

THE SHEPHERD PSALM

by

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CHAPTER TWO

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters" (Psalm 23:2)

They tell us that it is a very difficult and well-nigh impossible thing to get a sheep that is hungry to lie down in a pasture, or that is thirsty to drink by turbulent waters. A hungry dog will, but not a hungry sheep. The sheep described in this verse, then, are such as have been fed and satisfied in richest pastures, and whose thirst have been slaked in quiet waters. Doubtless the mind of the Psalmist is going back to such scenes in his own shepherd life when he had led his flock into rich, green pastures, sought out for his sheep some quiet watering-place, or had so manipulated the flow of turbulent waters as to make them flow smoothly.

The writer of this Psalm is seeking to illustrate spiritual truths from his own experience as a shepherd among the hills of Judea. He is spiritualizing his soliloquy. He thinks of the cry of GOD's people for the satisfaction of the soul's hunger and thirst; he sees the necessity for such feeding and nourishment if there is to be a walk of obedience "in the paths of righteousness."

Spiritualizing this verse, we may say that the "**green pastures**" and "**still waters**" refer to the spiritual nourishment which the child of GOD receives as he waits upon GOD in the study of His Word and prayers. There can be no spiritual strength sufficient to walk in "**paths of righteousness**" unless time is taken to "**lie down**" in the "**green pastures**" of the divine Word by "**the still waters**" of prayer. To "**lie down**" is the first lesson the Great Shepherd would teach His sheep. Not lie down after you are tired, but before. "**Lie down**" that you may have strength to walk in "**the paths of righteousness.**" One of the hardest commands for the soldier to obey is to wait in the trenches. He would sooner "go over the top."

RESTING IN THE LORD IS FOREIGN TO GOD'S PEOPLE

It is generally recognized as being a very difficult thing to get GOD's people to thus "**lie down.**" They will do almost anything and everything else but that. They will run, walk, fight, sing, teach, preach, work -- in a word, do almost anything and everything except seek seasons of quiet and periods of retirement for secret communion with GOD and quiet soul nurture.

Most of our favorite hymns indicate this attitude. They are militant, working, active hymns: "*Work, for the night is coming*"; "*The fight is on*"; "*Onward, Christian Soldiers, marching as to war*"; "*Stand up, stand up for JESUS*"; "*Steadily marching on, with His banner waving o'er us*," and many others. Where are such hymns as "*Alone with JESUS, O the hush, the rapture*"; "*In the secret of His presence how my soul delights to hide*"; "*Take time to be holy*"? How few of us are

willing to go alone into the woods "whither the Master went, clean forspent, clean forspent"!

We do not like pauses in our meetings. If there should be a pause we seek at once to fill it in with a verse of Scripture, or someone says, "Let us sing a verse of hymn sixty-six," and so we fill up the pauses with choruses.

From the rush into the hush JESUS call us. From the turbulent tumult into the quiet secret of His presence. Where there is peace, perfect peace, JESUS call us.

JESUS calls us, o'er the tumult
Of our life's wild, restless sea;
Day by day His sweet voice soundeth,
Saying, "Christian, follow me!"

JESUS calls us -- from the worship
Of the vain world's golden store;
From each idol that would keep us --
Saying, "Christian, love me more!"

In our joys and in our sorrows,
Days of toil and hours of ease,
Still He calls in cares and pleasures --
"Christian, love me more than these!"

JESUS calls us! by Thy mercies,
Saviour, may we hear Thy call;
Give our hearts to Thy obedience,
Serve and love Thee best of all.

-- Cecil F. Alexander

HE MAKETH ME TO LIE DOWN

Lie down we must. The text says, "**He maketh me to lie down.**" The word "**maketh**" is the Hebrew causative and indicates forcible, compelling action. Our great Shepherd knows that amid the activity, the stress, the strain and the restlessness of our lives it is absolutely necessary for us to take periods of quiet and rest, without which it will be impossible for us to continue in the way of righteousness. Have you so much to do that you do not have time to "**lie down**"? Then the gracious Shepherd will see to it that you have less to do. He would make you lie down. The overworked watchspring snaps. There must be pauses and parentheses in all our lives.

We make much today of active Christianity. We lay emphasis on the activities of Church work. Pragmatism is more than quietism to us. We must "bring things to pass," and "deliver the goods." This is all very well in its place, but we fear that the strength of our activities is not very deeply rooted. We shall be able to bear fruit upward and outward only as the roots of our spiritual life grow downward and deep. The secret springs of our lives must be well cared for.

One day we read in the daily newspaper of some leading man in the community who had fallen and brought discredit on the cause of CHRIST. The unfaithful one was described as having been "an active member of the church." Yes, that was the trouble. He was too active; he was not passive enough. He had omitted to "**lie down**" and feed in "**green pastures**" and drink by the "**still waters**" of GOD's Word and by prayer.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THIS PRINCIPLE

A friend tells us that while in the Orient he visited a Syrian shepherd. He observed that every morning the shepherd carried food to the sheepfold. On inquiry he found that he was taking it to a sick sheep. The next morning the friend accompanied the shepherd and saw in the sheepfold a sheep with a broken leg? Did a dog bite it? How was the limb injured? The shepherd replied, "No, I broke it myself."

In amazement the friend replied, "What, you broke it! Why did you do that?"

