**Promises, Promise**

**FBC Albemarle**

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Death Valley, in California, is the lowest, driest and hottest desert in the United States. Since the 1880s when official records were recorded, the hottest temperature in the United States - 134 degrees – occurred in Death Valley. It is not uncommon to have 120 degree days in the summer. So if you're planning to visit Death Valley, you'd be wise to choose one of the other seasons.

In the carefully measured language of the official brochure of Death Valley National Park, it states: “*Summer starts early in Death Valley. By May the valley is too hot for most visitors. ... Lodging and camping are available, but only the most hardy will want to camp in the low elevations in the summer. Most summer visitors tour by car to the main points of interest along the paved roads but do little else due to the extreme heat.”*

Yet that dangerously high heat is exactly the reason many car makers send their prototype models to Death Valley in the middle of the summer: They want to see how the vehicles perform under the intense conditions in the valley named Death. Car makers take their prototypes to the valley and put them through a series of grueling tests. In the extreme heat, the prototypes are put through frequent starting and stopping, prolonged idling, towing 7,000-pound loads up and down the steep mountain roads surrounding the valley, leaving the cars in direct sun with the windows rolled up and then clocking how long it took for the air conditioners to cool the interior and additional tests designed to push the engines, transmissions and other components to the limits.

There's good reason for all this testing, of course. Although the car companies know most of their vehicles will spend little, if any, time in Death Valley-like conditions, they deliberately overtax them to help ensure their customers won't have problems in normal service.

Another way to say that is that all this test-driving in an extreme environment is an attempt to take the scary out of the driving we car owners do in rough weather. And when we think of it that way, we have a somewhat different entry point into Psalm 23, which also talks about moving through a valley of darkness.

Psalm 23 is one of the best-known passages of the Bible because it is often read at funerals. It's appropriately used there and is, no doubt, a comforting passage to mourners. But if we think of it only as a funeral text, we can miss the fact that the Psalm is mostly about *living*.

David wrote the poem to express his confidence in the Lord’s care for him. As he reflected on that care, he realized that it was very much like the care of a shepherd for his sheep (vv. 1–4) and the hospitality of a host for his guests (vv. 5–6). David was very familiar with both. Much of his time during his boyhood years was occupied with the care of his father’s sheep, and one of his duties as a king was hosting guests. However, in this case, David is not the shepherd but the sheep and not the host but the guest, and it is none other than the Lord himself who is doing the shepherding and the hosting.

In the ancient world, as in ours today, shepherds were herders and tenders of sheep, but back then, "shepherd" was also a metaphor for the role kings were to play. They were to tend to their people, providing for them and protecting them. The problem was that most kings were terrible shepherds. Thus, for someone in that culture to say, "The Lord is my shepherd" was similar to saying, "The Lord is my king," and the point was that God does what a king/shepherd is *supposed* to do. The person was declaring an intention to live under God's rule, and the rest of the Psalm then becomes a description of the good things that come to that person as a subject of this king.

Thus, because the Lord is a good shepherd and I am a member of his flock, I shall not be in want. I will have what I need. The references to lying down in green pastures, being led beside still waters and fearing no evil in the valley of the shadow of death are poetic ways of saying the Shepherd-King provides what I need to stay alive.

Although we're used to hearing verse 4 in the KJV as "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ... ," the underlying Hebrew can also mean simply "place of deep darkness." Thus, the NRSV renders this verse as "Even though I walk through the darkest valley. ... " In that reading, the Psalm becomes a statement of God's shepherding us in the difficult, troubled and hard stretches we go through in life itself. As we complete our series titled “Thy Kingdom Come,” we want to examine God’s promises of renewal, guidance, care and his goodness.

God promises us refreshment and renewal in life. David writes, “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” Just as a shepherd leads the sheep to parts of the field where they can receive nourishment from the green grass and refreshment from the calm waters of a stream, God provides a place to find rest in him. When we allow the Spirit to lead in our lives, though we may be going through some dark moments, we can find rest and refreshment in the peace God gives us and in the words of comfort from scripture. We find renewal of life in the redeeming work of Christ and life-giving gift of grace. Even when we stray from the green pastures and still waters, we are reminded that grace is continually being offered.

God also promises guidance in our lives. “He leads me in right paths (or paths of righteousness) for his name’s sake.” Because God is always at work, we do not lack direction and guidance in our lives. Too often, we seek God’s will for our lives and feel like God is not answering our prayers. However, it is us that are not listening rather than God not speaking. As one theologian writes, “Our problem is not really one of guidance, it is one of closeness to God.” Our Lord desires for us to be faithful in our daily activities and the rest will be revealed to us in just the right time. God’s direction for us is never late but it is never early either. It is always on time and always the right plan.

Next, we find God’s promise of his care. “Even though I walk through the darkest valley (or the valley of death), I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” David understood that God was the Great Protector. For a shepherd, the rod and staff were enough to care for the flock. The rod was a heavy club the shepherd used to kill predators, and the staff, a long pole with a crook in one end, was used to round up the sheep and to guide them along the way. The sheep knew when the shepherd was around they were safe. In the same way, we know that God never leaves us nor forsakes us. God cares for us enough to sacrifice his Son for our sake. We can find comfort in God’s protection and love even when we are walking through the dark moments of life.

Finally, this psalm reminds us God’s promise of his goodness. “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.” Here we find a scenery change. We are no longer outside but now, we find ourselves inside as a guest at a banquet. God as the host provides for all of the needs of his guests. Even more as the Great Host, God’s provisions for his guests are both constant and abundant. It is more than enough. Even while facing our enemies, Satan and our own flesh, God’s goodness and mercy overwhelms us.

In the ancient times, it was customary for the host to receive the banquet guests by anointing them with fragrant perfume and with a cup filled with choice wine. This was a gesture indicating that nothing was too good for his guests. The best was being offered. In the same way, God does not withhold anything from us. His goodness and mercy overflows for anyone who desires it for this life and for the life to come.

Let's go back to that valley for a moment. The psalmist says the reason for not being overcome by fear while in the dark valley is that God the Shepherd is with him. The psalmist takes comfort that the Shepherd has a rod and staff at the ready to protect him, but another fear-reducing factor was likely *that the Shepherd had been through this valley before*. Only a foolhardy shepherd would take his flock into a dark valley he'd never been in before. The only reason for leading sheep into or through a valley where there might be risk to the sheep is because the shepherd knows there's something the flock needs - grass or water or shelter - in the valley or at the other end of it and that he can handle whatever threats to the sheep might occur there. We could say the shepherd has first taken a "test drive" in the valley and knows that the rod and staff will be sufficient to handle the threats they might encounter.

Thus, this Psalm becomes a statement of confidence in God. Whether our dark valleys are times of trouble or the actual passage through death itself, we believe God is not only with us but is more than equal to whatever might threaten us. The depth of the darkness sometimes may shake our confidence, but the testimonies of people around us and the testimony of Scripture are reminders that God doesn't leave us alone in the dark valleys.

One of the other Psalms, Psalm 139: 7-12, can even be read as evidence that God has test-driven the dark valleys ahead of us. The psalmist says:

Where can I go from your Spirit?

    Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

    if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

    if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

    your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me

    and the light become night around me,”

even the darkness will not be dark to you;

    the night will shine like the day,

    for darkness is as light to you.

God’s promises are trustworthy. We can be assured that God has experienced the full spectrum of life through Christ and understands our struggles. We can place our faith in his promises and know that we are never alone, even when we can’t see the light on the other side. His goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.