

Through the Valley

Sterling UMC
January 31, 2010
Psalm 23:4

There is an old Arab parable that says: All sunshine and no rain makes a desert." If you never have any down times, dark times, gloomy times in your life you'll be dried up. You'll have no depth to yourself, no maturity. It takes good times and bad times to make a mature person. Life is a mixture of pain and pleasure, of victory and defeat, of success and failure, of mountain tops and valleys. Today we're going to look at how we get through the valleys of life.

Psalm 23:4 (NIV) helps us find the way. "Even 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."

In Israel there is a real Valley of the Shadow of Death. It's a steep, deep and narrow canyon. The sun only hits the bottom of it when it's directly overhead at high noon. The rest of the time the bottom of the canyon is dark. David probably led his sheep through the valley of the shadow of death as he was growing up.

As you look in the Bible, the term "valley" also refers to all kinds of rough times in life. Joshua talks about the Valley of Calamity
Psalm 84 talks about the Valley of Weeping
Hosea talks about the Valley of Trouble
This verse in Hebrew actually means The Valley of Deep Darkness

How do I handle the dark valleys of life?

Well first of all there are five facts about valleys that you need to remember whenever you go through a tough time:

1. VALLEYS ARE INEVITABLE

They are going to happen so you might as well count on them. The fact is either you have just come out of a valley, or you're in one right now, or you're probably headed toward one. Jesus was very realistic about it. In John 16:33 (NIV), He says "In the world you will have trouble." It's not a matter of *if*, it's *when*. It's going to happen. You're going to have difficulty, disappointment, discouragement in life. There will be times of suffering, sorrow, sickness. There will be times of frustration, failure and fatigue. They are going to happen. They are a normal part of life. Don't be surprised by it.

2. VALLEYS ARE UNPREDICTABLE

You can't plan them, time them, schedule them. Valleys are always unexpected. In fact they usually come at the worst time -- when you don't have time, when you're unprepared. Have you ever had a flat tire at a good time? They just happen. And usually when you least need them and it's most inconvenient. It would be great if we could schedule our down times in life. You can't plan life like that.

Valleys come suddenly. They are unpredictable. A phone call, a letter, a routine doctor's check-up, a freak accident. Valleys just happen. Jeremiah 4:20 (LB) "Disaster follows disaster... In an instant my tents are destroyed, my shelter falls in a moment."

3. VALLEYS ARE IMPARTIAL

No one is immune to them. No one is insulated from pain and sorrow. No one gets to skate through life problem free. Everybody has problems -- good people and bad people. Problems, trials, difficulties, disturbances, downtimes, depression doesn't mean you're a bad person. It means you're a person. It doesn't mean you're an evil human being; it means you're a human being. The Bible is very clear that good things happen to bad people and sometimes bad things happen to good people. Valleys are impartial. They don't care how good or bad you are.

Matthew 5:45 (LB) Jesus said, "It rains on the just and the unjust too." When we go through a difficult time -- a valley in life -- the first reaction is always "Why me?" Yet really you should ask "Why not me?" Do you think you should be exempt from all the problems everybody else has to go through? Do you think you should be the only one in the universe that never has a tragedy, a loss, loses a loved one? Instead of saying "Why me?" just realize it's going to happen because you're a human being. Remember this is not heaven. Things are not perfect here and there are problems and difficulties. They are going to happen in life -- yes, even to good people, Christians.

4. VALLEYS ARE TEMPORARY

They have an end to them. They don't last. They are not a permanent location. David says, "Even though I walk through the valley..." The valley is not something you stay in your entire life. It's something you go through -- a circumstance, a situation that has a season to it. When you're in a valley you often think it's a dead end, but it's not. It's like a tunnel -- there is a beginning and end. You go through the tunnel and eventually you're out of it and back out in the light again. As 1 Peter 1:6 (LB) says, "There is a wonderful joy ahead, even though the going is rough for a while down here." He admits that sometimes you're going to go through tough times. It's going to be rough.

