

## The Valley of the Shadow

Sermon #21

08/20/23

Psalm 23:4 “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for You are with me, your rod and your staff comfort me.”

Certainly, a verse we’re all familiar with. Many of us can even quote the entire psalm by heart because it’s some of the first scripture we’re taught as children. But the question is why? Of course, it’s very comforting and encouraging as we’re assured that we are not alone. However, I believe its appeal lies in something more than encouragement, something much deeper. It reveals something we have all but forgotten. There’s something mysteriously familiar about it, like a gentle breeze resonating down the halls of our memories, the words to the song we can’t quite recall.

But before we unravel this verse, there are others we need to look at to better understand its meaning beginning. Let’s begin one psalm previous with Psalm 22. Its subject is a grim description of the crucifixion written by David approximately one thousand years before the actual event. The very first verse begins with the haunting cry of Jesus from the cross,

Psalm 22:1 “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping me, from the words of my cry.”

It has been a controversial verse because it has been misunderstood through most of the last two thousand years. It has been used by the modern church in support of the theory of atonement, (the method by which we are reconciled to God)

called Penal Substitution. In it, Jesus is God's sacrifice for sin, the understanding being that He is "the offering" to appease God the Father's wrath toward humanity. As Jesus took our sin upon Himself, the Father, too holy to look upon it, abandoned Him to His tormentors. It's viewed through forensic or legalistic eyes that demand the death penalty for sin, therefore, Jesus would be required to meet the need. All to pacify an angry God who couldn't simply forgive but required punitive measures to satisfy payment. He was the sacrifice to fulfill the blood lust of God's anger and wrath. This was the very mindset of the pagan nations who surrounded Israel. A sacrifice to appease their angry gods was the order of business and a human sacrifice was considered the most effective, be it virgin maidens or children, most often the weaker members of society.

But their theory makes absolutely no sense. Why? Because Jesus is also God. To say that the true God can't be in the presence of sin but Jesus can become it on our behalf leads us to the inevitable conclusion that He isn't fully God. This is the heresy of Arianism in the very early church that was addressed in the Nicene Creed. That being that God the Father and God the Son are both God, exactly the same. "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father."

I have a good friend who is a Baptist pastor and has been his entire life who strongly disagrees with me concerning this. I had explained to him that the Father could never disassociate with the Son because the Trinity cannot be separated. If that were the case then God who is three persons would cease to exist and if He ceased to exist, so would we. If the three aren't one in perfect union, absolutely no separation, then there is no God. The Western church has no real concept of the Trinity.

Deuteronomy 6:4

“Hear O Israel, the Lord (I Am) our God (Elohim-plural) is one Lord (I AM).”

He responded to me by simply saying he didn't know about all that but in this case, they were separated because God is too holy to look upon sin! Now he's a great guy and a reasonable man but his example reveals how deeply entrenched this teaching is in the modern church. There's no reasonable rebuttal, only that I know what I've always been taught and I'm quite satisfied with the blinders I wear.

The atonement theory we subscribe to here at Unconditional Love is known as the Recapitulation Theory. It was authored by Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers in the second century AD. He was a disciple of Polycarp who was a disciple of John the Apostle, therefore a recipient of a pure gospel message. He stated in

Ephesians 1:10

“That in the fulness (completion, consummation) of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him (Christ).”

Irenaeus' premise was that in the incarnation all of creation was recapitulated or re-presented in righteousness by the Son to the Father. Sin was taken away or lifted off ('airo', aheero) by the Lamb. Death was destroyed because without sin it no longer held existence. An interesting analogy as sin was the original medium that both suppressed and oppressed the mind of Adam causing it to fall from its lofty position. Jesus lifts that heavy-laden bondage, allowing for healing and restoration and removes sin from us as far as the east is from the west. Jesus, in whom all creation is contained, entered our death. What happens when the

Creator in whom all creation (including you and me) consists, dies? Creation dies with Him. But then what happens when He is raised with all creation in Him? It (including you and me) is raised from death to new life! The word recapitulation also means to summarize therefore, we now clearly see that all creation is summed up in Jesus Christ.

