



Summer at Woodland Hills

Part 2 – Who’s Afraid of the Dark?

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Last week, we jumped into this text, Psalm 23, one of my favorite texts in all of the Bible. We are going to finish... Maybe we’re going to finish. If we don’t finish, I’ll come back another time and we’ll finish. We’ll get as far as we can today in this great, great passage of scripture.

Last week, I pointed out that when David says, “The Lord is my shepherd,” that word *shepherd* in the Hebrew scriptures and in the Middle Eastern culture is such an important word. God is a shepherd in scripture, but he’s the shepherd over all of Israel. He’s the shepherd over two million sheep and the followers of God and the nation. In Psalm 23, it becomes really personal because David said, “He is my shepherd.” And he’s my shepherd to the degree that I will not lack or I will not want.”

Today, we are going to dive in and take this text as far as we can get. I want you to open your Bibles and I want us to walk through this and I want to point one more thing out to you that I referred to last week and that is that not one time in this whole psalm is there a plea or a request. Not one time. It’s all assumed through the relationship he has with God Almighty. And as you walk through this text, I just want you to ponder the thought of when was the last time you went to God in prayer without a list. Not that we shouldn’t ask; we should ask. God tells us to ask, but he has to love it when his children come to him and say, “I don’t want anything; I just want to spend time with you and I just want to be with you.” He has to love that as a heavenly Father just like you love that as an earthly father, an earthly mother.

Let’s pick up in Verse 2 where we left off last week. We only did one verse last week. We didn’t get very far, so maybe we’ll get further today. ***1 The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...*** Say “with me.” ... ***your rod and your staff, they comfort me.***

We’re going to walk through it. Maybe that’s as far as we’ll get; we’ll try to get a little bit further. We’re going to sing this truth in a little while. It is a song that we’ve done in our congregation called *Faithful to the End*. Y’all hadn’t done it yet, so I asked the worship team if they could learn it this week because I really want to sing it. But, I want you to listen to the song in light of the psalm. The song (the lyrics) in light of the psalm, which is a song, right? Listen to this and we are going to sing it together.

There wasn’t a day that you weren’t by my side. There wasn’t a day that you let me fall. In all of my life, your love has been true. With all of my life, I will worship you.

We were doing this song in our church and we came to this series a few months ago where I did Psalm 23. I told our worship leader that I wanted to sing the lyric. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. I'm not musical at all. This is a one-time occurrence in my life where I wrote a lyric. I didn't write it. I took the scripture and said, "Let's put it to music in this song." He's like, "I don't know how to do it." I said, "I'm going to tell you how to do it" and we did it and it ended up being this most powerful moment in our congregation. So, we're going to sing that lyric in a moment that the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. When you think through that truth, it's such a powerful, powerful truth in your life.

The main thing I want you to see today is that all up and down Psalm 23 are call-backs to the exodus. There are little call-outs to the exodus up and down and all through Psalm 23. You remember the exodus. Moses, the Hebrew baby, was rescued as a baby because God had big plans for him, but then he was raised in Pharaoh's house. And then a leader came along who remembered not Joseph and the Israelites were taken captive. God heard their pleas and God heard their prayers and God called out to this one, Moses, who happened to be a shepherd, by the way. He called the shepherd to go lead his people, the Israelites, out of slavery and out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

When you think about the exodus, you don't typically think of Psalm 23, but you should. Psalm 23 is David calling us back to remember the exodus. There's a Psalm... I think it's 77. It talks about God as the shepherd, leading his people out of slavery and out of Egypt. He chose this shepherd, Moses, to lead his people to the Promised Land. I don't know if you know it or not, but there are all kinds of verses in the Bible that refer over to Psalm 23 and they kind of fit like a hand in a glove together.

Let me just show you two of them today. Exodus 15 - ***13 In your unfailing love you will lead the people... Circle that word lead in your Bible. ...you have redeemed. In your might, you will guide... Circle that word guide in your Bible. ...them to your sacred home.*** Look at the word *guide*. That word is the same Hebrew word in Psalm 23 for lead. "He leads me beside still waters and quiet waters." The word *home* in that passage in Exodus is the exact same Hebrew word for *green pastures* in Psalm 23. It's a call-out and it is all going back to the exodus.

Look at this one in Deuteronomy 2. ***7 For the Lord your God has blessed you in everything you have done. He has watched your every step through this great wilderness.*** Like a shepherd would. He's watched your every single step in the same way a shepherd would do that. ***During these forty years, the Lord your God has been with you...*** Does that sound familiar. "For you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me."

