

Fil-Am Community Church
 GOD'S ANTIDOTE FOR DARK VALLEYS
 Stress busters - Part 5
 Pastor David Bennett
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Good Morning Fil-Am, it is so good to see you this morning, I promise I will have you out of here before the streetlights come on tonight....
 (Joke, Joke, Joke)

We have a saying here at Fil-Am that every time we get together it is like a family reunion, with that being said please take this time to reacquaint yourself with family members that you have not seen in a while and let them know how glad you are to see them again.

We are on part 5 of our "Stress Busters" series and today we are going to look at the area of, "Dark Valleys" but before we do let's take a moment and look at Psalms 23 again.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my Shepherd	<u>That's Relationship</u>
I shall not want	<u>That's Supply</u>
He maketh me lie down on green pastures	<u>That's Rest</u>
He leadeth me beside still waters	<u>That's Refreshment</u>
He restoreth my soul	<u>That's Healing</u>
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness	<u>That's Guidance</u>
For his name sake	<u>That's Purpose</u>
Yea tho I walk through the valley of the shadow of death	<u>That's Testing</u>
I will fear no evil	<u>That's Protection</u>
For tho art with me	<u>That's Faithfulness</u>
Thy Rod and thy Staff they comfort me	<u>That's Discipline</u>
Tho prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies	<u>That's Hope</u>
Tho annotitest my head with oil	<u>That's Consecration</u>
My cup runneth over	<u>That's Abundance</u>
Surley goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life	<u>That's Blessing</u>
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord	<u>That's Security</u>
Forever	<u>That's Eternity</u>

Today we are going to concentrate on just one aspect of Psalms 23 and that's 23:4, "*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.*"

There is an old Arab parable that says: All sunshine and no rain makes a desert." If you never have any down times, dark times, gloomy times in your life you'll be dried up. You'll have no depth to yourself, no maturity. It takes good times and bad times to make a mature person. Life is a mixture of pain and pleasure, of victory and defeat, of success and failure, of mountain tops and valleys.

Ask any climber or runner when they get to the top of the summit or cross the finish line, it's not just the finish but the journey that got you there that's important.

I know growing up in the Marine Corps I learned more about leadership from bad leaders than I ever did from good ones, for starters there were many more to choose from, but seriously I saw the mistakes that were made by my leadership and said to myself to pay attention and make sure whenever I was put into a position of authority that I would never make the same mistakes that they did. The bottom line is to use what you were given and try and make every experience a positive one by turning it into a learning experience.

Today we're going to look at God's antidote to the Dark Valleys of life. Even in our darkest valleys, our darkest days, God is there. "*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.*" Psalm 23:4

In Israel there is a real Valley of the Shadow of Death, beyond the hills of Bethlehem heading toward the Dead Sea. It's a steep, deep and narrow canyon. The sun only hits the bottom of it when it's directly overhead at high noon. The rest of the time the bottom of the canyon is dark. A spring breaks forth at the foot of the Mt of Olives some 2,700 feet above sea level almost 2 ½ miles high. It cuts a valley that through the centuries has cut deep into the earth; it goes all the way to the Dead Sea some 1,300 feet below sea level.

It is very similar to the Grand Canyon and is as deep as 1,500 feet in some places; it is in those shadows of this valley that wild animals and robbers waited to leap upon the innocent victims as they passed by. David probably led his sheep through the valley of the shadow of death as he was growing up.

There are five facts about valleys that you need to remember whenever you go through a tough time:

1. VALLEYS ARE INEVITABLE

They are going to happen so you might as well count on them. You have just come out of a valley, or you're in one right now, or you're probably headed toward one. Valleys happen throughout life -- one right after another.

After every mountain top there is a valley. Jesus was very realistic about it. In John 16, He says "In the world you will have trouble." It's not a matter of if, it's when. It's going to happen. You're going to have difficulty, disappointment, discouragement in life. There will be times of suffering, sorrow, sickness. There will be times of frustration, failure and fatigue. They are going to happen. They are a normal part of life. Don't be surprised by it.