2 Cor 5:18 “Now, ALL things are of God who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ Jesus and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. 19) that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world (cosmos) to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word (Word) of reconciliation.

21 For He has made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God.”

He mutually exchanged, the meaning of reconciliation, His life for our death. In that covenant exchange, that which was decayed and distorted, He took to the grave then made us whole once more, raising us to new life in Christ.

Our sin for His righteousness. Righteousness means to be made right or right wise once more, to be of equal weight and measure, to be in harmonious balance. The word in Greek is dike. It is the goddess who holds the scales of justice in equality, whose statue we often see erected in front of the courthouse. The word justice in scripture is a covenant term meaning to make things right.

Romans 6 “knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.”

Isa 53:4 “Surely He has borne our griefs (sicknesses) and carried our sorrows (pain), yet we esteemed Him stricken...”

The word stricken here is used of one who is struck with leprosy, a disease that causes severe disfigurement and significant disability as parts of the body rot away. This is a graphic description of the effects of the spiritual leprosy of sin on mankind.

It is the result of our bondage to a lie about ourselves. If sin is the loss of identity, then to be restored by revelation concerning who we truly are, is our healing and freedom. How do we come to know that? We're told to simply look into the mirror and observe our self-reflection in His loving eyes. If we don't believe Him, we can continue to gaze until the cows come home to no end. I used to think "Lord, I don't see anything different so maybe it will be true one day when I've become a better person, perhaps when I die and go to heaven, I'll glimpse it." But His answer was no, a mirror does not reflect the future nor the past, only the present moment. It is who you are now. In the years since, I've noticed the lines in my face have softened and my eyes seem to have become brighter as I gaze at the person who used to be a stranger but I now recognize as a friend.

When we finally forget our questions and agendas and simply say I want to hear what's in your heart Lord, we're amazed that it's mostly about me. Upon that revelation, we can stand back and humbly say, then here I am, I give you permission to love and adore me. Our adoration for Him then becomes so natural and pure when it's a reflection of His adoration for us.

No, God never abandoned Jesus. He doesn't know the meaning of the word. The mission of Christ was never about appeasement but of full restoration of man and God in total oneness.

Psalm 22 addresses this as we read:

21 “You have heard and answered.”

24 “But when He cried to Him for help, He heard.”

31 “They will declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has performed it.”

That performance was emphatically punctuated with the jubilant cry “It is finished!”

The cry of “why have you forsaken Me” is spoken by Jesus from the cross to identify Himself as the one David had written about. The expression was the primal cry of Adam spoken from the humanity of Jesus as He experienced death. Have you truly cast me out, have You actually forsaken me? He spoke it for the people to recall the scriptures comparing the narrative described in the psalm. As the meaning began to be understood, hope began to arise within. They could grasp the significance of the written word and its depiction of the physical event playing out simultaneously before them.

Quoting Robert Capon in his book “The Romance of the Word”,

“God in Christ doesn’t wait for the world to save itself. Instead of standing at some antiseptic distance from our agonies and our failures, He comes to meet us in the very thick of them: in Jesus, He dies in our death, He becomes sin for our sins, and in the mystery of His resurrection-without faking a single bit of history-He invites us to believe that He has made all things new.

He never forsook mankind; it was us who forsook Him.

Psalm 23 is so rich in depth of imagery and meaning it deserves to be looked at in its entirety.

Psalm 23:1 "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

The Lord is I Am, the self-existent one. Jesus refers to Himself as "I Am" fourteen times in the gospel of John alone. He is unbegun and unending and therefore describes Himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end who has no beginning nor end. He is the ultimate inexhaustible source of all things, including life, light and love and has given us all things pertaining to life in our Godly origin, we who have been created to participate in His image and likeness.

The word shepherd consists of two words, ago meaning to lead in agape and pao meaning rest. Therefore, when Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd, He is saying that it is He who leads us in love to our rest. Our rest is the restoration of our true person in the finished work of Christ. It is to repose in our abode, our true home.

John 14:23 Jesus answered him, "If a man loves Me, He will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our abode with him."

