

Saturday Communion Saturday Service

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Date: 09 November 2013

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Please turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 23 and verse 4. Psalm 23 and verse 4.

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

May I begin by saying what a great privilege it is for me to have been asked to share this communion season with you. It is a great joy for me to come back to the congregation I first came to 23 years ago as a student, 23 years, to people who mentored me by word and by example to follow and love Jesus more closely and who were very patient with my limitations, and there were very many of them.

So much has happened in the last 23 years, but we're so grateful, aren't we, that the love of God the Father has not changed toward us, nor has there been any diminution in the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ over those years, nor has there been any weakening of the Holy Spirit's transforming influence in our lives as Christian believers.

Through these years, God's Word has taught me these things, and God's love has kept me in His grace. But let me tell you about one of the most important lessons I've learned over all these years.

[1 : 42] A couple of years ago, I was privileged to be present as one of the oldest members of my congregation in Glasgow was breathing her last and passing into eternity. I had been visiting her in hospital daily during her last illness and had struck up a very precious spiritual bond with her.

During her last day, I asked her for her advice on how, as a minister, I should conduct myself and what kind of issues I should preach. She was struggling to breathe, but she pulled off her oxygen mask and she whispered into my ear, preach comfort, preach comfort.

These were the last words she ever spoke to me because that evening she entered into Christ's presence, but even now she's experiencing the comfort she so encouraged me to preach.

And though she's gone, her words still haunt me. Preach comfort. The longer I go on as a Christian and as a minister, the more I realized how much we need the comfort of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We come here week by week, very often hiding our grief and our frustrations, our boredom, our exhaustions, our fears behind a mask of false piety and Stoicism.

But all the time, in the language of Psalm 23 verse 4, we're walking in the valley of the shadow of death. And at times like these, our greatest need is the comfort of the gospel.

[3 : 27] Not just a gospel we intellectually understand, but a gospel we deeply experience as Christians. And it seems to me anyway that the primary comfort that the gospel brings us is that motivated by the love of God the Father for us, applied by the power of the Holy Spirit in us, the blood of Christ shed for us on the cross at Calvary opens up a new and living way for the very presence of God Himself to be known in our day-to-day lives.

Without the forgiving and justifying power of the blood of Jesus, there could be no fellowship between us and God other than the terrifying consciousness of our own guilt before Him and our impending judgment.

But now that we have been made right with God through the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the valley of the shadow of death isn't a place of emptiness, not of barrenness.

It's a place of the fruitful and filling presence of God with us. David says, Even walking in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you yourself are with me.

There's the gospel. There's what the gospel does. The presence of God with His people. In today's confused evangelical world, so influenced by God TV with its health and wealth prosperity gospel, which is no gospel at all, it would seem almost blasphemous to suggest that Christians could ever walk in such a dreadful, and evil place as this valley.

[5 : 11] And yet we do. And not necessarily because we've taken a wrong turn in life. Through long Christian experience, we know the shape of this valley only too well.

Throughout the Bible, this valley is described in many ways. For example, in Amos chapter 5 and verse 8, it's the darkest, darkest part of the night, just before the dawn breaks.

In Job 16 verse 6, it's the darkness of eyes which are heavy with weeping. In Psalm 107 verse 10, it's the darkness of sheer terror.

In Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 6, it's the extreme danger of famine and of enemy attack. In Job chapter 10 verse 6, it's the darkness of the land of the dead.

This is the valley of the shadow of death. You've been there. You know all about it, I'm sure. You're grieving because someone you love is gone.

[6 : 19] You're afraid of unemployment. You're homesick. You're afflicted with a mental illness. You're enduring a broken relationship right now.

You're trying to deal with your doubts. You're just plain exhausted. Whatever it is, you feel as if you're walking in the deepest darkness in the valley of the shadow of death.

Don't be surprised if it's like this for you right now. Every Christian must expect periods of life like this. But what you need most during these hard times isn't mere intellectual understanding.

You need to experience for yourself the guiding, comforting, empowering, protecting, joy-giving presence of God with you. The divine arms underneath you.

The divine voice in your heart. The divine light guiding your way. My late friend said to me, Preach comfort.

[7 : 24] Preach comfort. And this, the presence of God with us in the valley of death's shadow, is the greatest comfort I can preach and I can offer to you.

As we read these words of David in Psalm 23, verse 4, we are meant to understand the presence of God with us as we walk in the valley of the shadow of death in three ways.

First of all, it is a fulfilled presence. And secondly, it's a factual presence. And thirdly, it's a future presence. First of all, it's a fulfilled presence.

