

## 1 **Through the Valley**

- A Look at Psalm 23

## 2 **Death Valley**

- Death Valley, in California, is the lowest, driest and hottest desert in the United States.
- Since they began keeping records, the hottest temperature in this country - 134 degrees - occurred in Death Valley, and it isn't uncommon to have day after day of 120 degrees in the summer.
- So if you're planning to visit Death Valley, you'd be wise to choose one of the other seasons.

## 3 **Death Valley National Park**

- In the carefully measured language of the official brochure of Death Valley National Park, it warns park visitors as follows:
  - Summer starts early in Death Valley. By May the valley is too hot for most visitors. ... Lodging and camping are available, but only the most hardy will want to camp in the low elevations in the summer. Most summer visitors tour by car to the main points of interest along the paved roads but do little else due to the extreme heat.

## 4 **Deserts**

- Deserts, found on every continent, are, by definition, places that receive fewer than 10 inches of rain per year.
- The driest deserts never see rain at all. They receive as little as half an inch of precipitation per year—usually in the form of condensed fog.
- One-fifth of the earth's land is covered by deserts, and one-sixth of the world's population inhabits them, according to nationalgeographic.com.
- Temperatures in Africa's Sahara Desert can reach up to 122 degrees Fahrenheit during the day.
- Some deserts are mountainous. However, the common image of sand dunes is actually found in only 10 percent of the earth's deserts.

## 5 **Extreme Testing**

- As inhospitable as deserts are there are automakers who seek them out to test their automobiles and see how they perform under such intense conditions.
- Kia is one of those manufacturers.
- During a recent August, a team of engineers from South Korean put three of their proposed new models - a sporty crossover and two seven-passenger SUVs - through a series of grueling tests.

## 6 **Grueling testing**

- Those tests were:

- frequent starting and stopping,
- prolonged idling, towing 7,000-pound loads up and down the steep mountain roads surrounding the valley,
- leaving the cars in direct sun with the windows rolled up and then clocking how long it took for the air conditioners to cool the interior, and
- additional tests designed to push the engines, transmissions and other components to the limits.

#### 7 Grueling testing

- Naturally, all this testing means a team of people must work both inside and outside the cars, putting in 12-hour workdays, five days a week.
- And it can be tough.
- One engineer with the Kia team said, "When you wear shorts at 120 degrees and there's a wind, it burns."

#### 8 Grueling testing

- There's good reason for all this testing, of course.
- Although the car companies know most of their vehicles will spend little, if any, time in Death Valley-like conditions, they deliberately overtax them to help ensure their customers won't have problems in normal service.

#### 9 Grueling testing

- Another way to say this, is that all this test-driving is an attempt to help us car owners not to worry when we drive our vehicles through extreme weather conditions.
- In the same way, Psalm 23, is a type of assurance from God to encourage us that when we go through extreme and dangerous places, our faith in Him will not fail us.

#### 10 The Shepherd-King

- Psalm 23 is probably the best-known passage from the Bible.
- Even many people who don't read the Bible can quote parts of it—probably because they've heard it so often at funerals.
- And no doubt, Psalm 23 is a wonderful passage to use to help comfort those who have lost loved ones.
- But if we think of it only as a funeral text, we can miss the fact that the Psalm is mostly about living.

#### 11 The Shepherd-King

- In the ancient world, as in ours today, shepherds were herders and tenders of sheep, but back then, "shepherd" was also a metaphor for the role of a king.
- They were to tend their subjects, providing for them and protecting them.

- Problem was, many of the kings were lousy shepherds of their people, either inept or more concerned with their own power and wealth.

## 12 **The Shepherd-King**

- Thus, for someone in that culture to say, "The Lord is my shepherd" was similar to saying, "The Lord is my king," and the point was that God does what a king/shepherd is supposed to do.
- The person was declaring an intention to live under God's rule, and the rest of the Psalm then becomes a description of the good things that come to that person as a subject of this king.

## 13 **The Shepherd-King**

- Thus, because the Lord is a good shepherd and I am a member of his flock, I shall not be in want.
- I will have all that I need.
- The references to lying down in green pastures, being led beside still waters and fearing no evil in the valley of the shadow of death are poetic ways of saying the Shepherd-King provides what I need to stay alive.

## 14 **The Shepherd-King**

- Although we're used to hearing in the KJV as Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . the underlying Hebrew can also mean simply "place of deep darkness."
- Thus, the NRSV renders this verse as "Even though I walk through the darkest valley . . ."
- In that reading, the Psalm becomes a statement of God's shepherding us in the difficult, troubled and hard stretches we go through in life itself.
- The Psalm continues in that mode, talking about life, and it concludes, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life . . ." Why? Because the Lord is my shepherd.

