

“Our Shepherd’s Presence”

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Fourth in a series on Psalm 23

Psalm 23¹

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This week I’m using a translation of Psalm 23 by John Goldingay.
I’ve changed the punctuation slightly.

A composition. David’s.

*My shepherd being Yahweh, I don’t lack.
He enables me to lie down in grassy pastures.
He leads me to settled water.
He turns my life back.
He guides me in faithful tracks
for the sake of his name.
Even when I walk in a deathly dark ravine,
I’m not afraid of bad fortune.
Because you’re with me;
your club and your cane – they comfort me.
You spread a table before me
in front of my adversaries.
You’ve enriched my head with oil;
my cup fills me up.
Yes, goodness and commitment pursue me
all the days of my life.
I shall go back to Yahweh’s house
for long days.*

We began with a video. You can watch it [here](#).

That’s from the television series, *Lost*. Mr. Eko had found a crashed plane and, inside, the remains of his brother Yemi. After taking the cross from Yemi’s neck and putting it on himself, he set the plane afire, and prayed the 23rd Psalm.²

I think more than half the funerals I’ve done have included this Psalm. When I sit with a family and ask if there are any particular Bible readings they’d like, most often they pick this one. And I’m glad.

¹ John Goldingay, *The First Testament: A New Translation* (Downers’ Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 537.

² Here’s the clip, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-mpoZDWpzo>, and more information about the episode: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_23rd_Psalm

Psalm 23 permeates our culture, though it imagines itself to be so secular. When we stand face-to-face with death, our souls cry out. No matter what we believe, or doubt, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, many times. There, Psalm 23 works very well.

II

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . it's not just a line in the Psalm. It is the centre.

The Psalm tells a story from beginning to end. However, it works another way too. Picture it as like the rings of a tree.³ In much Hebrew poetry, the first part matches with the last, the second part with the second-to-last, and so on until you get to this middle, this heart.

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil.*

This centre core then ripples out. It shapes how we experience the entire Psalm. It's the only place where death gets mentioned, but it makes the whole Psalm suitable for such a valley. The valley is where we are in the most danger.

III

Translators render this verse two different ways. Some say it is “the valley of death’s shadow.” Others say, “the valley of darkness.” Both work. The valley is full of shadows. What might lurk there? It is deathly dangerous.⁴

And it’s real. In the Holy Land, through millennia, streams have relentlessly cut through rock, digging deep, narrow gorges.⁵

An actual shepherd described such a valley.⁶ (He called it “the valley of the shadow of

³ Kenneth E. Bailey, [The Good Shepherd: A thousand-year journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 24ff.

⁴ The problem is not strictly one of translation. Rather, it stems from uncertainty about what the Hebrew word is. Classical Hebrew was only written with the consonants. The reader was expected to know the text by heart, so the writing served as prompt for remembering. However, over time concern arose that the proper pronunciations, and even words were being forgotten. So between the 6th and 10th centuries in the Common Era, a group of scribes working in Palestine and Iraq developed a vowel notation system. These scholars were called the Masoretes. In Psalm 23:4, they added vowels to the consonants Ts-L-M-Tso that the word is *tsalmawet*, meaning “shadow of death.” However, many contemporary scholars think that the Masoretes were incorrect, and that the correct word is *tsalmut*, meaning “darkness.” Since there are no competing ancient texts to support this rendering, it can only be conjecture. See Robert Alter, [The Hebrew Bible. Volume 3: The Writings Ketuvim, A Translation with Commentary](#) (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 71 and Derek Kidner, [Psalms 1-72](#), Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 111 note 1. Among modern translations, the NRSV and NJPS favour the “valley darkness” translation, while the ESV and RSV favour the “valley of death” translation.

⁵ Bailey, 47.

