

Walking With Fingers Crossed

A Message About God's Deliverance The Lord Is My Shepherd (Part 5)

Going Down to Get Up

As I said last week, in order for sheep to remain healthy, they must constantly be led towards fresh pastures. For this reason, a good shepherd would always start his sheep each spring on a slow pilgrimage up into the hills. As summer came on, he'd keep moving his flock forward; up toward those mountain meadows where they could still find good forage long after the pastures on the lower ground had burned out. By summer's end, the flock would be high up above the timberline, chasing, as it were, the receding snows. And there, where the air is clearest and the pastures sweet, the sheep would prosper to the shepherd's delight.

There is only one strange, almost paradoxical thing about the journey up to those heights. You see, in order to get *up* there, a good shepherd would almost invariably take his sheep *down*. Sometimes it would be down into the depressions that separated one ridge from the higher one just beyond. Other times it would be into one of the canyons or gullies that scar the hills of the Middle East. The point is that to reach the higher ground, a shepherd had to allow his sheep to walk through valleys.

Now, that didn't always go over too well with the sheep. For one thing, some of these paths were more like crevices than valleys. They became so narrow that a huge flock of sheep could be reduced to a single-file line. Passage through could get depressingly difficult. Some of these valleys were so deep that sunlight would only filter down to the bottom for a few hours around noon each day. Compared to the open hillside, those valleys could be extremely dark. Unable to see as clearly what lay ahead, the sheep often grew very uneasy, if not downright despairing.

But there were other issues too. During his years as a shepherd boy, the Psalmist David would have seen how summer storms could produce flash floods that sent a wall of water down a ravine. He would know how rock slides could suddenly bury the traveling sheep beneath a crushing weight. Add to all that the fact that the sheep's predators could much more easily hide among the broken cliffs and rocks of the valley than on the open face of the mountain, and you can see why valleys were not just difficult and dark, but also dangerous places. Ancient shepherds gave to particularly treacherous canyons names like the "glen of gloom" or the "valley of the death-shadow."¹ Sound familiar?

Difficult, Dark & Dangerous Places

Sheep, of course, aren't the only ones who know such places. I think of the two people I saw standing next to one another in the Fellowship Hall last Sunday—each silently nursing a cup of coffee. One heaved a sigh and said: "You know, I wish I were dead." The other sighed even louder and said: "Oh, if only I felt *that* good!" I'm just kidding of course! I've never actually *heard* anyone say that. But I imagine it isn't too far from

what some people feel. You know. You've walked through the valley of the shadow at some point. Some of you are there now.

Perhaps you're in the midst of one of those incredibly difficult passages. You wonder how you're going to make it with your marriage or family the way it is, or how you're going to survive another week filled with the pressures you're facing at work. Or maybe you're deep in a dark canyon. You try keeping busy, but you just can't seem to get over that loss, or that aching loneliness, or that lingering physical problem and sometimes the depression becomes almost unbearable despair. I know there are people here today for whom the valley right now seems unbelievably dangerous. You're feeling yourself crushed by a rock-slide of pressure, or attacked by predators, or swept away by waves of worry or worse. You can't see how you'll ever get out of this trench alive.

Sometimes, when we've done everything else we know how to do, all we can do is cross our fingers—superstitiously hope that things will magically get better or turn out all right. I think of the apparently successful man who felt himself in a shadowed valley like that and, desperate for some kind of encouragement, secretly went to a fortune-teller. The fortune-teller gazed into a crystal ball and tells him: "I can see that you will be poor and unhappy until you are 45 or 50 years old." "Oh," says the man hopefully. "Then what happens." The woman looks back into the crystal and says: "Then, you'll get used to it!"