It is not important how many times you fall down the important thing is to remember how many times you get back up.

2. VALLEYS ARE UNPREDICTABLE

You can't plan them, time them, schedule them. Valleys are always unexpected. They usually come at the worst time -- when you don't have time, when you're unprepared. Have you ever had a flat tire at a good time? They just happen. And usually when you least need them and it's most inconvenient. It would be very great if we could schedule our down times in life. You can't plan life like that.

Valleys come suddenly. They are unpredictable. Have you noticed how easily a good day can become a bad day?

A phone call, a letter, a routine doctor's check-up, a freak accident. Valleys just happen. It could be a deer running in front of your vehicle at the wrong time.

Jeremiah 4:20 *"Disaster follows disaster... In an instant my tents are destroyed, my shelter falls in a moment."*

3. VALLEYS ARE IMPARTIAL

The President of the United States understands being in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, he rides in a \$500,000 automobile. That can withstand small military attacks. It is a new Lincoln Limousine but it has a fighter plane canopy and a ton of armor on the vehicle. The glass in the vehicle is the same type used in fighter jet planes and its tires are designed with hard steel disc under the rubber that allow the vehicle to drive full speed with four flat tires...

No one is immune to them. No one is insulated from pain and sorrow. No one gets to skate through life problem free. Everybody has problems -- good people and bad people. Problems, trials, difficulties, disturbances, downtimes, depression doesn't mean you're a bad person. It means you're a person. It doesn't mean you're an evil human being; it means you're a human being. The Bible is very clear that good things happen to bad people and sometimes bad things happen to good people. Valleys are impartial. They don't care how good or bad you are.

The Devil is not a discriminator to race creed or religion he infects us all the same.

Matthew 5:45 Jesus said, *"It rains on the just and the unjust too."* When we go through a difficult time -- a valley in life -- the first reaction is always "Why me?"

Yet really you should ask "Why not me?" Do you think you should be exempt from all the problems everybody else has to go through? Do you think you should be the only one in the universe that never has a tragedy, a loss, loses a loved one? Instead of saying "Why me?" just realize it's going to happen because you're a human being. Remember this is not heaven. Things are not perfect here and there are problems and difficulties. They are going to happen in life -- to good people, Christians. Disasters and tragedies happen to all of us.

4. VALLEYS ARE TEMPORARY

They have an end to them. They don't last. They are not a permanent location. David says, "Even though I walk through the valley..." The valley is not something you stay in your entire life. It's something you go through -- a circumstance, a situation that has a season to it. When you're in a valley you often think it's a dead end, but it's not. It's like a tunnel -- there is a beginning and end. You go through the tunnel and eventually you're out of it and back out in the light again. They don't come into your life to stay. They come to pass.

1 Peter 1:6 *"There is a wonderful joy ahead, even though the going is rough for a while down here."* He admits that sometimes you're going to go through tough times. It's going to be rough. Life is tough. You're going to have it. But it's only for a while. There is wonderful joy ahead. He's talking about Heaven. There are no problems in heaven, no valleys, no dark days.

While you may be harassed down here, in heaven you'll have no problems. If you know the Lord Jesus Christ, that's where you're going. He says don't get discouraged. Even if you live 80 or 90 years and have a problem your entire life, that is so insignificant compared to the thousands and millions of years in eternity problem free. He says, even if it's your whole life it's just temporary compared in light of eternity.

"Our troubles are short lived and there is an eternal glory which outweighs them all." They won't last; they will be short. But he says, there is an eternal glory. This is important. Pain can be productive. There will be a benefit for our problems if we respond in the right way. While we have the temporary

hassles there is long term, eternal benefit when you go through a valley and respond to it correctly.

5. VALLEYS ARE PURPOSEFUL

God has a reason for taking you through the valleys. Whether its doubt, depression, despair, discouragement, defeat -- He's got a reason behind it.

