



"Even Though I walk Through the Valley" - Chapter 7
 Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Faber McMullen- Facilitator)

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From a shepherd's view point this is the mid point of the year with the sheep. The shepherd follows certain measures of management based on the seasons of the year. The psalm now shifts, and turns to speak of the shepherd in a very personal and intimate way. This is the mid point in the psalm. The psalm now leaves behind the neglected sheep of the bad owner. The sheep now mentioned will be in the care of the good shepherd. It is an intimate look into all the sheep are going to go through to make it to high ground. For the shepherd, the year is divided up and the sheep are taken to distant ranges. In early spring sheep are taken from ranch central and they begin moving up the mountains.

By late summer they are up on the alpine meadows and timberline, and they must begin their trek down. Then in the early months of the fall they are taken down to low country. And once at the bottom, the sheep will once again spend the winter down in the shepherd's camp at ranch headquarters. That is a brief description of the cycle that a shepherd follows to do the most for his sheep.

It is during those times of travel, during the trek up and then down that the shepherd will have the most contact with his sheep. That's why the text at this point is written in such first person intimacy. David knew this terrain and he knew this pattern. He was high on the hills tending his father's flock when Samuel came to find him and anoint him as king. It is no surprise that he could write about the difficulties, dangers, and delights of being a shepherd and the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep.

Again and again, David had gone up into the high country with his flock. He never took his flock to a place he had not been. He was very familiar with all of the dangers of floods, predators, land-slides and every other thing that could take place along the way. They were all familiar to him. He had managed his sheep with care. This is all brought out in the beautiful simplicity of the verses. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me." There is an assurance in these words that sets the soul at rest.

In the Christian life we often talk about moving on up to "higher ground" to enter into a more intimate relationship with God. We speak of "mountain top" experiences". We long to make it to the top to have that experience where we feel like we are standing in His presence; where we've never felt closer to Him. Most of us somehow imagine we can be air-lifted to a closeness with the Lord without going through the valleys. But the reality is that one only gets to higher ground by moving up through the valleys. We've got to go through the low country to

get to the high country. The best route to the top is always through the valleys. It is the best route for several reasons.

Also, it is interesting that David says that even though we walk "through the valley of death" we do not die there. Instead, it says that when we walk through the valley of pain, darkness and death, we can experience it without fear. This verse is often used at the time of a person's death as a consolation, but death for the child of God is just a dark valley we go through to get to an eternity of delight with God. The good shepherd knows this. That is why he tells us, "surely I am with you always". We have all seen a loved one dying of some wasting disease or just age. Watching and experiencing my mother's death was a difficult process. But when we are the ones who are left behind upon the death of a loved one, we should not focus on our loss, and see what remains as empty days. They are darkly shadowed valleys, but they can be the road to higher ground. If you're left behind, God is NOT done with you yet, and He has a plan and a purpose for you life.

Isn't it interesting that even modern highways have to follow the valleys to get up to the highest points on the mountain. There's just no other way to engineer it that makes sense. It is just part of the path to getting to higher ground. We have to remember this, and taking this to heart can help us to lose our fear of the valleys. I have to remind myself that it may be tough in the moment to get through these times, but He can and will give me calm in the valley if I am willing to trust totally in Him. To come to this conviction in the Christian life is to realize that He is there in every adversity. He is not taken by surprise. And there is victory on the other side.

Sheep are also taken through valleys to the high ground for several reasons. First, it is because the valleys are the well watered routes to the highlands. There are always streams, pools, and rivers in the valleys. We've all seen that as we've followed mountain roads that follow streams and rivers. There are frequent watering places along the paths that lead us to higher ground. Our Good Shepherd promises to water us and care for us all along the way. I have been a cattle rancher through very difficult times of drought right here in south central Texas. Finding a clean water hole on the ranch made ALL the difference. We don't have mountain valleys, but the desperate need for water is understood by every cattleman.

As Christians, we will find that we can find the most precious refreshment when we are going through our most desperate circumstances. It is only when we go through difficulties that we learn we can rest in Him. I have never experienced His presence like I have when I've been in the middle of difficult circumstances. Also, only those who have gone through the valleys can be of any great help and comfort to others. Just as water can only flow through a valley, it may seem difficult to believe that there is refreshment when we are in the depths of emotional, financial, or spiritual valleys. But God's word promises us that for the man or woman who walks through the valleys, real refreshment is available. Often we pray or sing hymns asking God to make us an inspiration, but we really can't do that without going through pain, suffering, and valleys that have been cut into our own lives by difficult trying experiences.

The person who has had their heart broken is the only person who is able to comfort someone else who has a breaking or a broken heart. Most of us don't want valleys, but in spite

of that, we have to take hold of the promise that God can bring great blessing to others through us once we have passed through the valleys relying on the precious promises of God.

Another reason that sheep have to be brought through the valley to the high ground is because it is in the valley where the richest feed and forage grasses are found. Sheep are moved along slowly to take advantage of all of the feed that lies in the valley. This is the best grazing available to the ewes and lambs. The shepherds want to be sure that there is water and feed for his sheep. These grassy glades are found on the walls of steep canyons and gorges. The shepherd is well aware that along with good grazing, predators and destruction can take place in these valleys. Floods can come. Rock slides can come. Coyotes and wolves can hide out behind all sorts of rocks and stands of trees. The shepherd knows that in the valley many things can destroy a sheep. In spite of this, the shepherd knows he must bring his sheep through the valley.

One of the greatest threats in valleys is the chilling rain that can kill the sheep in no time. Things can look sunny and warm and it can turn in a minute. Sheep are especially susceptible to colds, and respiratory diseases, etc. The author told of a time that there was a chilling unexpected wind that came through his flock. He ran to take shelter and the rain soaked him through. Then it began to sleet and snow. The flock raced away to find shelter. When it had all passed, he was surprised to learn that they had taken cover and that even in the valley there was great protection in spite of all of the dangers there.

Our shepherd knows what we need. When we make it through valleys, we can look back over those times and realize that nothing can grow our faith like learning about God's faithfulness in the midst of difficult circumstances. That's when and where we learn that His mercies are renewed every morning. Over and over He proves His care for our welfare. All of this multiplies our confidence in Jesus. It puts stamina in our very being. In this knowledge, fear will fade, and tranquility of heart and mind will replace it. But because He is in the situation with us, we learn that we have nothing to fear. Only the Christian who has learned to live this way can share it with others.

Many of us claim to have confidence in God, and yet we feel like lying down to die when we're in the valley. The one who walks through life's dark valleys without fear is the one who is a tower of strength to others. Jesus said, *"³³ These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."* This means that each of us will absolutely go through difficulties and problems. We must come to realize that He is IN THE VALLEY with us, and He is giving us the water and food we need to make it through to higher ground.

He promises to be the water that we can drink from with assurance that we will never thirst again. (John 4:14) He promises to sustain us with His word. (Matthew 4:4) He tells (John 16:33) How do I react and respond to the calamities that come my way. With Jesus, we can face them calmly, fearlessly, and with the knowledge that we will become a blessing to others around us who may live in fear.

