Hey, good morning Grace Hills.

Good morning.

This morning I woke up and the first thing you do is look up my phone and see if I got any messages, and I had one from a dear brother in Christ who said that he had woke up and had me on his mind, and he was praying for me today because he knew I was going to be speaking and I really appreciated it. I responded back, "Well first of all, I'm glad that you woke up, and I'm glad you're praying for me." And so as I look out at you this morning, I'm glad you all woke up as well and decided to come to church this morning. And if you haven't prayed for me yet, you still have an opportunity to do that right now. And particularly, I really do want you seriously... I want you to just pray, "God, help me to hear the one thing that I need to hear this morning."

Over and over as we been in this series on Psalms 23, pastor Brandon has mentioned that oftentimes when we think about this particular Psalms, we think about funerals, and I can understand. If we go to a funeral, oftentimes when you get those little cards, those little memorial cards, oftentimes than not, 23rd Psalm is somewhere on it. As a pastor, over the years, I've had... I don't know exactly what the call it. First I want to call it a privilege, but at the same time there is another word I want to use that... I don't know what that word is.

But there've been at least four occasions as a pastor where I have stood at a hospital bedside along with the family as they said goodbye to a loved one and I've been there when that loved one has taken their last breath, their hardest stop, a nurse will come in and turn the monitors off. And for me, that has always been a surreal situation to realize that I've just been in the room, and that I want to believe that when we die, that there are angels that carry us into the presence of God. Not our bodies, of course, but our soul and spirit.

And I think to myself, wow, to be here and to know that angels have escorted these believers into his presence is just phenomenal feeling to be there. On three of those four occasions, so immediately after we realize that the loved one has gone on to heaven, a family member will say, "Let's say this Psalms 23 together." And a got me thinking as we've been in this series and as pastor Brandon has taught us and as I prepared for this, why the 23rd Psalms. And I think there's a lot of reasons for it, but it's so good. It gives us an opportunity when we quote that, standing there at that bedside to remember a life well lived or the memories of that person's life, realizing there was a shepherd for them as well, and one who provided for them, led them, took care of them, made sure they were not in want.

When you go to the end of that Psalms 23 and it says, "And I will be in the house of the Lord forever." Again, that's at such an assurance, a hope knowing that that life hasn't just ended here, but for everybody, life is an eternity somewhere and for the believers in Christ, it's an eternity and God's presence, and that just encourages us when we think about those things. But right in the middle of it though, is another precious verse of scripture that I think really pertains to that moment in time, and it's one that we're going to look at today. Verse Four of Psalms 23.

As our habit has been though, let's all quote, first of all, Psalms 23 together, from the new King James version of the Bible. We use that one a because it's close to what many of us have heard over the years. And so, would you say this with me? "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul, he leads me in the How to Face Our Fears During Hard Times (Completed 05/22/19) Transcript by Rev.com
paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of
deadth, I will fear no evil; for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a
table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely
goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

And of course, today's verse that we're going to look into is verse four, "Yea, 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." And so when I think about those scenes at the hospital bed, I realize that when we think
about the Psalms in this particular verse here, we are standing with folks who are making a journey
through what we might call the valley of the shadow of death.

In this particular verse though, I find that the psalm takes a very serious turn in two different ways. First
of all, the tone is much, much darker than verses one through three. We move from not wanting, we
move from not lacking anything, we moved from the green pastures to the still waters, to being led
down paths of righteousness by the shepherd himself and now, suddenly, we are walking in a valley, a
valley of the shadow of death, much, much darker scripture there.

Yet at the same time, I find that it takes a serious turn in the fact that the help and the assistance that
the shepherd provides, it's much more personal in verse number four. There is a noticeable increase in
the intimacy between the sheep and the shepherd. We switch from a third person pronouns in verses
one through three to the more... what I might call intimate second person pronouns. It goes from he
leads, he makes, he restores to now it says, You are with me. It's your rod. It is your staff that comforts
me.

Before, in those verses, one through three, the Psalm is... He talked about the shepherd and what the
shepherd was doing, but now in verse four, he begins to talk to the shepherd. And so I find that even
though it's a darker tone, we've moved closer in our relationship to the shepherd. And I think to
understand or to appreciate how we can walk through this valley of the shadow of death, there're or
certain things that we need to do that are promised to us right here in God's word.

But the first thing we need to do is to realize, and just expect this, that dark valleys are going to come.
It's never a matter of if they're going to come, but it's a matter of when. And I think for a lot of us, we
can think back very easily and we can think about those times in our lives when things were dark, when
we felt like we were in despair, we were wondering where our hope was and where there was going to
come help. This valley, I like the description that one preacher gave it, a famous preacher of old by the
name of Lehman Strauss, he talked about the valley. And he said this about the valley of the shadow of
death.

