The Shepherd Psalm

A Meditation

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INTRODUCTION

The Twenty-third Psalm Psa_23:1-6

The world could afford to spare many a magnificent library better than it could dispense with this little Psalm of six verses. If the verses of this Psalm had tongues and could repeat the tale of their ministry down throughout the generations of the faithful, what marvels of experience they would reveal! Their biographies would be gathered from the four winds of heaven and from the uttermost parts of the sea; from lonely chambers, from suffering sick beds, from the banks of the valley of the shadow of death, from scaffolds and fiery piles; witnessing in sunlight from moors and mountains, beneath the stars and in high places of the field. What hosts of armies of aliens it has put to flight! If by some magic or divine touch, yea, some miraculous power, the saints' experience of this Psalm could shine out between its lines, what an illumination of the text there would be!

Luther was fond of comparing this Psalm to the nightingale, which is small among the birds and of homely plumage, but with what thrilling melody it pours out its beautiful notes! Into how many dungeons filled with gloom and doubt has this little Psalm sung its[*Page* 8] message of hope and faith! Into how many hearts, bruised and broken by grief, has it brought its hymn of comfort and healing How many darkened prison cells it has lightened and cheered! Into what thousands of sick rooms has it brought its ministry of comfort and support! How many a time, in the hour of pain, has it brought sustaining faith and sung its song of eternal bliss in the valley of the shadow of death! It has charmed more griefs to rest than all the philosophies of the world. And I am persuaded that this little Psalm-bird will continue to sing its song of comfort and cheer to your children, to my children, and to our children's children, and will not cease its psalmody of love until the last weary pilgrim has placed his last climbing footstep upon the threshold of the Father's house to go out no more. Then, I think, this little bird will fold its golden pinions and fall back on the bosom of God, from whence it came.

It has been well said that this Psalm is the most perfect picture of happiness that ever was or ever can be drawn to represent that state of mind for which all alike sigh, and the want of which makes life a failure to most. It represents that heaven which is everywhere, if we could but interpret it, and yet almost nowhere because not many of us do.[*Page* 9]

Unusual Application

How familiar this Psalm is the world over! Go where you will; inquire in every nation, tongue and tribe under heaven where the Bible is known, you will find this Psalm among the first scriptures learned and lisped by the little child at its mother's knee, and the last bit of inspired writ uttered in dying breath by the saintly patriarch.

This Psalm is so universal, says one, because it is so individual; it is so individual because it is so universal. As we read it, we are aware not only of the fact that we are listening to the experience of an Old Testament saint, but also that a voice comes speaking to us through the long centuries past—speaking to us in our own language, recounting our own experience, breathing out our own hopes.

The Davidic authorship of this Psalm has been questioned. We believe firmly that David is the writer; and yet a man feels as he reads the Psalm that it is so personal, so true to his own individual experience, that he could fain claim to have written it himself. It might seem as though the promises and precious things set forth in this Psalm lie beyond our reach; we have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep, but "one of like passions with ourselves has passed that way before and has left a cup to be let down, with His name and[*Page* 10] story written on the rim, and we may let that cup down into the well and draw a draught of the deep, refreshing water."

The Location of the Psalm

Have you ever noticed just where this Psalm is located? It lies between the Twenty-second and the Twenty-fourth Psalms. A very simple statement that—but how deep and wondrous a lesson lies hidden therein!

The Twenty-second Psalm. What is it? It is "The Psalm of the Cross." It begins with the words uttered by Christ on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It ends with the exclamation of the cross: "He hath done it," or, as it may be translated, "It is finished." The Twenty-second Psalm, then, is the Psalm of Mount Calvary—The Psalm of the Cross.

What is the Twenty-fourth Psalm? It is the Psalm of Mount Zion—a picture of the King entering into His own. How beautifully it reads: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory." The Twenty-fourth Psalm, then, is the Psalm of the coming Kingdom of Glory.[*Page* 11]

There you have the two mountains; Mount Calvary and Mount Zion. What is it that lies between two mountains? A valley with its green grass, its quiet waters, its springing flowers, with shepherd and grazing sheep. Here, then, is the lesson we learn from the *location* of the Psalm: it is given to comfort, help, inspire and encourage God's people during this probationary period of our life, between the Cross and the Crown.

Is not this the reason why the tenses of this Psalm are *present* tenses? "The Lord *is* my shepherd"; "He *maketh* me to lie down"; "He *leadeth* me." Even the last verse, "*I will* (not I shall) dwell in the house of the Lord for ever," describes the *present* attitude of the soul of the Psalmist, who determines by no means to miss participation in the fellowship of the saints in heaven.

