

By Dan Cruver

CHAPTER 1

THE SHEPHERD IN DEEP DARKNESS

Psalm 23

I never expected to *feel* this way but I did: cut off from the loving presence of God. Not that I had always *enjoyed* an uninterrupted sense of God's loving presence. There have been more times than I can count when God has not felt near, but that is not what I am talking about. What I had never experienced before and never really expected to *feel* was the *sense* of being cut off from God's loving presence. It is one thing not to feel close to someone. It is another thing to feel cut off from him or her. That's how I felt when God took my family through deep, uncharted waters in the fall of 2002. Those months were the most difficult, burdened months of our lives. Daniel's 3 years of suffering and his untimely death cut through us like an arctic wind cutting through a sweat shirt. We had never felt so naked, so exposed, to the elements of fear, grief, anger, and sorrow. Yet I can say, on this side of that time, that those days were filled with much grace. Over and over again God applied the sweet, protecting, healing balm of His Gospel Word to our hearts, though most often not as quickly as I would have preferred at the time.

A question I was asked several times the last three weeks of Daniel's life was, "What passages of Scripture has God used to minister to you during these difficult days?" Each time I was able to answer by sharing how God ministered His grace to me through Scripture. Specifically, and not surprisingly, God met me at the lowest point of our family tragedy through the words of Psalm 23.

The LORD *is* my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

During the agonizing months of Daniel's illness, I walked through a valley of the shadow of death. Many people associate the phrase "shadow of death" with the time leading up to one's death. It is interesting to see, though, that the phrase "the shadow of death" is really one word in the Hebrew text meaning "deep darkness." Psalm 23:4 literally reads, "Even though I walk through the valley of *deep darkness*." In the moments immediately following Daniel's death I felt the black night of "deep darkness" more profoundly than I ever had before. It was as if I was losing all sense of hope and promise. The "deep darkness" was making it extremely difficult for me to see what I desperately needed to see, namely, the God of my salvation. It was a darkness in which I found myself, to my shock, approaching the precipice of despair. Job, a man plagued with the deep darkness of this valley of which David writes, provides us with a vivid word picture of this valley experience. He cries out to God in complaint in Job 10:18-22. Note his descriptions of death.

Why did you bring me out from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me and were as though I had not been, carried from the womb to the grave. Are not my days few? Then cease, and leave me alone, that I may find a little cheer before I go—and I shall not return—to *the land of darkness and deep shadow, the land of gloom like thick darkness, like deep shadow without any order, where light is as thick darkness.* (emphasis mine)

Job experienced suffering of every kind. Clearly his "shadow of death" included the deep darkness of bitter hardship, depression, turmoil, and death. We may not face them all at one time as Job did, but shadows of many varieties darken the lives of Christians.

However, from my personal experience, I know that no darker shadow ever falls upon us than that which death casts.

The weeks leading up to Daniel's passing from this world to the next brought me more intimately close to death than I had ever been before. One day we were celebrating Daniel's third birthday. It was a beautiful day with blue skies and low humidity. We spent the day thanking God for giving us such a sweet and precious gift in our son, Daniel. That was Saturday. On the very next day, as we arrived at church for the Sunday evening service, we noticed that Daniel was not breathing. The minutes to follow were the most intense moments of my life up until that point. The memories of our birthday celebration were immediately swallowed up into deep darkness of panic. 911 was called. My wife successfully administered CPR. Then the rescue squads arrived and rushed him to the ER. He only had to spend two nights in the hospital before he was sent home.

Over the next several days, our life with Daniel seemed to be back to normal. We were praising God that he had spared our son. But just 11 days later he stopped breathing again. My wife had to administer CPR once again while I called 911. This time he was placed in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit where he spent the next three nights. The doctors informed us that Daniel's inability to breathe would happen repeatedly until at some point one of those episodes would take his life. After three days in the I.C.U. the doctors sent us home only to have to rush him back to the ER the very next day. He never left the hospital alive again.

On the morning of November 18th, 2002, when we were told that Daniel would never leave the hospital alive, God graciously gave us an unusual abundance of peace. But the peace of God that we received on the eighteenth suddenly and unexpectedly vanished as death finally came and left his little body lifeless, at 1:25am, Tuesday morning November 19th.

For the first time in my life I felt the words of Psalm 22:1, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" I felt more lack, more need, in those moments than I ever had before. I found my soul in deep darkness and *felt* as if God had abandoned me, as if I were suddenly outside of His grace and lovingkindness. I *felt* orphaned, left out in the cold to fend for myself. It was in those moments that the words of Psalm 23 began to haunt me. You would expect that Psalm 23 would have been a significant encouragement to me.

After all, how many times has this great psalm been read at funerals for the encouragement of all who grieve? But it provided none for me in the moments and hours following Daniel's death.

