

The Lord is my Protector

The early American Indians had a unique practice of training young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, after learning hunting, scouting, and fishing skills, he was put to one final test. He was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until then, he had never been away from the security of the family and the tribe. But on this night, he was blindfolded and taken several miles away.

When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of a thick woods and he was terrified! Every time a twig snapped, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. After what seemed like an eternity, dawn broke and the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was his father. He had been there all night long.

Psalm 23: 1 – 3 The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

Psalm 23: 4 **Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

1) Living in dark times

- The King James version calls it the valley of the shadow of death, which is more expressive than the darkest valley.
 - It gives us the idea that things are so bad that the only thing that could be worse is death itself.
 - Everything is bleak, miserable, hopeless without any light at the end of the tunnel.
- At the time of the Psalmist the shepherd would have had to lead the sheep through these valleys where they had no way of escape if danger came from both sides. Death seemed to be almost certain.
 - Life is full of valleys and it is a relief to get out of a valley but only to go into another one.
- When we look back on our lives we will remember the dark times that we thought we'd never get through. The times of financial difficulty, relationship problems, stress at work, accommodation problems.
- Some of them might not look that bad when we think back on them but at the time we were going through them they were like valleys of the shadow of death. They were traumatic times.
- Living in times of darkness – difficulty and oppression – is the norm for many Christians in many countries.
 - Right now the Christians are facing oppression in China.
 - Asia Bibi was on death row for 8 years in Pakistan before being acquitted in court but Pakistani Muslims still wanted her to be killed.
 - Violent Hindu mobs are constantly attacking Christians in India.
- What we consider an atrocity of persecution is the Biblical norm.
 - Christians suffered horrendous persecution under the Roman Empire.
- We can be grateful that our dark times come and go giving us a reprieve from them. Many don't have such a luxury.

2) Living confidently in dark times

- This verse starts with “even though” which means that there’s going to be a positive response to our times of darkness.
- Even though there’s all this darkness all around me. Even though things aren’t working out at work, even though times are tough and finances are low, even though there’s uncertainty for the future.
- I will fear no evil
 - I will not live by fear and I will not allow fear to paralyze me
- So many people live their lives paralyzed by fear. They fear every and anything whether real or unreal.
- It is when we know the presence of the Lord that our fears are dispelled.
 - For you are with me.
- This changes our whole outlook on life
- The good shepherd is with me so I have no reason to fear.
 - Isaiah 43: 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.
 - Isaiah 43: 5 Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.
- As followers of Jesus Christ we don’t only refrain from negative living – do not fear – but we live positive confident lives in the Lord regardless of our circumstances.
 - Habakkuk 3: 17 – 18 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.
- We ought to live lives full of peace regardless of our circumstances
 - Philippians 4: 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
- Paul and Silas were thrown in prison and prayed and sang while in prison.
- We are free people regardless of our circumstances and we need to live as free people.
 - Cast off bondages of fear to live confidently in the presence of the Lord.

3) The Lord protects us in dark times

- His rod and staff comfort us.
- The shepherd’s rod was a shorter baton-like stick used to fight off predators.
- The shepherd’s staff was his walking stick that normally had a crook at the top to allow him to hook and pull sheep to himself.
- The comfort is that during dark times – in valleys of darkness – the shepherd was always close enough to protect them and keep them safe.
- He always had His tools ready to defend them.
- We can be assured of God’s hand of comfort and protection over our lives at all times.
 - Psalm 121: 1 – 8 I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.