



Behind Enemy Lines Training Saints

Written by an Inmate

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

- Psalm 23 -

Brother Eric

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¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. ³He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. ⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

I don't know what period in King David's life he wrote this psalm, but I do know he went through a lot of rough times. King Saul hunted him for years, and he felt surrounded by his enemies. Even after he became king, his own son tried to depose and kill him. He was God's anointed and chosen king, but he wasn't perfect and gave in to sin with the wife of another man whom he later had killed to try to cover it up. But David was called a man after God's own heart – because of how he reacted when confronted by his shortcomings: he repented. He didn't harden his heart like Saul; he submitted to the will of God and humbled himself and had faith that God was always with him. In this short psalm, we see a beautiful example of David's outlook on life.

I want to look a little deeper at verse 4 for a minute. "Even though ..." – despite; David is going through another rough time, but even so he will trust in God. He could respond to his troubles with despair and self-pity, but instead he responds with faith.

"I walk ..." – David doesn't let the valley overwhelm him, doesn't let the shadow stop him. When tragedies strike or we hit setback after setback, we have to keep moving forward and keep living our lives. We can't go backwards. We can't stay still, frozen in our fears. We have to walk! And when we do, we need God to guide us through the darkness, through this evil world corrupted by sin and death. Even here in prison, we make choices every day that can either help build us up or ones that don't. Each step we take in the right direction, in accordance with God's will, will lead us out of the valley in God's good time.

"... through the valley ..." – God never promises a life free of pain but the power to overcome it, the strength to get through the valleys in life. He promises that He will be with us every step of the way.

"... of the shadow of death ..." – I always wondered why it's the shadow of death rather than just death. Was David just being poetic? Maybe. But also, if we think about it, death casts a big shadow in our lives when it happens near us, when we lose loved ones ... it can block out the light.

In darkness we can be afraid to move, to take any step since we might trip and fall. I was in a cave in Tennessee once called the Lost Sea (since it has an underground lake in part of it) and at one point when you're deep in one of the caverns ... they turn off all the lights! You literally can't see your hand in front of your face. There'd be no way to get back out of there without someone to guide you –

and even then, you'd be stumbling at every step. What you really need ... is the light! When we're stumbling around the valley of the shadow of death, we need Jesus who said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (**John 8:12**).

You cannot have a shadow without the light. Evil and death are just parasites – a corruption of what is. Light is. Shadow is not. It is the absence, the blocking out of light. The separation from our God – the light of the world. The devil wants us to dwell in darkness, in the shadows, to wallow in our fears, to not take that next step in faith. But we can't do it alone. We need our Father, through Jesus, to take our hand and guide us out. He knows the way and lights our path through His Word. We just need to trust Him and walk like David did, clinging to God rather than going his own way.

However we got into the valley, whether through our own fault as the consequences of our sin (which is likely for most of us here), or through someone else's sin, or just the result of living in this fallen, sinful world, God can lead us out. He is the Good Shepherd who will take care of His own. And not only will He lead us out, but He uses the experience for our own good! "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose." (**Romans 8:28**) He gives purpose to our pain! He makes us stronger by going through the valleys.

Like strength training, you have to break down the muscle to build it up stronger. In the movie "The Flash," Barry Allen goes back in time and prevented his mother's murder. When he went forward again, he met a different version of himself who he really didn't like. The other version was immature and ungrateful and entitled. He was objectively a better person before he messed with time. And he was a better person because of the painful experiences he went through. His mother's murder definitely wasn't a good thing, but good things came out of it. Though that's just a fictional story, it does illustrate how good can come out of making it through the darkness of the valleys in life.

Back to the psalm, David starts and ends with hope. He believes in the promises of God, so he has that hope, that confident assurance of what's to come. He talks about the blessings in his life – the green pastures and still waters. We have to always open our eyes to the blessings of God. They are around us every day if only we look and see! David's cup overflows with God's blessings! Even in the valley, there's too many! It overwhelms David to think about – even as he's being hunted by his enemies. He knows the end of the story. He has faith in God, so he knows that he'll be with God forever in heaven.

When you're watching a scary movie or reading a suspenseful book, if you know how the story ends – if the main character lives or not for example – you won't have fear for how thing will turn out. Now that kind of ruins the movie/book, but in life, it's everything!! Since we know how the story ends, we can fear no evil, we can stand strong in the storm, we can walk confidently in the darkness of the valley! Because we have seen a great light. On us a light has shone. To us a child is born. And His name is called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (**Isaiah 9:2,6**) In Him whose birth we celebrate in a couple of weeks, we place our trust and our hope. Because of Him, we know we are forgiven, death has lost its sting, and we can say along with David, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Amen.