

Berlin Christian Church

November 29, 2020

“The Blessed Life: God Is Our Shepherd”

Psalm 23

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A note on behalf of Lincoln Christian University

We appreciate the partnership we have long shared with Berlin Christian Church. Your prayers and financial support are a constant source of encouragement. The message today is about the hope we have because of God’s grace and guidance. We have that hope in this life, no matter how difficult our situations appear – and we have hope for eternity because of Jesus.

LCU has been preparing men and women to hold out that hope to the world for the last 76 years. The COVID 19 pandemic has reminded us that life is uncertain, and people are struggling because of anxieties, fears of getting sick, losing jobs, and the loneliness of isolation. Our world desperately needs the hope that is only found through life in Jesus. LCU continues to prepare and send out Kingdom workers who will carry that message of hope. So thank you BCC for partnering with us in that mission. In closing, let me paraphrase Philippians 1: 3-4, **“We thank our God every time we remember you. In all our prayers for all of you, we always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now ...”**

Dominant Thought: God is always with us and He gives us hope.

Objectives:

I want my listeners to embrace the valleys of life.

I want my listeners to say, “I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.”

I want my listeners to hold on to the hope we have in and through God, our Shepherd.

Last summer I had the opportunity to speak in Prescott, Arizona. My wife Cindy, was able to go out with me, so we tacked on a few days for sight- seeing. We flew into Phoenix and then drove up to Sedona. There would be signs marking every 1,000 feet above sea level as we drove north. Sedona’s elevation is 4,300

feet – which is amazing to me because ... well ... I live in Illinois! All around us it is as flat as a pancake. So we drove through scenic drives with mountains & beautiful valleys ... we don't have mountains in Illinois (Mt. Pulaski and Mt. Auburn don't count!). We don't have valleys in Illinois – we have ditches. We went to the Grand Canyon ... and saw the biggest valley I've ever seen! It was all so beautiful!

Now I said just a few moments ago that in Illinois we don't have valleys ... but that isn't really true. We do have valleys ... not the physical kind that are at the bottom of a mountain ... but we have valleys of **discouragement, despair, and depression**. We have the valleys that come from life not always going the way we had hoped it would ...

- The valley of a doctor saying those words, “It's cancer ...”
- The valley of a boss saying, “Your job is being cut ...”
- The valley of a spouse saying, “I don't want to be married anymore ...”
- The valley of a cemetery – as you say goodbye to a spouse – a parent – a child – a friend ...
- The valley of COVID – as we are inconvenienced and isolated.

Life can be hard ... but our God is good. And Psalm 23 tells us that God is our shepherd ... He is always with us ... He leads us ... He protects us ... and He walks with us – in and through those valleys. I love the 23rd Psalm and I appreciate the opportunity to walk through this psalm with you this morning.

I'm afraid that we have all too often, viewed the 23rd Psalm as simply a “funeral psalm” ... it is read at the cemetery to offer comfort. But Psalm 23 is a Psalm about living ... it's about trusting God ... It's about hope. So let's walk through the 23rd Psalm together ...

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. ³ He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.” Psalm 23 (ESL)

Life is a mixture of pain ... and pleasure ... of highs ...and lows ... of success and failure ... of mountain tops ... and valleys.

- In verse 4, David writes, **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me ...”**

We all have and will, encounter valleys ... so let’s consider 5 life lessons about valleys that we need to remember when we go through challenging times ...

1. Valleys are a part of life

- They are going to happen – you will have valleys & I will have valleys.
- Sometimes when something goes wrong in our lives ... we act like we never had any idea that something bad could possibly happen to us.
- I once read that valleys work this way: You are either **(a) coming out of a valley or (b) in a valley right now or (c) heading into a valley.**
- Don’t you feel encouraged?
- Now most of us have had mountain-top experiences ... we have had good times ... but with every mountain – there’s a valley.
- We won’t stay on a mountain top forever ... so when things go wrong ... instead of stopping and throwing a little pity party ... and wringing our hands and whining ... we need to walk through the valley ... we need to keep going.
- Valleys are a normal part of life ... they are going to happen.
- In fact – when you think about it ... mountain tops are great places to visit – but you really can’t live on a mountain top.
- Life takes place in valleys ... that’s where we live.