It's a fulfilled presence. When we are walking in the valley of the shadow of death, we must remember that we are not the first to have found ourselves in this place.

Indeed, I would go as far as to say that every believer who has ever lived has at one point or other in their lives found themselves walking in the darkness of grief, pain, doubt, and exhaustion.

[8 : 26] When David speaks of the Lord being present with us in the valley of death's shadow, his mind is ranging over the experiences of all those faithful believers who went before him.

No, we're not the first to have walked in the valley of the shadow of death, but likewise, we're not the first to have depended upon the presence of God with us to see us through that valley.

We're not the first to have longed for a fresh experience of the intimacy of God with us in our fear and doubt. The history of God's people is the story of God's presence with them.

And the truth is that in past days, that as in past days, even as God's people have experienced this valley of the shadow of death, they've also experienced God's presence penetrating deeper than the depth of the ice of the darkness.

And that gives David confidence that even though in the past believers have experienced the valley of the shadow of death, they've also experienced the presence of God in there.

[9 : 43] For example, think of Jacob the lonely in Genesis 28, a passage we read together. Jacob the lonely, he had to leave home because of the hatred of his brother Esau and was in such desperate need that he reached a place he would later call Bethel.

He could only find a stone which to rest his head. He had nothing else, just a stone on which to rest his head. And that night he had his famous dream of a ladder stretching from heaven to earth, and in all his personal uncertainty and loneliness, he hears the voice of God saying to him in Genesis 28 verse 15, I am with you.

God with Jacob in his own personal darkness of loneliness. Think then of Moses the fearful. The Moses who God was calling to go back to Egypt and confront Pharaoh.

And Moses cowers before the voice of God speaking in the burning bush, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Moses objects. But to fearful Moses, God says in Exodus 3 verse 12, I will be with you.

Through all the challenges and fears of his own personal experience of the valley of the shadow of death, God was with him. Think also of Joshua the stressed.

[11 : 13] Joshua the stressed. The Joshua who succeeded Moses in leading the wandering Israelites and brought them across the river Jordan to the promised land of Canaan.

There was almost an inhuman burden of pressure on Joshua's shoulders. Entering into the land of Canaan was what millions of wandering Israelites had been waiting for for 40 years.

But to stressed out, pressured Joshua, God says in Joshua 3 verse 7, I am with you. God was with Joshua in his own personal darkness of stress.

There's many more examples we could point to in the Old Testament of God being with his people in the valley of the shadow of death. But you see how much confidence it brought David to think, I'm not the first to have walked in these dark places.

And I'm not the first to have experienced God's presence in these dark places. We have many more examples we could speak of in the New Testament.

[12 : 23] For example, think of Mary the Troubled. The girl to whom an angel appeared. The girl. Informing her that she would carry in her womb the Messiah, the Son of God himself.

She is deeply troubled by what she saw and heard, we read in Luke 1. Her heart was walking in the darkness for a time. But surely these words must have brought her light.

When in Luke 1 verse 28, the angel says to her, The Lord is with you. God's with Mary in her own personal darkness of trouble.

Then think of the disciples, the commissioned. The disciples, the commissioned. The disciples who were commanded by Jesus, Go and make disciples of every nation.

These men who had seen what the consequences of living a holy and Godward life were when they saw their master Jesus being nailed to a cross. And now they're being told to go do the greatest of all tasks.

[13 : 25] Go make disciples of all nations. Surely though, the energy and empowerment they needed for the fulfillment of Christ's commission are found in his words in Matthew 28 verse 20 when he says, I am with you always.

In the darkness of their own personal fear at being commissioned, God was with them. And lastly, consider Paul the persecuted.

Paul the persecuted. The Paul who found himself in the center of a storm when he preached the gospel in Corinth. He was opposed by many who were trying to attack him. For the sake of his own safety, he could have left the persecution of the Corinthians behind him.

And yet listen to what the Lord says to him in a vision in Acts chapter 18 verse 10. He says to Paul, Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

In his own personal darkness of persecution, God was with him. And the point is, are you lonely like Jacob? Are you fearful like Moses?

[14 : 40] Are you stressed like Joshua? Are you troubled like Mary? Are you overwhelmed like the disciples? Are you persecuted like Paul?

What is the precise nature of the darkness of your valley of the shadow of death? Whatever it is, God speaks powerfully and lovingly to you on the basis of his previous fulfillments of this.

And he says to you, I am with you where you are right now. I will always be with you. Yes, even in this valley of death's shadow.

The fulfillment, the fulfilled presence. Secondly here, we see the factual presence, the factual presence.

When David wrote these words, For you are with me, what did he understand by the presence of God with him, such that he could use it as the foundation for being able to say, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil?