But it's only for a while. There is wonderful joy ahead. Paul says in Romans 8:18, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. He's talking about Heaven. There are no problems in heaven, no valleys, no dark days. While you may be harassed down here, in heaven you'll have no problems. If you know the Lord Jesus Christ, that's where you're going.

Again listen to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17 (NEB), "Our troubles are short lived and there is an eternal glory which outweighs them all." They won't last; they will be short. But he says, there is an eternal glory. This is important. Pain can be productive. There will be a benefit for our problems if we respond in the right way. While we have the temporary hassles there is long term, eternal benefit when you go through a valley and respond to it correctly.

5. VALLEYS ARE PURPOSEFUL

God has a reason for taking you through the valleys. Whether it's doubt, depression, despair, discouragement, defeat -- He's got a reason behind it. 1 Peter 1:6-7 (LB), "At the present you may be temporarily harassed by all kinds of trials." He says *temporary* -- they aren't going to last forever. You are temporarily harassed with problems here. And there may be all kinds of trials. There are financial valleys, relational valleys, emotional valleys, all kinds of different trials. "...This is no accident -- it happens to prove your faith..." You see God wants to build your faith in the valleys of life. We love to enjoy the mountain tops, but you don't build faith on the mountain tops.

You build faith in the valleys of life. When everything is going fine and great you don't really need God. But when you come face to face with a dark valley, you get on your knees. Faith is strengthened in the valleys. When you don't feel like serving and trusting God, praising God... that's where your faith is tested. Not in the good times of life, but in the valleys.

God wants to make you like Jesus Christ. He wants you to develop the character of Christ. So let me ask you, was Jesus exempted from suffering? Absolutely not. What makes you think you're going to be exempted? Did Jesus go through times of loneliness? Yes. Will you? Yes. Was Jesus ever tempted to be discouraged? Yes. Will you? Yes. Was Jesus ever misunderstood, maligned, criticized unjustly? Yes. Will you? Absolutely. What makes you think you're any different? You're going to go through valleys. Does God cause accidents and tragedies? No. God is a good God and He cannot cause evil. He cannot do evil. Can God use accidents and tragedies for good? Absolutely. He can use even the evil done to us by others, turn it around and bring good out of it by building character in us. He definitely uses the tragedies and valleys of life in our lives.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU GO THROUGH DARK VALLEYS?

David said, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4)

1. REFUSE TO BE DISCOURAGED

"I will fear no evil." That's what David says to you as a Christian, who puts their faith in God. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death". It says "I walk" -- not "I run through it" or "I panic and run the other way". To walk means calmly,

deliberately make steps through the valley. David says, "I'm not going to be afraid. I will calmly walk through the valley."

Refuse to be discouraged. You can't go around the valley. You can't go under the valley. You can't go over the valley. The only way out is through the valley. Here he says, "I will not fear evil". The word will implies a choice. It implies an act of volition, decision. I will not be afraid.

If you are discouraged this morning, it's because you're choosing to be discouraged. Discouragement is always a choice. Always. You don't have to choose to be discouraged, but you're choosing to think discouraging thoughts. You're choosing to look at all the negatives. You're choosing not to look at Christ and all the positive things. You're looking at all of the negatives.

How do I choose to not be discouraged? By focusing on God's power rather than on your problem. That's how you do it. You can take two people and put them in the identical situation -- a chaos, tragedy, crisis -- one of them will be blown away by it, the other is actually strengthened by it. One of them falls apart, one of them is strengthened through it. The difference is what you're focusing on. You need to focus, not on your circumstance, but on Christ. Not on the situation, but on the Savior. Not on your problem, but on God's power.

Colossians 1:11 (NCV), "God will strengthen you with his own great power so that you will not give up when troubles come, but you will be patient."

If you think you're going to make it through all the valleys of life on your own power -- forget it. You're not going to. You don't have enough power to handle all the things that are going to hit you in life. In the valleys of life you need a power source bigger than yourself to plug into. And that's exactly what we have. Psalm 34:18 (NIV), "The Lord is close to the broken hearted and He saves those who are crushed in Spirit."