We love *the Christ of the Cross*. We may not yet fully understand that cross; may not yet have found any particular theory of the atonement which completely satisfies our intellect. But we have learned to say that we believe in the atonement and in the vicarious death of our Redeemer. Somehow or other we have come, by faith, to throw our trembling arms around that bleeding body and cry out in the desperate determination of our sin-stricken souls to Him who hangs on that cross to save[*Page* 12] us by His death. We have come to express our faith in that divine sacrifice in the words of the hymn:

Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee.

Let us never forget that we reach the Twenty-third Psalm by the way of the Twenty-second Psalm—the Psalm of the Cross. "The way of the cross leads home." We love the Christ of the Twenty-second Psalm, the Christ of Calvary, the Christ of the Cross.

We also love *the Christ of the Throne and the Glory*. It may be, that, at times, we have trembled and feared as we have thought of the coming judgment, but when we have remembered that He who sits upon the throne is our Elder Brother, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh; that He left His throne in the glory and took on Him the form of a servant, dying the ignominious death of the cross that He might redeem us and save us from the just wrath of God against sin; that some day, He who loved us and gave Himself for us, will say: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," then we take courage and look forward with joy to the time when, having washed the last sleep from our eyes in the[*Page* 13] river of Life, we shall gaze with undimmed vision upon Him, whom having not seen, we have yet loved.

We love the Christ of the cross, the Christ of the past, the Christ of Mount Calvary. We love the Christ of the future, the Christ of the throne, the Christ of Mount Zion. But more precious to us, and we say it reverently, than the Christ of the past, or the Christ of the future, is the Christ of the present, He who lives with us now, dwells within us, walks by our side every moment and every hour of the day. We used to sing in our childhood days that beautiful hymn,

I think, when I read that sweet story of old,
When Jesus was here among men,
How He called little children as lambs to His fold,
I should like to have been with Him then.

I wish that His hands had been placed on my head,
That His arms had been thrown around me;
And that I might have seen His kind look when he said,
"Let the little ones come unto me."

—*Mrs. Jemima Luke*

Many of us feel that we would have given anything to have walked by the side of the Christ in the days of His earthly pilgrimage, and we almost envy those who saw His face in[*Page* 14] the flesh. Some of us know the thrill of joy that came to our hearts when we trod the sands of Galilee that once were fresh with His footprints, trod the Temple's marble pavements that once echoed with His tread, and sailed the blue waters of Galilee that once were stilled by His wonderful word.

And yet, we should not forget that the enjoyment of the real presence of Christ is just as truly ours today as it was the possession of the disciples in the days of His flesh. As the old hymn so beautifully says,

We may not climb the heavenly steeps
To bring the Lord Christ down;
In vain we search the lowest deeps,
For Him no depths can drown.

But warm, sweet, tender, even yet
A present help is He;
And faith has still its Olivet,
And love its Galilee.

The healing of His seamless dress
Is by our beds of pain;
We touch Him in life's throng and press,
And we are whole again.

—*John G. Whittier*

The name given to our Lord in connection with His birth was Immanuel, which being interpreted is, "God with us." One of the most beautiful doctrines of the Christian faith is the[*Page* 15] divine immanence, the continued presence of the ever-living Christ with His people; for

For God is never so far off as even to be near, He is within.

—*F. W. Faber*

Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands or feet.

—*Alfred Tennyson*

I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

—*John G. Whittier*

THE SHEPHERD PSALM

CHAPTER ONE

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Psa 23:1

"The Lord is my shepherd." Have you ever noted how the word "Lord" is printed in the Bible? Sometimes all the letters are large capitals (LORD); or the first letter is a large capital and the other letters smaller capitals (Lord); then, again, the first letter is a large capital and the remaining letters ordinary (Lord). Each method of spelling the divine name indicates a different phase of the character of God. "LORD" refers to Jehovah as the covenant-keeping God, the One who never fails to fulfill all His promises. "Lord" points to our Lord Jesus Christ as the second Person in the Trinity, He who became incarnate. "Lord" signifies also God in Christ, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, God of power, the One who is able to do all things and with whom nothing is impossible, manifesting Himself in Jesus Christ.