All kinds of text line up with Psalm 23, so when you read Psalm 23 in the future, I want you to do it with the glasses of the exodus on and the lens of the exodus and I want you to view this departure from this land of slavery and this journey to this Promised Land that God has blessed you with, that has called you to, that is calling you out of a land of slavery into a land of promise, calling you out of a land of hard work and little reward to a land flowing with milk and honey. He is calling you out of a land where you feel like God can't hear you at all into a land where you feel the ever-present presence of God Almighty, with him right next to you. All of us have this promised land that God has called us to. If you are a child of God, you have that in your life.

But we also have a place of slavery that God has called us from. For some of us, that's a long time ago. For some of you, you are in it still. For some of you, you're going to come out of it soon, out of this land of slavery. So, you have a place that you are called out of or from and a place that you are called to, but neither of those are the focus of Psalm 23. The focus of Psalm 23 is the journey in the middle, between the from and the to, and that's the place. I want you to think of your journey and you coming out of this land of slavery, into the Promised Land as we read it.

Let's go back to Verse 3 in Psalm 23. **3 He guides me along the right (righteous) paths for his name's sake.** I want you to circle or underline or star that phrase *for his name's sake*. What that means is that he has put his name on it. He is staking his name on it. That's why he is guiding you along the righteous path. It's because of his name's sake. And the name of the Lord is so great that we don't even use it. The Jew's said, "Don't even say it." It's Jehovah or Yahweh, neither of which is probably correct because the Jews wouldn't even pronounce it or say it, but it's within the name of God that we find his character. Yahweh means "I am" and he's saying "I am, I am. I am in your life. I am what I always was. I am what I am today and I am what I will always be." And within his name is the trust that he will guide you to exactly where you need to be and exactly where he wants to take you because he has been your I am in the past and he promises to be your I am in the future and we can trust him when he puts his name on the line for his name's sake.

4 Even though... In other words, no matter what. And, Woodland Hills, today, in this worship center and in the chapel, how many of you have an "even though" in your life right now? "Even though this doesn't work, I believe in God." "Even though this doesn't appear to be fleshing out, God, I believe you're present with me." "Even though I'm in the midst of everything I'm walking through." "Even though I got laid off, God has something great for me." "Even though I was just served divorce papers, I'm going to trust God to work this out." "Even though they haven't found a blood donor..." "Even though the x-rays look bad..." "Even though the report from the oncologist is disappointing..." "Even though the funeral is next week..." "Even though it appears that everything is crashing down on me today, it does not mean that I don't have a Promised Land because the Lord is my shepherd and if the Lord is my shepherd, I have a Promised Land."

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil... Shepherds had to go through valleys and there were times where the Middle Eastern sun would bake the quiet waters and would bake the green grass. And the only green grass and still waters were found in the shadows and found in the dark valleys. David, as a shepherd, would have been intimately aware of that. There were times you had to go and find that and you had to take the sheep through the darkest valley in order to get them to the green grass and you had to take them through the darkest valley in order to find the quiet waters. David knew that and he understood that.

There is a massive valley and it resembles the Grand Canyon kind of territory. It's between Jerusalem and Jericho. The locals refer to it still to this day as the Valley of the Shadow of Death. David, no doubt, would have walked that journey because to go from Jerusalem to Jericho, you had to walk through that valley. David was raised in Bethlehem, just a few miles away from Jerusalem and Jerusalem is just 18 miles away from Jericho. You see this play out all throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, this journey from Jerusalem to Jericho.

I have a picture on the screen. This is similar to what I'm referring to in that the green grass is in this dark valley. When the sun is rising on the east or setting in the west, the shadow from the hills casts over these crevasses and cracks in the valley and it becomes totally dark. In fact, in the Hebrew, *the darkest valley* can be translated *total darkness*.

And sometimes your God and sometimes your shepherd will lead you into the darkest place where you can't even see your hand in front of your face, but he can see and he knows where he's going and he knows where he's taking you and he knows where he is leading you in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

I wish I could take all of you there. In fact, I can take all of you there. Because Ted won't. I've asked him multiple times. You pray that he'll repent and go to Israel with me. I will say to you... Joking and jest and all of that aside. I've never been on a trip that changed my life more than going to the Holy Land. I've been all over the world actually. Before I was ten years old, I had been in ten countries. My dad wanted me to travel the world, so I've been all over the world. But, going to the place, for this ADD brain and going to the place for this visual generation I was raised in, where Jesus walked and to then take out the word of God and open it in that place and see it with my own eyes has made the Bible no longer black ink on white pages, but the living word of God. It changed the way I view it. I actually will take you if you want to go. On January 1, I would be glad to take you. In fact, several of you asked earlier, so the website is thechurch.at/israel if you want information on it. I pray Ted will go with us. You pray too. Amy wants to go and I think Ted is a good husband, so he's going to take her.