He said as far as he knew, he said it was the longest valley that he knew of that existed demand. And
instead of using a geographical description of this valley, he used a chronological one. And he says that
this valley began in the book of Genesis. It began when God warned Adam and Eve that there was this
one particular fruit that they should not take of. And if they did, he warned them, they would surely die.
And the Bible tells us that they did just that, that they disobeyed God, they ignored the warning, they
ate of that forbidden fruit and right then, that valley began for them, and it began for all of mankind.
But that valley has extended over time, over 6,000 years and more of Biblical history, and it's going to keep going until that day that's mentioned in the book of revelations when we will all stand around the tree of life. Not the tree with the forbidden fruit, but the tree of life, and there God will pronounce that death is no more. Now that is a long, long valley for all of mankind, but I realize that as individuals, that's true for all of us as well. I mean we have a valley, and we're going to experience them from time to time.

At our own hard times, it's going to begin... Well, it begins at the day of our birth, and it's going to continue on until we leave this place and enter into glory. The Term valley of the shadow of death, we need to realize it describes more than just the fear of death or to experience the death of a loved one. Most scholars believe that the words that are used here is used symbolically to describe any trial in our life, anything that happens to us that wants us to maybe retreat from life itself. It robs us of any hope and instead, helplessness and fear begins to fill that void.

And for all of us, we've had those experiences. There has been those things like health concerns, cancer, not having a kidney that works. There's been those losses of jobs, there has been losses in the families due to divorce and death, and the list can just go on and on and on of the valleys that we often have to walk through. And I think the question for Christians is, well, we have a shepherd. We have one who's going to make sure we want for nothing. We have one who's going to provide for us. He gives us those times of rest. He's there to lead us, and his desire is always to lead us down the paths of righteousness. We might ask then, Why does a journey that a good shepherd wants to provide for us... Why does it have to include such valleys?

Phillip Keller has written a wonderful book that... It's called A Shepherd's Looks at The 23rd Psalm, and if you haven't gotten a copy, you might consider getting one. It was written some years ago, but it's a very good commentary on on the psalms, and it was written from a man who was a shepherd, a sheep who went to Africa and dwelt among shepherds there. And he just gives some wonderful insights of what it meant to be the shepherd, the flock and how they interacted with one another. But he describes in his book the fact that come summertime, the pastors in the low land will begin to dry up and so the shepherd would need to take the sheep, the flock to higher ground, to get up higher, where the pastors were green and lush and to feed the sheep there.

And the best way to go up the highlands, up to the mountain top was to go, by the way of the valleys. The valleys provided a gradual inclined to get the sheep up there. It was in the valleys where the waters would pull up and there'd be pools of water to quench their thirst. It was even in the valleys that they would find patches here and patches there of lush green vegetation as they made their way up there. And so it was just the best way to get to the high places where the green pastures were.

But at the same time, as the shepherd led his sheep up there, he realized that there were dangers as well. There were predators who were waiting to take the life of the sheep, there were flash floods that would come once in a while and they always come down the valleys, there were boulders that can be set loose, they were sheep who could get too close to the edge of the valley and fall off into dangerous places. And so even though it was the best way to go, it was a dangerous place, a dark place. Oftentimes, the bluffs, the hills would hide the sunlight from those who are traveling on those days.

And so I remember years ago, the day that I was saved. It was a great day in my life. It was such a great day in my life. Maybe I'm one of those few individuals, because I can remember the exact date and I can remember the exact time. It made such a difference in my life. It was April 1st, 1976, 10:30 in the
morning, and the woman who would become my wife would be the one kneeling beside me and leading me to the Lord with that Gospel message. I remember that well. I remember getting up off of my knees and how my life felt so much different, how much relief that I felt. I can remember that as if that happened yesterday.

But there's one more memory that happened around that occasion. I was saved at something that's an old fashioned revival service. Some of you know what those are, where the evangelist comes in and preaches for three, four week, sometimes two weeks at a time. And the next day, we went back to this revival service and at the revival services, Carolyn's brother Stan was with a music group and he was there to sing that night. And we all went back to his house after the services that night and Stan barely knew me, but he said, "Man, I'm so glad that the Lord saves you."