The shepherd then told him how wayward this sheep had been, how it had led others astray, and how difficult it had been to come near it. It was necessary that something should be done to preserve the life of this particular member of the flock, and also to prevent it from leading other sheep astray. The shepherd therefore broke its leg and reset it. This breakage necessitated the sheep's lying down for a week or more. During that time it was compelled to take food from the hand of the shepherd. Thus had the compulsion of lying down cured the wandering and wayward disposition of the sheep.

"WOULD I STILL HAVE TO DIE?"

It is said that when a sheep will not follow the shepherd he takes up the lamb in his arms -- and then the mother follows.

So it sometimes happens with the children of GOD. Our Great Shepherd has to lay us aside, put us on our backs, perhaps, for a while in order that we may look up into His face and learn needed lessons. A little girl lay dying. She looked up into the face of her father, who years before had been a very active church worker, but on account of business prosperity, had drifted away from Christian moorings, and said, "Papa, if you were as good as you used to be, do you think I would have to die?" GOD was making this man to "**lie down**," do you see?

A deacon in a Baptist church told me this story. When first married, he and his wife observed family prayers every day. This worshipful spirit continued for some years after their first child was born; then gradually the father became so engrossed in business that the family altar, Bible reading and prayer were gradually neglected and finally altogether dispensed with. One day, on coming home from the office, the deacon found his nine-year-old girl very ill with a fever. For weeks they watched over her, but finally the angel of death took her home. As the deacon told me this story, the tears filling his eyes, he said, "Then I knew that my daughter had been taken for my sake that that GOD was making me to '*lie down*.' From that day until this, which is over a quarter of a century, the family altar has been maintained in our home."

Mother, in that sweetest of all hours to a mother, the last hour of the day when the child is being

put to sleep, when the last thing its eyes rest upon is the face of the mother, does its last vision rest on a mother who has taught it to pray, to love JESUS? It would be infinitely better that the heavenly Father take that little child to be with Himself than that it should go out into the world from a godless, Christless, prayerless home.

Fathers and mothers, are we taking time to "*lie down*," to be alone with GOD in prayer and the reading of His Word? Has the family altar in your home been neglected? What are you waiting for? Do you want GOD to come and lay His hand upon some precious one in your family circle to take to be with Himself? Would you then take time to "*lie down*"?

HOW FAR HAVE WE COME? HOW FAR WILL WE GO?

It is said that when a sheep is wayward and will not cross the brook, the shepherd finds that by taking the little lamb from it and carrying it across, the mother sheep will at once follow, rushing over the stream. Fathers and mothers, are you waiting for GOD to do this? Our fathers and mothers used to have the family altar. They took time to read the Bible and pray with their children. What kind of age will the next be if we neglect these religious privileges? It may be that our parents were not the scholars that some of their children are, but I think we may safely say that they were the saints that we never will be until we "*lie down*" in the green pastures and quiet waters of GOD's Word and prayer as they did.

Christian workers especially need to learn the lesson of "*lying down*." We are restless; we fume and worry and fret because we are tired and hungry. We do not take time to "*lie down*." Strange, is it not, that we will do almost anything but *lie down*? We will walk, run, climb, sing, preach, teach -- do anything but "*lie down*." Let us not forget that the secret of power lies in being alone with GOD. CHRIST drew the multitudes to Him because He withdrew from them at times. The drawing preacher is the withdrawing man. Significant are the words of JESUS to His active disciples: "**Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while.**" He was telling them, "Come apart before you come apart."

Resting in the pastures and beneath the Rock,
Resting by the waters where He leads His flock,
Resting, while we listen, at His glorious feet,
Resting in His very arms! O rest complete!

-- Frances Ridley Havergal

OUR LYING DOWN FITS US FOR WALKING UPRIGHTLY

These seasons of *lying down* are periods of renewal of strength for duty, not for indolence or mere ecstasy. By thus feeding in the green pastures and drinking by the still waters, we are strengthened in order that we may walk in the paths of righteousness. We eat and drink for strength, not for drunkenness. One may lie in a bath so long that his strength is exhausted thereby, or he may take a good plunge in the morning which will be a source of exhilaration to him throughout the day. These times of "*lying down*" may be likened to the plunge. We must not be mere recluses or visionaries. Our "*lying down*" must fit us for "*walking*." If our private communion with GOD does not fit us for Christian activity in our daily avocation, distrust it. We

cannot keep the rapture of devotion if we neglect duty of service. Life must not be all contemplation any more than it must not be all activity. We will not need to speak of these times of lying down, nor advertise that we have seasons of quiet communion, of ecstasy and vision; but the result thereof will be clearly apparent in our lives as we walk in the path of righteousness, and in the joyful assurance of soul when we are called upon to pass through the valley of the shadow.

Would that we knew how much depended, both for ourselves and others, on these seasons of retirement for meditation and prayer! What a blessing it would be to us! What a benediction to others!

"Lord, what a change within us one short hour
Spent in Thy presence will prevail to make;
What heavy burdens from our bosoms take;
What parched grounds refresh as with a shower!
We kneel, and all around us seem to lower;
We rise, and all the distant and the near
Stands forth in sunny outline, brave and clear;
We kneel, how weak! We rise, how full of power!
Why, therefore, should we do ourselves this wrong --
Or others -- that we are not always strong;
That we are ever overborne with care;
That we should ever weak or heartless be,
Anxious or troubled, when with us is prayer,
And joy and strength and courage are with Thee!"

-- Richard Chenevix Trench

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