## 15 **The Shepherd knows the way**

- The psalmist says the reason for not being overcome by fear while in the dark valley is that God the Shepherd is with him.
- The psalmist takes comfort that the Shepherd has a rod and staff that are ready to protect him, but another fear-reducing factor is likely that the Shepherd had been through this valley before.
- Only a foolhardy shepherd would take his flock into a dark valley he'd never been in before.

- The only reason for leading sheep into or through a valley where there might be risk is because the shepherd knows there's something the flock needs - grass or water or shelter - in the valley or at the other end of it and that he can handle whatever threats to the sheep that might occur there.
- We could say the shepherd has first taken a "test drive" in the valley and knows that the rod and staff will be sufficient to handle the threats to his sheep.

## 16 **The Shepherd knows the way**

- Thus, this Psalm becomes a statement of confidence in God.
- Whether our dark valleys are times of trouble or the actual passage through death itself, we believe God is not only with us but is more than equal to whatever threats to our spiritual well-being may lurk within that darkness.

## 17 **Consider Abraham**

- In writing to the Romans, Paul talks about confidence in God, using Abraham as a model.
- Paul tells of God's promise to Abraham that a nation would descend from him and the story of how Abraham, despite being old and despite being married to a childless woman well past child-bearing years, believed God.
- Paul states it like this:
  - Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead — since he was about a hundred years old — and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (Rom 4:19–21 NIV)

## 18 **Consider Abraham**

- While it is not true that Abraham never doubted, he did and this is why we find Ishmael.
- Nevertheless, Abraham in spite of His doubts pressed on and believed God.
- As he did, he grew stronger in his faith and the promise was eventually fulfilled through him and his descendants.

## 19 **Confidence in God**

- Psalm 23, and indeed the whole book of Psalms, is about that confidence.
- The Psalms, in general, recount all sorts of human troubles, despairs and fears, but like a compass needle that keeps swinging back to the north, they keep coming back to the confidence that God is with us in the darkness.
- So when Psalm 23 talks about God's rod and staff being a source of comfort in the frightening valleys we go through, it is stating the main point of the whole book of Psalms.

- God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. (Psa 46:1 NIV)

## 20 Psalm 139

- One of the other Psalms, 139, can even be read as evidence that God has test-driven the dark valleys ahead of us. The author of that Psalm says:
- Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. (Psa 139:7–12 NIV)

## 21 Confidence in God

- That's a testimony from someone who's been in a dark valley, and that person invites us to believe that our experience in the valley will be similar, if we trust God.
- To trust God doesn't mean we have to muster up belief or desperately try to shore up shaky hope.
- It does mean we rely on more than just what our fears tell us.
- Confidence in God doesn't change the facts about the world, but it does change the conclusions we draw about those facts.

## 22 Confidence in God

- For example, two people can look at the same facts and arrive at opposite conclusions.
- One man might look at the dark valleys in life and conclude, "There is no God. If there were, he'd have never let us go through such troubles."
- Another can look at those dark valleys and say, "It's so comforting that God has gone through them first so we can trust him to shepherd us while we're in them."
- Same facts; different interpretations.

## 23 Confidence in God

- There are plenty of witnesses to Kia's road tests in Death Valley.
- A hoard of freelance photographers capture them with cameras. But when it comes to our journeys through life's dark valleys, we have no photos of God in the valley.
- We have only the testimony of others who have been there and our interpretation of what they tell us.
- Psalm 23 is one such testimony:

- 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.

## 24 **Confidence in God**

- James Limburg, professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, tells of going bicycling with his son.
- Stopping to explore a drainage tunnel, they walked way back into the concrete pipe.
- Turning a corner, everything became very dark.
- Immediately, he felt his son's hand reach out for his and he took hold of it until the light was once again visible.

## 25 **Conclusion**

- In the same way, life has its many twists and turns.
- One moment, things can be going great and the next moment, we can find ourselves in a dark valley.
- We can get laid off at work, find out we have a serious illness, or experience an accident that threatens forever the way we live.
- But God is faithful, even in the midst of deep darkness, He has promised never to leave us or forsake us.
- So then, let us encourage each other that God is not indifferent to our problems, but is the help and solution of all our problems.
- All we have to do is only believe and put our faith in His big hands.

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