

# FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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**SERMON:** *The Valley of Death*

**SERIES:** *Psalm 23*

**SCRIPTURES:** *Psalm 23:4*

**SPEAKER:** *Shaun Kipe*

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*\*Credit to...Dallas Willard, Scott Scruggs, W. Phillip Keller, John Ortberg*

Well good morning, it so great to worship with you. Want to say welcome to all of you gathered on-line, at home, tuning in to the live stream.

On August 5<sup>th</sup> in 2010, 33 men were trapped in a mine in Northern Chile (**PIC**). Teacher Scott Scruggs describes the incident like this: *A massive rock, twice the weight of the empire state building collapsed trapping these men over 2,000 ft below the surface of the earth. They had no way out, no way of communicating with the outside world, no way to speak to loved ones. They had only three days' worth of food and water and for the next 69 days they were trapped in the one darkest valley's.*

*There is a book written about the experiences of these 33 men and how they survived. Describing first how **fear** began to overcome them. "What if we don't make it out? What if we never see our families again?" There was **anger**. One of the minors was even angry at himself. He knew the mine was unstable and had chosen to go in anyway and so he blamed himself. It didn't take long for **regret** to set in. "I wish I had been a better husband. A better father. A better friend. I wish had spent more time with the people I love, doing the things I love."*

*People begin to see life differently when they walk through life's darkest valleys.*

*And slowly these men began to succumb to the terrifying sense of **despair**. One of the men said, “It took a hundred years to dig down this far, there’s no way they’re digging us out.”*

*One newspaper gave the minors a less than 2% chance of surviving. Another journalist reflected on the irony of a species as proud and advanced as the human race facing this kind of predicament. She wrote, “Even now I find it hard to believe that the human race can be outmatched by such a primitive adversary as a hole in the ground.”*

*All the while the whole world was watching in suspense.*

*But something else also began to happen down in the dark valley. The minors asked one of the men who was a follower of Jesus to pray. His name was Jose, but after that they called him the pastor. The first time he prayed he said, “We aren’t the best men, but Lord have pity on us.” Everyday these 33 men began to pray together. Even some of the men who didn’t believe in God began to plead with God to save their lives. Because you see **in the dark valleys of life, everybody prays, everybody cries, everybody doubts. In the dark valleys of life, we either lose our hope or we find it.***

*Some of you in this room have been in that dark valley, haven’t you? And if you haven’t, you will. It is the place where you feel trapped. Where fear and regret and blame and despair begin to take over your life. What do we do in the dark valley’s of life?*

We’re in this series walking through Psalm 23 (**SERIES GRAPHIC**)...A lot of us are familiar with the words of Psalm 23, but what does a life look like that lives in the fullness of Psalm 23? To live as if it’s true. That’s what this series is all about.

So far we’ve looked at the first three verses...<sup>1</sup>**The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.** <sup>2</sup>**He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet**

**waters, <sup>3</sup>he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.**

And last week we kind of left with this picture of contentment and security. But we all know life is not just full of “peaceful and quiet waters.” This morning we kind of come to this rather ominous section of the passage. If you have your Bible, open to Psalm 23:4.

**<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,<sup>[a]</sup> I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

This is not a very pleasant image, is it? In fact, some of you who have memorized other versions Psalm 23 know another translation is **“even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”** I don't know about you but when I think about “walking through the valley of death” that can be a little bit uncomfortable.

What we do with this part of Psalm 23? How do we handle the pain and suffering we experience in life? Is there any redeeming quality or hope as we think about facing our own dark valleys? That's what today's message is about.

First, I think we all need to acknowledge that

### **I. Dark valley's are real.**

The image presented in Psalm 23 comes from the dangerous nature of dark valley's in the Shepherding world. In the ancient middle east shepherds were like nomads, they did not live in one area, but moved from place to place. Leading their flocks to new pastures and fresh water sources. And often in order to get from place to place they were forced to walk through dark valleys. Now these valley's were ominous because they consisted of sudden storms, flash floods, rock slides, snow avalanches as well as hiding places for predators like, coyotes, bears, wolves and cougars.

And so the dark valley in Psalm 23 is symbolic of the place of danger, pain, hardship, suffering that all humans experience in life. (keller 107)

If you're anything like me, most of us don't like to talk about painful experiences. We are pain avoiders.