2. Valleys are never convenient

- You can’t plan them ... you can’t find a good time for them on your calendar – when it is “a more convenient time.”
 - How many of us get our calendars out & say something like, “I think I can schedule a dark valley a week from Thursday ...”
 - No – there is never a convenient time for a valley.
- In fact – they usually occur at the most inconvenient times!
 - Has your car ever broken down at a convenient time?

- Or have you gotten a flat tire at a great time?
- Have you gotten sick at a really good time?
- Have you lost a job when you have just saved up enough to live comfortably for the next 10 years?
- Is there ever a great time for our kids to make a bad decision?
- Has the phone call with devastating news ever come at a good time?
- Valleys have a way of appearing out of nowhere and usually at the worst time possible.
- A good day can become a bad day – with one phone call ... with one piece of mail ... with one doctor’s visit ... with one freak accident ...
- Valleys just happen.

3. Valleys are impartial

- No one is isolated from tough times.
- No one gets a free pass – because bad things are going to happen to everyone.
- And everyone has problems ... good people have problems and “not so good” people have problems.
- You will have trials ... you will have difficulties ... you will have down times ... you will more than likely have times when you might be depressed.
- Valleys are impartial ... the Bible teaches that in this life we will have problems ... that means we will all have problems.
- Jesus taught in Matthew 5:45, that **“it rains on the just and the unjust.”**
- Now when bad things happen – we tend to ask, “why me?”
- But when you think about it ... perhaps we should ask, “why not me?” Do we think everyone else should have hard times – but we should be exempt?
- Do we ask that same question when we are on the mountain top? Why me? Why did this really good thing happen to me?
- Bad things happen to all of us – simply ... **“because this is earth – not heaven.”** One day, heaven will be perfect – but until then we will have problems.

4. Valleys are temporary.

- Valleys do not go on forever – there is an end to them.

- Now sometimes it might seem like the valley goes on forever – but it doesn't.
- There is a beginning and there is an end.
- Years ago we were on vacation and were staying in Colorado Springs. We were heading to the Royal Gorge, when I missed a turn. My wife, Cindy found a little cut off road on the map that looked like a short cut. It was called, **“Phantom Canyon.”**
- It ended up not being a short cut – in fact, I think it was about 26 miles and most of it was unpaved ... there were hills & curves ... around one curve – you couldn't see the top of the mountain ... around the other curve ... you couldn't see the bottom of the valley.
- Instead of being a short cut ... it took longer ... and I was not happy the first half of the drive (I'm fairly confident that I had “the look.”) But it ended up being a beautiful drive and we have some great pictures from that detour. It ended up being a good thing – although it didn't seem like it at the time.
- And in the scope of the entire vacation – and life in general ... being inconvenienced wasn't really worth getting upset over.
- Whatever you go through in life – it doesn't last forever. Anything in this life is temporary – but heaven is eternal.

5. Valleys are purposeful.

- God will never waste a valley.
- There is always good that will come out of every hurt ... every disappointment ... every defeat ... every discouragement.
- Listen to the words of Romans 8:28, **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** Romans 8:28 (NIV)
- God doesn't promise to work in some things ... or in the good times ... or on the mountain tops ... or when life is smooth and going our way.
- He promises that he works in everything ... for the good ... of those who love him.
- Now if that is God's promise to us ... and it is ... then we have two basic choices. We can say, “God, I trust you and what is going on in my life right now is tough ... but once again I trust you – so please reveal to me the good that is going to come from this.”