[15 : 51] What are the features of God's presence with us that can so fill us with comfort that we can overcome the fear of the darkness of this valley?

As I see it, there are at least three. First of all, there's intimacy. And secondly, there's guidance. And thirdly, there's protection.

Whatever your darkness is right now, let these three things be the foundation of your comfort. First of all, we have intimacy. Intimacy. If I were to translate verse 4 literally, we'd read, I will fear no evil, for you yourself are with me.

For you yourself are with me. There is an emphasis here on the intimacy of the personal presence of God with him in the valley of the shadow of death.

God does not send another to comfort us in the darkness. He himself comes to be with us. And this in itself is a most amazing truth, that in the very antithesis of all God is, God does not send another to us.

[17 : 03] In the valley, when he is enthroned in the heights, in the shadows, when he is the light, in death, where he is life, but here in the valley of death's shadow, God himself is with us.

He doesn't delegate our comfort to angels or to other spiritual beings. Rather, he himself is with us. There is an intimacy of relationship with God to be found in the valley of the shadow of darkness that you won't find in the heights of clarity.

Moses discovered this for himself when he experienced far more of the presence of God when in the poverty of the wilderness as an old man than ever he experienced in the plenty of the courts of Pharaoh as a young man.

And in the same way, although none of us, I'm sure, would willingly walk in such dark places as these, it's often here we experience the you-yourself intimacy of God.

Very soon after my brother married his wife, she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and she was suffering all the painful symptoms common to that kind of cancer.

[18 : 33] My brother phoned me to cry on my shoulder a wee bit and to look for answers to his deepest questions. Why has this happened just weeks after we got married?

I had no deep answer to give him. I never have. I'm not a very deep person. Other than saying that by holding her hand in this darkness, in the darkness of her treatment from cancer, their marriage and interdependence as a couple would strengthen more in the course of three months than most marriages would in 30 years.

It's often in the valley of death shadow that our relationship with God assumes new depths of reality.

The second foundation of the factual presence of God in the valley is guidance. Guidance. David goes on in verse 4 to explain the source of his comfort of the presence of God with him in the valley.

Your rod, he says. Your rod. In those days, every shepherd carried a curved rod. When that sheep was going astray, he would hook that rod around the sheep's neck and pull it back from danger.

[19 : 51] The rod was his instrument of guidance. He used the rod to lead the sheep away from cliffs and toward the green pastures. The rod is in our shepherd's hands.

He knows the way he takes us. And this gives us comfort in so many different ways, but let me confine it to just three.

First, he led us into this valley in the first place. This painful experience you're enduring right now, whatever it is, it's his sovereign plan and purpose for your life.

It's the path he is leading and guiding you on. The shepherd knows best for his sheep, and he knows that this valley, even, yes, though it's the valley of the shadow of death, it's for your good.

But then also, he leads us in the valley of the shadow of death. He leads us here. You know how the saying goes, laugh and everyone laughs with you.

[20 : 54] Cry and you cry alone. How often we have found that when we're in the valley of the shadow of death, even our closest friends have abandoned us.

Or even if they haven't, there was nothing they could say or nothing they could do which would make the experience bearable for us in any way. They spoke into our ears, but we needed God to speak into our hearts.

All those promises of the presence of God we considered earlier were given to believers as they were in the valley of the shadow of death. God was with them there, leading and guiding them there so that they would not stumble, fall, or damage themselves.

His rod is with us in the valley. And of course, lastly, the shepherd who led us into the valley and leads us in the valley will lead us out of the valley.

The valley of the shadow of death is only so long and it's only so dark. It has a beginning, it has a middle, and it has an end. And the shepherd knows the way out.

[22 : 05] He knows how to get back to those green pastures and those still waters. And even though it might not seem this way to you now, he will lead you out of the valley of your darkness toward the brightness of his house.

His rod will hook you round your neck to guide you and lead you to safety in him. What comfort there is to be found in this shepherd's rod! Painful though it may be round our necks, for we know that he who led us here and he who leads us here will lead us out.

We have guidance. That's the second foundation of the factual presence of God with us. And the third is protection. Protection. The comfort of God's presence with us in the valley is not merely his intimacy and his guidance, but also the staff of his protection.

Because the Lord who is our shepherd carries a staff with which to fight off those animals determined to kill his beloved sheep. But the shepherd has a staff and he'll drive away those wild animals.

The sheep see his staff and they know they're safe, they're protected. The wild animals see the shepherd's staff and they know they will not get past it. He is the Lord.