And he says, he says, "Right now you're on a mountain top, aren't you? And I'm going, "Yes. Yes, I am." This feels great. I'm glad I know Jesus. He says, "That's good," he says, "but you need to remember something; you're on the mountaintop right now, but it we won't be long, he said, that Satan's going to come along and knock you off of that mountaintop. Now, at the time when he said that, I really didn't understand that, and I don't think I wanted to understand that. I thought to myself, "I don't want to do that. I like the mountain top. I'm going to stay here."

But my brother-in-law, Stan, he was right. I don't know how much longer, but it was much longer where I found myself in a valley. I found myself in a place of disappointment and a place where I was scared and through my life with the savior, these 43 years, I still, still know that from time to time, a valley can pop up and he can pop up so fast. When I look at this verse four, something jumps out at me. It says, "The valley in difficult times..., I think it says that there may be a source for it because the sheep says, "Yeah, though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

And though that's not the only reason for us finding ourselves tramping along inside of a dark valley, but many times the reason for the source of us putting in that place is wickedness. It's evil. It's the bad things, about living in a broken world there. There's all kinds of sources around us that can drag us into a valley. I think about Satan himself. The Bible says that he's roaring like a lion and he's seeking to devour us. And so from time to time, Satan is looking for a [inaudible 00:17:38] in our life. He's looking for something that he can take to drag us away from God and to bring us into those bleak places.

I think the world system in which we find ourselves living in is a source of evil. When I think about the world system, and it has a... It's sole objective is to remove God from his throne. It's to not consider him at all, but to simply go the way of the world of the flesh of what we desire. There's sinful people that sometimes can be the wickedness or the evil that brings us into the valley. I mean, sometimes people who are outside of faith and they're not believers, they're going to cause us harms at times. They're going to do things to offenders and to hurt us.

I think one of the most important lessons that I learned right after I was saved and I learned that could be knocked off the mountaintop sometimes. Sometimes that source of evil was even within the church. That there were certain folks who were like me, they were broken, and yeah, they were saved. But from time to time, they would say things, they would do things that we might think, "Man, that's [inaudible 00:18:59] the devil." We thanked ourselves. That's a broken person who's trying to break somebody body else.
And then there's just simple fact of our own brokenness, of our frail bodies. We will succumb eventually to death. There's sickness, there's disease that pursue us. And so the question isn't whether we have many or few valleys, is not whether those valleys are dark or [inaudible 00:19:33] with shadows. The question is, how do we react to them? How do I go through them? How do I cope with the calamities that come my way? I finally realized this, despite all of the evil that surrounds us and leads us to journeys and dark valleys, our responses, I fear no evil. And so how is that possible?

Well, verse four tells us that there are two reasons why we can be fearless. The first one is this, Jesus is always present during the hard times. And I like to underline the word always. He's always present during the hard times. The psalmist says that he's going to make it through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil. Why? For you are with me... It gets very personal in there, for you are with me. I have found today that in my nature, that when bad things happen, when dark times come, when you get a little desperate, I found that oftentimes, it is within my to sense or to have a feeling that God is not close, that he has forgotten me, that he's standing off at a distance, not concerned about my situation. I'm reminded this is same psalmist who says here, "I shall fear not for you are with me." It's also the same psalmist who just flipped backwards, flipped forward through the book of Psalms, who oftentimes says, "God, where are you? God, why have you forgotten me? God, why have you forsaken me?" That's the same psalmist who says right here, "I will fear no evil for you are with me." You think about David, you think, "Wow, he's fickle there. Is he with him or is he not?" And what he's really describing is how we often all feel at times.

In those thoughts that I had, that God has forgotten me or standing off at the distance and doesn't care, those are thoughts that are the farthest thing from truth that there is. The shepherd even comes closer in hard times. In verses one through three, I told you about that third person of... He's going to do this and he's going to make and he's going to guide me. But at the same time, we find that the shepherd seems to be out front leading his sheep. But in verse four, he's no longer out front leading the sheep, but he is standing right beside them to help them through this valley, this hard time in their life. He's walking right beside the sheep, through the valley with him.

I like an old testament example in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is a book written by the Prophet as Ezekiel, who was one of those prophets who was carried off in captivity during the Babylonian captivity. He was taken from Jerusalem and taken away to Babylon along with other prophets like Daniel. We're familiar with Daniel's story of how he got to the king's palace and became one of the king's main advisor. But Ezekiel is of those prophets who didn't make it into the city of Babylon, who didn't make it into the palace.

But instead, he was encamped with most of the Jews outside the city of Babylon. And there, he would minister to them, and he would preach to them, he would teach them. God used him as his messenger to the majority of the Jews who had been carried away in captivity. And God wanted his people to know what was going on, and so through Ezekiel, he sends a message, you're here in captivity because of your rebellion, because of your disobedience, and I love you and I'm chastising you to bring you back to myself.