2. REMEMBER THAT GOD IS WITH ME

David said, "For You will be with me. You're with me every moment." God not only promises us His power in the valley, He promises His presence. You will never go through a valley in life by yourself. You will never go through a dark day alone. God has said, "I will be with you."

Isaiah 43:2 (LB), "When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fires of oppression, you will not be burned up – the flames will not consume you." You're not going to drown, burn up, die -- God says I am with you. He will be with you every step in the valley. God says there is nothing to fear when Jesus is near. God does not sit up in heaven, looking down on you saying, "I sure hope they make it!" He's there with you in the valley, walking with you, hand in hand. God says, I will lead you through this. When you see one set of footprints in the sand, it is then that he is carrying you.

At verse 4 of Psalm 23 there is a strategic change in the language. In the first part of the psalm all of the pronouns are in the 3rd person -- he talks about God: "He leads me beside still waters, He guides me into green pastures, He restores my soul". David is talking about God.

But when he gets in the valley it changes to second person pronouns. He starts talking not *about* God but *to* God. "You are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me." It's the valleys of life that bring us face to face with God. All of a sudden the ultimate becomes the intimate. When I'm going through the valley I don't want to talk *about* God, I want to talk *to* God. Religion becomes a relationship. Any mature believer will tell you that the times they have been closest to God were in those face to face encounters that happen only in the valley.

When you're in the valley and you're spent, depleted, perplexed, in despair and you're talking directly to God, He becomes real and God says, "I'm with you. You're not in this by yourself." He'll never be closer than when you're in the valley.

3. I RELY ON GOD'S PROTECTION AND GUIDANCE

David reminds himself that God's rod and staff comforts him. The rod and staff were the two basic tools that a shepherd used to protect and guide the sheep. A rod was basically about two foot long, at the end of it was a heavy knot. Shepherds were very skilled at hurling the rod, like a missile, at anything that would attack the sheep. God is saying, "When you go through the valley, I'm defending you. I'm protecting you." The rod of God will protect you. God is not setting in heaven unconcerned and apathetic. The Good Shepherd fights for you.

"Your staff comforts me." A staff was a long stick with a crook at the end of it. The shepherd uses a staff to guide and comfort. He will use the staff to draw the sheep in close to him. He will use the staff to lift them up when they're down. He also uses the staff to guide them. When you go through the valley, you're not going through it alone. God's going with you and He's using His rod and staff to protect and guide.

When you go through a valley of life the scary parts are the shadows. In the darkness you just see the shadows on the wall of the valley as you're going through that canyon. And you're thinking "How am I going to make it?"

You must remember there is no shadow without a light somewhere. When you're going through a dark valley, you think the sun has stopped shining. I'm all alone. You can't see at all and you think you're in total darkness. But any time there is a shadow it means there is a light somewhere. When you start to get afraid of the shadow in the dark valleys of life turn your back on the shadow and look directly at the light and the shadow falls behind you.

When you're afraid, don't look at the shadow. Turn in the exact opposite direction and look at the light and the shadow falls behind you. Jesus said, "I am the light of the

world." When you look at Him you cannot be afraid of all the other shadows around you. They fall behind you. It's your choice. It all depends on what you're looking at. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. Don't look at the shadows. When you're walking through the valley, look at the light.

Psalm 34:19 (LB) "The good man does not escape all troubles -- he has them too. But the Lord helps him in each and every one." Friends Christians go through valleys just like everybody does. Christians have disappointments. Christians get sick. Christians experience tragedies. Christians lose loved ones. Christians have financial problems. God's people have family problems. Believers go through valleys just like everybody does. But there is a difference and it's a big difference.

The difference is that while believers and non-believers go through the same valleys of life, the difference for the Christian is not the absence of the shadow but the presence of the Shepherd. God is with you.