

Holiday Cheer?
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Let's face it; this can be a very difficult time of year, especially for those faced with the loss of family and children through separation divorce and even parental alienation. While we know that God is always walking beside us through difficult times, it is sometimes hard to actually feel his presence through the pain. The pain we feel at these times in our lives is so excruciating that we cannot even imagine that God is involved in any way, not to even mention walking beside us and yes, actually being involved.

As I work with people spiritually and ponder this pain, there is one piece of scripture that comes to mind is the 23rd Psalm. We are all familiar with it, and I think often think of it as "the piece that is read at funerals." But it is much more than just a funeral piece – it can be the true foundation upon which we build our recovery from the pain we feel particularly at this time of year, and it can be the very source of *hope* we need to make it through this time of year.

It goes like this:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for you are with me.
Your rod and thy staff they comfort me.
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 for ever.*

Roy Campanella, the famous baseball player, talks about this psalm in his autobiography as he describes being in a bad accident that left him a semi-invalid. Campanella describes crying himself to sleep night after night as he sank into a deep depression resulting from what life dealt him. He writes:

All my life whenever I was in trouble, I had turned to God for help. I remembered my Bible and asked the nurse to get the one from the drawer in the night table. I opened it to the 23rd Psalm: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.' [Roy Campanella: *It's Good to be Alive*]

From that point on, Campanella reports, *I was on my way back – I was going to make it!* Psalm 23 truly gives *courage, strength and hope* to those of us facing pain in our lives – whether it is physical or emotional.

Much of this psalm deals with shepherding in early Palestine – something about which we may know little – but we can certainly figure out that there is a *strong* bond between a shepherd and his sheep – he cares deeply for each one of them, and does everything in his power to protect them from any sort of danger or harm – both physical and emotional.

The one verse that seems to be particularly appropriate to us this season is the 4th verse:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and thy staff they comfort me.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death is a real place in Israel, having steep sides and lots of rocks. There was a pass, however, that shepherds used to take their sheep from one side of the mountain to the other. However, the sheep become very scared in this pass because of its narrowness, not to mention all of the caves and caverns along each side which are perfect hiding places for animals of prey, and for people who want to harm those passing by.

At the beginning of this Psalm we hear, *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.*

But all of a sudden, the sheep are in the Valley. How did they get there? *The shepherd* led them there!

As we know from the Gospels, Jesus identifies himself as *the Good Shepherd*. It becomes clear now – the *Lord* is the shepherd, and *we* are the sheep. We also can see clearly that the Valley is all of those terrifying, dark, lonely, frightening times in life -- times of sickness, tragedy, emotional stress, tension, economic disaster, loneliness, when God may seem far away – just like what we experience these holiday seasons when we are alone – separated from our families and those we love.

It may be hard to comprehend, but the shepherd has a reason for leading us into these dark valleys of life. He does this *to lead us into greener pastures – to deeper faith*. He calls us to *trust him, to put our faith in him, and to allow him to lead us, even though we cannot always see his purpose or plan for doing so.*

Yes, you may well have been in that Valley of the Shadow of Death this Christmas season, separated from your children and those you love, feeling alone and forsaken by God. But, *by faith, we know* that we are *not alone and are not forsaken!* We have God's promise that he, the Lord and Good Shepherd, will lead us into the green pastures of life despite the valleys – despite those times at which we feel alone and forsaken. We may feel that God is very far away, but we must have *faith* and know that he is actually very near – *calling us* to a better place in life.

My friends, I encourage you to *Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd* when you feel you are in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. *Listen and know* that He is leading you to a better place, and you *must pass through that valley to get there.*

We can feel comfort in these words:

*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for you, O Lord, are with me. Your rod and
your staff comfort me.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my
life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Peace and Blessings for a 2008 of ***Green Pastures!***

[John welcomes your thoughts and will respond to your email. Email him at DrSpiesman@aol.com.]