

THE SHEPHERD PSALM

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

"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" (Psalm 23:4)

It was necessary for shepherds in Palestine, when leading their flocks from one pasture to another, to lead them at times through dark ravines, on either side of which were caves and holes wherein dwelt ravenous beasts. From the attack of these beasts the shepherd must protect his flock. For this purpose he used the staff which he carried with him. The staff was a great stick with a large knob at the end of it pierced through with sharp nails and spikes. This weapon was used to beat off the attacks of the wild beasts. The shepherd must be bold and courageous. We recall how David referred to his encounters with wild beasts which attacked his flock. **"And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock; and I went after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth; and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the living God. David said moreover, the Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of the Philistine. And Saul said unto David, Go, and the LORD be with thee"** (I Samuel 17:34-37).

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

"**The valley of the shadow of death**" may refer to any dark, dread or awful experience through which the child of GOD is called to pass. In this sense it is used in many places in the Scriptures. The Christian's path is not always beside still waters and in green pastures.

"In pastures green? No always; sometimes He
Who knoweth best, in kindness leadeth me
In weary ways, where heavy shadows be.

And by still waters? No, not always so,
Ofttimes the heavy tempests round me blow,
And o'er my soul the waves and billows go.

But when the storm beasts loudest, and I cry
Aloud for help, the Master standeth by,
And whispers to my soul, "Lo, it is I!"

Above the tempest wild I hear Him say,
"Beyond the darkness lies the perfect day,
In every path of thine I lead the way."

-- Henry H. Barry

But is it not kind of our Father that He puts the valley in the middle of the Psalm -- not at the beginning of our Christian journey, lest we should be unduly discouraged, but in the middle -- after we have been strengthened with food and drink and have been assured of the tender care and guidance of the Great Shepherd. Oh! wondrous thought and care!

Of course, "**the valley of the shadow of death**" refers also, and probably more particularly, to the experience of death itself. At least we have come to look upon it in such light, and doubtless thousands of GOD's people have found the comforting truth of this verse a safe pillow in the dying hour. It has lightened the valley, removed the fear of death, and illumined immortality.

THE FEAR OF DEATH

When a robber would scatter a flock of sheep and cause fear and consternation, he throws a dead carcass in the midst of the flock. Sheep fear nothing as much as the sight of death. Is this not true of man also? About the last fear taken from the human heart is "**the fear of death.**" "**The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.**" Even though the believer knows that the sting of death has been removed, nevertheless there is usually an attendant fear connected with the passing out of this life.

No really thoughtful man will speak lightly of death. He may, as some men may, in the fullness of health and vigor, laugh at the idea of dying; but when he comes face to face with the real experience, there is, as any minister or physician will tell you, quite a different story to tell.

It reminds me of an experience in our own family life. Behind a former residence of ours was a stretch of woods where, after school, our boys would go to play their outdoor games. It was the understanding in the home that when the whistle was blown or some other signal given the boys should come home for their meals. At times the boys would come home in response to the signal in a somewhat murmuring spirit. They have said something like this to their mother: "Mother, what did you call us home for anyway? Didn't you know that we were just in the midst of a great game and our side was about to win? We wish you wouldn't call us." I have felt as I have listened to them speaking thus to their mother that, just at that particular time and in the middle of the day, they could, apparently, get along very well without their mother. But I have noticed this also, that at night time, after their mother had prayed with them and the lights were turned out, there was another story to tell. It seems to me that I can still hear one of the boys calling out in the dark to his mother, "Mamma, are you there?"

"Yes, son."

"Mamma."

"Yes."

"Is your face turned toward me?"

"Yes."

"Mamma, will you hold my hand? It's dark, isn't it, Mamma? Good night, Manna."

Ah, yes, in the daytime they might think they could get along very well without their mother, but when the night comes, and the lights are all out, and it's dark, then nobody on earth but mother will do.

