Session 4: The Valley (Psalm 23:4)

SESSION GOALS

Every session has a point–what we want to walk away from the discussion knowing, feeling, and doing.

Main Idea: Our hope in times of darkness is the presence of God, not the resolution of our circumstances.

Head Change: To know that God is present with us as we walk through times of suffering.

Heart Change: To feel confidence when facing difficulty based on the comfort experienced through God's presence.

Life Change: To reject any fears we have about suffering while in this world, knowing that our true hope is in God and the comfort he brings.

OPEN

What kinds of things help boost your mood throughout the day? (Some answers could include: a cup of coffee, a kind text from a friend, a favorite snack, etc.)

Why do you think those things have the ability to raise your mood? Why do you think the mood-boost doesn't always last?

Sure, sometimes little parts of our day can make it a better one. But we can also find ourselves in situations that are too difficult for a cup of tea or a walk to remedy. Where can we turn when life is hard? This series has taken us through Psalm 23 where we've seen how God is our shepherd who guides us, gives us rest, and provides for us. We'll learn today how God is who we can rely on through the valley of the shadow of death.

READ

Read Psalm 23:1–6.

Show Session 4: *Psalm 23:4* (11 minutes).

DISCUSS

In our last session, we revisited the question of whether or not an Old Testament psalm written thousands of years ago by King David applies to us today. One of the ways in which we can be sure that it does is through Jesus's fulfillment of what Psalm 23 teaches. When the Lord is our shepherd through faith in Jesus, we lack nothing. He provides everything we need.

Take a minute to reflect on that truth. How has Jesus demonstrated his provision to you over the last week?

In what ways has the Bible been more "real" to your daily life as you have worked through this series?

Now, there is another aspect to this psalm's application that Matt talked about in this session. He pointed out how the Bible never lies to us. Rather, it paints a picture of reality that is unflinching in terms of its consistency with our daily experience.

Read Psalm 23:4.

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "the valley of the shadow of death"? What experiences have you witnessed in your life or that of others that would fit what that phrase suggests?

If verse 4—and Psalm 23 as a whole—are painting an accurate picture of reality, do you believe Christians today have a good understanding of what the Bible teaches about suffering? Do you understand? Why or why not?

GO DEEPER

Read more about biblical suffering in the following verses:

John 16:32–33; Romans 5:1–5; James 1:2–4

Based on these passages, does suffering seem like an optional experience for Christians in this world?

What is the purpose of suffering in our lives?

In what ways do these passages echo David's words in Psalm 23 about our hope in suffering?

We have all faced times of difficulty in our lives. Like Matt said in the session, David assumes that all of us will at some point or another walk through the valley of the shadow of death. So our approach should not be one of figuring out how to avoid it, but understanding what we need to do to remain faithful along the way.

Think back to some of the times when you have faced a "dark night of the soul," as Matt described. **How did you respond to your circumstances?**

Dark nights of the soul are painful. There's no getting around that. And God does not expect us to enjoy our suffering, but he does have expectations for our focus in the midst of it. In verse 4, David proclaims that he will "fear no evil" while facing the valley of the shadow of death. **Based on your answer above, did your response reflect David's confidence? Why or why not?**

More than likely, you did not respond to your own suffering with the perfection of Christ. Join the club. We have all fallen short in this area and desperately need help because fearing no evil requires more than simply our own human strength.

According to verse 4, what is the reason for why David fears no evil?

How does God's presence remove our fear of evil? In what ways would a deeper focus on God's presence have changed the way you responded to difficulty in the past?

While suffering is never enjoyable, one of its benefits is that it shows us when we are following false shepherds. Matt specifically mentioned the "shepherds" of health and wealth. When we place our confidence in our bank accounts, what happens when we come up short one month on our mortgage? Or can't afford groceries? When we place our confidence in our health, what happens when we get sick? Or find ourselves on the other end of a freak car accident? These are false shepherds and cannot provide for us the way Jesus can.

Continue to reflect on the suffering you have faced in the past or may be facing presently. **How has it revealed to you the ways in which you might have followed false shepherds? Where did you place your confidence?**

What were you looking for in that false shepherd that it could not provide?

Dark nights of the soul drive us to whatever we think will save us. And when the Lord is our shepherd, he will always remain with us providing every step of the way. But David takes the truth of God's presence a step further. Not only is the Lord with us in our suffering, but he also comforts us.

How might they demonstrate the ways God cares for his people in times of suffering?

As we've seen in every other session so far, God perfectly displays the characteristics listed here in Psalm 23 through his Son, Jesus Christ. Because he is God in the flesh, Jesus reiterates this comforting presence as our good shepherd.

Read John 10:7–13.

What stands out to you about Jesus based on these verses? How do they describe his relationship to his sheep?

Specifically note how John characterizes the "hired hand" in verse 13. **How does Jesus feel about his sheep compared to the hired hand?**

In what ways should your faith in Christ be strengthened by the truth that he, the creator of the world, cares for you?

LAST WORD

If you're not in the valley today, you will find yourself there at some point. Which shepherd do you plan to turn to when that day arrives? Apart from the Lord, you will find all other shepherds wanting. They will flee when wolf arrives because they do not truly care for you.

But when the Lord is your shepherd, he will fight for you. He will comfort you and lead you by his wisdom. There is no enemy too strong for him, no terrain too difficult for him to navigate. The promise of our faith is not that we will be spared from suffering, but that God will be by our side. Lean into him today.

LIVE IT OUT

Memorize: Continue working on memorizing Psalm 23. This week, focus on verse four reciting it to yourself over the next few days.

Pray: Whether or not you are currently in a season of difficulty, ask the Lord to prepare you for suffering. Pray that he would remove all other shepherds that compete for priority in your life so that he alone would be your comfort in both good and bad times.

Journal: Set aside some time this next week to reflect on times you have faced suffering in the past. For each instance, write down 2–3 specific ways that God comforted you throughout that time with his protection and guidance.

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Psalm 23 STUDY GUIDE

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