The word come in Greek is 'erchomai' and means to accompany, be present to or appear face to face with. It is used only in the present tense which means that God is continuously appearing and revealing to each of us that we are His home. He's not somewhere in a distant heaven but inhabiting the heavenly places within us. Jesus didn't come to take us to heaven, He brought heaven to us. For wherever God is there is heaven and wherever you are, there is God. For in Him dwells the fulness of the Godhead bodily. We are complete in Him who mirrors our wholeness and endorses our true identity. He is "I Am" in us.

The word for shepherd also means friend, even best friend. It is a covenant term promising that we will lack for nothing for our covenant partner provides all needs.

Psalm 23:2 “He makes me to lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside the still waters.”

He causes me to rest in my verdant and splendid home, that is His heart. It is the destination of the path on which we are led. The still waters describe the waters of reflection, the mirror in which we see.

One of the great teachers of the early Celtic Church in Ireland, John Scotus Eriugena, (er i u' ge na ) taught that Christ is our memory, because we all suffer from the “soul’s forgetfulness”. Christ comes to reawaken us to our true nature. He comes to show us the face of God as well as the true face of the human soul, our face. This leads the Celtic tradition to celebrate the relationship between nature and grace. Rather than grace being opposed to our essential nature or as somehow saving us from ourselves, nature and grace are viewed as flowing together from God. They are both sacred gifts. The gift of nature is the gift of “being”; the gift of grace on the other hand is the gift of “well-being”! Grace is given to reconnect us to our true nature. At the heart of our being is the image of God, and thus the passions of God, the wisdom of God, the creativity of God, the longings of God. Grace is opposed not to what is deepest in us but to what is untrue in us. It is given to restore us to the core of our being and to free us from the unnaturalness of what we are doing to one another and to the earth. -from Christ of the Celts

Psalm 23:3 “He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.

To restore is to return to the point of beginning. The Hebrew word is ‘shuwb’ and is used prolifically throughout the OT encouraging all to remember and turn back to who you are. It correlates to the Greek word ‘anothen’ in the NT meaning again or once more. It was a term used in a musical performance by a conductor when he would bring up his baton and say to his orchestra, once more from the top.

This is an appropriate analogy to Jesus as we read in the heading of Psalm 4 that it is written for the Chief Musician, Choir Director or Lead Singer. We read in

Hebrews 2:11 “...He is not ashamed to call them brethren 12) saying I will declare your name to My brethren; in the midst of the congregation, I will sing praise to you. “

Who are the brethren?

John 20:17 “...go to My brethren (meaning those from the same womb) and say to them I am ascending to My Father and your Father and to My God and your God.” He is no longer Almighty God but God the Father Almighty!

He leads me in the way of righteousness, a covenant term as I referred to earlier, meaning of equal weight, harmonious balance, equality in love. For His names sake means to be of the same family or blood, from the same womb. As Clint shared with us a couple of weeks ago the adage of “blood is thicker than water” is our abbreviated Western version. The full saying is “The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.”

Psalm 23:4 Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for You are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

The word valley means a narrow way with lofty sides, in other words a grave. So to what does the psalmist attribute his confidence as he makes his way through what should be a terrifying experience beneath death’s shadow? Notice that the narrative has shifted now from third to second person. The reason is because You are with me. It is no longer an abstract of he or him but literal and personal, you and me. This is the confidence that allows me to fear no evil in the face of death for Your Face far outshines it! It is Your authority over the grave that assures me that we walking together out of this hole.

I believe this is a prophetic picture of Hosea’s account.

Hosea 6:1 “Come and let us return to the Lord for He has torn so that He may heal us, He has stricken that He may bind us up.”

This is further described in Ezekiel 36:26 “I will give you a new heart and put a renewed spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” (For our flesh has been circumcised of sin- Colossians 2)

I often hear people quote a favorite verse in evangelical circles,

Jeremiah 17:9 “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

What they don’t see is God has performed a heart transplant!

Hosea 6:2 “After two days He will revive us and on the third day He will raise us up that we may live in His sight.” (Face to Face)

Psalm 23:5 “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.”