So it is with you, my friend. In your bravado of health and strength you may say that you are not afraid of death, but you wait until your feet come down to the brink of the river; then there will be a different story to tell. Some men haven't much use for GOD in life, but nobody else but GOD will do in the hour of death.

THE VALLEY IS CERTAIN AND NARROW

Death is certain. It is appointed unto men once to die. While the Lord tarries, every child of Adam will have to pass through the experience of death.

"There is no flock, however watched and tended,
But one dead lamb is there!
There is no fireside, howso'er defended,
But has one vacant chair!"

-- Henry W. Longfellow

We cannot bribe death. We cannot avoid or evade passing through the valley of the shadow. We cannot dig under it, nor tunnel around it, nor fly over it. Face it we must. It behooves us, therefore, to make sure that we have the light and the life which alone will secure for us a happy exit from this valley and a glorious entrance into the unfading light of a new day.

The valley of the shadow of death is narrow, very narrow -- so narrow indeed that even a mother cannot take her one-hour-old babe with her. It is so narrow. She must go through the valley alone. Single file, if you please, is the order of march through this valley of the shadow. An aged woman lay dying. By her bedside, with his hand in hers, sat the man who for over fifty years had been her husband. The light was failing fast, and eternity drawing near to the aged woman. Grasping the hand of her husband tightly, she said, "John, it's getting dark. Take my hand. For over fifty years we have traveled together, and you have led me. Now it's getting dark, and I cannot see the way. John, come with me, won't you?"

But John could not go, and with tear-filled eyes and trembling voice, he said, "Anna, I cannot, cannot go. Only JESUS can go with you."

She was a little girl of ten years. The angel of death was hovering over her bed. The end was drawing near. She said to her father, who was standing by the mother's side at the bed, "Papa, it's getting dark and I cannot see. Will you please go with me?"

With heart breaking, the father had to say, "Child, I cannot, I cannot go with you."

The girl turned to her mother and said, "Mama, then you will, won't you?"

But the mother, in turn, amid her tears, replied, "Child, I would, but I cannot. Only JESUS can go with you."

THE PERSONAL PRONOUNS CHANGE

It is interesting to note the change in the personal pronoun in this verse. Up to this point the Psalmist has been speaking in the third person and using the personal pronoun "**He**" -- "**He leadeth me.**" "**He maketh me.**" "**He restoreth**"; he, he, he. When he comes to speak of the shadow of death, however, the third personal pronoun is changed to that of the second person: "**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou, [thou -- not he, is with me, but thou] art with me.**" There is no room for a third person in this valley. If one does not have CHRIST as Saviour and GUIDE in the dark hour of death, he goes through the valley of the shadow all alone. Surely, without CHRIST with him man will stumble and fall in this valley.

Poor indeed is that soul who, when his feet are about to enter the valley, has no Guide, or, when he comes to the brink of death's river, has no PILOT.

"Oh, to have no CHRIST, no Saviour,
How lonely life must be!
Like a sailor lost and driven
On a wide and shoreless sea.

"Oh, to have no CHRIST, no Saviour,
No hand to clasp thine own!
Through the dark, dark vale of shadows
Thou must press thy way alone."

-- W. O. Cushing

But what a blessing and comfort it is for those who know CHRIST as Saviour and COMFORTER to have the assurance that in that last hour of life He is by their side to guide them. It was doubtless this thought of the presence of CHRIST that comforted Tennyson when he wrote the words of that beautiful poem:

"Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And, may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea.

* * *

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And, may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my PILOT face to face
When I have crossed the bar."