By the way, Jesus was referring to this very valley in Luke 10 when he talked about the story of the Good Samaritan. When he said the guy was on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho and he was going down the hill to Jericho and he was robbed, and the thieves came out and they left him for dead and they beat him and only the Samaritan came out to help, that was that valley, the Valley of the Shadow of Death that Jesus was referring to there.

Sometimes God will lead you through those dark places to get you where he wants to take you. But it wasn't just darkness; that wasn't the only problem there. He said there are other dangers there as well. Just like the thieves hid in that day. You saw it in the photograph. It's a perfect place to hide behind the nooks and the crannies and when somebody was traveling alone you could sneak out of the cave and rob them and beat them and leave them for dead and take all of their belongings.

But, David went on to say, ***I will fear no evil***. Not just darkness, but evil. There is evil present there and what evil... What our enemy wants us to do is fear, right? Our enemy wants us to be afraid. What do we do when we are afraid? We get off our track, we get off of our path. When we are scared, we want to go back to what is safe. When we're afraid, we have no confidence in the path that is in front of us, especially when you can't see because you are in the darkest valley.

The enemy's MO is to yell at you and to shout at you and to scream at you so that you lose confidence and you lose focus and you forget about where you're going and you forget about what God is trying to do. Your enemy is an anxiety creator, a fear monger, and his MO is to yell at you.

When I was a child, we would visit the Smokey Mountains all summer, every summer in Asheville, North Carolina, where all of my extended family lives. There were these little... I don't know what they were. I think they were chipmunks. They would come out of the bushes and these noble fir trees and these big trees that grow where it gets cold. We don't have those trees in Tulsa and a tornado comes through about once every three months, so we don't have trees that get that big. But, these little chipmunks would crawl out of these big trees.

Somebody showed me one time how you could catch the chipmunks. You just yell at it. When they're running away, if you yell and scream at them, that little cute creature will stop and put his little paws over his ears and you can grab it. It's exactly the picture of what happens to you and me when we listen to the voice of the enemy. He yells at us and he screams at us and this fear mongering comes into our lives and we lose focus and we lose confidence in the path that God has right in front of us.

By the way, sheep are easily startled. In John 10, Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd. And he said not only am I the good shepherd, but my sheep know me and they know my voice; they hear my voice. He's saying that over time, as you listen to Jesus and respond to him, you learn to trust him and over time, this intimate relationship, this "my shepherd" intimacy... As you respond to Jesus, you learn to hear his voice and you learn to trust him to lead you into a deeper place.

In Psalm 23, David gives us a couple of reasons that he will fear no evil. ***I will fear no evil, for you are with me...*** The promise of the presence of God. "You're with me." That's what a shepherd promises. "I will be with you." And ***your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*** Shepherds were in the field 24/7. They were out with the sheep all of the time. They didn't have a home base or a tool shed. Or a tool box in the back of their truck that they could put their tools in, but there were two things that a shepherd had always at all times: a rod and a staff.

The rod looked like a club and it was small and compact and the shepherd kept it in his belt. When an enemy came after the sheep, he could take it and let it fly and pound that enemy. It was hardly ever seen because it was protected on the inside of his cloak and in his belt, but it was convenient and compact and it packed a really, really big wallop. That's the rod, but he also carried the staff. The staff had a curved end, but it also had a pointed end. When the sheep... a whole herd... There were over 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 or 60 sheep and he wanted to keep them all going the same direction, so he would take this staff and he would bring them back into line so that they stay on the course and on the direction that they are going in.

David mentioned both of them and both of them, by the way, he said, "are used for my comfort." I want to explain that to you really quick because the temptation is for you to think that they are the same instrument and they are not the same instrument. It seems like such a simple detail or such a small detail that why would you spend time teaching on it. It's not just a simple detail; the nuance is unbelievably important to your life because it affects how we view the comfort of God. It affects how we view and how we perceive and how we think about God. **The rod was for protection.** That's what the rod was for. The rod was to protect us, not to punish us, not to prune us, not to keep us in line, not to smack us when we do something bad. That's what a warden does, right. That's not what a shepherd does. A shepherd is bigger and greater than that.

Our temptation is to think of God as this great big God who's over the whole earth, not just our part of the earth and not just the earth, but all of the universes and he's over everything. In fact, when you read the Old Testament, you see Job. It says God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. When we read a text like that, we think that when God speaks, he's like a hurricane or a typhoon, right? We think that when God speaks, the whole earth shakes and the mountains quake and he's this big, big, big God. The temptation is to take that view of this big, big God and read a text like this that says he has a rod or he has a Billy club and think that God is going to use that Billy club on us.