I suppose that's *partly* helpful! We can try to simply *get used to* the valleys of life. They are, in a sense, inevitable and unavoidable. That's why the Psalmist does not say "Yea, just in case I walk..." or "Yea, if I'm one of those one in a million who has to walk..." but "**Yea, though I walk through the valley...**" The very word "**though**" is a reminder of the inescapability of such furrows on the face of our lives. As Scott Peck remarks in that unforgettable first paragraph of his bestseller, *The Road Less Travelled*: "Life IS difficult." The road to the higher ground—whether in a family, a career, or the spiritual life—always leads through some valleys. The sooner that we stop trying to wish our way around that reality, says Peck, the sooner we can get on to the business of living creatively in spite of it.

The Valley Can Be a Road

So let me dare to suggest that there may be an even more helpful way of looking at this stuff. Consider the possibility that there may actually be some creative, redemptive opportunities for you not simply "*in spite of*" the valleys in your life, but precisely "*because of*" them. In other words, consider the possibility that there may actually be some very good reasons why the shepherd has either led you (or someone you know) down into the valley, or else allowed you (or that loved one) to wander down there in the natural course of life.

ONE possible reason may be because, ironically, valleys tend to provide a safer route to higher ground than any other part of the mountainside. Have you ever noticed that modern-day roads up mountains will often follow the course of natural valleys and ravines? There's a reason for that. It's because the water and ice that creates valleys in the first place, tends to smooth them out. The good shepherd knows that. He knows

from experience that the pitch of the slope there isn't quite as severe, the ground a bit firmer underfoot. There is less chance of his sheep stumbling, falling, and back-sliding when they're walking toward the top by way of those ravines.

Could that be true of you and me too? Could it be that God allows us to travel by way of a valley now and then because He knows that we are a bit less prone to prideful tumbles or moral slides when we're walking humbly through a vale of hardship or trial than when we're scrambling over the shale of self-satisfaction and success? In looking back at my own life, I can honestly say that I have travelled more effectively and efficiently up the mountain of character-development by way of dark valleys than by the wide open slope. How about you?

The Valley Can Be an Oasis

I suspect there's another reason why a good shepherd leads his flock up through ravines. Some years ago, I hiked up a canyon in the Anza Borrego Desert east of San Diego. There in the midst of a barren wilderness, where the rocky walls of two opposing mountains are steep and close, is an oasis better than Disney could imagine. There are towering palm trees like the pillars of a great cathedral, a magnificent waterfall, a pool of the coldest, clearest, cleanest water. When I first laid eyes on it, I was blown away. But a good shepherd wouldn't have been. That's the SECOND reason why he risks leading his sheep through the valley of the shadow of death. He knows that in arid countryside, it is not on the open hillside, but in the deep ravines that the best water and food can be found. It is at the bottom that the greatest resources collect and grow.

I know people who've discovered that to be true in matters of the spirit too. I think of the business executive who, in the midst of a massive financial reversal, finally found the fulfillment he'd been searching for; it turned out to be a whole new level of intimacy and commitment with the wife and kids he'd been ignoring for years. I think too of Stephen Hawking, the brilliant astrophysicist whose *Brief History of Time* many of you have read. Hawking says that before he became ill with Lou Gehrig's disease, life held little interest for him. It was an exercise in sheer boredom. He drank too much and did little work. But when he learned he had ALS and was only given a few years to live, his life underwent a radical change. Claiming to be happier after he was afflicted than before, Hawking said, "When one's expectations are reduced to zero, one really appreciates everything one has. Suddenly each day becomes precious and meaningful."²

I don't know if you are walking through a valley right now or not. But on the off-chance that you are, I encourage you to consider the possibility that it is simply the shepherd's way of trying to lead you to an unexpected oasis. Maybe God is calling you to drink deeply at the spring of scripture or some other fount of spiritual growth. Perhaps the Lord is inviting you to eat of the fruit of friendship or of family commitment in a way that you've neglected in recent years. And here is a wilder thought still. Just maybe God has allowed suffering to carve deep valleys in your soul because He intends to make *YOU* an oasis. He intends to pour into that channel some living water, to grow in that furrow in your soul a greater love, patience, gentleness, kindness, or some other fruit of the Spirit, that will make you the unexpected oasis some thirsty and hungry sheep may be led to this week. Do you think that's possible?