As the words of Psalm 23 came to mind, I was bombarded with questions like, "Is Christ really my Shepherd? Am I really one of His sheep?" Those were terrifying questions for me during those long dark hours and days when I most longed for comfort. I found myself in the midst of a huge spiritual crisis, the biggest I had ever faced.

There was a part of me crying out, "**Where are the green pastures, the still waters? Where is the soul-restoration, the straight path? Where is God's presence? Where is His comforting rod and staff? Where is the banquet table in the presence of my great enemy, death?**" These were not questions coming from an angry heart. They were coming from a frightened heart, a heart that was not connecting with the truth of this great Psalm.

Darkness and light cannot coexist in the same location at the same time. Darkness covers a place that is completely untouched by the sun, and I felt as if my life was smothered by a shadow that blocked my communion with God. I could not understand how David had confidence in God's comforting presence during his shadow of death experience when I did not. I *felt* as if God had suddenly turned his back on me. I could not relate to David's sense of intimacy with God in the darkest of shadows.

David speaks of green pastures, waters of quiet rest, restoration, guidance, and the comforting presence of God. This great psalm is full of sweet, soothing words, but in those moments following Daniel's death I felt nothing of its sweetness. I had no sense of its soothing power. All I felt was weight of deep darkness, the shadows of death.

These feelings caused me to question how I should interpret my experience in my deep darkness in light of the sweetness of Psalm 23. I wrestled with this question in the days that followed that early morning of November 19th. *Why was I being haunted by Psalm 23 rather than encouraged by it? Why wasn't my heart connecting with this great psalm?*

It is only after I meditated on Christ as both the Lord and Servant of Psalm 23 that I found the answer to my nagging questions. My problem was that I was looking at Psalm 23 as

primarily about me and my experience of God. I had failed to consider the fact that the Psalms are ultimately about Christ, that is, they ultimately point to Christ as the one who had to suffer and after that enter into His glory (Luke 24:25-26, 44-46). Jesus himself made this clear when, after his resurrection, he told his disciples that “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). The narrator Luke then adds, “then [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (v. 45). The Psalms ultimately testify to Christ. My trouble began when I sought to interpret my experience in light of Psalm 23 *without recognizing its God-intended connection with Jesus*. It is when we see the psalms in connection with their fulfillment in Jesus that their true significance comes into view. Let me explain. Biblical theologian Graeme Goldsworthy writes:

We should not be seduced into thinking that the Psalms can speak from and of themselves to us. If they speak to us of God, they must speak to us of the God who has finally revealed himself in Jesus Christ. If they speak to us of sinners, they speak to us of those who are outside of Christ. If they speak of the judgment of God, they speak to us of the curse of the law that Christ suffered for his people on the cross. If they speak to us of the faithful, the godly, or the righteous, they speak to us first of Christ, and only then of those who are redeemed in Christ (*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 200).

JESUS: THE LORD of PSALM 23

The Bible used in Jesus’ day was the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. It translated the Hebrew word “Yahweh” (“the LORD is my shepherd”) with the Greek word “kurios” (“Lord”). Significantly, the New Testament applies the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Yahweh” to Jesus. For example, in Philippians 2:11, Paul says that every tongue will confess “that Jesus Christ is *Lord* (i.e., kurios), to the glory of God the Father.” When Paul writes, “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow,” he’s quoting the words of Yahweh recorded in Isaiah 45:23. Paul’s point is that Jesus in none other than Yahweh manifested in the flesh. This means that given what Jesus claims in John 10:11, namely, that he is the good shepherd, we can

confidently conclude that Jesus is the “LORD” of Psalm 23. Therefore, Christ is ultimately the one to whom David refers in this psalm. He is the Shepherd who makes his people lie down in green pastures, leads them beside the waters of rest, and so on. So when we, like David, claim Psalm 23 for ourselves, we are saying that Christ is our Shepherd. This is what I mean when we say that Christ is the Lord of Psalm 23.

What I was failing to remember when the words of Psalm 23 haunted me was that the shepherd of Psalm 23 is the good shepherd of John 10. As I meditated upon this in the days and weeks that followed Daniel’s death, it occurred to me that the evidence that Jesus gives for being the good shepherd in John 10 is not found in Psalm 23. According to Jesus in John’s Gospel, the one activity that identifies the good shepherd is that He lays down His life for His sheep. John 10:11 does not say, “I am the good shepherd. *The good shepherd makes His sheep to lie down in green pastures, He leads them beside still waters.*” No, what Jesus says here is that the good shepherd gives His life for His sheep and He does it willingly, of His own accord. John 10:18 says, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Jesus states very clearly that the supreme piece of evidence that He is the good shepherd is that He sovereignly gives His life for His sheep. How then does this evidence from John 10 square with the evidence provided in Psalm 23:2-5? In Psalm 23, it is the leading, guiding, and comforting of His sheep that are emphasized, whereas the defining activity of the good Shepherd in John 10 is His sacrificial death. Since it is true that these two different descriptions refer to the same Shepherd, we should discern how these two very important texts relate to one another.

