

He Walks with Me
Psalm 23:1-6 (NIV)

On the first Sunday of our sermon series, “If the Lord Is My Shepherd,” I shared that Psalm 23 was one of the most viewed and searched Bible passages on BibleGateway in 2019 and 2024. Can you guess which verse from Psalm 23 is often considered the most cherished? It’s verse 4, because it powerfully expresses comfort, courage, and the assurance of God’s presence during life’s darkest and most difficult moments. At the same time, it reveals that people are yearning for God’s presence in their lives.

Please join me in reading today’s scripture on the screen.

“**Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**” (Psalm 23:4 NIV)

If the Lord is my Shepherd, He walks with me.

Psalm 23 is King David’s prayer praising God for His steadfast presence, protection, and provision throughout his life. He might have meditated on the story of God’s salvation when Israel came out of Egypt from the bondage of slavery and made a journey to the Promised Land through the wilderness.

Psalm 23:4 starts with this confession, “**Even though I walk through the darkest valley.**” David didn’t pray to avoid or pass around the darkest valley. He prayed, “**Even though I walk through the darkest valley.**” This is because “**the darkest valley**” is not avoidable but is a must-part of our journey. Like David, we are to deal with “the darkest valley” in our lives.

1. What is the meaning of “the darkest valley”?

Literally, it means “**a steep, narrow, deep, dark valley.**” It is an extremely dangerous and life-threatening place. In other translations, it is rendered as “**the valley of the shadow of death**” (KJV, NASB, ESV). It speaks to **inner turmoil, depression, spiritual doubt, or seasons of deep suffering.** It can also imply **death itself** or the **looming presence of death.** So, “the darkest valley” represents **life’s most difficult moments.** Do you think there are people who have lived their lives without “the darkest valley”? No, we all must walk through the darkest valley.

When was the time you had to walk through your darkest valley? Why do you think you were in the valley of the shadow of death at that time? How did you manage to get out of the darkest valley? Or are you walking in the darkest valley now?

2. God’s Presence: From Past Faithfulness to Future Confidence

Then, hear King David's faith confession: **"I will fear no evil, for you are with me."** (Psalm 23:4b NIV). He doesn't say, "I will fear no evil, for you will be with me." Instead, he confesses, "for you are with me." Because you are with me right now, I am confident that even in the future, when I face life-threatening challenges, God will be with me."

David's future confidence ("I will not fear") is grounded in his present trust ("You are with me"). How is that possible? We should develop our intimate relationship with God every day by practicing and appreciating God's moment-by-moment presence in our lives. Our current faith in God will become our future confirmation of God's being our Shepherd. Without this kind of effort, it's not easy to recognize God's presence when we face challenges in our lives.

When young David volunteered to fight the giant warrior Goliath, King Saul questioned his ability. But David responded from his past experiences with God: **"The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine"** (1 Samuel 17:37, NIV). David remembered God's past faithfulness ("rescued me from the lion and bear"), which gave him present assurance ("the Lord will rescue me"), resulting in future confidence ("I will go and fight him without fear").

As a shepherd, David did his best to protect his sheep from bears and lions, lead his flock to safe pastures and waters, and nurture and heal them. He learned and practiced how to use a sling, rod, and staff to defend and guide his flock, as well as overcome any challenges that arose.

Today, we should do our best to take good care of our family, fulfill our assigned duties at work, and strengthen our relationship with God. By doing so, we can confirm God's presence every single day and be sure of God's presence in our future. Our faith in God today will lead us to recognize God's presence in the future, regardless of the situation. Let us read the following scripture together. **"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."** (Isaiah 41:10 NIV).

Let me quote the same point from Henri Nouwen: **"God is not in the distant heavens or in the hidden depths of the future, but here and now. God has pitched a tent among us. Even more than that, God has made a home in us so that we can make God's home our home."** Henri Nouwen

"If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." (John 15:7-8 NRSVUE)

As we abide in God's word every day, we will grow more and more into faithful disciples of Jesus, overcoming any difficulties we may face as we journey toward God's Kingdom.

3. God's Rod and Staff for Our Comfort (or Protection) (Pictures)

As God walks together with us in the valley of the shadow of death, He uses his rod and staff for us. “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4b NIV). Here, the rod is a club used to fend off wild beasts. By attacking wild beasts with the rod, shepherds protect their sheep. Many times, sheep never recognize their shepherds fight against their enemies to protect them. They just focus on grazing on grass: “... he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.” (Psalm 121:3b-6 NRSVUE)

The staff is to guide and control the sheep. Sometimes, shepherds have to hit their sheep hard to guide them not to get off the road and prevent them from going into dangerous areas away from their flock. The ultimate purpose of the Shepherd's action of using the rod and staff on the sheep is to bring them to safety and comfort. The most recently translated version of the Bible, CEB, has this translation: “Your rod and your staff - they protect me.” (Psalm 23:4b CEB)

Let me close my sermon with a story from the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul had suffered greatly in his life as he faithfully followed God's directions to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. He was stoned in Lystra and left for dead (Acts 14:19). He was beaten and imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16:22-24). He was arrested in Jerusalem, had to go through multiple trials, experienced shipwrecks, and was finally taken to Rome as a prisoner (Acts 21-28) and was finally executed in Rome. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, you can find a more detailed list of his suffering.

His suffering situation hadn't improved. When he was on trial in Rome, he stood before a judge. However, there were no witnesses who testified on his behalf during his trial. It seems that his friends, his church family, and his coworkers didn't want to be entangled in the situation.

He was walking in the darkest valley, facing death. However, he didn't fear at all. It was because he could have God's presence with him.

“At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.” (2 Timothy 4:16-17 NRSVUE)

It was because Apostle Paul had experienced God's caring and protecting presence throughout his missions and ministries. Let us hold on to the following scripture together: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39 NIV). If the Lord is my Shepherd, He walks with me today and tomorrow.