

# THE FIRST 15

Monday, July 22, 2024

Today is Monday, July 22 and we are studying what the Bible says about dark valleys.

## OPENING PRAYER

*I pause in the quiet stillness at the dawn of another day. There is rhythm to my life. The sun sets and rises, my heart beats within my chest, and my breath moves in and out of my body. Hours turn to days and days turn to weeks. In every season and circumstance, I am not alone. God is with me. I seek Him in the mountaintops and in the dark valleys. Amen.*

## SCRIPTURE

***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. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Psalm 23:1-6 (NIV)***

## REFLECTION

This summer we are slowing down to enjoy a lengthy reflection on a beloved Psalm - Psalm twenty-three. This week we reflect on the words, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley." Difficulties, challenges and suffering are part of the human existence. We all will go through dark valleys during certain seasons of our lives. They are unavoidable. But the psalmist reminds us that these dark valleys, even the darkest of valleys, are something we walk through. They do not last forever, the darkness is not permanent, we walk through them.

In late summer, shepherds take their sheep on a long trek up into the mountains to enjoy the fresh grass of remote alpine meadows. The shepherd stays with the flock during this season until the cold weather and winter approaches. The sheep are in intimate contact with the shepherd and spend time daily in his company. To get to the high country, you pass through the valley. The sides of mountains are scarred by deep ravines, and the best route to the top of the mountain is always along these valleys. The shepherd leads his flock gently and persistently up the paths that wind through the dark valleys.

Are you going through a dark valley? Or perhaps someone you know, a loved one, is struggling in a valley of darkness. There are many circumstances that can cause dark valleys for us. Dark valleys are the result of physical pain, chronic illness (including mental illness), grief over the loss of a loved one, the pain of losing a spouse or a child, grief over the loss of a loved one to something other than death - to Alzheimer's or dementia. Dark valleys are caused by broken relationships, estrangement or cut off, drug or alcohol abuse, crime or imprisonment. Dark valleys are the result of mounting debt, financial challenges or poverty. It is the couple who

works and works but never is able to get ahead, struggles to put food on the table, keep a roof over the family's head and provide basic necessities.

Sometimes in a dark valley, we can feel very alone, like God is absent and no one understands. What Psalm 23 reminds us is that in the darkest of valleys the Good Shepherd is right there with us, leading us, guiding us, protecting us, caring for us, helping us and even carrying us when we need carrying. We are not alone. Jesus is with us.

**Ask:** Am I currently in a valley or on the mountaintop? How can I look to Jesus, my Good Shepherd, for love, care, help and support?

**Pause and Pray**

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Lord Jesus, You are my Good Shepherd. Lead me to higher ground. Walk with me through the dark valleys of life and shine Your light on my path. Whenever I feel alone, remind me of Your abiding presence, comfort me in my sorrow and strengthen me for the journey. I pray for those who are going through hard times and are facing their own valleys of darkness. Be with them Lord and guide them through their time of struggle. Amen.*