

have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (He.12:5-11).

"Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal (Jb.5:17-18; See Je.31:18-19; Ps.80:1-7).

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word (Ps.119:67).

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old (La.5:21).

Thought 4. The LORD created us with the need for rest, and He commanded us to rest one day a week. Sometimes, like foolish sheep, we do not get the rest we need. Perhaps responsibilities weigh us down, causing us to feel that if we take time off, we will only get further behind, which only increases the pressure we already feel. People are often guilty of overly committing themselves or of getting involved in so many unnecessary activities that they simply do not get enough rest. Eventually, they wear themselves out. When this happens, some break down or even get sick. If we are too foolish to rest, the LORD will make us lie down and rest, sometimes against our wills. "Your 'green pastures' may actually be a white hospital bed."⁹ Our faithful, loving Shepherd encourages us to receive the rest we need.

Many believers struggle with sleeplessness. Their minds are flooded with decisions and problems. Others have spirits burdened with needs and cares. Some cannot sleep because of fear. The Great Shepherd longs to take us—His sleepless sheep—in His arms and calm us by His presence and loving care. When we place our full trust in Him, He takes care of us; He tends to all of our needs, and our hearts, minds, and eyes find rest in Him.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Mt.11:28).

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests

to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Ph.4:6-7).

I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety (Ps.4:8).

Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep (Ps.121:4).

When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet (Pr.3:24).

3 (23:4-5) Trust the LORD for protection.

The life of a sheep in Palestine was filled with threats and dangers, and its nervous, easily-frightened nature was justly aroused. Many people also live in the cold, cruel grip of fear. As one of God's dear followers, David certainly faced many threatening circumstances and people. Yet in the midst of all his perils, he had found one thing to be unfailingly true: his Shepherd had been by his side through every hazard. Notice a change in pronouns from *He* in verses two and three to *Thou* or *You* in verses four and five: David is no longer speaking *about* his Shepherd but *to* his Shepherd. This suggests that the LORD is no longer out front leading him but beside him.

a. He will be with you in the darkest hours (trials) (v.4).

For many people, the word *valley* calls forth an image of a flat, grassy expanse lying peacefully between mountains, like a dale or a meadow. However, this is not what the word means or what Old Testament valleys were like. A valley was a deep ravine or gorge. It was narrow, dark, and damp and usually encased by steep stone walls, making it virtually inescapable. Valleys were frequently located at the foot of towering cliffs. They were extremely dangerous: snakes, wild beasts, and criminals lurked in their darkness.

Since grass grows in Palestine during a very short season, shepherds struggled to feed their flocks the rest of the year. Often, it became necessary to lead their sheep into valleys where green plants grew in the cool, damp soil at the bottom. Passing through valleys was also necessary at times in order to reach pasture on the other side. Some scholars think *the valley of the shadow of death* was the name of an actual valley, an extremely dangerous one, through which shepherds and their flocks were forced to cross.

Valleys are symbols of the darkest times of life. *The valley of the shadow of death* speaks of life's gravest circumstances, fearful occasions when death is a real possibility, such as...

- severe illness or disease
- a sudden attack on your health
- a serious accident
- deadly weather conditions

⁹ Haddon W. Robinson. *Psalms Twenty-Three*, p.26.

PSALM 23:1-6

- a violent, criminal attack
- war
- a terrorist attack
- famine or extreme poverty

David testified that he was not afraid to walk through life's darkest valleys. Although he was defenseless in himself, he was not alone in the peril: his Shepherd was with him. The LORD would protect him and keep him close to His side. David was *comforted*—turned from fear and terror—because his Shepherd was skillfully armed with His *rod* and His *staff*. The rod was a club the shepherd fashioned and carried to fight off wild animals and thieves. It was a deadly weapon. The staff was the instrument the shepherd used to deal with his sheep. It was not a weapon but a tool. The shepherd leaned on it for support as he journeyed across rough ground and rocky crags. Most staffs had a hooked end that the shepherd used to catch a sheep's leg or neck to pull it out of a hole or back into the fold. The shepherd would nudge a sheep with his staff when it began to stray or when it was hesitant to move along with the flock.

David was fearless in the valley because he knew his Shepherd would protect him from all deadly threats, including his own waywardness. His Shepherd would keep him close to His side in the darkness and would be with him through every step until he passed safely through to the light on the other side.

b. He will be with you when facing enemies (v.5).

The image of the psalm shifts slightly from the strict comparison of a sheep's life over to a human's experience of encountering and dealing with enemies. Not long after Samuel identified young David and anointed him king, David began to face opposition. For nearly ten years Saul sought his life. Then when David became king, he had to battle against invaders and enemy nations throughout most of his reign. And, sadly, there was Absalom, his own son who tried to seize the kingdom from him.

David testified that his Shepherd was with him in every battle, strengthening and refreshing him throughout. First, the LORD fed and nourished him. He spread a table for him in the very presence of his enemies. David was surely thinking of those who had supplied food to him when he was a fugitive in the wilderness (1 S.21:6; 25:18f.; 2 S.17:27-29). In various circumstances the LORD had used these people to provide for David. Second, the LORD anointed his head with oil. Note the significance of oil:

- Oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The LORD had empowered David with His Spirit in every battle.
- Samuel had anointed David with oil when he identified him as Israel's future king (1 S.12-13). The LORD had preserved David in his many battles in order to fulfill His anointed purpose for him.

- Shepherds applied oil to their sheep. When a sheep was injured, the shepherd would use oil to soothe and heal its wounds. They poured oil on their sheep's heads and backs to repel insects. As they grazed, the fragrance of the oil would also repel snakes that hid in thick grass.

Third, the LORD showered David with blessings in the midst of the battle. His cup overflowed not only with the provisions he needed throughout battle, but also with confidence and with the joy and love of the LORD in his life. Though David's soul was often in distress, his spirit never ran dry. God provided all he needed to be triumphant in battle.

Thought 1. How comforting it is to know that we are never alone in life's valleys! The LORD has promised His unfailing presence in our lives. When we are walking through the valleys, He will move to our side and escort us safely through them, even carrying us when necessary. We can come victoriously through every trial with the LORD at our side.

Life's darkest valley is surely the valley of the shadow of death. At times in our lives we only pass through death's shadow and escape to live another day. But if the Lord delays His return, a day will come when we will all fall into its grip. Many live in terrible fear of dying, but there is no need for the LORD's sheep to be afraid. Our Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ, passed through death's valley and came through triumphantly on the other side. He left a shining light for us to follow when we pass through the valley of death ourselves (He.2:14-15). He plucked the sting from death and left it a powerless, defeated foe (1 Co.15:26, 55-56). He seized the power of death from Satan and emerged from hell and the grave with its keys in His almighty, conquering hand (He.2:15; Re.1:18). "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Co.15:58)!

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows (2 Co.1:3-5).

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (He.2:14-15).

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you