

Guidance, Protection, Correction and Abundance

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- [0 : 0 0] This is a sermon from King's Church Westmore. So, Psalm 23 verse 4, which is the one I'm going over today, teaches us, Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will feel no evil, for you are with me.
- There's a couple of things when it comes to unpacking that. First of all, what is the darkest valley? I think that depends entirely on who's answering the question more than who's asking it.
- The darkest valley, as us as believers, usually is whichever the biggest issue is in our life at the moment. That could be as small as you've got five minutes to get out the door and you can't find your house keys.
- It could be as big as hoping you survive through the night for a bombing raid. It's important to remember that both of those are equally legit and equally okay to experience.
- God is God of the big, but he's also God of the small. So, the valley changes depending on who it is of the small.
- [1 : 0 8] Because God does absolutely care whether it's what we conceive as tiny.
- He also can change and does the big, horrible, often situations in which we all exist. Because let's not forget that even when Jesus walked amongst us, he did defeat death on the cross.
- He also did absolutely bring Lazarus back from the dead. So, he defeated death not once, but twice. He also turned water into wine at a wedding just because they ran out.
- So, we know from Jesus' own behaviour that the fact that we incorrectly think of something as insignificant, God still cares.
- He still wants to be there. We have this habit, or maybe it's just me, I don't know, of, I know that this is small, so I'll pray for the big stuff. And we end up neglecting that.
- [2 : 1 1] Please do not neglect that. God still wants to be there. God still cares. God still cares. Have no fear, because I am with you. Big ask.
- Particularly the first three words of that. I think God knows it's a big ask. Because when we are asking for God's advice, or even if he's giving it and it's something we don't want to hear, particularly often in the second one, you'll find that you're being reminded throughout your daily lives.
- And, again, it's not always, it's always good advice. It's not always the advice you want. Or, it is always the advice you need, but you don't always want to hear it. But there will always be, you know, verses that stick in your mind that you didn't even know you've read.
- Or, whether it's somebody talking often at church. And, again, you didn't know. It resonates, but you don't always know why at first.
- Again, we see this in the Bible. In Isaiah 41, verse 10, it says, So do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
- [3 : 2 3] This is very much in line with Psalm 23, and almost worded the same. It's very much telling you the same thing, as you will see in your daily life with God.

How amazing is it that we have a living God who cares about our daily lives? It's so easy to underestimate the significance of that.

To overlook, obviously, we're all Christians, so we believe in God, and we believe God created the world. Let's not be unmoored by the absolute absurdity of that statement.

The person that built the cosmos, that holds the stars in place, cares about you as an individual. And that's equally true if the biggest problem in your life in that minute is getting the bus to work or fleeing a war zone.

There's no triage to God. There's no, hold on, this is more important. God wants to be there for all of it. And it's so easy to overlook the small moments, but they really do build up, and they really do matter.

[4 : 38] You're going to lead us through the first half of verse 4. I'm going to lead us through the second half. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Eight words, and a whopping nine syllables long.

But it is quite a lot in there, I think, to be honest. And there's two main points I want to drag out. All right, just before we dive in, just before we dive into what those points are, I, unsurprisingly, am a bit of a city boy.

I don't know anything about sheep. And to my knowledge, I have never met a shepherd. And I want you to have a little look into this imagery before I talked about it, because otherwise I would just be making it up.

So, we're going to run through very quickly Shepherd's Tools 101 as a group, okay? So the rod, no, the staff. Starting with the staff.

The staff is the long, tall stick, curved at the top. You'll have seen nativity scenes. The curved bit was used to pull sheep back from danger. If they're getting too close to the cliff, or too close to somewhere they shouldn't be, quick from the neck, yank.

[5 : 44] The other end, used for a nice little gentle, this way, mate, that way, away from that dog. Cheers. The rod, shorter and thicker. Think the back end of a pool cue, okay?

Metal-tipped to make it stronger. If the staff is tap-tap away from that, the rod is very much whack. Luckily for the sheep, though, and for us, given the imagery, the rod was mainly used on predators, not on the sheep so much.

So now we've all graduated Shepherd School. We're going to dive into the first point that we can pull from this, the first piece of comfort we can take from the rod and the staff is that God protects us. Sheep as a whole, as an animal, have no defensive capabilities whatsoever.

Beyond flocking together and running as fast as they can, they have no means to defend themselves. And David, as a shepherd, knows this. He's not caught off guard by this.