What a world of meaning, then, lies wrapped up in the word "Lord" in the first verse of this[*Page* 18] Psalm! Jehovah who is all-faithful, never failing in His promises, almighty, all-powerful, who is able to supply all of our needs, who created the heavens and the earth, who upholds all things by the word of His power, who spake and it was done, who commanded and it stood fast; the Lord of whom Job said: "I know that thou canst do anything, and no purpose of thine can be hindered"; the "Lord" who never fails in the keeping of His promises, however seemingly impossible of fulfillment, from a natural viewpoint, those promises may be; the "Lord" of whom it is said, "God is not a man that he should lie, nor the Son of man that he should repent." "Hath he said and shall He not do it; hath He promised and shall he not bring it to pass?" the "Lord," the incarnate One, who for our sakes took on Himself our nature with all its sinless infirmities, who was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin, and who is thus able to feel our needs and sympathize with us in all our trials and temptations; the "Lord" who, speaking to the multitudes, said, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep"—such a Shepherd, faithful, powerful, sympathetic, is our "Lord." What a wealth of meaning, then, lies in the first clause, "The Lord" (who is LORD, and Lord) such a "Lord" is "my Shepherd."[*Page* 19]

We can then well say, "I shall not want." With such a Shepherd, how could we want for anything for time or eternity? All that we need for body, mind and soul shall be supplied. The God who provided the table in the wilderness, who fed Elijah by the brook, who struck the rock in the wilderness that the thirst of His people might be quenched, will provide for His children according to His riches in glory.

Reviewing Israel's history in the wilderness it could be recorded, "These forty years Jehovah, thy God, hath been with thee; thou hast lacked nothing." How wonderfully God supplied the needs of His people when they were traveling through that long, weary wilderness! "For the Lord thy God hath blessed thee in all the works of thy hand; he knoweth thy walking through this great wilderness; these forty years the Lord thy God hath been with thee; thou hast lacked nothing" (Deuteronomy 2:7). "Thou gavest also thy good Spirit to instruct them, and withheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst. Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not" (Nehemiah 9:20, 21).

Let us, then, as the children of God, take all the comfort possible out of these words. Let us not go about mourning, grumbling, and[*Page* 20] borrowing trouble, thereby proclaiming to the world that our great Banker is on the verge of bankruptcy. The "Lord" is our shepherd; we shall not want for nourishment (verse 1), refreshment (verse 2), rest (verse 3), protection (verse 4), guidance (verse 5), home (verse 6). Here is a Bank the child of God can draw on at any time without fear of its being broken. Millions have been supplied and there's room for millions more. No want shall turn me back from following the Shepherd.

How encouraging to recall the words of Jesus uttered to the disciples when they had returned from their itinerary of missionary activity: "When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye any thing? And they said, Nothing" (Luke 22:35).

The Lord my Shepherd is,
I shall be well supplied,
Since He is mine and I am His,
What can I want beside?

—*Isaac Watts*

When the writer was a lad he secured a position for which he was promised so much a week in money and "everything found," by which was meant board, room, and clothing. So this verse may read, "The Lord is my Shepherd," and "everything found."

In a park one day two women were overheard talking. One of them, who by her ap[*Page* 21]pearance showed that she was in very straitened circumstances, said to the other, "I am at my wit's end; I know not what to do. My husband has been sick and unable to work for almost a year. What little money we had saved is all spent. We have not a penny with which to buy food or clothing for ourselves or the children. This morning we received notice from the landlord to vacate." And then, in words that were full of suggestive meaning, she added, "If John D. Rockefeller were my father, I would not want, would I?"

Oh, what a world of comfort lies in the thought, "The Lord is my Shepherd," and, therefore, "I shall not want"! I shall want for nothing in time or eternity. Every need of body, mind, and soul shall be supplied. In the great Shepherd lies strength for my weakness, hope for my despair, food for my hunger, satisfaction for my need, wisdom for my ignorance, healing for my wounds, power for my temptation—the complement of all my lack.

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in thee I find.

—*Charles Wesley*

Religion Is a Personal Thing

"The Lord is my shepherd." *My* Shepherd. Religion is a *personal* thing. Really speaking, your religion consists in[*Page* 22] your personal relationship to God in Jesus Christ. Not mere profession, but actual possession is what counts. Christianity emphasizes the worth of the individual and his personal relation to God. Sin degrades men into mere numbers.

A photograph was placed on my desk. It had inscribed on it a number, but no name. It was the likeness of a convict. It was a number I went to jail to see; a number I spoke with by the cell door; a number I stood by and saw handcuffed; a number with whom I walked down the steps of the jail; a number with whom I walked up the stairs to the scaffold; a number around whose neck I saw the rope placed; a number I saw drop to his death. Sin degrades personality, but the religion of Christ exalts its adherents to a place in that innumerable company which cannot be numbered, but every one of whom bears upon his forehead the name of his Redeemer and King. Jesus calleth His sheep by name, not by number.

