excuses to rationalize why they can't do it. Many Christians sing about moving up to higher spiritual ground, but they often refuse to make their way through the valleys of pain and trial necessary to move their faith from the mediocre lowlands to truly high and fruitful spiritual high ground. The trek through valleys for David in his young shepherding days was punctuated annually with that journey through the valleys to the lush summer high ground. Given that David was not present when Samuel visited his family to anoint a new king, that someone had to find him and bring him to Samuel suggests that he was tending his family's sheep in the high country on that occasion.

I dearly love the following poem from a book by the same name, subtitled "A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions." It says what I would like to say to you far better than I could say it. Do not fear those dark valleys, for your Shepherd goes with you through them.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

The Valley of Vision

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,
 Where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;
 hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold thy glory.
Let me learn by paradox
 that the way down is the way up,
 that to be low is to be high,
 that the broken heart is the healed heart,
 that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
 that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
 that to have nothing is to possess all,
 that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,
 that to give is to receive,
 that the valley is the place of vision.
Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells,
 and the deeper the wells the brighter thy stars shine;
Let me find thy light in my darkness,
 thy life in my death,
 thy joy in my sorrow,
 thy grace in my sin,
 thy riches in my poverty,
 thy glory in my valley.

Frightening Valleys—Never Alone

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. (Psalm 23:4 KJV 1900)

Up to this point in the Psalm, David has directed all our attention to our Shepherd. He uses “he” and “his” pronouns. Beginning with Verse 4, David will turn his focus on himself as the beneficiary of his Shepherd’s exceptional care. However, even as he emphasizes his personal experience, in each step David links his blessed experiences back to his Shepherd’s care. This section hearkens our thoughts back to Verse 1, “*The Lord is my shepherd.*” David used his own personal blessings in his Shepherd’s flock to comfort and to instruct us of our Shepherd’s very personal care for us. When you next read Psalm 23, as you read Verse 1, along with this personal section of the Psalm, in your mind underscore the personal application. The Holy Spirit directed David to write of his personal experience under his Shepherd’s care to encourage us. The Lord is no less “My Shepherd” than he was David’s.

In his “A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm,” Phillip Keller makes, for me, a surprising application of this verse in the normal shepherd-sheep culture of David’s day. During the safe winter months in the low ground, a shepherd would travel to the high country where he would find the best meadows for the sheep to graze and find ample water and safety under his watchful eye. In the Spring, the Shepherd would lead the sheep from their home to that high country where he and the sheep would spend the summer alone. The trek from home to the high country must be carefully planned. The sheep would need to graze and find water along the way. They would also need safe terrain over which to travel. These needs were normally best met by a well researched path through the valleys leading up to the chosen high country.

I find many instructive ideas for the Psalm in Keller’s comparison. I confess to also struggling some with David’s description if this is the Psalm’s intent, “*valley of the shadow of death.*” Let me venture from Keller and offer a pastor’s observations to the lesson.

We often hear many in today’s superficial Christian community sing and talk often about “Moving up to higher ground” in their spiritual experience. They reflect little to no awareness of Scripture’s description of the single path from mediocrity to a more devoted and God-honoring spiritual life in a believer. Folks, you’ll never discover that higher spiritual ground unless you are willing to travel through the valleys of trial and disappointment along the way. And through those valleys, we must keep our eye on our Shepherd and stay close to Him lest we are overcome by a “root of bitterness” (Hebrews 12:15 KJV) or disappointment. David didn’t write that he died in the valley or that he never left it. He wrote that **he walked through it**, but he understood what we so often forget. The darkest, most ominous valley we’ll ever face—we shall not face it alone! “...**thou art with me.**” We fear no evil in that valley only because our Shepherd goes with us through it.

Much as we like to sing about moving up to higher spiritual ground, most of the sincere Christians of today who sing the loudest simply are not equipped to trek the dark valleys that one must travel to reach that higher ground. Sadly they often never do more than sing about it and wish for it, but they refuse to pay the admittedly steep price to reach it. Life’s richest and best spiritual lessons are not learned on Easy Street; we learn them in those valleys. Today’s “Name it and claim it” cheap imitation spiritual message simply does not prepare believers for the path from the mundane to the high country of spiritual maturity. Cryptic as it was, that old Texas country preacher, J. Vernon McGee, accurately described much of today’s Christian culture, “Preacher-ettes preaching sermon-ettes to Christian-ettes.” Until pastors bravely teach and prepare their congregations for seasons in the valleys, and folks in the pew brave those valleys in steadfast faith, clinging close to the Shepherd, neither they nor their congregations shall ever breathe the fresh air or graze the lush green pastures of spiritual high country.

David knew nothing of the idyllic life that these folks teach and describe to their naïve congregations. It was likely in that same lush high ground where David, the devoted and self-sacrificing shepherd, faced the lions and the bears intent on devouring his sheep for their next meal. And the necessary constant moving of a flock from home to the high country subjected the flock and their shepherd even more to wild beasts who might be hiding around the next corner, waiting to devour the sheep.