I want you to know that the rod is not for you because your shepherd is for you. The rod was used to protect you and it was inside his belt, not for you, but for you. Do you understand what I'm saying? When an enemy comes after you or a circumstance or a demon comes after you, he would rear back and let that club fly at your enemy. Before you move forward in your walk with Christ, you have to let that truth go from your brain to your heart and you've got to accept the truth of God's Word that God is for you and he is a good, good father.

The Billy club that God carries in his belt is not for you; it's for your protection. The religious view of God says that God is this angry God and he's a pouting God and he's a self-centered God to the degree that when you don't do something right, he's going to get you and that when you can't do it all right, he's going to pound you and when you don't act a certain way or jump high enough or lie in close enough, he's coming after you. But that's not the picture of God that I want you to have today and it's not the picture of your shepherd.

The relational view of God is the view I want you to have today. The one who takes that injured sheep and puts it in that sling on his chest so that it can feel the heart of the shepherd beating. The relational view of God doesn't say if you do this or if you obey that or if you act this way or if you look that way... The relational view of God says I love you... period.

The rod is not for you, but the staff is for you. You didn't think you were going to get off scott free in this whole scenario, did you? The staff is for you and, again, notice the straight side that is to bring the sheep back into direction, but when one of them gets so far out of line and he can't reach him with the straight side, he can take that curved side and reach out and snag that sheep and bring it back into line. That's the correction of God.

The rod is for your protection. The staff is for your correction. You need both, by the way. As you walk with God, you need both. If he's going to shepherd imperfect people, which we all are, he needs a staff. He wants to snag you back in. The Lord is my shepherd, so he corrects me. The Lord is my shepherd, so he puts me back in line. The Lord is my shepherd, so he loves me enough to correct me.

Hebrews tells it this way. **6 For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child.** Think about the punishment you give your children. You don't punish your children to protect other people, right? You punish your children to protect your children. You don't punish your children to get them out of the way or to knock them out; you punish your children because you love your children and you want to protect your children and you want to take care of your children. You're trying to keep them from danger, your trying to keep them safe.

No one likes being corrected, by the way. No one likes being corrected. You need counseling if you like being corrected. No one like conflict, by the way. We weren't born to like conflict. Every person I've ever met who said, "Yeah, I like conflict," I'm like, "I'm afraid of you." We don't like it. We were built to be at peace with our God. We were built to be at peace with other people, but correction is part of the process. No one likes getting a paper back that a teacher graded and it be full of red ink to the degree it looks like she was wounded on the paper, right? No one like a coach to call them out in practice and stop the whole practice and say, "You're doing it wrong." But, it's better to do it in practice than in the game, right?

The correction is part of the process to get us where we need to be and where we want to go. God is the shepherd who loves you so much that he will correct you. He loves you so much that when you get off the trail, he will nudge you back in. He loves you so much to snag you and say, "Get back over here, come on over here; that's dangerous over there. You can't see it, but there's an enemy over there. I know that they promised this over there, but that's not true. It's a lie. I know that you think that will fulfill you, but it will not fulfill you. You were made for me. I will fulfill you. You are the child of God; you're my sheep; come back into the line. Come back where you belong."

He loves you enough to correct you. God doesn't correct you to make you feel badly. He doesn't correct you to make you feel shameful. He doesn't correct you to make you feel depressed. He corrects you to make you feel safe. Which, by the way, the greatest maturity I know of is for you to lean into the correction of God. For you to sense the heavenly Father's love for you when he is correcting you and you don't feel shame. Shame is not from him. He doesn't sign his name shame. The enemy signs his name shame and blame and guilt and depression. Those are not from God.

In fact, sometimes teenagers will ask me what the difference is between conviction and guilt. Conviction always leads me closer, always makes me want to come out of the dark. Guilt always turns me away and always makes me want to hide. Guilt is from the enemy; conviction is the loving Father and the shepherd drawing you back. When you can lean into the comfort of the correction of God that when God corrects you and says, "No, no, no, over here," you say, "Thank you, God. I didn't see that. Thank you, God, for showing me that, for pointing that out to me. I don't see it even today, but I trust you and I know that you are a good, good Father and you know what's best for me and you're bringing me back."

Don't you long for that with your children. I'm not there yet with any of the four of my children to the point that they will look at me and go, "Thank you, Dad. Thanks for the correction."