- Or we can wring our hands and cry, “God this isn’t fair ... why does this kind of stuff have to happen to me?”
- We can respond in faith – trusting that the shepherd will lead us through the valley ...
- Or we can respond in fear – and get stuck in the valley
- But listen to me ... **our faith is developed in the valleys of life.**
- I have to be honest with you – I love the mountain top experiences ... I want the mountain top experiences ... I would like to have more mountain top experiences.
- But as I look back over my life – it has been in the valleys that I have grown the most ...
 - It has been in the tough times that I have learned to trust God ...
 - It has been when things around me are falling apart that I have held on more tightly to God.
 - It’s been when I can’t take another step – that I have reached out to take the hand of the Father.
 - It’s been when I have stood in a cemetery with a broken heart ... that the hope of eternal life in heaven has become so comforting and real.
- Last year, my wife woke me up at 3:00 in the morning and told me she thought she was having a heart attack. She wasn’t basing it on how she felt ... she had googled “women’s heart attack symptoms” and had all but one. I called 911 and watched the paramedics load her into the ambulance and close the door ... I felt helpless as I watched the ambulance drive away & then jumped in my car to head to the hospital. It ended up not being a heart attack ... but they didn’t know what it was. A few months later the same thing happened – but this time it was determined that her gall bladder was bad & needed to be removed. Following her surgery, I went back to recovery, and being the sensitive husband I am – was hoping to videotape some of the funny things she would say due to anesthesia. But there was nothing funny – because she was in pain. When I held her hand, she seemed to calm down. If I tried to let go, she would become agitated. So I pulled up a stool and sat by her bed holding her hand. And I had what can only be called, “a holy moment” with my wife ... as memories and pictures of our last 40 years flooded my mind. There were mountaintops for sure ... but there were valleys ... there were difficult times ... there were times of heartache ...

and all I could think of was how blessed I was – how blessed we were. Not because God had prevented us from having valleys ... but because He was always with us ... and we were blessed. And because of all that we had gone through, sitting beside my wife in a hospital recovery room – was a holy moment.

- My friends, God will use the valleys we go through to help build and shape our character so that we will have more of the character of Christ.
- Now listen to me ... God does not cause bad things to happen in our lives ... He is a good God – not an evil God ... but God can even take the bad things we face – and turn them around for good.
- He can take us through the valleys so that our faith is bigger and better when we get to the other side.

So what do we do when we find ourselves in a valley?

Refuse to give up.

- David writes, **“I will not be afraid ... I will fear no evil ...”**
- Let’s break this verse down a little bit ... David says, **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ...”**
- He is going through a valley – but he says that he walks ... he doesn’t say that he is running through it ... he is not running scared ... he is walking ... because he has nothing to fear.
- We tend to make mistakes when we panic ... we react ... we run – and sometimes that causes us to get off track – or go the wrong direction.
- David says, “I walk ... I’m steady ... I am taking deliberate steps in the right direction.”
- He goes on to say, **“I will not be afraid ...”**
 - Notice that he does not say, “I am not afraid” – he says, “I will fear no evil ... I will not be afraid ...”
 - He has made up his mind ahead of time – not to be afraid.
 - He was choosing in advance -not to be afraid.
- Listen to me here ...
 - If you are discouraged today ... you are choosing to be discouraged.
 - If you are afraid today ... you are choosing to be afraid.
 - If you have a negative attitude today ... you are choosing to have a negative attitude.

- If you are upset with me right now because I just called you out ... you are choosing to be upset with me!!!
- Now please know that I am not trying to be hard ... or harsh ... the last thing I want to do is kick someone when they are down.
- But the truth of the matter is that you are the one who chooses how you are going to respond to the valley ... just like I am the one who chooses how I will respond to a valley.
- You can choose to not be afraid - and walk through the valley knowing that the Shepherd is walking with you ...
- Or you can choose to be afraid ... and be discouraged ... and be bitter.
- You can choose to focus on your problem ... or you can choose to focus on God's protection.

Remember that God is with us.