At the close of a sermon in a church in the Highlands of Scotland the preacher, who was supplying the pulpit for a few Sundays, was asked to call upon a shepherd boy who was very sick. Arm in arm with one of the elders of the church the minister crossed the moor, climbed the hillside, and came to the cottage[*Page* 23] where the boy and his widowed mother lived. After knocking at the door the visitors were admitted by the mother. Her face showed the marks of long vigil. The boy was her only child. The minister and elder went into the room where the sick boy lay on his cot. The minister, looking upon the pale, haggard face of the sick shepherd boy, asked him tenderly, "Laddie, do you know the Twenty-third Psalm?"

Every Scotch boy knows the Twenty-third Psalm, and so the little fellow replied, "Yes, sir, I ken (know) the Psalm well."

"Will you repeat it to me?" said the minister to the boy.

Slowly and tenderly the lad quoted the words, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," unto the end of the Psalm.

"Do you see," said the minister to the boy, "that in the first clause of the first verse there is just one word for each finger. Hold up your hand, laddie; take the second finger of your right hand, put it on the fourth finger of your left, hold it over your heart and say with me, 'The Lord is *my* Shepherd.'"

The fourth finger of the left hand! Why that finger? Every woman knows. It is the ring finger. Who placed that ring on your finger? My friend, my lover, my husband; the man who is more to me and different to[*Page* 24] me than any other and all other men in this world; the man without whom life would not be worth living; *my* friend, *my* lover, *my* husband.

The following Sunday the elder and the minister again crossed the moor and came to the cottage on the hillside. As the mother opened the door to admit them they saw by the expression on her face that a deeper sorrow had fallen on her heart since they last saw her. She took them, silently and solemnly, into a little room, and there, covered with a snow-white sheet, lay the lifeless form of the shepherd laddie, her only child. As the minister took the white sheet and passed it from forehead to chin, from chin to breast, and from breast to waist, he saw, frozen stiff in death, the second finger of the right hand on the fourth of the left hand, which was fastened in death over his heart. The mother exclaimed amid her tears, "He died saying, 'The Lord is *my* Shepherd.'"

What a world of difference that little word *my* makes, does it not? As a pastor I have often stood by the open grave that was to receive the body of someone's beloved daughter, the light and joy of some heart. I sought to be deeply sympathetic with those who were suffering bereavement. I tried to mourn with those who mourned, and weep with those who wept, and I think I did, so far as it is possible[*Page* 25] for a friend to sympathize. But one day I stood by an open grave when *my* daughter, *my* child, *my own* darling girl, *my* Dorothy, was placed beneath the sod. Ah! then I knew what grief was. Ah, what a world of difference that little word *my* makes!

It will not profit you much, my friend, to be able to say, "The Lord is *a* Shepherd"; you must be more personal; you must say, "The Lord is *my* Shepherd."

A Shepherd who giveth His life for the sheep,

A Shepherd both mighty to save and to keep—

Yes, this is the Shepherd, the Shepherd we need,

And He is a Shepherd indeed!

Is He yours? Is He yours?

Is this Shepherd, who loves you, *yours*?

—*Ada R. Habershon*

CHAPTER TWO

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters." Psa 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[*Page* 27] 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 prayer. 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."

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[*Page* 28] 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 another. 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 calls us. From the turbulent tumult into the quiet secret of His presence. Where there is peace, perfect peace, Jesus calls 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!"[*Page* 29]

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.

—*Alexander*

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[*Page* 30] 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. This 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.

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. The friend asked the shepherd how the accident happened. Was it struck by a stone? Did it fall into a hole? 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[*Page* 31] 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.

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[*Page* 32] 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 and 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[*Page* 33] 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"?

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[*Page* 34] 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."

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*

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[*Page* 35] 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, then with us in prayer,
And joy and strength and courage are with Thee!

—*Richard Chenevix Trench*

CHAPTER THREE

"He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Psa 23:3

David, the shepherd Psalmist, is doubtless thinking of the refreshment that comes to the soul from browsing or meditating in the green pastures and by the still waters of the Word of God, and of the exhilaration and inspiration that comes from being alone with God with an open Bible and on bended knee. Every true child of God knows the strength and blessing that comes from such fellowship and communion. "Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:30, 31).

But the Psalmist is referring more particularly, perhaps, to the restoration of the soul from a spiritual lapse or backsliding, resulting[*Page* 37] from failure to "lie down." We well know from what we have read regarding the Oriental shepherd life, that the shepherd must needs be a physician as well as a guide. A sheep is a most defenceless creature. A cat, horse, cow or a dog will defend itself—a sheep cannot. Sheep have a genius for going wrong. A sheep is said to have less brains than any other animal of its size. If lost, it cannot find its way back unaided. A dog, a cat, a horse can, but not a sheep. "All we, like sheep, have gone astray." If the Good Shepherd had not gone after us we would not have been in the fold today.