We are often able to turn our heads and close our eyes to the pain in this world. I've been thinking about this recently with the Russia Ukrain crisis. The other night saw a story about a family of 3 who lived in their basement for 27 days while the bombing was happening. Little 8 year old girl had the basement walls covered with chalk pictures, it was her way of passing the time. But I so far removed and isolated from that kind of life. We may see sad images on television but often live too comfortably to understand the dark valley world. But the truth is no matter how you try you cannot avoid life's dark valley's.

Notice that, David doesn't seem to be saying "if you walk through a dark valley" or "you might walk through a dark valley". No, he says...even though you do...in other words, "you will." In life, you will walk through dark valleys. It's not if, it's when.

Very similar to something Jesus acknowledged to his disciples. **"In this world you will have trouble..."** Not you might have trouble...but you will have trouble. You will experience danger, hardship, pain and suffering.

I was listening to a devotional that I follow and the speaker was telling a story about a woman who was sharing her own life story in front of a group of people. Almost like sharing her testimony and she had experienced a good bit of pain and heart-ache in her life. She had made some really bad mistakes, it was painful for her. It was raw and pretty hard for her to walk through the story of her life. Her mentor was sitting in the room and at one point she kind of paused and looked over at him in front of this group of people, big tears streaming down her face and she said, "I just

feel so uncomfortable.” And her mentor looked back at her, deep into her eyes and there is this moment of wondering what’s he going to say to relieve her and comfort her and remove her from this moment of great difficulty. But the words were not that at all. Instead he looked her right in the eyes and he said, **“I am 100% committed to your discomfort.”** (Ortberg The discomfort zone!)

He was saying, “I am not just going to pick you up and remove you from this uncomfortable situation. I’m not gonna make it all just go away.”

I think what David is saying in Psalm 23, and what you and I need to understand about life with God, is that He often doesn’t work, by just removing us from uncomfortable, painful situations in our lives.

And so I think that’s where have to begin. We need to acknowledge we will face dark valleys in life. We should expect it. Let’s not be surprised, or caught off guard when we do. We don’t need to ignore our pain. We don’t need to hide our pain. And we shouldn’t avoid pain.

Ok, so in an effort to put this into practice I thought, let’s just take this one step further and acknowledge human suffering.

And I’ve kind of put these dark valley’s into two categories.

### **Suffering that happens to us...**

Some of the pain that we experience are the circumstances that our world throw’s at us. You didn’t choose the accident that debilitates your body. You don’t choose natural disasters. You don’t choose cancer. You didn’t choose for someone you love to give up on the relationship and walk away. You don’t choose to have a foreign military invade your country and demolish your home. You don’t choose to be a refugee.

So much of the pain that we experience in this world seems out of our control. And it can leave us feeling depressed, sad, hurt. It's a dark valley.

But also when I think of dark valleys, it also makes me think of the **hidden things** within our own hearts. Sometimes the valleys we face are of our own choosing. Those things about us, that are our choices, but that are hurting us but that we'd rather other people don't know about. The images you allow in front of your eyes. The temper that gets out of control. The greed you indulge in your lifestyle. The discontent you harbor in your life by comparing your life to others.

These hidden secrets lead to all kinds of guilt and shame and loneliness in our lives.

And so, I think when it comes to life's dark valley's we need to do better at acknowledging pain and suffering.

One of the best ways you can start coming to terms with your own hardship and pain is to talk about it, as appropriate, with a close a group of friends or family.

**“Integrate your past hurts, pains, challenges into your life story.”** Don't suppress or hide or ignore them. This is being authentic, it is part of the healing process.

This is why at Funeral services...we spend so much time talking about the person who has passed. In one sense it hurts to think about them, but in another sense this is part of the healing process. “I am 100% committed to your discomfort.”

I remember thinking about this concept a few weeks ago when I had broken my thumb. And I remember one the things the orthopedic doctor told me was that when I got my cast off was, I will need to move my thumb as much as I can. She said, it will be painful as the stiffness wears off, but you have to walk through that pain if you want to heal.

This is how acknowledging our own stories of pain can help us to heal as well.

You know when little children are younger, and they have a pain. Stubbed toe or paper cut...my finger hurts, my tummy hurts. They just want you to know. You can't fix and make it go away. You say, "Oh I'll kiss it better." But somehow just tell you makes it feel better.

And I think that's one of the reasons God gave us the church. Maybe you need to allow some people to suffer with you. When the dark valley's happen you need a compassionate and caring community around you. You need people who will be willing to walk into the dark valley with you.