I must confess. When yet in my teens, an older pastor whom I trusted became jealous and seriously tried to take me out before I had time to get started. The experience shocked and disillusioned me no end. Added to that shock, I lost my mother to painful cancer in my nineteenth year. Even in that era, far too much preaching ignored the valleys between home and the high country of spiritual maturity, leaving many sincere and zealous young—and old—believers ill-prepared for what life dished out to them. It literally took me decades to come to terms with the “*valley of the shadow of death*,” and to realize that Scripture does not teach that our faith will enable us to avoid all such experiences. No, sound Bible teaching reminds us quite emphatically that we shall face such moments. If we have any hope of reaching higher spiritual country, we must find the grace and courage to walk through that valley which we’d prefer to think doesn’t even exist. And the only way we shall ever fully understand and believe with conviction that “*Thou art with me*” through those valleys is to pause on the other side and look back on the valleys we crossed with the realization that we survived the valley and lived to look back by our faithful Shepherd’s abiding presence and care. No less than Paul himself had to learn in the trenches that simply praying, even repeatedly, for the Lord to remove his thorn in the flesh didn’t guarantee its removal. Instead, the Lord taught Paul what He also taught David. Rather than preventing the valleys in our lives, our Shepherd faithfully goes with us through them and ensures that we arrive safely on the other side. ***If you are alive today to look back and remember your valleys, thank your Shepherd!*** You are here and alive now because of His abiding faithfulness and His always walking beside you through life’s dangers.

I seldom cite a movie, but the 1988 movie “The Bear” is one of my all-time favorites. The movie plot is of a young bear cub whose mother is killed, leaving him an orphan. The movie follows the young defenseless cub through his frightening ordeals in the wilderness. During his trial, the cub encountered a mature male who had been wounded. He tried to make friends with the bear, including some small acts of kindness toward him, but the old bear didn’t seem to be interested. I recall one scene vividly. A mountain lion spotted the young cub and started chasing him. Eventually the cub found himself hopelessly cornered. He turned toward the mountain lion, stood on his back legs, and, instead of growling, all that could escape his voice was a frightened scream. However, to the cub’s amazement, the mountain lion suddenly cowered, turned, and ran away. Only then did the cub look behind him and saw that old male bear. He did remember the cub and, upon hearing the cub’s frightened scream, ran to its rescue. When the tiny cub stood on his back legs and faced the mountain lion in fear, he was wholly unaware that, right behind him, that giant male bear also stood on his back legs and roared at the mountain lion. Oh, how often in our life’s troubles we feel cornered by our greatest fears. When we are most paralyzed by them, they often seem to simply dissolve and vanish. Do you think for a moment that you chased that horror out of your life? Stop! Turn around and look behind you! Perhaps at the very moment you stood and screamed in fear, the “***Lion of the Tribe of Judah***” stood up right behind you and for your defense! Anything that had any thought of destroying you must first deal with Him. ***You were in safe hands and didn’t even know it.*** David understood this amazing truth. At his most fearful moment, he understood, “*Thou art with me!*” Whatever trial or pain we face and whatever the outcome, as believers, we need to work at facing our trials as the Hebrew children faced the king of Babylon and the fiery furnace. We do not know what the Lord may do in any situation, including our trials, but we know He is able to deliver us. Regardless, we shall serve Him and not His adversaries. While we may not know how the Lord will deal

with our personal trial, deliver us from it, or, as with Paul's thorn, give grace sufficient to endure it, we may rest fully assured that He shall never leave us to face our trials alone. "Thou art with me."

For most of my eighty-one years, I've been richly blessed with good health. On the two occasions when I faced potential life-threatening health problems, at the darkest hour, in my "Valley of the shadow of death," My Shepherd reminded me that He was present, and that, whatever I faced, I would not face it alone. He would be with me! And praise His gracious name, I live today to tell you about "My Shepherd."

Before moving to the next point in the Psalm, we need one last reminder. Couple all the personal comforts and blessings that David gives us in this Psalm with the dominant New Testament emphasis that the believer's two chief objectives are to faithfully love and serve both the Lord and other believers. The point is simple and obvious, though often neglected. We cannot give a single word of comfort or encouragement to another believer who is facing their dark valleys unless we have had the experience and live to witness the Lord's walking with us through our valleys. Our only hope to help another believer rests in our personal "Dark valley experience." When the Lord delivers you through your valleys, carefully store that memory in your faith-bank for future use. And when you encounter a frightened believer facing their own valley, do not hesitate to share your own season in the valley with them, but be sure to include the Lord's abiding presence with you in that season, as well as your present safe standing on real "Higher ground."

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Ancient shepherds normally carried two sticks or poles. One was a rod used in walking, much like we might use a hiking pole. The other was longer and had a crook on one end. The shepherd used this pole to either prod sheep to move in the shepherd's chosen direction or to hook around the sheep stuck in a gully to pull the sheep back to safe standing. David finds comfort in both. Just recently I discovered an ancient Hebrew dictionary that traces Hebrew words back to the era when the word was a pictogram. A companion thought to this idea appears in Verse 2, "...*he leadeth me beside the still waters.*" The pictogram definition of the word here translated "leadeth" combines two images that mean "**Continue toward/with the staff.**" Always, regardless our circumstance, joyful and carefree or loaded with pain and trials, our one safe path to travel is just this, to "Continue toward/with the staff" in our Shepherd's hand.

Elder Joe Holder