Have you ever looked into a sheep's eyes? They look for all the world like glass eyes. A sheep can see practically nothing beyond ten or fifteen yards. It recognizes persons by sound and not by sight. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice; a stranger will they not follow, for they know not the voice of strangers."

Traps for Falling

Palestinian fields were covered with narrow criss-cross paths over which the shepherd would have to lead his flock in seeking new pasture. Some of these paths led to a precipice or deep ravine over which a stupid sheep might easily fall to its death. From such dangers the shepherd had to guard his flock. Some sheep, however, being[*Page* 38] wayward by nature would take one of these criss-cross paths leading to danger and fall headlong into thickets or down ravines, where they would lie wounded, bleeding and dying. What does a stupid sheep know of ravines, precipices or haunts of wild beasts? That hill or valley seems to offer fair prospects and good pasture—but death lurks there. The sheep knows not. The shepherd would have to seek the lost, wounded sheep, and, finding it, bind up its wounds, reset broken limbs and restore its health.

It is said that if a sheep wandered into a stranger's pasture the finder could cut its throat and keep the carcass, providing the shepherd did not come in time to save the sheep. Many times the shepherd arrived just after the sheep had been mutilated, and by care saved its life and restored it to health again. The sheep was again his own—it was "restored."

The Wandering Sheep

David is spiritually soliloquizing. He thinks of the tendency of human nature to err and stray like a sheep. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Man, too, has a genius for going wrong. "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are[*Page* 39] the ways of death." No man is clever enough to guide himself through the devious ways of life. He needs God as a guide.

David recalls how tenderly God had dealt with him after his backslidings and how graciously and completely He had restored him to fellowship.

How gently Christ deals with the backslider! When John the Baptist temporarily wavered in his conception of the mission of the Christ, and sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?" how tenderly Christ dealt with His forerunner! The circumstances in the case might have led us to expect harsh treatment. John had seen the open heavens and heard the voice of God saying, "This is my beloved Son." In a special and miraculous way it had been revealed to John that Jesus was the Messiah, "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" The people had looked upon John as a prophet. All that he had said concerning the Christ they had believed, and now from the forerunner of Christ comes this message of doubt repeated to Jesus within the hearing of the multitudes. But that child of the desert had been incarcerated for some time in a narrow prison cell. No wonder the eyes of the caged eagle began to film, and the faith of the stern prophet began to waver. Other[*Page* 40] great men have wavered in their faith before John. David himself said, even though God had definitely promised that he should succeed Saul as king, "I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul." Elijah, after his great triumph over the four hundred prophets of Baal, sat down under a juniper tree, and full of fear because of Jezebel's threat asked disconsolately that he might die. No wonder then that, momentarily, the faith of John the Baptist was in the shadow. You and I have failed in faith amid circumstances less trying than those which surrounded John the Baptist in his dungeon.

The Gentleness of the Shepherd

How does Jesus answer John? Does He curse the doubter? No. That would not be like Him. He has never been known to do that. Not once, so far as we know, did he ever send a message of censure to a soul in the dungeon of darkness, doubt, and despair. We have seen Him blast, with the lightning of His eloquence, the false pride of scribe and Pharisee who stood before Him in haughtiness and scorn, but we never knew Him to say a harsh word to a creature that was sore stricken in soul. No, "He will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax." No, He will not send a curse; He will send a[*Page* 41] blessing. That will be more like Him. He will say, "Go tell John again those things that ye do see and hear; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, the poor are evangelized, and *blessed* is he that shall not be offended in me." Not a curse, but a blessing will He send.

How much like his treatment of us! Do we not remember when we first came to Him as our Saviour, how He forgave, freely and gladly, all our sins, and sent us on our way rejoicing? Do we not recall how shortly after, when we had sinned and spotted the clean white sheet of paper He had given us, that when we brought it back to Him all spotted with sin He freely pardoned, gave us another clean sheet, and, without upbraiding, sent us away, saying, "Thy sins are forgiven; sin no more"? Yes, we recall it. We believe in the deity of Christ, not because of the metaphysical arguments that have been produced to prove it, no matter how elaborately stated or eloquently discussed; not because our library shelves are groaning beneath the weight of evidences of His deity; nor because theologians are said to have forced Him to that high eminence. We believe Jesus Christ to be God because when we sinned and came asking pardon He freely forgave, and gave us a clean sheet of acquittal, saying "Thy sins are[*Page* 42] forgiven; go and sin no more," and then when we did sin again and brought back the sheet of paper all blotted over with sin and said we were sorry and again asked pardon, He freely forgave, and without chiding sent us on our way rejoicing. That is what makes us believe in Him as the Son of God and love Him with a love surpassing expression.