As I thought about this the Lord brought Revelation 7:17 to my mind. “For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water. . .”

What I find amazing and instructive here is that the one who is described as doing the work of the shepherd is said to be “the Lamb.” The shepherd is a lamb! Something very similar to this happens in Revelation 5 where John turns expecting to see a lion and instead sees a lamb. The lion is a lamb.

Now I mention Revelation 5 because of how John describes the Lion who is a Lamb. In verse 5, John writes, “And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw Lamb standing, *as though it had been slain*’” (emphasis mine).

It was at this point in my study that I began to see afresh the great beauty of the Gospel. The foreboding darkness of Psalm 23 began dissipate. The shepherd is a lamb. The Good Shepherd of John 10 is the Lamb who laid down His life for His sheep (Revelation 5). He is the one who, according to John in Revelation 7:17, “will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water.” It was of great significance to me when I noticed that Revelation 7:17 is referring to people who have come out of the great tribulation. The ones that the Lamb guides are those who have suffered intense persecution and earthly loss. John says that this persecuted people will no longer hunger, thirst, or ever again experience the scorching heat of the sun (v. 16). In other words, the Lamb will forever make them lie down in green, hunger-satisfying pastures and lead them beside still, thirst-quenching waters (Psalm 23:2). How can that be? How is it possible for these persecuted believers who have suffered such great earthly loss to enjoy such rich provisions? It is because “**the Lamb** [who is] in the midst of the throne will be their **shepherd**, and **he** will guide them to springs of living water.” It is because the Shepherd dies in the place of his sheep, his people, that they will never experience ultimate loss. It is through his loss that they have the great hope of experiencing eternal joy and happiness in the presence of God.

How, then, does Revelation 7:17 help us understand the benefits referred to in Psalm 23? It tells us that they all flow out of the substitutionary death of the Shepherd who is the Lord of this psalm. In other words, the green pastures, the still waters, the table in the presence of our enemies, come to us through the cross. The death of our shepherd is the fountain from which we receive every blessing. The crucified shepherd is the one who makes us lie down in fields of plenty. It is through his death that we enjoy the calm of still waters. The one who restores and leads us is the one who loved us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20). New Testament scholar

Vern Poythress brings this out well in his commentary on Revelation:

The slaying of the Lamb, by crucifixion, is paradoxically the foundation for his triumph and redemption. This triumph through weakness is foolishness to the world, but it was already anticipated in the Exodus, in which the blood of lambs purchased freedom for the sons of Israel (*The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation*, 111).

Just as it was through the death of the Passover Lamb that God's people were freed to enjoy the eventual rest of the Promise Land, it is through the death of our Good Shepherd that we are lead to enjoy the blessings described in Psalm 23. Commenting on the Good Shepherd of John 10, one of my favorite Scottish theologians, Thomas F. Torrance, writes:

It is in His death that He destroys the wolf, so that the blackest place on earth, where the Son of God is crucified, becomes the place where the blackest of evil is subdued by the love of God and made to minister to the redemption of the world. By the Cross all our evil is taken under the command of the sacrifice of Christ and made to work together for good to those who love Him, and who hear and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd, not only because by His death our sin and guilt are removed, but because He who died lives again, and is able to make the very grave of mankind to become the cradle of new and abundant life (*When Christ Comes and Comes Again*, 94).

The one who shepherds us is the one who gave himself for us as our substitute, and every good gift that we receive as his sheep springs from his death. All of our privileges and benefits as God's children flow from the Christ who set us free from our sins by the shedding of His own blood on the cross (Rev. 1:5).

The rich truth of Psalm 23 flows directly out of the sacrificial death of our Lord. It is out of the cross that God gives us all things that we need. Even if the world around us is falling apart or our sorrow is profoundly deep or this life seems black and hopeless, the cross of our Good Shepherd remains for us the fountain head of all the blessings spoken of in Psalm 23.

You may be thinking at this point, "I agree with everything you have said. The benefits outlined in Psalm 23 only come to us

through the cross. That is true. I wholeheartedly affirm it. But how does knowing this really provide res for us when our circumstances are anything but restful?" One of my favorite scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy takes place in the land of Rivendell after the hobbits Frodo and Sam almost lost their lives at the hands of those seeking to capture the ring of power and before they continued their dangerous journey to the fires of Mount Doom where they would destroy the ring. J.R.R. Tolkien writes:

Such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their minds. The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have any power over the present. Health and hope grew strong in them, and they were content with each good day as it came, taking pleasure in every meal, and in every word and song (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, 287).

The good news of the work of Christ at the cross is of such a quality that the past, present, or imagined future, "good or ill, are not forgotten, but cease to have any power over the present." It is through the gospel that we are freed from the soul-darkness of devastating circumstances. I'll write more about this later.