I Peter 1:6-7 *"At the present you may be temporarily harassed by all kinds of trials."* He says temporary – they aren't going to last forever. You are temporarily harassed with problems here. And there may be all kinds of trials. There are financial valleys, relational valleys, emotional valleys, all kinds of different trials. *"...This is no accident -- it happens to prove your faith..."* The valleys are not just a freak of nature. God wants to build your Faith in the valleys of life.

We love to enjoy the mountain tops, but you don't build faith on the mountain tops. You build faith in the valleys of life. When everything is going fine and great you don't really need God.

But when you come face to face with a dark valley, you get on your knees. Faith is strengthened in the valleys.

When you don't feel like serving and trusting God, praising God... that's where your faith is tested. Not in the good times of life, but in the valleys.

1. Every problem has a purpose.

Even the little tiny ones, the inconsequential ones, the things that seem like mere irritations. They have a purpose. God can teach you character. He wants to change you, mature you.

I know I have mentioned this in the past but it bears repeating. I know there were times in my life I looked back and asked God why was I allowed to go through this or that? Why did these bad things happen to me, when I am trying to do good and all that happens is life comes crashing in all at once. But I have learned that it is all to teach me something, some of it was a lesson

that I needed to learn and at other times it was to take me somewhere down into a valley so one day I can tell others how to get out, or how to maintain while you are there, the lessons I had to learn were not always for my benefit but for the benefit of my kids, neighbors, home group, church.....

In Prov. 3:5-6 "**Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.**" I still don't understand why things happen but instead, I focus on trusting God in the valleys of life that don't make any sense.

2. Faith is built in the valleys of life.

There is an Indian fable that says a mouse was in constant distress, because of his distress of its fear from the cat. A magician see's this and talks pity on the mouse and turned the mouse into a cat, immediately it became afraid of the dog. So the magician turned the cat into a dog, immediately it began to fear the tiger. The Magician turns the dog into a tiger, immediately, it began to fear the hunter, the magician finally said, "Be a mouse again, you only have the heart of a mouse and I cannot help you." Maxwell Droke

God wants to build your character. He is far more interested in your character than He is in your comfort or your convenience. God's goal in life is not to just make life comfortable for you. He wants to build character. He's more interested in your holiness than He is in your happiness. Holiness lasts, happiness doesn't. Happiness comes from holiness anyway. He wants to make you like Jesus Christ. He wants you to develop the character of Christ. If God is going to make you like Christ, He is going to take you through all of the circumstances of life He took Christ through.

Was Jesus exempted from suffering?

Absolutely not.

What makes you think you're going to be exempted? Did Jesus go through times of loneliness? Yes. Will you? Yes. Was Jesus ever tempted to be discouraged? Yes. Will you? Yes.

Was Jesus ever misunderstood, maligned, and criticized unjustly? Yes. Will you? **Absolutely.**

What makes you think you're any different? You're going to go through valleys. God wants to build character in your life. It's not by accident.

God can use even the evil done to us by others, turn it around and bring good out of it by building character in us. He definitely uses the tragedies and valleys of life in our lives.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU GO THROUGH DARK VALLEYS?

David said, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

It reminds me of the Rodney Atkins song, "If you're going through hell" The chorus goes;

*If you're going through hell,
Keep on going, don't slow down,
If you're scared don't show it,
You might get out,
Before the devil even knows your there.*

*If you're going through hell,
Keep on moving, face that fire,
Walk right through it,
You might get out,
Before the Devil even knows your there.*

Saints that's the same attitude we should have when facing Dark Valleys.

1. REFUSE TO BE DISCOURAGED

"I will fear no evil." I've always thought Christians should be the ones wearing all of the "No fear" T-shirts. I will fear no evil; I fear nothing. That's what David says as a Christian, who puts his faith in God. *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death"*. It says "I walk" -- not "I run through it" or "I panic and run the other way". To walk means calmly, deliberately make steps through the valley. David says "I'm not going to be afraid. I will calmly walk through the valley."

Refuse to be discouraged. You can't go around the valley. You can't go under the valley. You can't go over the valley. You can only go through the valley. Here he says "I will not fear evil".

Will implies a choice. It implies a decision on your part. I will not be afraid. If you are discouraged this morning, it's because you're choosing to be discouraged. I don't have to know your problems. You're choosing to be discouraged. Discouragement is always a choice.