He's looking at them, and he's choosing this imagery purposefully. This is an intentional choice to display himself as the sheep and God as the shepherd. And if I'm honest, I don't think David is looking at the sheep and saying, wow, I wish I could be like this dumb, smelly animal that can be killed by flies.

[7 : 01] I think he's looking at the sheep and saying, wow, you need a shepherd. And he's looking at himself and his life and he's going, wow, I need a shepherd.

He's looking at God, calling him in to be his shepherd because he knows that there's comfort in the presence of the shepherd and in his staff and his rod. But as we all learned a moment ago in School 101, the rod is a big stick tipped with metal for hitting things hard.

So how is there comfort in that? The comfort from the rod is in the one who's wielding it. Shepherds will defend their flock. They defend their sheep. David knows this as well.

We see in 1 Samuel, just before he fights Goliath, he recounts his exploits to Saul. David said to Saul, your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it, rescued the sheep from its mouth.

When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair. I struck it and killed it. shepherds will defend their flock. God will defend his people. We see this protection throughout the Bible.

[8 : 13] In the Old Testament, he leads the Israelites out of Egypt. He closes the lion's mouth to protect Daniel. He stands with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fire so they won't be burned. Through into the New Testament, he protects Paul from various assassination attempts, from snake bites, from shipwreck, and prison time.

He breaks Peter out of jail, walking him out of chains, through locked doors, past guards, in a jailbreak so blatant and brazen, Peter thinks it's a vision until he realizes he's outside the city for real.

And most importantly, we see Jesus. Jesus fights for us, he bleeds, and he dies for us to pay the cost of our sin and protect us from the consequences of what we've been doing.

God was standing with David when he was fighting the bears and the lions and the giants. And he's standing with us now, protecting us, he's fighting for us, and he's clearing a path for us as we move forward.

In the interest of keeping us on that path, we get to point two, second comforting thing from this, is that God corrects us. And correction is a good thing. I felt that little subscript was needed.

[9 : 23] Maybe you were all better people, more rounded people than I am, but correction's not my favorite thing in the world. It is this permanent paradox between this desire I have to be better at everything and then that involving someone actually telling me that I'm not perfect.

It's that trade-off between, I want to get better. Okay, this is what you did wrong. No! Correction, when we do it to each other, even with the best of intentions or the greatest of hopes can hurt.

It can be painful. So if it can hurt, how can it be good? If it can be painful, how can it be comforting? Again, it comes down to who's the one doing the correcting.

When God corrects us, it doesn't come from a best guess or a hope or from good intentions. It comes from God's perfect love and his all-powerful knowledge, his all-world-creating knowledge.

I've lost my place. God knows what's good for us and he knows that we quite often want things that aren't or that we want things that we think we seem good to us at that time but aren't what we need in the long run.

[10 : 34] And it can be frustrating when God pulls us away or says no to something we are convinced is right for us. But we don't have what God has. We don't have the big picture image. We can't see the glory over here.

We just see the hurt and the frustration and the pain here. When I dropped out of uni, I needed a job as one does when you want to live at home and not study anymore.

I got an interview with the Scottish Rugby Union to be a modern apprentice in their media team. So I was going to get to create videos, to make content, to write blogs, to travel with the team, get free tickets to every Scotland home international which is a big, big tick for me.

And I couldn't see how this couldn't be perfect. This job opportunity would allow me to get qualifications that I didn't get through uni. It gave me the chance to come back to live and work in Edinburgh.

It's a city that I love. No offence to everyone here. It also opened up three weeks after I dropped out of university. Everything seemed to be falling in place and I couldn't see how this couldn't be perfect.

[11 : 42] So I prayed for it. And my friends prayed for it. My family prayed for it. My church prayed for it. I don't know if you can see where this is going but I didn't get it. And I couldn't see how it couldn't be good.

I couldn't see why God had said no. I just couldn't picture how this couldn't be what he had planned for me. So if we fast forward the story a little bit and we skip 18 months and because I didn't get the job I wasn't in London I wasn't making content for the team as they prepared for a World Cup quarterfinal against Australia I was in Edinburgh having been dragged out by some friends having a chance encounter with someone I had no real reason to meet meeting the woman who would go on to become my wife.

That's the reaction I was going for. Abby's gone red everyone else went aww. God loves us far too much to let us settle for second best or good enough.

When he takes things away it's to hold us for what he has. God's correction and discipline are what lead us to the right paths mentioned earlier on in the psalm. They also mark us as children of God as his family as opposed to just followers or just believers.

We see in Hebrews 12 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves. He chastens everyone he accepts as his son. Endure hardship and discipline. God is treating you as his children for what children are not disciplined by their father.