Matter of fact, he uses Ezekiel to tell them, this captivity, it's not permanent. You're going to come back home one day. Within 70 years, I'll bring you back to Jerusalem. In that book of prophecy, the Lord also uses Ezekiel to announce judgment against shepherds, the shepherds that were back at Jerusalem, the How to Face Our Fears During Hard Times (Completed 05/22/19) Transcript by Rev.com
shepherds that he speaks of are the governmental leaders, the kings, the princes, those who were in authority over the people. Not only the government, but also those who were... the priest who were to be serving the people as good shepherds.

And God condemns them for their behavior because they weren't tending to the sheep. They were not caring for the sheep. Instead, they were oppressing them, they were stealing from them, they were scattering them, they were not providing for them when they became ill or sick. They basically did everything they could to destroy the sheep and to scatter them and God took [inaudible 00:25:12]. But what is God going to do about that?

And I love what he tells Ezekiel to tell the people of Israel. It's found in chapter 34 beginning at verse 11. What's God's answer to the bad shepherds? It's this, "For this is what the sovereign Lord says, I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherds looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the people and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live.

Yes, I will give them good pasture land on the high hills of Israel, where they will lie down in pleasant places in feed and the lush pastures of the hill. I, myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace," says the sovereign Lord, "I will search for my lost ones straight away, and now will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak." When I read those few verses of scripture, I find 10 times, 10 times God says that he will. That he will. He speaks of his direct intervention in of the valley that they find themselves in the captivity of Babylon.

He talks about his provision when others have failed them. He talks about his presence among them in their time of trouble. He's not forgotten him. He is with them even in that particular journey. And in our experience of darkness and confusion, we can take hope as well, and the fact that the great shepherd has drawn closer to us in those dark times. There's a second reason that's a psalm. It says that, he's going to fear not, and it's this, he can trust the shepherd's rod and his cross to bring comfort. "Your rod and your staff, they come from me."

The ancient shepherds of those days, of David's days, they carried two pieces of equipment with them at all times. First they carried a rod. A rod was just say a short piece of wood, heavy wood, very tough wood and on the end of it was carved a knob. It would have made for a good hammer. And they would use that rod for defense and for correction. I mean with a skillful throw of it or just simply using in their hands, they could dispatch those that would prey after the sheep.

You remember David when he took up the challenge to go against Goliath, and people asked him, "Do you know what you're doing? You want to go up against this giant?" And David recounted his past as a shepherd and he was a shepherd boy and he says, "It's not going to be any problem," he says. He says, "Because I've had this experience where a bear attacked my flock, and I had another experience where a lion came against my flock." In both instances, David says that with blows, he was able to dispatch both the bear and the lion and that giant Goliath therefore wasn't going to be anything to defeat with the Lord's help.

And I imagine when he talked about striking them and killing the lion in the bear, what he had in his hand wasn't a shotgun. It wasn't a high powered rifle, it was simply that rod in his hand. He rushed him How to Face Our Fears During Hard Times (Completed 05/22/19) Transcript by Rev.com
and struck him with that until they were dead then. Then there is that other piece of equipment, the one that we’re probably most familiar with because of Christmas cards and things like that, is the shepherd’s staff, a longer piece of wood and at the end of it was a hook or a crook on the end of it, and it was used...

Of course, the shepherd would use it as a walking stick to helping up those inclines in the valley, but it was also used for the sheep, for the flock to gently prod them to where they were to go, to steer the sheep in a certain direction. The hook at the end was also used to pick up young lambs with when a sheep needed rescuing. Again, that crook would just perfectly fit that sheep’s neck and help him out of the pit, the hole or the river or whatever that he was into. And so the staff is a symbol of the concern of the compassion that a shepherd has for his sheep, for those that he’s in charge of.

Thomas used these items to symbolize for us God's defense, God's care, God's direction that he’s going to provide for us in our dark times of trouble. You see the shepherd, the divine shepherd, he can use all kinds of circumstances to defend and to feed those who would oppose us. We need to remember that, that he desires to do that for us. He can do that for us. It is the shepherd that can use his written word as a rod, even in our lives, in particular, in our lives, to bring about conviction, to bring about correction, to bring about assurance, all those great promises that God has made us to help us to do the right thing and to be assured and to stand strong and fear not in those times of trouble.