[23 : 27] He is the covenant-keeping, powerful God of the Exodus and of Calvary. The Lord who is seated in the throne of glory and from whom all sovereignty and power originate.

The Lord who is with us in the valley of the shadow of death, wielding his staff so that even though we may see and we may hear the terrors of the night, we shall not be consumed by them.

No, not ever. He has a purpose for our holiness and our comfort in the valley that we shall learn to depend upon him wholly for everything.

Nothing will get in his way. But you may say when confronted by the darkness of this valley, it doesn't feel to me as if God is protecting me from anything.

How dare you suggest that God could be protecting me from pain when I'm going through such at the moment. But then you see, only eternity will ever tell you what God was keeping from you.

[24 : 27] What other darkness the devil would have imposed upon you if God had not been protecting you from the full force of Satan's malevolence. When the chicks of a hen hear the sound of a fox, they hide under their mother's wings for defense.

And in the same way, the Lord allows you to hear the snarl of Satan so that you may draw closer to him for protection. But when Satan sees that staff of God, he knows he is defeated and he backs away into his haunts of eternal darkness.

No wonder, given the intimacy of the you-yourself presence of God with him. No wonder, given the guidance of God's leading rod.

No wonder, given the protection of God's powerful staff, David can say, yes, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

These aren't the words of mindless bravado or stupidity. They are the confidence of a mind and a heart which knows that God is greater than any evil which may come up against him and that his light is brighter than the deepest darkness of the valley.

[25 : 51] Meditate on the presence of God with you in the valley. Is this not the comfort my friend who passed into glory called upon me to preach?

A comfort that you want to know for yourselves? A factual presence. A fulfilled presence, a factual presence.

And thirdly, it's a future presence, a future presence. For all we've said about the presence of God, the presence fulfilled, the presence factual, we dare not forget that the central truth of the presence of God is not to be found in David's presentation of the shepherd leading his sheep as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

It's to be found in the face of Jesus Christ. without understanding how God was in Christ, the presence of God would bring us no comfort at all, only terror in the awareness of the burning purity of a God who is against us because we are sinners in his sight.

But as the truth of Emmanuel, God with us, becomes part of us, mind and heart, we find the deepest comfort as we pass through this valley. And as we close, I want to reflect on how this truth, that of God's presence in Christ, overcomes the darkness of the valley of death shadow.

[27 : 20] First of all, let's look together at the presence of God in Christ. And then let's look together at the presence of God in communion. And then let's close by thinking of the presence of God in consummation.

The presence of God in Christ, first of all. In Matthew chapter 4, verse 16, an introduction to the public ministry of Jesus, Matthew chooses to use the words of Isaiah 9, verses 1 and 2 as the backdrop to the coming of Jesus.

Matthew writes of the great impact Christ will make in his life. He says, the people living in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

Those walking in the shadow of death have, in Christ, seen the dawning light of his coming among them. This is what we have in the cradle of Christ, in his birth and in his life, the Jesus who is the light of the world, the Jesus who is God with us.

In him and through him, God made his dwelling among us. He is tabernacled in our midst. He is with us. He's with us in our valleys. He's with us in our brokenness and our loneliness and our stress and our abandonment and our grief and our persecution and our fear.

[28 : 57] He is God with us. There is no experience we can endure today that he has not endured before us. Furthermore, his comfort in the valley was of the same variety as ours.

The intimacy of his Father, the knowledge of his Spirit's guidance, the certainty of God's protection. He knew the story of his fathers, Joshua, Moses.

He knew how God was with them in all their troubles. He knows and he is with us where we are and when we need him most.

But most importantly, Christ was with us in our sin. Christ was with us in our sin. Not that he himself was a sinner, but that he took up our cause before a holy God.

He himself bore our penalty and the wages of our sin upon the cross. He loved us and gave himself for us. He gave himself to the absence and the forsakenness of God.

[30 : 04] On the cross, in his extreme valley of the shadow of death, he cried out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? This truth here in verse 4 did not apply to Christ on the cross because God was not with his Son on that cross to comfort him, but to crush him on account of our sin.

The solemnity of Calvary, the ultimate valley of the shadow of death, was one Christ bore alone. But through his victory, we have been forgiven and declared righteous before God.

Our sin has been taken away. We have been made right with God. As Paul says later on, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them.

It's the cross and the reconciling work of Christ which opens up the possibility and the certainty of God's presence with us in the valleys.

It is the crushing presence of God in the valley of Christ's death shadow which allows the comforting presence of God with us in our death shadow.

[31 : 27] Perhaps this kind of truth was opaque to David here in Psalm 23, but for those who have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It's the dawning light which turns the darkness of death shadow into the place of divine presence.