Poor wandering soul, have you fallen by the wayside? Have you become a wayward sheep? Have you wandered from the fold? Are you tossed about, wounded, sick and sore? Do you desire to come back again to the Shepherd's care? Come now, right now, while the throb of passion is still beating high, while the deed of shame is recent; while the blot of sin is still wet; come now, say,

With all the shame, with all the keen distress,
Quick, "waiting not," I flee to Thee again;
Close to the wound, beloved Lord, I press,
That Thine own precious blood may overflow the stain.

O precious blood, Lord, let it rest on me!
I ask not only pardon from my King,
But cleansing from my Priest, I come to Thee,
Just as I came at first—a sinful, helpless thing.[*Page* 43]

Oh cleanse me now, my Lord, I cannot stay
For evening shadows and a silent hour:
Now I have sinned, and now with no delay,
I claim Thy promise and its total power.

O Saviour, bid me go and sin no more,
And keep me always 'neath the mighty flow
Of Thy perpetual fountain, I implore
That Thy perpetual cleansing I may fully know.

—*Frances Ridley Havergal*

O wandering sheep, backslidden soul, may the Saviour find you today, put His strong arms around about you, bring you back again into the fold, keep you from wandering, teach you all you need to know, until the gloaming, until after having washed the last sleep from your eyes in the river of life, you place your last climbing footstep on the threshold of our Father's house to go out no more.

Callest Thou thus, O Master, callest Thou thus to me?
I am weary and heavy laden, and longing to come to Thee;
And out in the distant darkness Thy dear voice sounds so sweet,
But I am not worthy, not worthy, O Master, to kiss Thy feet.

"Child!" said the gracious Master, "why turnest thou thus away,
When I came through the darkness seeking my sheep that have gone astray?[*Page* 44]
I know thou art heavy laden, I know thou hast need of me
And the feet of thy loving Master are weary with seeking thee."

Callest Thou thus, O Master, callest Thou thus to me?
When my untrimmed lamp is dying and my heart is not meet for Thee;
For Thou art so great and holy, and mine is so poor a home,
And I am not worthy, not worthy, O Master, that Thou shouldst come.

"Child," said the tender Shepherd—and His voice was very sweet—
"I only ask for a welcome, and rest for my weary feet."
Then over my lonely threshold, though weak and defiled by sin,
Though I am not worthy, O Master, I pray Thee enter in.

—*Helen Marion Burnsides*

Christ the Restorer

Do I not speak to a soul who once has known Christ as the Good Shepherd, but has now wandered away from the fold?

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love He sought me,
And on His shoulders gently laid,
He home rejoicing brought me.

—*Sir Henry W. Baker*
[*Page* 45]

May I not remind you of the Master's own parable, "What man of you, having one hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which has gone astray, until he find it?" May I impress upon the words *until he find it*? He will not cease the search until He has found the sheep. It has been said that the first verse of this Psalm may be translated, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be *missing*." "O love that will not let me go."

The Shepherd stands at the door of the sheepfold and counts the sheep, his one hundred sheep. He counts to ninety-nine. One is missing. He cannot rest until that last one is found. The door of the sheepfold is closed, and out into the darkness and cold and pain of the night the shepherd goes until he finds his lost sheep, and on his shoulders he carries it back to the fold, then calls upon his neighbors to rejoice with him. He has found his lost sheep.

There were ninety and nine that safely lay
In the shelter of the fold,
But one was out on the hills away,
Far off from the gates of gold—
Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the tender Shepherd's care.[*Page* 46]

Lord, Thou hast here Thy ninety and nine;
Are they not enough for Thee?
But the Shepherd made answer, "This of mine
Has wandered away from me,
And although the road be rough and steep,
I go to the desert to find my sheep."

But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.
Out in the desert He heard its cry—
Sick and helpless, and ready to die.

Lord, whence are those blood-drops all the way
That mark out the mountain's track?
They were shed for one who had gone astray
Ere the Shepherd could bring him back.
Lord, whence are Thy hands so rent and torn?
They are pierced tonight by many a thorn.

But all through the mountains, thunder-riven,
And up from the rocky steep,
There arose a glad cry to the gates of heaven,
Rejoice! I have found my sheep!
And the angels echoed around the throne,
Rejoice, for the Lord brings back His own!

