

The Shadow of Death

A Godly Response to a Pandemic – Part 2

Series Overview

Proverbs 27:1 says, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.” The COVID-19 outbreak certainly shows that this is true. When 2020 began, we had no idea we would face this new kind of challenge. Though it caught us by surprise, we know God was not surprised. He knew this would happen and will guide us through this challenging time.

This study guide is the second in a new Faith Baptist Bible study series called “A Godly Response to a Pandemic.” Each lesson will provide biblical teaching that enables us to think, feel, and live in a Christlike way throughout this pandemic experience.

Together, we’ll tackle topics like fear, anxiety, and loneliness. We’ll also examine our behavior as a church. Most importantly, we’ll learn about our loving, sovereign God who is all-knowing, almighty, always present, and trustworthy in every way.

Series Guidelines

This series will continue throughout our period of “social isolation” in New York City. To participate, please take the following approach.

1. A new study guide will be provided each Saturday at Shepherd Thoughts. You can follow the guide online or download and print it as a PDF.
2. Use each guide for an in-home Bible study from 9:30-10:30 a.m. on Sunday.
3. If you live with a Christian family, you can study together. If not, try studying together with another believer from Faith by phone or internet using a service like Facebook Video Chat, Google Hangouts, Skype, or Zoom.
4. For each study: (1) begin with prayer, (2) read the Scripture passage, (3) work through the study guide, then (4) end with prayer.
5. Then tune in early to the Faith Baptist Livestream on Facebook at 10:45 a.m. to post questions, feedback, and comments about the lesson. Pastor Overmiller will respond to your feedback before the 11:00 a.m. service begins.
6. You can also leave comments on the blogsite at the end of the study guide page and Pastor Overmiller will respond by sometime Sunday.
7. As a bonus, memorize a verse or more from the passage and think about it throughout the week ahead.

Lesson Introduction

Like a large fishing net encircling a school of tuna in the ocean, the COVID19 pandemic has cast death’s long, dark shadow on all of us. For those who’ve lived a while or who bear the daily challenge of preexisting conditions, this shadow is especially scary. Yet

every one of us, from nurses to teachers, police officers to pizza deliverymen, parents to children worry what “might be” if we or those we love contracts this pernicious virus.

In times like these, the words of Psalm 23:4 provide our hearts with the comfort and assurance we need, reminding us that the Lord himself is our shepherd. No matter how frightening the pathway ahead might be, he is lovingly guiding us each step of the way.

Psalm 23:4

Yea, 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.

Study Guide

Consider the Background

Before winter, an Old Testament shepherd would lead his sheep down from the sunny fields and pasturelands on the mountain above to the safety of his home ranch below. This descent was often a treacherous, uncomfortable journey, crossing rushing rivers, rocky terrain, dense forests, and dark valleys that harbored predators and bandits.

Examine the Scripture

- The word *though* (יָ) doesn't mean “if” but “when.” Though “walking through the shadow of death” isn't a daily experience for most of us, it's an experience we all will experience in the cycles of our lives.
- The “shadow of death” is a metaphor. We know that death is not an actual shadow, but it's *like* a shadow. A shadow reduces the light from our eyes and darkens what we're able to see. Though we know that a shadow can't hurt us, we're often scared about what stands behind the shadow – like a sheep would be scared of a wolf's shadow in the forest.
- The word *fear* means to be “afraid, frightened” and to feel “greatly distressed and concerned about potentially painful or unfavorable circumstances.” It can also mean to be “intimidated.”
- The word *evil* here means more than just immorality and wickedness. It is a general term that can also refer to something that is “undesirable or potentially harmful.”

Ask Yourself Some Questions

- Why is it important to anticipate and embrace the difficult and scary experiences of life as normal rather than hoping they won't occur and being surprised when they happen?
- How is the prospect of death like a shadow and why is it so frightening?
- What are some attitudes and behaviors that reveal our fear of death?
- What are some other kinds of “undesirable or potentially harmful” experiences, besides the prospect of death itself, that can cause us to be afraid in times like these?

Examine the Scripture

Read Psalm 23 from the beginning. Can you notice the writer's emphasis on the Lord by using the word *he* and *his* at the beginning of every line? Then notice a quick, subtle shift to *I* at the beginning of verse 4.

Ask Yourself Some Questions

- Why does the writer of this Psalm put himself at the beginning of the opening sentences of verse 4 when he hadn't done so in the previous verses?
- Why do frightening experiences in life turn our attention and confidence away from the Lord on onto ourselves (which is what is going on here in this verse)?
- What fact or truth encourages the writer to set his fear(s) aside?

Search the Scripture

Compare the encouraging phrase, "for you are with me," to Isaiah 43:2, Matthew 28:20, and Hebrews 13:5.

Ask Yourself Some Questions

- How do brushes with death and other scary, uncomfortable experiences make us more aware of God's presence in our lives?
- How would a sheep respond to its shepherd in a dark valley and how should you respond to the Lord in scary times like this COVID19 pandemic?
- Are you drawing closer to the Lord during this time or wandering farther away from him?

Search the Scripture

When sheep get scared, they get spooked. When they get spooked, they run in any random direction and get into more trouble than before. That's why the word "walk" is important here. We cannot "run" through life's frightening experiences or push "fast forward" to get out of them quickly. We have to be willing to walk through them patiently with the Lord, making one wise and trusting decision after another until the long ordeal is over, even if it won't be very soon.

- "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." (Lao Tzu)
- "To get through the hardest journey we need take only one step at a time, but we must keep on stepping." (Chinese Proverb)
- "One may walk over the highest mountain one step at a time." (John Wanamaker)

Ask Yourself Some Questions

- Why do we find it difficult to "walk" through difficult experiences, wanting to "run" through them instead?
- How does knowing that Lord is with you help you to "walk" through difficult experiences one decision at a time?

- What are some small decisions that you need to make next to navigate your current trial in a godly, un-frightened way?

Search the Scripture

The writer mentions two tools that an Old Testament shepherd would use when they were guiding their sheep on a journey through the valley.

- The *rod* was something like a wooden club that would hang on shepherd's belt, ready for use at any moment. The shepherd used his rod to examine the sheep for harmful bugs and diseases and would occasionally strike a sheep firmly to keep it in line, preventing the sheep from going into harm's way. He would also use the rod as a weapon to fight away predators and bandits.
- The *staff* was a longer stick, up to six feet long. A shepherd would use this rod to pull sheep back to safety who had fallen over a cliff or into the water. He would also use it as they walked to gently bump or nudge a sheep who was beginning to stray from the path.

Ask Yourself Some Questions

How is God shepherding you through the COVID19 pandemic?

- How is he caring for your physical health?
- How is he examining and caring for your smallest needs?
- How is he correcting you from wayward, disobedient behavior?
- How is he pulling you back to a more biblical, spiritual mindset?
- How is he keeping you on the path?
- How is he protecting you from danger?

Share Your Feedback

Now that you've finished this study, don't forget to tune in early to the Faith Baptist Livestream on Facebook at 10:45 a.m. to post questions, feedback, and comments about the lesson! Pastor Overmiller will respond to your feedback before the 11:00 a.m. service begins.