

The Good Shepherd Leads Me (and All) through Threats and Even Death

Psalm 23:4; James 4:14 b,c

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You may have heard of the worshiper at a funeral service who arrived at work the next day and heard a colleague ask, “Charles, how was the funeral service you attended yesterday?” Charles replied, “The preacher spoke so beautifully and persuasively about life-after-death that, when it was over, I almost regretted I had not experienced it myself.” Personally, I don’t remember anyone’s preaching on life-after-death to have been as persuasive for me as Charles, from that funeral, describes his reaction.

“The Good Shepherd leads me through the valley of the shadow of death; I fear no evil; and the Good Shepherd carrying a rod and a staff gives me confidence” are three sentences of Scripture which I first remember hearing in Sunday School when I was six years old. At that time, our teacher and the church gave the six of us in the class a small cardstock booklet in which a shepherd carrying a tall walking stick in one hand and a crooked staff in the other was portrayed leading sheep along a trail next to a creek with high canyon walls rising left and right. “The Good Shepherd leads me through the valley of the shadow of death; I fear no evil; and the Good Shepherd carrying a rod and a staff gives me confidence.”

For the first 21 years of my life, my closest brushes with death included a great-uncle on my mother’s side of the family, a great-aunt on my father’s side of the family, and my younger brother’s pet-store-purchased red-eared slider turtle. Within the next seven years, however, before I was 28, my maternal grandfather, my dad, and my maternal grandmother died. Death can seem to take years of vacation during certain periods in our lives; then death can seem to come in clusters. Aside from death’s outcome and finality, two other challenges and frustrations exist: first, the unevenness with which death shows up (primarily coming too soon / cutting life short without a full complement of years – or without advance notice); and, second, the length of time death can take when reasonable health irreversibly declines. Keep that in mind: Aside from death’s outcome and finality, two other challenges and frustrations exist: first, the unevenness with which death shows up (primarily coming too soon / cutting life short without a full complement of years – or without advance notice); and, second, the length of time death can take when reasonable health irreversibly declines.

Three or so years ago, I attended a funeral and burial in Coryell County for one of my father’s first cousins. She was likely a few years short of 80 at the time of her death. Before the family departed the funeral home, a man whom I did not know approached me and asked, “Are you Ted Foote?” I said I was. He introduced himself and proceeded to tell me of an incident from the summer of 1939. He said, “I was six years old, and your dad was 15, almost 16. It was July. We were both hoeing weeds in the cotton field. At some point, he looked over at me and said, ‘When I graduate high school next year, I’m leaving this cotton field behind and never coming back.’ You know, nine years later he came back to live on the land and to raise sheep for awhile and practice law, I guess, for thirty years, but he never came back to hoe weeds in the cotton field.”

As I drove to the cemetery, I amused myself thinking about what is not funny at all. The next five years in my dad’s life – from hoeing weeds in the cotton field during the summer of 1939 before his senior year in high school, until 1945, (those next five years) would take him to Texas A&M and then, in November of 1944, to the fields and forests of central and eastern Belgium. I could not help but wonder, as the temperatures of December, 1944, began to drop there and German bullets and tank and artillery shells endangered everyone and everything around, if he would have traded his all-expense-paid travel to Europe for that July hoeing weeds in the cotton field on his

grandfather's farmland. We most often don't know when death or the threat of death will crop-up, but when it does, other undesired challenges – like hoeing weeds amid cotton – certainly can seem not as extreme. Yet (1) hard work in some form, and (2) the challenges of growing up and earning wages, and (3) the threat and reality of death all come with the territory of living.

Like Charles who attended a funeral and the next day told his work colleague that the preacher had spoken so eloquently that he (Charles) almost regretted he could not have experienced life-after-death himself, when those die who have influenced us as family, mentor, friend, acquaintance, or even total stranger, some people feel that some words about life-after-death are essential, even required. For certain others, words specifically about life-after-death are not needed or even desired, especially if the words are speculative. By speculative, I mean even certain people of faith have no desire to hear about life-after-death options being warmer or cooler temperatures, or wailing and gnashing of teeth, or playing harps and singing hymns.

It is enough for certain people of faith – who deeply respect both life and death – to hear, amid life's serious challenges, threats, and the event of death itself, (it is enough to hear) descriptions about the One to whom we belong and relate, and whom we ultimately serve day by day. "The Good Shepherd leads me through the valley of the shadow of death; I fear no evil; and the Good Shepherd carrying a rod and a staff gives me confidence." So many days in the string of days comprising your life, my life, anyone's life are tough days. Threats and death are tough opponents. They "win" many days. Threats and death, it is said, take no holidays; but while death has death's victories, death wins no championship for those of a faith tradition – who trust God at each beginning and along every trail, in the face of each challenge and threat, and even at the end.

Death is individualized, with extended effects. Even the story of the deer mother and her male offspring, Bambi, "brings home" that reality to children, teens, and adults. Life ends for someone, but life without that someone continues for someone else; and history, as life's on-going witness, is a conduit of life's enriching potential and value. Said again: When individualized, death comes, and life ends for someone; but life without that someone continues for someone else; and history, as life's on-going witness, is a conduit of life's enriching potential and value.

We live well, not fearing death or worrying about death, when not fretting over the warmth or coolness of the after-life, or wailing and gnashing of teeth compared to playing harps and singing hymns. We live well when planning to live through death – trusting and "faithing" to live through death, because, while death wins days and takes individuals, death wins no championships. Life without others who have died before us continues for each other one who is still breathing and relating. History, even a few more days for you and me, is life's on-going witness and the conduit of life's enriching value from God, whom we recognize in Jesus and in the way Jesus lived and died and has what we call "a witness through resurrection beyond death." This "crucifixion-resurrection witness" known in Jesus continues to give each person's life enhanced value – whether it's hoeing weeds in a summer cotton field, coming under fire in war, sitting in a hospital intensive care waiting room, sitting for your own chemotherapy or kidney dialysis, in a courtroom waiting for a legal decision, or standing in a cemetery with more grief, at the time it seems, than faith. In each and all of those places, are we not strengthened to say: "The Good Shepherd leads me through the valley of the shadow of death; I fear no evil; and the Good Shepherd carrying a rod and a staff gives me confidence"? Death wins victories, but no championships; because, as one Apostle wrote: "God is love" (I John 4:8b,16). And as another Apostle wrote: "God's love never ends" (I Corinthians 13:8a). – All honor and praise be to God.