-- Alfred Tennyson

Someone has called the fourth verse of the Psalm "*a song of the waters*". Did you ever hear singing on the water? There is something wonderful about it. The water seems to take all harshness out of the music, and puts something exquisitely beautiful into it. Here then is "a psalm of the waters," a song for the believer to sing when his feet are touching the margin of the river: "**When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee . . . For I am the LORD thy God.**"

Here, too, is "*a song in the night*." Sing it, Christian pilgrim, when earth's last hour is at hand. Sing it as you enter the valley. Sing it as the darkness deepens. Sing it when the light of earth's day begins to fade. Sing it when the earth is receding, Heaven is opening and GOD is calling you. Sing it until the glory of the eternal morn breaks upon thine enraptured vision. Sing it until you feet stand upon that golden shore against which death's chilly wave never again shall dash, and where death is no more. Sing it, sing this song of the waters -- "**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.**"

"Why be afraid of Death as though your life were breath!
Death but anoints your eyes with clay. Oh glad surprise!
Why should you be forlorn? Death only husks the corn.
Why should you fear to meet the thresher of the wheat?"

Is sleep a thing to dread? Yet sleeping, you are dead
Till you awake and rise, here, or beyond the skies.

Why should it be a wrench, to leave your wooden bench?
Why not with happy shout run home when school is out?

The dear ones left behind? O foolish one and blind.
A day -- and you will meet -- a night -- and you will greet!

This is the death of Death, to breathe away a breath,
And know the end of strife and taste the deathless life.

And joy without a fear and smile without a tear,
And work, nor care, nor rest, and find the last the best."

-- Malthie D. Babcock

"THY ROD AND THY STAFF THEY COMFORT ME"

The rod is a protection from all the adversaries of the night. No enemy, not even the last enemy, death, can affright the soul in the care of the tender Shepherd, for He has extracted the sting from death. The staff is used for counting the sheep as they pass one by one into the fold. This action is sometimes called "*passing under the rod.*" The language used here indicates safety and security.

"I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me."

-- Henry F. Lyte

CHRIST hath "**abolished death and brought life and immortality to light.**" The word "**abolished**" is a very strong one in the Greek. It has three root letters, e, r and g. Then the preposition *kata* is added to it, thus making our English word "*energy*" which means "*a working force.*" Then, in a way know to Greek students, the preposition gives the word, as it were, the force of a double negative. So the apostle teaches us that CHRIST, when He came into the world and died on the cross, did something with death. He double-twisted it, He de-vitalized it, double-negated it, made it inoperative, rendered it powerless, so that ever afterwards it would be unable to hurt the children of GOD.

I do not know very much about bees except, of course, that they sting. I am told, however, that when a bee stings you it leaves its stinger in the wound and goes away to die. A little child may play with the bee after it has stung a person without any harm coming to the child. The bee has lost its power to hurt. So we are told that the sting of death is sin. Death stung CHRIST on the cross and left its sting in Him, so that ever after it could not hurt the children of GOD. He is "Death of death and hell's destruction."

CHRIST the Great Shepherd will be there at the entrance of the valley to meet you and lead you through. He will beat off all the powers of death. He will destroy all the enemies of darkness and convey you safely through the valley into the Homeland. He holds the keys of death and the grave. How helpless a thing a sheep is! How much in need of a defender it is! It seems as though almost any other animal can defend itself. A dog will fight when attacked. A sheep stands helpless in the presence of its opponent. CHRIST, the Good Shepherd, will protect to the last.

The comforting thoughts of this verse must certainly take the sting out of death for those who grasp the great truths taught here. It surely abolishes death and illumines immortality.

No one need fear death with such thoughts as these before him. The apostle Paul asserts that every believer in CHRIST has "a cheerful view of death," and desires rather "**to be absent from the body and at home with the Lord**" than to remain here upon the earth.

Go to thy grave, not as the slave scourged to his dungeon, or the dog whipped to his kennel, but as the prince wraps around him the drapery of his couch and lies down to pleasant dreams. The conscious companionship of the CHRIST will remove thy fears. With what alacrity, courage and

fearlessness doth he walk the highway whose heart is honest and whose conscience doth not convict him of the violation of his country's laws! How different with the criminal! How full of fear and apprehension!

"Abide with me! fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens -- Lord, with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me!

"Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me!

"I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me!

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!

-- Henry F. Lyle

~ end of chapter 4 ~