Always.

You don't have to choose to be discouraged, but you're choosing to think discouraging thoughts. You're choosing to look at all the negatives. You're choosing not to look at Christ and all the positive things. You're looking at all of the negatives. That's a choice. You can choose to change, too.

That's what God wants you to do -- choose. It's a deliberate act.

How do I choose to not be discouraged?

By focusing on God's power rather than on your problem.

Remember David the Giant Killer he was not focusing on the problem he was focusing on God.

When you focus on Giants you fall, but when you focus on God your Giants fall.

That's how you do it. You can take two people and put them in the identical situation -- a chaos, tragedy, crisis -- one of them will be blown away by it, the other is actually strengthened by it. One of them falls apart; one of them is strengthened through it. The difference is what you're focusing on. You need to focus, not on your circumstance, but on Christ. Not on the situation, but on the Savior. Not on your problem, but on God's power.

Col. 1:11 *"God will strengthen you with his own great power so that you will not give up when troubles come, but you will be patient."*

Human energy runs out. After a trial of a certain length of time, you don't have any energy left. No stamina. Human endurance has an end to it. It runs out. In the valleys of life you need a power source bigger than yourself. If you think you're going to make it through all the valleys of life on your own power -- forget it. You're not going to. You don't have enough power to handle all the things that are going to hit you in life. You need a power source beyond yourself to key into.

Ps. 34:18 *"The Lord is close to the broken hearted and He saves those who are crushed in Spirit."*

Jeremiah 29:11 *"I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you, not harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."*

2. REMEMBER THAT GOD IS WITH ME

David said, *"For You will be with me. You're with me every moment."* God not only promises us His power in the valley, He promises His presence. You will never go through a valley in life by yourself. You will never go through a dark day alone. God has said, *"I will be with you."*

Isa. 43:2 *"When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fires of oppression, you will not be burned up -- the flames will not consume you."* You're not going to drown, burn up, die -- God says I am with you. He will be with you every step in the valley. God says there is nothing to fear when Jesus is near. God does not set up in

heaven, looking down on you saying, "I sure hope they make it!" He's there with you in the valley, walking with you, hand in hand.

God says, I will lead you through this. At verse 4 of Psalm 23 there is a strategic change in the language. In the first part of the psalm all of the pronouns are in the 3rd person -- he talks about God: "*He leads me beside still waters, He guides me into green pastures, He restores my soul*". David is talking about God.

But when he gets in the valley it changes to second person pronouns. He starts talking not about God but to God. "You are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me." It's the valleys of life that bring us face to face with God. All of a sudden the ultimate becomes the intimate. When I'm going through the valley I don't want to talk about God, I want to talk to God. Religion becomes a relationship. Any mature believer will tell you that the times they have been closest to God were in those face to face encounters that happen only in the valley. When you're in the valley and you're spent, depleted, perplexed, in despair and you're talking directly to God, He becomes real and God says, "*I'm with you. You're not in this by yourself.*" We enjoy the mountaintops but we come face to face with God in the valleys of life. He'll never be closer than when you're in the valley.

In 2 Cor 1 it says that one reason God allows us to go through trials, tribulations, valleys is so we would be able to comfort and help others. Finally, if you're facing any major illness let me encourage you with this verse from Rev. 2:10 "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you the devil will put some of you in prison to test you and you will suffer. But be faithful, even to the point fo death, and I will give you the crown of life."

3. I RELY ON GOD'S PROTECTION AND GUIDANCE

David reminds himself that God's rod and staff comforts him. The rod and staff were the two basic tools that a shepherd used to protect and guide the sheep. A rod was basically about two foot long, at the end of it was a heavy

knot. Shepherds were very skilled at hurling the rod, like a missile, at anything that would attack the sheep. God is saying, *"When you go through the valley, I'm defending you. I'm protecting you."*

The rod of God will protect you. Today's shepherds don't use rods, they use guns. It's interesting that in the Old West a gun is also called a rod. God says "I'm going to defend you, protect you." When you're going through the valley, the dark valley of life, God is not sitting in heaven unconcerned and apathetic. The Good Shepherd fights for you. While you're fighting for your life in that depression, God is fighting with you. He's fighting off spiritual forces. He is your defender and protector. That's what the rod represents.