⁶ Meshach Paul Krikorian was a Methodist pastor who grew up in Turkey. His book, [The Spirit of the Shepherd: An Interpretation of the Psalm Immortal](#), was published in 1956. His description of the valley

death.”) He said it’s a very narrow gorge with jagged rocks. Its sides reach high overhead like walls in a great cathedral, almost touching at the top. This valley runs for 5 miles, yet is 12 feet across at most. In spots, it’s so narrow a sheep can hardly turn around.

What might lurk in such a valley? Bandits. Predators. Rock falls.

Imagine when it rains. In 1957, one of these valleys, leading to Petra an ancient city in Jordan, flash-flooded. There was no warning. Some 50 tourists died.

If you know all this . . . then even if nothing happens to you on a particular trip you have to take through the valley, how are you feeling the whole way along?

Yet in the Psalm, the sheep fears no evil.

Do you? Do we?

IV

As I said before, this Psalm 23 lives strong in our culture. But something interesting happens. Often this line — *the valley of the shadow of death* — gets used in a song or a movie. But its meaning gets turned. Instead of being about promise, and trust, and hope, it becomes about despair, despondency, and doubt.⁷

So Coolio sings about living in his *Gangsta’s Paradise*.⁸

*As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I take a look at my life and realize there’s nothin’ left.*

The song goes on and on, with a really nice groove. But its message stays the same: *there’s nothin’ left*. The gangsta’s in the valley, and there is no way out.

Or, here’s a clip from Clint Eastwood’s 1985 movie, *Pale Rider*.⁹ Thugs have destroyed the camp of some prospectors and their families. They’ve killed Megan’s dog. She is burying it. Listen to her pray.¹⁰

You can watch the video clip [here](#).

is quoted in Bailey, 47.

⁷ I’ve really benefited from Karl Jacobson’s article, " Through the Pistol Smoke Dimly: Psalm 23 in Contemporary Film and Song," Society for Biblical Literature Forum. <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=796>

⁸ You can see the video for *Gangsta’s Paradise* here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPO76Jlnz6c&list>, and read about the song here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gangsta%27s_Paradise.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pale_Rider

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0pPG6s_daY

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He leadeth me beside still waters. . . .*

But I do want.

He restoreth my soul. . . .

But they killed my dog.

*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil. . . .*

But I am afraid.

*For Thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. . . .*

But we need a miracle.

*Thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life. . . .*

If you exist.

And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever. . . .

But I'd like to get more of this life first.

I love this. I love what Megan does with the Psalm. She turns it into a conversation, a wrestling with God. She takes its words and on them, she hangs her own. And her words are tough. Because it's brutal in the valley. Megan is honest about that. God is faithful to such honesty.

V

But does God show up?

That's the question the Psalm begs us to ask.

When I'm in that valley, and when there is no turning back, and when I can't climb out . . . and when the dark shadows are hiding all sorts of I-don't-know-what-but-I'm-terrified-of-it, and when I can hear the flood rumbling and roaring, crashing as-yet-unseen around the bend ahead of me, churning rocks and devouring the valley floor . . . are You with me?

God-Shepherd, You're all I've got. More than any other human shepherd, more than myself even, I need You.

But around us, in our culture, in our communities, in our neighbourhoods, in our families, in our own souls, we wonder. Or despair. *I take a look at my life and realize there's nothin' left . . . and I do want, but they killed, and we need a miracle, if you exist . . .*

Clint Eastwood might ride in on his horse, but no lone gunman is going to save us. Or an army of them.

VI

The Lord is my shepherd. He doesn't show up. He's always been here.

Jesus went to the valley first. He climbed a hill and carried his cross.

Your Shepherd, so you belong to Him. You don't need to fear no evil, because Jesus is carrying you through the flood. You don't need to fear the shadows, because Jesus has already shone light into the darkness, and no darkness will overcome it. You don't need to fear death, because in Jesus you have already died. (Been there! Done that!) Now you're living his resurrection.

Friends, this is centre of the Psalm: *You are with me!* It's ours. And it's for those in the valley with us, who do not know about the Shepherd. For them, it's our message.

Jesus, you are with us.

Thanks be to God.