

# GOD'S ANTIDOTE FOR DARK VALLEYS

## Stressbusters - Part 5 Psalm 23:4

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An old Arab parable 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, no maturity. It takes good times and bad times to enable us to mature. Life is a mixture of pain and pleasure, of victory and defeat, success and failure, mountain tops and valleys. Today we look at God's antidote to the Dark Valleys in our lives.

Even in our darkest valleys, on 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, I hear that there is a real Valley of the Shadow of Death. It's a steep, deep, narrow canyon. The sun only hits the bottom when it's directly overhead. The rest of the time, the bottom of the canyon is dark. David might have led his sheep through that valley as he was growing up. In the Bible, the term "Valley" also refers to all kinds of rough times in life. Joshua talked about the Valley of Calamity. Psalm 84 speaks of the Valley of Weeping. Hosea mentioned the Valley of Trouble. A literal reading of Psalm 23 speaks about the Valley of Deep Darkness. How do I handle the dark valleys of life? There are five facts about valleys that we need to remember whenever we go through a tough time:

### 1. VALLEYS ARE INEVITABLE

They are going to happen so we might as well expect them. Some of you might have just come out of a valley and others might be in a valley right now. And all of us can expect a valley in our future. In life we find valleys. 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, but when. It's going to happen. We're going to have difficulty, disappointment, discouragement in life. There will be times of suffering, sorrow, and 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.

### 2. VALLEYS ARE UNPREDICTABLE

We can't schedule the valleys in our life. They are always unexpected. And they usually come at the worst time; when we don't have the time or the energy to deal with them. Have you ever had a flat tire at a good time? They just happen. Now it would be great if we could schedule our down times in life. But we can't. Valleys come suddenly. They are unpredictable. In a moment a good day becomes a bad day with a phone call, a letter, a routine doctor's appointment, or a freak accident. Valleys just happen. Jeremiah 4:20 *"Disaster follows disaster... In an instant my tents are destroyed, my shelter falls in a moment."*

### 3. VALLEYS ARE IMPARTIAL

No one is immune to them. No one is insulated from the pain and sorrow. No one gets through life problem free. Everybody has problems. And those problems don't necessarily mean that we are bad people. It doesn't mean that we are evil. It's just that we are imperfect humans living in an imperfect world. And no matter who we are, valleys will be a part of our life. Sometimes bad things happen to good people because valleys are impartial. They don't care how good or bad we are. Matthew 5:45 Jesus said, *"It rains on the just and the unjust too."* When we go through a difficult time the first reaction is always "Why me?" But the question is really "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 crisis, or loss? It happens because we do not live in heaven. There are problems and pain, difficulties and despair. Christian or not, good or bad, the valleys come upon all of us.

#### **4. VALLEYS ARE TEMPORARY**

They don't last forever. They have a beginning and an end. David says, *"Even though I walk through the valley..."* The valley is not something we stay in our entire life. It's something we go through for a time, a season. When we're in a valley we might think that it's eternal, but it's not. It's like a tunnel, with a beginning and an end. Eventually we're going to come out of it. The valleys come upon us, but as long as we keep moving, we pass through them.

1 Peter 1:6 *"There is a wonderful joy ahead, even though the going is rough for a while down here."* Peter admits that sometimes life is tough. But it's only for a while. There is wonderful joy in our future, for heaven is in our future, where there are no problems, no valleys, no dark days. If you know the Lord Jesus Christ, that's where you're going. He says don't get discouraged. Even if you live 80, 90, 100 years and have problems your entire life, that is insignificant compared to the thousands of problem free years in eternity. In 2 Corinthians Paul writes, *"Our troubles are short lived and there is an eternal glory which outweighs them all."* The valleys won't last, but the glory will be eternal.

#### **5. VALLEYS ARE PURPOSEFUL**

God has a reason for taking us through the valleys. Whether it's doubt, depression, despair, discouragement, defeat, whatever, He's got a reason behind it. 1 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. But A...*This is no accident -- it happens to prove your faith...* The valleys are not just a freak of nature. God uses the valleys in life to build our faith. We love the mountain tops, but we build our faith in the valleys. Why? Because when everything is bright and beautiful we don't think that we need God. But when the dark valleys envelop us, we fall to our knees. Faith is strengthened in the valleys. Faith is tested in those times when we are not sure that we trust God; on those days when we don't feel like praising God. Not in the good times, but in the valleys.

Every problem has a purpose. Even the little ones that are more irritation than major event. They have a purpose. God teaches about character so He can change us and help us mature. And God knows that faith is built in the valleys of life. God is far more interested in our character than He is in our comfort or convenience. God's goal is not just to make life comfortable for us. He wants to build character. He's more interested in our holiness than our happiness. Holiness lasts, happiness doesn't. And yet, true happiness comes from holiness.

Beyond all that, God wants us to be like Jesus. He wants to develop the character of Christ in us, and that requires us to go through the same sort of circumstances that Jesus experienced. Was Jesus exempt from suffering? Absolutely not. Then neither are we. Did Jesus go through times of loneliness? Yes. Was Jesus ever tempted to be discouraged? Yes. Was Jesus ever misunderstood, maligned, criticized unjustly? Absolutely. So if we are to be like Christ, we are going to have to experience life as He did. We are going to go through valleys because God wants to build our character and our faith. It's not by accident. Does God cause accidents and tragedies? No. God does not cause such things. Our Lord is a good God who cannot cause evil, or do evil. But God can use accidents and tragedies for good? He uses the evil done to us by others, turns it around and brings good out of it by building character in us. He has a purpose, a way to use the dark valleys in our lives.

**WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU GO THROUGH DARK VALLEYS?** Three things:

##### **1. REFUSE TO BE DISCOURAGED**

*AI will fear no evil.*" I'm not going to panic and run away. I am going to face the valleys and choose to keep walking through it. I will not be paralyzed by fear. I refuse to be discouraged. Because I do have a choice in life. I have a will, and I will walk and act and live in spite of the dark valley around me. Now you might have come here this morning with an abundance of problems. But no matter what, do not choose to be discouraged. Because when we choose to be discouraged, we are choosing to look at all the negative stuff. Remember that when Peter walked on the water he was fine until he looked at the winds and the waves. Once he stopped looking at the positive, powerful force of Jesus, he gave up and went down. Instead, choose to look upon Jesus. Follow Him into the light and the love. Walk by all the negative stuff. Stop focusing on the negative stuff, and choose to turn your eyes upon Jesus. Make the choice.

But how do I choose to not be discouraged? By focusing on the power of God rather than the problem before us. You can take two people, put them in the identical situation, and one will be blown away, while the other is strengthened. One falls apart and one builds faith. The difference is their focus. Instead of focusing on the situation, look to the Savior. Not on the problem, but on the power of God. Colossians 1:11 *AGod will strengthen you with his own great power so that you will not give up when troubles come, but you will be patient.*"

Our energy is limited. After a stressful trial we may not have any energy left. No stamina. Our endurance has run out. In the valleys of life we need a power source bigger than ourselves. We can't always get through the valleys on our own strength, our own power. We need help. And that help is available to us. And that is the second point,

## **2. REMEMBER THAT GOD IS WITH ME**

David said, *"For you are with me."* God not only promises us His power in the valley, He also promises His presence. We never have to go through one of life's valley alone, for in Isaiah 43, God told us that *"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."* God says, "I am with you even in the valleys. There is nothing to fear when Jesus is always near." God does not sit in heaven and say, *AI sure hope they make it!*" He's with us in the valleys, walking with us, hand in hand. God says, "I will lead you through this."

In the midst of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm the language changes. In the beginning he talks about God: *AHe leads, He guides, He restores"* But after going in the valley, he talks to God. Not He, but You. *AYou are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me."* In the valleys of life we come face to face with God. All of a sudden the Ultimate becomes the Intimate. In the valleys 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 we are weak and confused only to discover that the Lord has not abandoned us; that the Lord is with us. We love living on the mountaintops, but it is in the valleys when we come face to face with God.

## **3. I RELY ON GOD'S PROTECTION AND GUIDANCE**

*AYour rod and staff comfort me"* The rod and staff were the basic tools that a shepherd would use to protect and guide the sheep. A rod was about two feet long, with a heavy knot at the end of it. Shepherds were skilled at hurling the rod, like a javelin, at anything that would attack the sheep. The psalm says that the rod of God will protect us. When we're going through the dark valleys of life, God is not unconcerned and apathetic. The

Good Shepherd fights for us. While we're fighting for life in that dark depression, God is fighting for us. He's fighting off spiritual forces. He is our defender and protector. That's what the rod represents.

A staff was a long stick with a hook at the end of it. The shepherd used a staff to guide and comfort. He could pull the sheep close to him, or lift them up when they're down. When we go through the valley, we're not going through it alone. God is going with us and He's using His rod and staff to protect and guide, to lift and lead, to draw us close to Him.

Sometimes in the valleys the scariest parts are the shadows. David recognized that because he didn't talk about the valley of death, but about the valley of the shadow of death. When we see those scary shadows in the valley, there are three important things to remember:

1. Shadows are always bigger than the reality. Fear is always greater than the actual problem. It's the fear that is enormous. Our problems are never as big as they appear.
2. Shadows cannot hurt us. Shadows are image without substance. They cannot hurt us. They can scare us, but they cannot hurt us, because they are just shadows - image without substance.
3. There can be no shadow unless there is a light. In the darkness of the valley we think that the light is gone, and God is gone. But any time there is a shadow it means that there is a light somewhere. Now the shadows in the dark valleys might frighten us, but if we look to the light, suddenly the shadows are behind us. Don't look at the shadow. Look to the light and the shadows are gone. And since Jesus said, *I am the light of the world,* when we look at Him, the shadows disappear from our sight, to be feared no more. We just need to live what we sing *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.* When in the dark valleys, look at the light that is Jesus Christ.

Psalm 34 *"The good man does not escape all troubles -- he has them too. But the Lord helps him in each and every one."* Everyone goes through the valleys, even Christians. We get sick and suffer disappointments. We lose loved ones and experience tragedies. We have financial problems and family problems. Believers go through the dark valleys. But the difference is that while we all go through the same valleys of life, we can walk in the light and the presence of the Lord, *"for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."* In your life, may it be so. Amen.