He prepares a table that we may wash the feet of our enemies as we break bread and enter covenant with them. How are we able to do this? Because our mind is saturated in the oil of the Spirit revealing our true nature in agape love.

Mark 10:45 “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve...”

Psalm 23:6 “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Goodness, for only God is good, and mercy, meaning covenant bond, pursue me all the days of my life.

The words follow or pursue don't communicate the intensity David desires to communicate. It's much more akin to the meaning of wrath which is a stretching forth or reaching out in the excitement of passionate desire for the beloved.

Paul will later echo this same idea in

Romans 8:38-39 “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, angels nor demons, the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Our reality is that we are powerless to be anything other than infinitely loved by God.

And as alluded to earlier, I dwell as a member of the family of the Great House of God forever.

Psalm 24:7 “Lift up your heads O you gates, and be lifted up you everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.”

To lift up your head means to awaken. You gates is referring to people and the everlasting doors are symbolic entrance to the city of the New Jerusalem, city meaning society, the new society of mankind. (See Amplified Bible)

Revelation 22:2 “Then I, John, saw the holy city (the new humanity), coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

22:25 “And her gates shall never be shut at all by day (and there shall be no night there).”

21:23 “For the glory of God illuminates it and the Lamb is its light.”

In summary, we see an amazing picture of the Gospel in these three Psalms. In Psalm 22 is the crucifixion and death of not just Jesus but of all mankind, for if one died for all, all died. We were crucified with Him that the body of sin might be done away.

Psalm 23 recounts our burial and resurrection and as referenced earlier follows Hosea 6:2 perfectly “After two days He will revive us and on the third day He will raise us up.”

This is our walk through the grave, the valley of the shadow of death. A place that has held such fear and foreboding and held mankind in bondage all their lifetime.

To be set free from the bondage of fear is to be set free from sin and death for that’s what fear is. It was the first response of Adam and Eve to God after the Fall.

It caused a crisis of the mind, causing them to forget who they were and because of the torment of impending judgement, resulted in separation from God. Perfect love casts it out because they simply cannot coexist.

I find it interesting that we are described as walking through it which would indicate some level of awareness, even if our perception is one of sleepwalking. Nonetheless, a transformation is taking place as we gradually and incrementally begin to remember who we are. A new rest and a new assurance of righteousness in Him becomes our reality. Fear begins to fade as my mind is anointed in your Spirit of Truth and I am immersed in your goodness and mercy all the days of my life.

John 6:39 "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me that I should lose nothing but should raise it up at the last day."

The last day is the final day of the Old Covenant as well as the third day in the tomb signifying our resurrection.

Psalms 24 describes the culmination of the event in which we are ascended in Christ. We awake from our dreamlike state to a new reality seated in heavenly places. We are now fully aware that all of mankind has been made new. We are the Bride of Christ and the New Jerusalem is the abode of the new society.

There's no longer a dualistic view of us and them. We awaken to the reality of complete and total union of all men in Christ. No longer separated by laws and rules but all being healed and made whole in Him. It's a beautiful train of thought to maintain, yet one in this life that can be elusive, even though the Holy Spirit within us witnesses to its truth.

The fact is we are experiencing all three, death, resurrection and ascension at any given time. Our pursuit of law in order to attempt justification for our behavior and a forgotten identity and sin consciousness reigning in death. There are old memories within that we still cling to as being true about us; things needing to be purified by His refining fire, for everyone is preserved with fire.

Our resurrection can seem at times to be a surreal concept. It's the "walk" in His love that keeps it alive in us for Love is dynamic and exists in motion.

Galatians 5:6 "For in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working ('energia') in love."

The faith to continue our walk is set in motion by love. That's why coming to the revelation that God is love is the vital ingredient to grasping who we are and what He's done for us.

It's only then that ascended life becomes the norm of our reality and even then, we're often completely unaware of it. The darkness of deception has been penetrated for it is the God who commanded the light to shine out of our darkness who has shone His truth in our hearts.

Colossians 3:4 Passion Translation "And as Christ is seen for who He really is (the God of Love) who you really are is also revealed."

Amen