—*Elizabeth C. Clephane*

"*The Paths of Righteousness*"

"He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."[*Page* 47]

These words are strikingly significant, and show forth the tender aspect of God's guidance. Ofttimes, after rain, the heavy wagon wheels would leave deep ruts in the road, which in cold weather would become hardened and make it difficult for the sheep to walk. Not such roads did the true shepherd willingly choose for his sheep. If compelled, however, to take such roads, he would choose those that had been flattened down by wagon wheels until level. He chose those roads that had been worn smooth, that the tender feet of the sheep might not be bruised. "He leadeth me in smooth roads." "Thou didst sustain them in the wilderness; their feet swelled not."

He who follows the divine leading will always be led aright. His feet will travel in "right roads." No man will go wrong who follows Christ. He never leads the soul into questionable places, and no feet guided by Him will go into any place where He Himself does not go. "Where I am, there shall my servant be." "He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness." "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth." Sometimes the road He chooses may not be after our liking, but it will always be for our best interest, welfare and usefulness. This fact will eventually be[*Page* 48] made clear to us, and we will gladly go with Him all the way.

I said, "Let me walk in the fields,"
He said, "No, walk in the town,"
I said, "There are no flowers there,"
He said, "No flowers, but a crown."

I said, "But the skies are black;
There is nothing but noise and din,"
But He wept as He sent me back—
"There is more," He said, "there is sin."

I said, "But the air is thick,
And fogs are veiling the sun,"
He answered, "Yet souls are sick,
And souls in the dark, undone."

I said, "I shall miss the light,
And friends will miss me, they say."
He answered: "Choose tonight
If I am to miss you or they."

I pleaded for time to be given.
He said, "It is hard to decide?
It will not seem hard in heaven,
To have followed the steps of your guide."

I cast one look at the fields,
Then set my face to the town.
He said, "My child, do you yield?
Will you leave the flowers for the crown?"

Then into His hand went mine,
And into my heart came He;
And I walk in a light divine,
The paths I had feared to see.

—*George MacDonald*
[*Page* 49]

"*His Name's Sake*"

All this He does for His name's sake. How beautiful those words are, "*for His name's sake*." Christ's own glory is involved in the security and care of His children. The physician cares for your child who is sick unto death, for your sake, it is true, but for "his own name's sake" as well. To lose your child would hurt his reputation and practice. The lawyer protects his client for his client's sake, it is true, but also, and perhaps more so, for "his own name's sake." To lose the case would be to hurt his standing in the legal profession. The pilot guides the ship safely into harbor for the passengers' sake, it is true, but more particularly for "his own name's sake," for to lose the ship would be to lose his license.

We remember that Jesus said, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory." He also said, "And of all that thou hast given me, I have lost none." Christ Himself is the door. His broad figure and bulk fills it. Who shall strip Him of His power, or rob Him of His sheep? He is the secret of the security of the believer; yea, He is the security itself. We are hid in Him. It is rather the perseverance of the Christ than of the believer. Here, then, is the security of the believer, saved and kept for "His own name's sake."[*Page* 50]

How proud we are of someone who is named after us! We have more solicitude and care for the child that carries our name than for other children. *For His name's sake*, therefore, is an indication of the intense, intimate interest and care of the Christ for His people. Do we not recall what Moses said to Jehovah when He said He thought to destroy the people of Israel? Did not Moses plead thus with God, "If thou dost destroy them, what shall we say to the nations, and what wilt thou do for thine own name's sake?"

Shall it not be that in that great day not one of Christ's sheep will be missing? "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand." "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be missing."

Christ Jesus hath the power,
The power to renew,
The power to cleanse your heart from sin,
And make you wholly true.
Christ Jesus hath the power
For evermore to keep;
Oh, none can pluck you from His hand,
Or rob Him of His sheep!

—*Dr. James M. Gray*
[*Page* 51]

God as a Guide

What a wonderful truth is asserted in this verse—"*He* leadeth *me*." Meditate just a moment on these words—"*He*," God, the great and mighty One, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the One who upholdeth all things by the word of His power, the unerring, unchangeable, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful One—"*He* leadeth me"—*me*, poor, trembling, wayward, straying, sinning, fallible, erring son of Adam, unworthy, unfit, not entitled to the least of God's blessings; yet, incomprehensible as the truth may seem, God in heaven leads "*me*," here, on earth. He leadeth me on a journey in which it is so easy of myself to go astray from the right path. Further, He *leads*, not drives, His sheep. "He goeth *before* His own sheep and leadeth them." The Good Shepherd will not ask you to go anywhere where He Himself has not gone. He does not drive His children. He leads them.