The Valley

Why does a shepherd allow his sheep to walk through the valley of the shadow of death? I think it is, first, because as difficult, dark, and dangerous as such valleys are in some ways, they are, spiritually speaking, safer more reliable pathways to the high ground of Christ-like character than the slippery shale of success on which human pride so often stumbles and falls. I think it is, secondly, because it is not on the open hillside, but in the deep ravines that the greatest oases are usually found. But let me suggest one FINAL reason.

In his book, *Half Time*, Texas media mogul, Bob Buford, tells of the drowning of his son Ross in the Rio Grande River. After 41 trackers searched for him, and Buford himself hired airplanes, helicopters, boats, trackers with dogs, Buford walked along the river—in his words—"as frightened as I've ever felt." "Here's something you can't dream your way out of," I told myself. "Here's something you can't think your way out of. Here's something you can't buy your way out of. Here's something you can't work your way out of." "This is," Buford thought to himself, "something you can only trust your way out of."

Have you ever been there? Could you be there right now? Then here's the good news. Dr. Leonard Sweet puts it this way: "Though' none of us gets out of life without walking the valley, the psalmist makes it plain that God does not intend for us to sojourn there forever. We can walk **through** our problems. We can walk **through** our sorrows. We can walk **through** our pain" and failures. But what even sheep understand is that what makes all the difference in whether or not you make it victoriously through to the higher pastures, is whether there is a good shepherd in whom you can put your trust. Do you have such a shepherd?

I believe you do. Let me say in closing that it is interesting that the difference between the "though" of the valley and the "through" of victorious arrival on the other side lies in one letter—the letter "r." Do you know how the letter "r" is made in American Sign Language? It's fashioned by crossing your middle finger over your index finger. Look familiar? As I said at the start, we tend to think of crossed fingers as wishing for luck. But crossed fingers didn't always mean that. Early Christians used to make that gesture as a sign of identification between themselves and an affirmation of the assurance they shared. They crossed their fingers to remind themselves that there was a great Someone who had made a promise to them.

You see, Jesus had said to them: "**In this world you will have suffering, but be brave, for I have overcome the world.**"³ Those who had stood at the foot of Christ's cross could never forget that they had a shepherd who'd been through the darkest valley any of us have ever walked. But that was not all they knew. You see, they'd also met the once crucified Shepherd alive beyond that cross. It convinced them to the core that the shepherd was stronger than the shadow of death, wiser than the predators who lurked there, and it gave them the absolute courage to believe that though the sheep walked through the darkest valley, He had the power to bring them safely *through* to the other side.

My friends, the shepherd's promise is made to you too. You can say my "thoughts" will become "throughs," for "Thou" O Lord art with me—and you've never lost one of your sheep. I know it's easier to believe that here in the fold than when you're out there in the valley. That's why, when fear for the future looms up—when you wish you had a crystal ball to remind you that you're in good hands—here's a suggestion, just walk with your fingers crossed.

Let us pray...

Introduction

It seems to me that most of us walk through life with our fingers crossed. We go along hoping that the way we're parenting our kids will give them what they need to make it in this world. We go along praying that somehow we'll make it past the period of difficulty we may be in right now. We go along hoping that the next tee shot or the next business quarter, the next doctor's report or the next season of life will be as we'd like. Some of us probably worry too much—others of us perhaps not enough!—but we are united in this: Amidst all the uncertainties of life, we yearn for the assurance that somehow things will turn out O.K.

That's why there is such encouragement for you and me in the Scripture lesson for today. You see, embedded in the fourth verse of the Twenty-Third Psalm is this awesome assurance—one that you and I can take with us as a source of strength and perspective for the journey ahead. But, as with the other affirmations we've studied these past several weeks, this one will be just that much more embraceable the more we understand about *sheep*... and—even more importantly—the more we understand about their *Shepherd*. Would you please pray with me?

¹Leonard Sweet, "The Six Longest Verses in the Bible," *Homiletics Magazine*, March-April 1995.

²*Omni Magazine*, February 1979, p.46.

³John 16:33.