



THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL: The Valley Experiences in Our Life - Ps. Lyn

World news is pretty devastating at the moment. So too are some of the conditions Australians now face thanks to the devastations of flood, cyclones, drought and fire. In the midst of these it is easy to slip into despair, to become disoriented and to enter what is known as “the dark night of the soul”.

Today I want to give you a tool to help you navigate your way through such a night.

As a young woman I was a keen bushwalker. I loved the sense of freedom it gave you, the sense of wellbeing. I loved being surrounded by the peaceful noises of nature, the moist smell of the bush, the magnificent views from the peaks when my spirit rose on the wind and soared across the scenery like an eagle, dipping down into the valleys and gliding over the peaks. This was for me, pure ecstasy; my taste of heaven. Combined with the unmatched sense of achievement at the completion of the hike, the experience is unmatched.

Yet to be truthful, my relationship with bushwalking was a love hate relationship. When my muscles screamed as I made my way up a never ending ridge, when icy winds cut through me, and falling sleet would allow me to see no further than my next step, when I had bush bashed for an hour, only to find I faced a swollen, impassable river – then I HATED bush walking. There were times I was so tired I could no longer get my bearing with either map or compass and would weep with frustration and exhaustion. At those times, I was so thankful I never hiked alone! The others with me, would come and find me when I got geographically embarrassed, would encourage me when I was ready to give up and even bully me when my stubbornness would have me just sit where I was and refuse to go on.

Life's like bushwalking. I've discovered. Sometimes you walk on the mountain peaks and sometimes you trudge forever and feel like you're getting nowhere. Or you find yourself so disoriented, so tired and so sick of having to push through life's challenges, when even the weather seems against you. It's then you want to scream at God, demanding to know why life has to be so jolly difficult and at times, so unexplainably painful! St John of the Cross called these times “The Dark night of the soul” Even Mother Theresa faced them:



As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, — Listen and do not hear — the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak...

On the subject of the Dark Night of the Soul, Thomas Moore was quoted as saying: *Sometimes this letting go of old ways is painful, occasionally even devastating. But this is not why the night is called 'dark... For that reason it can be disturbing or even scary, but in the end it always works to our benefit.*

In the dark times, one of the most comforting Psalms is Psalm 23. It's why you hear it so often at funerals.

Psalm 23

- ¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need.*
- ² He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.*
- ³ He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name.*
- ⁴ Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.*
- ⁵ You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honour me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings.*
- ⁶ Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD FOREVER.*

All of us go through valley experiences in life. Adversity is an inevitable part of life. When difficulties come, we tend to wonder why God has allowed us to suffer. We may even feel abandoned by Him. But Scripture tells us otherwise.

Psalm 23, is a pocket guide to understanding God's place in the scheme of things. Let's start at the very beginning.

The LORD is my shepherd; Lord: the Creator and sustainer of all things, the One who is goodness personified. It is He who is our personal Shepherd. As shepherd, it is He who is responsible to see us safely Home. He who is responsible to choose the path, to see that we are fed and provided for, and brought safely



through whatever the elements throw at us. Be very clear on this. IT IS NOT OUR RESPONSIBILITY. We are just sheep. It's our responsibility to follow, to listen for His voice, to respond to both His rod and His staff, to rest at the rest points, to eat in the pastures and to stay close to one another through storms or threat, as well as to care for our young to the best of our ability, though even these are ultimately His responsibility.

And so the Psalm reminds us:

I have all that I need.

² *He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.*

³ *He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name.*

⁴ *Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.*

The valleys – now there's the rub! Valleys are in shadow, their paths often narrow and rocky.

Valley experiences are inevitable.

From the mountain tops you can see for miles, in the valley you are hemmed in with few options for escape. The light is dimmed, and the air cold and often damp. It's not a place we choose to go if we can help it. Yet it is in the valleys where the clear streams flow and the grass is the sweetest. Let me tell you something else – the shadows are just that – shadows. Your shepherd never leaves you, even on the darkest night when you cannot see Him or feel His presence, He is there watching over you. Understanding that means you can be at peace.

Are you restless? Sheep will not lie down and rest if they are:

- Hungry.
- Fearful/ anxious.
- Are experiencing friction with others in the mob (sheep stop rivalry when in the shepherd's presence).

Psalm 4:8

⁸ *I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makes me dwell*



in safety.

It is in the valley that many of us experience “the dark night of the soul” but remember :

- Every valley is a passageway rather than a destination. Eventually, the difficulty will pass. David wrote, “I walk through the valley”.
- God controls the depth and the length of a valley experience. Trust in His goodness and His faithfulness helps us keep on keeping on in this situation.
- In our humanity a season of suffering can seem longer if we are in a tremendous amount of pain. In this situation, it helps if you can identify the root of the pain. Is it grief over loss – present or future, real or perceived? Is it an old internal wound that circumstances are rubbing against – rejection, loneliness, fear? Has it been brought about by the removal of your safety net – job, money, church family, safe environment, predictability.

“Our hearts faint with fear.” Suffering throws us off balance. Losing anything-- a position, a friendship or a marriage, or something else precious, can cause a person to wonder, *Why did God do this to me?*

Take comfort in the fact that the deeper the valley, the greater the work God will be able to do through it.

“I would rather walk with God in the dark than go alone in the light” Moses “If you don’t go with me, I will not go”.

The valley experience might be shorter and less painful if it takes only a little suffering to bring about deeper surrender to God in your life. Resisting Him will typically lengthen a period of suffering. Jacob discovered that fighting God always leaves you with a limp.

God is more interested in our character than our comfort. His goal is to make us more like Christ in faith and in nature.

We will handle adversity poorly if...

- We don’t have a solid belief system. If you and I don’t understand God’s character, we will panic in the face of difficulty.



- We don't understand the ways of the Lord.
- We don't know His promises. The reassurances found in Scripture can help carry us through trials.

In the valley, we learn more about the nature of God: His presence in our pain, His love in our loss, and His patience despite our complaints. Through hardship, He may strip us of pride, renew our passion for Him, refine our character, and/or purify our motives.

There is a correct way to respond to valleys.

- Surrender your life to God.
- Believe that the Lord will use this experience for good (Rom. 8:28).
- Rest in His wisdom, love, and power.
- Thank Him for bringing you through the valley. You will learn invaluable lessons in life's darkest seasons.
- Shift your focus and look forward:

⁵ *You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honour me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings.*

⁶ *Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD FOREVER.*

So the Psalm completes the picture. God is responsible for us. He has anointed us with oil : the symbol of priesthood and of His Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. He has poured blessing upon blessing on us, and sees to it that goodness and unfailing love actually pursue us all the way Home!

For this reason we are urged to take the short cut to joy in all circumstances and;

1 Chronicles 16:23-36 (Amplified Bible)

²³ *Sing to the Lord... show forth from day to day His salvation.*

²⁴ *Declare His glory among the nations, His marvellous works among all peoples.*

²⁵ *For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised...*

²⁷ *Honor and majesty are [found] in His presence; strength and joy are [found] in His sanctuary.*

new life

CHRISTIAN CENTRE



- ²⁸ Ascribe to the Lord, you families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength... worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness*
- ³¹ Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice; and let men say among the nations, The Lord reigns!*
- ³⁴ O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy and loving-kindness endure forever!...*
- ³⁶ Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, forever and ever! And all the people said: Amen.*