- David says, **“for you are with me ...”** You are with me every moment of every day.
- Somehow I think we convince ourselves that God is with us on the mountain top – but he leaves us when we are in the valley.
- But God promises that He is always with us
- Let's look at something that takes place in the Psalm at this point ...
- In the first 3 verses, David is referring to God in the third person ... **“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. ³ He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”**
- But notice what happens in verse 4 ... when David starts talking about the dark valleys ... there is a switch to the first person ... instead of talking about God ... David starts talking to God ... **“⁴ 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. ⁵ 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 ...”**
- It's almost like David is saying, “When I get to the valley – I don't want to know about God ... I want to know God ... I don't want to talk about God ... I want to talk to God.”

- David wants us to know and remember that God is with us ... God is not sitting up in heaven watching us go through a valley and saying something like, “I sure do hope they make it ...”
- He is in the valley ... he is walking beside us ... he is holding our hand ... He is our shepherd.
- And He expects us to walk ... He expects to keep going ... He expects us to trust Him.
- Remember that God is with you ... so walk with Him.

Rely On God’s protection

- Let’s look again at the last part of verse 4, “**your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**”
- The rod and the staff were the 2 basic tools that a shepherd used to protect and guide his sheep.
- The rod was about 2 feet long and had a heavy knot at the end. It could be used as a club – or it could be thrown at anything that might be attacking the sheep.
- And the picture we get is that when we are going through a valley. God ... our Shepherd is going to defend us ... he is going to fight for and protect us.
- God is our defender and protector.
- The staff ... was a long stick with a crook at the end of it.
- The shepherd used the staff to lead ... to guide ... to draw the sheep close to him ... to reach out and pick up a lamb or sheep when they were down.
- God is our leader and our guide and protector.

Conclusion:

Do you remember the Old Testament account of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery? They are walking through the desert on their way to the Promised Land ... they were on top of the world.

- They were singing Kumbaya ... Our God is Mighty to Save ... How Great is Our God ... Raise a Hallelujah ...
- And then they came to the Red Sea ... mountains on either side of them ... water in front of them ... and Pharaoh’s army coming fast behind them.
- Talk about being in a valley ... and immediately the mood changed and they were afraid.

- I love the way the psalmist describes what happened in Psalm 77 in the NLT, **“Your road led through the sea, your pathway through the mighty waters – a pathway no one knew was there!”** ²⁰ **You led your people along that road like a flock of sheep, with Moses and Aaron as their shepherds.”**
Psalm 77:19-20 (NLT)
- I love that phrase – **a pathway no one knew was there ...**

Perhaps you feel trapped today ... you don't see a way out ... it all seems hopeless. What do you do? Keep holding on ... Hold on to God's promise ... Hold on to God's power ... Hold on to God's presence ... Hold on to God's protection ... and know that God is with you ... He is always with you.

“Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God” Corrie Ten Boom

Psalm 23 gives us hope for today and tomorrow ... hope for this life. God is with us. He walks with us ... He is our shepherd. But Psalm 23 ends with one of the most beautiful lines in the Bible – with a reminder of our hope. Not hope to simply make it through a valley ... or through a tough day ... but hope that will last for eternity.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

And that is why we can have hope, no matter what is going on around us or what we are going through here on earth. Because one day, we have heaven to look forward to ... one day, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

5 Day Devotional Guide on Psalm 23

Dominant Thought: God is always with us and He gives us hope.

You may want to refer to the sermon notes for further discussion. Take a moment to read the assigned Scripture and then reflect or discuss the questions.

Customize this outline to your situation. Here are some questions to ask from the Discovery Bible Method:

What are you thankful for today or this week?

What challenges are you facing?

Have 2 or 3 people read the scripture out loud.

Can you summarize this passage in your own words?

What did you discover about God from this passage?

What have you learned about people from this passage?

How are you going to obey this passage? (What is your “I will” statement?)

With whom are you going to share what you have learned?

Based on this passage, what can we pray about?

Day 1: Psalm 23.1-3

Day 2: Psalm 23.4

Day 3: Psalm 23.5-6

Day 4: Romans 8.28

Day 5: Philippians 1.3-4