[13 : 20] Like all parents God's correction can be obvious. It can be closing down opportunities it can be leaving people out of our lives it can be blocking things that we are convinced are right.

It can also be subtle. God's correction God's discipline can be that small voice in the back of your head just telling you this isn't right. You know you shouldn't do that. You know you shouldn't say that. You know you shouldn't be here.

And he does this to keep us in his plan for our lives. Shocking stat here. God's plan for your life is better than your plan for your life.

I know we like to think we know best but we know God knows all. We see in Jeremiah 29 11 for I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you.

Plans to give you hope and a future. And if we transpose that with Proverbs 14 12 there is a way that seems right to man but its end is the way to death.

[14 : 24] So that is pretty much our choice. We have a choice between stubbornness and correction. We have a choice between hope and a future and death. We have a choice between God's plan and our plan.

And I don't know about you guys but one half of that equation seems much better to the other to me. So your rod and your staff will comfort me. There's a whirlwind trip through eight words nine syllables and hopefully two things you guys can be comforted by.

I'm going to pass over to Vicky now who's going to bring us home. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Hello.

I have the mic last. They'll buckle up because we're going to be here a while. So yeah we're on to verse 5 of Psalm 23 which doesn't sound like a lot but actually the Psalm has already covered quite a lot of ground and quite a lot of locations.

As you can tell I love flapping about in PowerPoint with icons and photos so this is just going to get worse. So yeah so God has taken us so far into so we've got the top the green pastures you know the still waters the restoring of our soul it's all very calm peaceful lovely the paths of righteousness for his name's sake that you know taking us along the right roads then he brings us to the valley of the shadow of death and leads us through that with his rod and his staff as we've heard about today and then on to the table he brings us along to the table go to the next one please don't you just love the internet for memes like this so there's a bit of a shift in this arm here to from the sheep that are being led and you know as Dan was saying occasionally yanked back from something that's not good for them to thinking of fellowship and communion with God now we know at least one person here who would also enjoy what I did with this psalm which was diving into the words and finding out what they mean

[16:37] I don't get kindred spirit and duly amen but the word presence here where we've got you prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies it means in front of or opposite so I'm not saying anything you know this is just an angry but you know I don't mean you're my enemy but it's just it's just it's just like that because I kind of thought of it as like you know my enemies are sort of they're there but away but it means in front of it's quite a confrontational or defiant word quite a confrontational or defiant stance so it's not just in the absence of difficulty or struggle or confrontation but in spite of and one commentator put it as when chaos reigns around us now that's not the time I'd normally think right let's sit down and have some food you know it's all going a bit nuts but that's what God invites us to that confrontational almost countercultural sort of stance of

I'm going to enjoy communion and fellowship with you despite the fact that this is staring me in the face can we move to the next one please Regan so the next part of the verse is you anoint my head with oil and we have two pictures here that probably don't look like they actually connect with one another but again did a little deep dive into the word anoint so when we think of anointing typically if you've been in church for any length of time you think of the top picture so anointing with oil being poured onto somebody's head but that's not the word that's used for anointing this verse it actually means to be fat grow fat or become prosperous now finding a picture for that was interesting you've got to be careful what you've got to be careful but yeah God prepares the table to prosper and to enlarge us even in the midst of difficulty which I found just an amazing concept and if we could go to the next one please Regan it reminded me of

Pharaoh's dream in Genesis 41 so there were the seven cows that are described as fat and sleek and then I think the Bible describes the other ones as ugly and scrawny and lean which is not very nice but the seven fat cows were seven years of great abundance and that was much more than the people of Egypt needed so much so they were going to be able to store up food for the seven years that followed so this word you know it suggests to me God's anointing God's filling us up with much more than we actually need with that abundance and prosperity that the word talks about and then if I could just go on the final slide please Regan so the verse ends with my cup overflows so the abundance that God gives to us it doesn't just stop with us it doesn't just get to like the top of our head and then we're alright it overflows it overflows so that others see it it overflows so that others are touched by it you know he fills us up so much we cannot contain it there's just no way now we might not always feel like our cup is overflowing we might not always feel like we're living in abundance and none of this is about just going oh well everything's fine

I feel great all the time because I don't think any of us ever would if we were honest with ourselves but God's provision and abundance don't run out so what this verse is to me is an invitation to that communion and that relationship and to receiving from God in the midst of in spite of in front of whatever else is going on round about us I'm going to hand over to Mike to close up applause thanks I'm going to