Some people are ready to give up on the church because of the churches many failures. I won't try to justify or excuse the churches failures. But at it's core, when the church gets it right, it is meant to be that compassionate group of people who walk through life with us.

You need to allow people to suffer with you in your pain.

So we acknowledge the reality of our pain and suffering. But then second

## **II. Where do we turn in the dark valley?**

Are we just stuck with that pain and despair or is there any kind of hope, in the midst of our hurt. Well as we've been learning over the past couple of weeks, ultimately the answer to the dark valley's we face is

### **A. The Good Shepherd.**

**<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest valley,<sup>[a]</sup> I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

A couple of things about how the good shepherd walks us through pain. First,

**1. He is familiar with suffering.**

The prophet Isaiah says, **“<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.”**

This is a really important idea. You know, how when you’ve experienced something unique, you wonder if other people understand?

Like if say, are you familiar with the smell of that **“fresh, Franklin county, spring, farming air”**? Or perhaps odor would be more accurate. Do you know what I’m talking about? The farmer has just spread manure, fertilizing his fields. Every spring we get that odor around here don’t we. And if you’re from our part of the country you know exactly what I’m talking about. We share a unique experience that inner-city folk wouldn’t share. It’s kind of like a bond almost.

It’s not just unique experiences or odors that form that bond, but the same is true of **painful experiences**. When you find someone who has experienced pain like you have, there is special bond? This is the idea behind Alcoholics Anonymous. When I tell people about my broken bones, everyone whose ever had a broken bone knows what I’m talking about. If you’ve lost a loved one too young in life...if you’ve gone through a relationship break-up...if you’ve received a troubling diagnosis, there is something powerful when you meet someone else who has gone through the same thing.

One of the unique things we discover about Yahweh, the Hebrew God, is that he experiences pain and suffering. The Greek god’s would never experience pain.

In fact, can I show you something neat? A few weeks when we started this series, someone sent me an article talking about how Psalm 22 & 23 really go hand in hand.

And how Psalm 22 speaks of Jesus, the Messiah, walking through his own valley of death.

Do you have your Bible open? You're in Psalm 23. Turn back for a just a moment to Psalm 22. This is the Psalm that Jesus quotes from in the Gospel's when he's hanging on the cross...he's walking through the valley of death.

**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? <sup>2</sup> My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest...<sup>15</sup> My mouth<sup>[d]</sup> is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. <sup>16</sup> Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce<sup>[e]</sup> my hands and my feet. <sup>17</sup> All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. <sup>18</sup> They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.**

Do you see what Psalm 22 is saying? It says, God walks through suffering himself. The writer of the article goes on to say...**I tremble at the mystery for Christ himself is crying through this psalm...**

He experiences what we experience. He understands the dark valleys of life, just as we do. When we go to the Good Shepherd in our suffering we are talking to someone who can say, **“I know. I understand. It hurts. I am so sorry.”**

But not only does he understand but also...

## **2. He walks with us.**

W. Philip Keller talks about watching herds of Sheep in Africa being led into enormous hand-hewn water caverns (**PIC**), cut out of sandstone. Deep, dark water

caverns...like great rooms chiseled out of the rocks with ramps running down to the water trough at the bottom...where the herds would find cool, clear, clean water.

And then he said, and down in the well at the bottom of that deep, dark valley, was the “owner or Shepherd bailing water to satisfy the thirsty flock. It was hard, heavy, hot work. Perspiration poured off the body of the bailer, whose skin glistened under the strain and heat of his labor.”

And do you see what he’s saying...that many of the places we may be led into in our lives will appear dark, deep and dangerous. But we hold onto the fact that He is there with us in the deep darkness. He is very much at work in the situation. It is his energy, effort and strength expended on our behalf that even in this deep, dark place is bound to produce a benefit for us! (Keller 64-65)

In fact, did you notice something important about the pronouns. Look back at Psalm 23 starting in verse 2...

**2He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.**

Pay close attention now...

**4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,<sup>[a]</sup> I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

Did you see what happened with the pronouns? At this point in the poem the pronouns change from 3<sup>rd</sup> person to second person. From he to you. David is no longer speaking of God as “he”...that God out there. No, in verse 4 as he enters the dark valley he starts talking directly to God. You. As if God is right there with him.

The poem becomes even more intimate and personal as we move into the dark valley's of life. (Keller 97)

He understands and he walks with us in our pain and then third...