It is the shepherd God, that can open doors and close windows of opportunities and simply to do that, to help guide us and what we need to do next and what decision that we need to make. The rod of authority and correction along with the staff of gentle care are all meant to serve one purpose and the psalmist says, "It comforts me." I think the problem for myself and for a lot of us though is that while we're in that dark place, those valleys, sloshing through the valley with dangers on one side and discouragement on the other side, I think we have a tendency to want to stray away from God.

The reason it seems that way is because we often times turn to ourselves, to our own strength, to our own wisdom, to find solutions for helping us out of those valleys, hoping for the best. And didn't even realize that while we’re hoping for the best, that's always going to fall short. That's always going to fall short of what God's best is for it. But it's also going to fall short of what the shepherd can can do for us as well.

Pastor Tony Evans, he tells a story that I really like. He tells a story about an older woman back several years ago who lived alone in a rural area, and she lived a very simple life and one day as she was getting along in years, one day her family determined, while we really need help mom out, one of the ways that we can help her out is to provide electricity to her home. For all those many years, she lived without electricity. So they paid to have a line run through her house to electrify her home. And a couple of months later as though, those people, the Rural Electric Company, I guess, noticed that this lady had, in a couple months time, used one unit of power. And so they were concerned about that, and so a couple of representatives went out to visit her.

And they asked her, they said, "How do you like this electricity thing? Are you enjoying it?" And she says, "Oh my! Do I ever? I really love this thing called electricity." And they’re a little bit baffled. And said, "Well, okay. Well, tell us what you use it for." And she said, "Oh, that's easy," she says, "Every night when the sun begins to go down and it gets dark", she says, "I turn the lights on long enough to lighten my kerosene lantern and then I turned them back off."
Even though she was living in the age of electricity, she was still living a kerosene life. And I think there's some spiritual application for us there as well, is that many, many times while we're in the valleys, we're living the kerosene life. We're living on what we can do and how we can plan this to be better and all along, we had this shepherd who's present there with us and we need to keep our minds on that. And we have a shepherd who has both a rod and a staff that's to bring us comfort and instead of immediately pursuing what we can do in our own strength and in our own wisdom, we really need to take our minds and concentrate on the goodness of God, on the power of God and put our trust in him, and how that might just dissipate all the fear, the discomfort, the discouragement that we're feeling.

God says that we can fear not. We can be comforted in our valleys because he is with us, because he will defend us, because he will gently care for us. And he's not like a hired hand neither, but he is that good shepherd who loves his sheep. What is it this morning that's causing you to walk in the valley of the shadow of death? What's going on in this season of your life? Will you lean... What the scriptures are telling us to is that we need to lean into the shepherd's presence, knowing that he's with us. We need to trust him to act according to what is going to be good for us.

We need to look for those times in our lives when we realize, that's the staff that's gently encouraging me, giving me direction and bringing me comfort. We need to look for those moments where the rod is used in the hands of God to bring us a defense, to protect us, or even to speak to us through the rod of his word, to convict us, to show the places where we need to change, where we need to become more Christ-like or simply just to encourage us with his promises.

I wanted today, if there's someone here who has yet to trust Christ as their savior and to be the shepherd in their life, that you can do so. You can do that right here this morning because you know why? Because he's present. I would not describe this church and what we're feeling and what we're doing to here today anything like a valley. Again, we're here in the mountaintop, right? But God is still present. The Old Testament made it clear with a beautiful illustration that he's the God of the valley, but he's also got of the mountain top as well.

God's in this place and right here, right now, you can call upon him and just simply say, Lord, I know I'm lost without you. I know I'm a sinner that's in need of a salvation. I need direction in my life. I need assurance in my life, and I come to you as a savior to ask you to be my savior, to be my shepherd. And God will immediately receive you. He will immediately call you into his flock. You'll become one of his sheep. And immediately after he does that, he then reaches down, picks up that rod, and he picks up that staff on your behalf to guide you, to defend you, to protect you. And all you can think of is this, I fear no evil.

Let's bow our heads for prayer. Father, I thank you so much for meeting with us this morning. I'm grateful for the psalms that we've been studying and for verse four, which leads us into reality, it's not always about mountaintops that we as Christians are going to experience, but there's going to be downtimes. There's going to be desperate times. There's going to be things that happen that cause us to simply be afraid and wonder where our hope is coming from.

Again, may our minds come to this scripture where it tells us at your ever present, you're always there, ready to assist, ready to help in our time of need. May we realize that you are the shepherd with that staff that wants to lead us, to care for us, to comfort us, and may we turn to you and trust in your promises. Lord, we love you, we ask for your forgiveness. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.