The presence of God in Christ. Secondly, we have the presence of God in communion, the presence of God in the communion. One of the great old Scottish worthies said, in the Lord's Supper you do not get a better Christ, but you do get Christ better.

You do not get a better Christ, but you do get Christ better. It is as if the Lord who promises to be with us in our valleys intensifies and reinforces his presence with us as we eat bread and drink wine at his table.

There at his table we meet with him as our host and he invites us saying, take, eat, this is my body, drink this, all of you, this is my blood. Perhaps you're at the stage of your life right now where you desperately, desperately need the comfort my old friend challenged me with, the comfort of the experience of Christ.

It's been so long since you've experienced the intimacy of his presence with you, but now at this communion weekend you have been given an opportunity by Christ himself to get to know him better, to experience his presence with you at the table as together with all the other disciples of Jesus here you eat and drink of him and with him.

[33 : 11] The act of eating and drinking is that of receiving and taking all the benefits of his salvation afresh, of reappropriating your adoption as his sons and daughters with all the rights and privileges of being heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, the highest of all being the presence of God with you in the valleys of this world's death shadows.

So in the next few hours anticipate with excitement and longing that he shall be with you at this table and you shall experience a fresh intimacy in your heart with your Father.

The future presence is the presence of God in Christ, the presence of God in communion and finally the presence of God in consummation, the presence of God in consummation.

There will come a day when there shall be no more valleys of the shadow of death where fear and grief and brokenness and shame and boredom will be gone and we won't even remember how they felt.

But what shall be the reality for us in the glory of the new heavens and the new earth will not be the absence of the terrors of the valleys. It shall be the presence of our shepherd.

[34 : 41] The greatest desire and the ultimate purpose of salvation work is expressed in what Jesus said to his disciples in John 14 verse 3.

And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am.

And also in the prayer of Jesus in John 17 verse 24 remember Father I want those you have given me to be with me where I am. To see my glory.

It's often said that you can only really describe heaven in terms of negatives. No sin no tears no death. But I think a better way of expressing the realities of heaven is to describe it in terms of its positives.

The eternal and full presence of Christ with us forever. Even as we read in Revelation 7 verse 17 the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd he will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

[35 : 55] And then again from Revelation 21 verse 3 where we read now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

does this not fill you with the comfort of hope? Is this not the comfort which my old friend urged me to preach?

Is this not the reality that she's experiencing right now at Christ's God's right hand in heaven? The comfort of looking into the eyes of Jesus and being led by him to springs of living water?

even in a small measure isn't this what comfort you so desperately are looking for in your life? Then in some small way beginning with the Lord's Supper tomorrow morning strive to experience the truth of Psalm 23 verse 4 in your life.

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

[37 : 15] Let us pray. We think oh Lord of so many of your people this evening who are passing through valleys of the shadow of death. Those who are experiencing great pain and brokenness and Lord we pray that you would guide them and protect them but most importantly oh Lord that you would be present with them.

We know that we're not the first to have experienced these kind of valleys and we're not the first to have experienced the truth that very often you are closer to us in these valleys than anyone else in life.

and once again we pray Lord that in the hours between now and that hour when we shall sit round the Lord's table together and meet with you that you would heighten and enhance our anticipation that we shall meet with Christ here the Christ who is with us when we pass through the valley of the shadow of death the Christ who is our comfort the Christ who himself endured the forsakenness of your presence when he passed through the valley of his own death shadow so that we may be comforted Lord we ask and pray that you would give us tonight an earnest desire not to rest not to go to bed not to rise until we have experienced a fresh outpouring and a fresh experience of your presence in our lives we ask these things in Jesus name

Amen now we shall close by singing together in Psalm 85 Psalm 85 we shall sing from verse 1 to verse 7 this is from sing psalms Psalm 85 from verse 1 to verse 7 you'll find this on page number 113 in times past Lord you showed favor to your own beloved land the prosperity of Jacob you restored by your strong hand you forgave your people's trespass you were pleased their sins to hide you withdrew all your displeasure from your wrath you turned aside Psalm 85 from verse 1 to 7 to God's praise«

Vad hat after he bitch said the prosperity prosperity of Jacob, you restored by your soul and you forgave your legal trespass, you were pleased that sins survived.

[40 : 49] You, through all your displeasure, from your wrath you turn past.

God, O Savior, now restore us, all must turn away your rage.

Will your anger burn against us? Will it thus promise to wage?

Will you not again revive us, that we live rejoicing you?

Show us, Lord, your covenant mercy, your salvation grant on you.

[42 : 10] May grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, rest and remain upon each one of you, now and always.

Amen.