My oldest is brilliant and smart. She made a 33 on the ACT and I'm pushing her. When she said, "Dad, I did better than you," I said, "Yeah, but I'm wiser and you're capable of more." She said, "Dad, I don't know of any parent that pushes their kid to do better than 33" and I said, "You're welcome because I know what you're capable of and I know who you are. I'm pushing you because I know what you don't know and one day you will look back and say, "Thank you, Daddy for pushing me, for correcting me, for training me, for moving me into the place where you see what I don't see."

The same is true in our relationship with our heavenly Father that we come into the conviction of God to say, "Thank you, God, for your rod for protection and your staff for correction. They both are very comforting to me."

We usually want one without the other, don't we? We want the protection without the correction. When we're in conflict with somebody else, we want God to get them with the rod, but we don't want to feel the hook around our neck of God comforting us and saying, "Wait, you were wrong too and let me correct you and bring you back in." If you don't have both the rod of protection and the staff of correction, you'll never move toward spiritual maturity where God wants you to be. We want the path from vision to fulfillment to be easy. We want the path toward what God has called us to and what he's put in our heart to be easy.

We don't want the pain that is required to get there. In fact, we will avoid pain to the nth level, right? We will go through any distraction and any detour to avoid pain, but God has a plan for you, just like he had a plan for the children of Israel. And in order to get you to the Promised Land, he's going to have to take you, at times, through the wilderness. In order to take you where you need to be, he will take you where you don't want to be. In order to get you to the place on the other side, he has to take you through the desert.

You have to eat the manna, right? They had to eat the manna, they had to go through the places where they shook out the sand and set up their tents and spend the night and got up the next morning and packed up their tents and packed up their camels and walked through the sand again to get to the place where they shook the sand out... They had to go through the desert in order to get to the place God wanted them to go. They had to go through rocks and snakes to get to the place with milk and honey. They had to go through the place of dryness and abandonment to get to the place of refreshing their soul. In order to get to green pastures and still waters, they had to go through the darkest valley.

And he knew the way to go and the sheep couldn't see, but he could see. He knew every trail and he knew every nook and cranny in the trail. He knew every rock that could slip under their feet and create problems for them. He knew where a bear may be hiding, where a lion may be hiding. He knew everything about it to get them through the darkest valley to the brightest mountaintop.

In order to fulfill what God has placed on your heart, you may have to go through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I think all of us who are believers would sense that on the inside. We sense that God has called us to something more than we're experiencing. We sense that God is calling us to something greater, to something deeper, to something better. That's the function of the living Holy Spirit of God in the life of the children of God.

He wants to lead you to the place and take you to that place, but in order to get to that place that's bigger than yourself, it's going to require you going through something you cannot do on your own. It's going to require that you be challenged. It's going to involve danger. It will involve correction. Then to get where you need to go, you've got to go through places you don't want to go. No one wants to go through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. No one says, "Oh, bring me more correction." No one says, "I love feeling like I'm going to fail over and over and over again." No one says, "Hey, just correct me

and bring me the difficult stuff and bring me the hard stuff,” but we have to go through that in order to get where we need to go. And the more we walk through it, one step after the other, we begin to trust God more and greater.

God has given you a Promised Land today. I don't know what it is, but maybe you do. Some of you are right on the cusp of it and you see it. It may be that business that God has called you to start. It may be that non-profit that he has called you to birth. It may be the final papers to do the adoption or the foster care. It may be the last couple of hundred dollars for that mission trip. It may be something incredible, but you see it and there is a valley between here and there. You can trust your shepherd to take you by the hand and lead you through that place.

I'm out of time today. We'll have to finish it another time. I want you to bow your heads and close your eyes. I want to lead you through a confession today.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Would you just declare that in your heart today that that's the truth, the truth of who he is, the truth of what he wants for you? Would you let the Holy Spirit begin to speak to you today and declare who you are and whose you are? The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not live in fear. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not dwell in doubt. The Lord is my shepherd, I will not walk in anxiety. The Lord is my shepherd, I'm not the tail; I'm the head.

The Lord is my shepherd, I will not fear death. The Lord is my shepherd, I will not be consumed with worry. The Lord is my shepherd, I will not live in inadequacy. The Lord is my shepherd, I will not walk in defeat. The Lord is my shepherd, I will not be preoccupied with my failures. The Lord is my shepherd, I will not judge myself by the expectations of others. The Lord is my shepherd, I will not judge others by my own expectations. The Lord is my shepherd, I'm going to quit not enjoying the green pastures because I fear the valley is ahead. I will walk in your presence because you are my shepherd and because you are my shepherd, I am the child of God, a co-heir with Jesus Christ. It's who I am and I receive it as the truth and the very Word of God.