Proverbs 29: 25 *"The fear of mankind brings a snare but those who put their trust in God will be safe. "*

When you go through a valley of life the scary parts are the shadows. In the darkness you just see the shadows on the wall of the valley as you're going through that canyon. And you're thinking "How am I going to make it?"

John 14:1, 17 *"Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me...peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives, do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

David says, "When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" -- he didn't walk through the valley of death, but the valley of the shadow of death. One day, someday, a shadow is going to fall over your life. Count on it.

You will experience one of those shadow moments. When those times come you need to remember three important things about shadows:

1. Shadows are always bigger than the reality. Fear is always greater than the actual problem. It's the fear that is enormous.

2. Shadows cannot hurt you. Ever been run over by a shadow? There is a difference between the shadow of a truck and the truck itself. Shadows are

image without substance. They cannot hurt you. They can scare you, but they cannot hurt you. They are just shadows.

3. *There is no shadow without a light somewhere.* When you're going through a dark valley, you think the sun has stopped shining. God is dead. I'm all alone. You can't see at all and you think you're in total darkness. But any time there is a shadow it means there is a light somewhere.

When you start to get afraid of the shadow in the dark valleys of life turn your back on the shadow and look directly at the light and the shadow falls behind you. When you're afraid, don't look at the shadow. Turn in the exact opposite direction and look at the light and the shadow falls behind you. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." When you look at Him you cannot be afraid of all the other shadows around you. They fall behind you. If you look at the world you'll be distressed.

If you look directly into the sun or a flashlight that is shined directly in your face? You can't see anything but the light. That's the same reaction we should have when we are going through the valleys of life, remain focused on Jesus and his protection and everything around you will fade away until all you can see is the light. We know why the disciple could walk on water, it was because he was focused on Jesus and not his surroundings.

If you look within you'll be depressed. If you look at Christ you'll be at rest. It's your choice. It all depends on what you're looking at. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. Don't look at the shadows. When you're walking through the valley, look at the light.

Fear is inevitable, it is always there it is all in the manner we approach it and how we deal with it. During his years as [premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience. "You were one of Stalin's colleagues, why didn't you stop him?"

Who said that? Roared Khrushchev. An agonizing silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev quietly replied; "Now you know why."

Christians have disappointments. Christians get sick. Christians experience tragedies. Christians lose loved ones. Christians have financial problems. God's people have family problems. Believers go through valleys just like everybody does. But there is a difference and it's a big difference.

The difference is that while believers and non-believers go through the same valleys of life, the difference for the Christian is not the absence of the shadow but the presence of the Shepherd. God is with you.

This is the last story I will tell you today it is a story of a man who was working construction on a skyscraper late into the evening time. He was working on the outside of the building when he suddenly lost his balance and fell, as he was falling he managed to reach out and grasp the edge of the wall with his fingertips. He was desperately holding on for dear life, stories above the city streets below. This was his valley as he hung there he tried to pray and yelled into the night but his voice was carried away with the busy city below.

Soon his arms began to grow numb and began to shake, at last his fingers gave way and with a retching sob of sheer terror he fell into the night..... a full three inches to a scaffold that had been there in the darkness the whole time.

How like a lot of Christians, thinking their salvation depends on their endurance, and conscious of their weakness, they are fearful, anxious and unhappy most of the time, forgetting that they are safe in the arms of the everlasting God. If God is for us who can be against us?

David did not worry about nor fear this valley as he entered it. He was aware who his shepherd was and what he was able to do. For David it was a walk in the park, because he realized he was never alone.

Are you afraid today?

Are you afraid of what's lurking in the shadows waiting on you to come walking by?

What is it that is keeping you from putting all your trust in Jesus? Go all in it will be a decision you will never forget.

Let us pray.....