



This Week's Message
January 7, 2024

*Psalm 23: Do We Really Have to
Talk About This?*

*Yea, though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with
me; thy rod and thy staff
they comfort me.*

Psalm 23:4
(New International Version)

Sunday's Scripture Reading
Psalm 23

¹*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*
²*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*
³*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*
⁴*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*
⁵*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*
⁶*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*
—King James Version.

¹*The Lord is my Shepherd [to feed, to guide and to shield me], I shall not want.*
²*He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still and quiet waters.*
³*He refreshes and restores my soul (life); He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.*
⁴*Even though I walk through the [sunless] valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod [to protect] and Your staff [to guide], they comfort and console me.*
⁵*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You have anointed and refreshed my head with oil; My cup overflows.*
⁶*Surely goodness and mercy and unfailing love shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell forever [throughout all my days] in the house and in the presence of the Lord.*
—Amplified Version

On Sunday, I will continue the series of messages from the 23rd psalm.

On the left, you will notice that I have included two different versions of the psalm. The first, of course, comes from the King James Version of the Bible. As I said last Sunday, it is hard to read the 23rd psalm, in public especially, in any version other than the King James. Even though the KJV uses language we haven't used in regular conversation and writing for many years, it remains so strongly ingrained in us that when it comes to the 23rd psalm, we think any other versions just sound strange. This week, I've also included the Amplified Version. The Amplified Version of the Bible is one you might not be as familiar with. That version helps to explain the meaning of the text by adding words and phrases, generally in parentheses. While I find it to be a help in understanding the meaning of a verse, I also find it to be a bit awkward for reading, especially public reading. While it can be helpful, it's not my favorite translation, but it's good to be familiar with it.

In my message last week, I said the 23rd

Questions to Consider –

* Apart from the obvious reason that it's uncomfortable to talk about, why do you think it is so difficult for us to talk about our mortality?

* There are many beautiful, and challenging, phrases in the 23rd psalm. What do you find to be the most beautiful, and the most challenging?

* How far is it legitimate, in your opinion, for us to go in protecting ourselves against the evil in the world? Does the proliferation of weapons bring to us a greater chance of peace, or of violence?

* What do you think of the approach of the Amplified Version of the Bible? Do you find the added words and phrases to be helpful, or do you find them to be distracting? What is your favorite translation overall, and why?

* How often do you find the language of the Bible to be distracting, especially if you are using a translation such as the King James Version? How far do you think it is fair to go when paraphrasing the original language of the Bible, in order to make it more readable and understandable? Can we go too far in how we change it?

psalm is one of those passages that is *deceptively difficult*, meaning that the beauty of the psalm's language can allow us to overlook how difficult the message is. I think that is especially true when we come to verse 4, which will be the focus of Sunday's message. That verse tells us *yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me*. The title of my message for Sunday – *Do We Really Have to Talk About This* – refers to the difficulty we have discussing the topics of our mortality and of the presence of evil in our world. I don't like talking about them, but they are topics that confront us whether we want to talk about them or not.

Notice that the psalmist connects those two topics together – *though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*. It is evil that the psalmist seems to fear most, and not death, though death can be the outcome of the evil that is present in the valley.

God [is portrayed] not as a warrior who raises weapons of warfare, but as a shepherd who provides comfort and assurance rather than vengeance and violence.

It is difficult to not be fearful in this world, especially as it is full of evil. The question of evil – specifically why it exists – has long vexed humanity, especially people of faith. The question of why evil is present in a world created by an all-powerful, loving God, is one that does not have an easy or adequate answer. But the psalmist is not looking for a theological answer to the existence of evil. What the psalmist is looking for, and receives, is the presence of God that removes fear and provides comfort. Notice also that while the psalmist mentions God's *rod and staff*, they are portrayed as instruments of comfort rather than weapons. A rod and staff could be used as weapons, of course, although they would not be much use in the face of someone who brandished a sword or a bow and arrow. For the psalmist, though, the question of whether they are weapons is answered by the portrayal of God not as a warrior who raises weapons of warfare, but as a shepherd who provides comfort and assurance rather than vengeance and violence. In our over-weaponized world, that is quite a challenge to us.

I look forward to seeing you Sunday, and God bless you!