### 3. He Redeems our suffering

And this really important. One of the unique things about walking through suffering with God is that often those things that cause the greatest pain and hardship for us become those things that grow us, change us in the most significant ways.

**God doesn't keep us from experiencing dark valleys, but no dark valley you face is beyond his redemption.**

Notice the passage does not say the sheep stops or dies in the valley, but rather the sheep **“walks through”** the valley. (Keller 100)

I opened this morning with the story of these 33 miners trapped beneath the ground. The climax of the story happens on October 13 when all thirty-three men (**PIC OF MEN BEING RESCUED**), one at a time, were winched to the surface and re-united with their families, with tears of joy and hugs of relief. Redemption. You don't think their lives were changed after that experience. Viewed their time with their families and friends a little differently, hugged a little longer, spent less time concerned about accumulating more stuff and extra hours at the office and more time with the people who mattered most.

I will confess to you I don't know why God allows “valleys of death to happen.” I am not one who thinks that God causes them to happen. But still he allows them and I don't have a fully satisfactory answer as to why.

He is not a God who shelters us from pain, heartache...but I do know he is a God who redeems and uses our pain and heartache. *Helen Keller didn't choose blindness*

*and deafness. Nelson Mandela did not ask for 20 years in prison. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot dead at such a young age. But I do know a goodness and courage has shown into the world because of them that wouldn't be there otherwise.*

**It is very rare that the circumstances that cause the greatest comfort in our lives also lead to the greatest growth. It often turns out to be the exact opposite. Having to deal with discomfort and suffering is essential to human flourishing.**

Each winter the harsh cold turns my grass brown and the flowers fade and die, but every spring they shoot up once again. It's a reminder of God's redemption story. He brings life out of death.

This is the story of the cross, which we'll be highlighting in just a couple of weeks, at Easter. A Roman Cross and tomb tried to overcome the Messiah but he came back to life. Death on a Roman cross led to the salvation of humanity.

Persecution in the early church led to the spread and growth of the Jesus community. The weak are made strong. The first are last and the last are first. The story of the Bible is suffering that eventually leads to redemption.

So whatever it is that you are facing, it may be hard. And you will need people to come beside you and walk with you. But also know...there is a God of redemption and restoration and whatever it is you face...he will use it to continue forming you into the person he wants you to be.

All of this kind of leads to one closing thought related to dark valleys. If it's true that the one we follow entered the suffering world, and walks through the pain and hardship of life with us. Then we as his followers must learn to do the same thing. We must get better at...

## **B. Entering into the suffering in our world.**

I said earlier this is a great challenge for many of us. We are good at pain avoidance.

But maybe we need to become a little bit more familiar with the suffering in our world. Not that we enjoy suffering, but we should all of us be involved in becoming familiar with the pain, the dark valley's of the people around us, our community, our world.

One of the best examples of this in our modern day, of course is Mother Theresa. I love this story I read about Mother Theresa. Shane Claiborne, author who spent some time working with Mother Theresa wrote that even though her notoriety and popularity grew around the world, "When I was in Calcutta, she'd be out jumping rope with the kids or she'd be hanging out on the streets."

**She used to say, "It's very fashionable to talk about the poor (we could add the hurting, the suffering) but not as fashionable to talk to the poor. If we really care about the poor we can name them; they're our friends. They're people that we're with. In some ways we have a church that cares about the poor and justice in some general sense, but the place that we've really been missing is that we've lost our feet being on the ground. (Claiborne 216).**

We have secluded and sheltered ourselves from the poor, the hurting. It makes us uncomfortable.

**The challenge for my generation is to take one of these "pains" we're constantly confronted with and find someone (yes, a real human being) who is living in this pain. We have to get to know that someone for the person God made him or her to be. Meet his or her families. Hear his or her struggle. I've had the privilege of knowing a number of Hispanic immigrants, and now immigration isn't simply an "issue" for me; it's become the pain of the people I**

**know – there are faces and families and joy and suffering and hope. It’s now a pain I can speak to.** (Claiborne 234)

What pain are you willing to enter into with others? And I’ll just warn you, as a staff we’ve been talking about how we can do better at this as a church.

As we face the dark valleys of this world...we must get better at talking about and **acknowledging** their reality. We must learn to hold onto the Good Shepherd, trusting that **he understands** and he is in the valley **with us**. Remembering that he is a God of **redemption** who brings good, even out of our pain. And that if all of this is true, then we his followers should be motivated to **enter into the places of suffering** in our world as well.