He leadeth me! Oh! blessed thought,
Oh, words with heav'nly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

Sometimes 'mid scenes of deepest gloom,
Sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,
By waters calm, o'er troubled sea—
Still 'tis His hand that leadeth me.[*Page* 52]

Lord, I would clasp Thy hand in mine,
Nor ever murmur nor repine;
Content, whatever lot I see,
Since 'tis my God that leadeth me.

And when my task on earth is done,
When, by Thy grace, the victory's won,
E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,
Since God through Jordan leadeth me.

He leadeth me! He leadeth me!
By His own hand He leadeth me;
His faithful follower I would be,
For by His hand He leadeth me.

—*Joseph H. Gilmore*

Knowing God's Will

God's way of guidance varies with different individuals. There is probably no point on which we need more careful instruction than that which concerns the will of God for us. We may speak of two wills of God. The first concerns our *character* and may be known by all, for it is distinctly declared in the Word of God in such passages, for example, as, "This is the will of God, even your sanctification." There can be no doubt or hesitancy with regard to knowing what the *general* will of God regarding our *character* may be.

There is another will of God, however, which affects not our character but our *career*. This *particular* will of God is not as easy to dis[*Page* 53]cern as that which touches our character. Others may not know this for me. In the last analysis God and I alone must solve the problem of my career. It is true I may consult others and get all the light possible on the question at issue, but ultimately the solution of the matter is to be found in the quiet with the soul and God Himself.

Three Things About Guidance

Three things may be said to indicate clearly the *particular* will of God which concerns my *career*.

The first comes from a constant and prayerful reading of the *Word of God*, through which God will in some way make known to me in particular His will regarding me. The scripture which decides the matter for me may not have the same meaning to others, but I recognize it to be God's will for me. A minister received one day two calls to the pastorate of two churches. One offered a stipend of $3000 a year and manse, and an established church with 900 members, and located under the shadow of a great university. A flattering call indeed. The other invitation was from a struggling suburban church with a membership of 75, and offering a salary of $1800 a year. What should the minister do? Which call should he accept? To say there was no[*Page* 54] struggle in the heart at the time would be to belie the fact. The man of God took the two invitations, laid them on the bed, knelt by its side, and put his open Bible in front of him between the two letters. After prayer for guidance and after reading the Word for some time his attention was riveted upon this verse: "Set not your mind on high things, but condescend to them that are lowly" (Romans 12:16, R. V.). He had read that verse before, many times, but somehow he could not get beyond it at *this* time. To *him* at *that particular time* it was indicative of God's will. Obediently he chose the smaller church. After years proved the wisdom of the choice. So God will in some way indicate to you through the reading of His Word His will for *you* at *that time*.

The second element in discerning the will of God is what may be called *the inward impression*, by which we mean the constant, irrepressible, insistent, persistent conviction in the heart of the child of God that he ought to do thus and so in a given case. It often happens that a strong impulse comes to a child of God. In a day or two that impulse has passed away, and he looks back and sees that he has no assurance that such was the will of God for him; but to the obedient soul in communion with the heavenly Father, the con[*Page* 55]stant, irrepressible, insistent and persistent conviction that a certain thing should or should not be done is one of the sure indications of God's voice in the soul.

The third feature in discerning the will of God is what may be called *the favorable circumstance*, or *the open door*. If God wants one to go to a certain place or do a certain thing, the opportunity to do it will be present with the call to do it. If it is not, then one should wait until the door opens. If the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night remains stationary, then Israel must remain in the camp. When these emblems of God's guidance lifted and moved, then Israel knew that it was time for them to move.

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone;
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since and lost awhile.

—*John H. Newman*

These three things, the Word of God, the inward impression, and the open door, should be present in every clear indication of the will of God. If any one of them is missing, it indicates that the will of God is not yet clear. We have a beautiful illustration of these three[*Page* 56] things in the call of Peter to admit Cornelius into the Church (Acts 10 and 11). First, Peter had the *Word of God*—nothing should be regarded common or unclean; second, he had *the inward impression*—he was meditating on what the vision he had seen should mean; and third, there was *the open door*—three men were already waiting for him to convey him to Cæsarea.

Wonderfully instructive is God's guidance of the children of Israel by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. In this connection we should recall the words of Jesus when in the Temple, at the time they were celebrating God's care for His people in the wilderness in providing them with the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. He said, "I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Christ is our Guide; the Word of God is our chart. Having them, we may rest assured that God who has guided His people in all the ages will guide us safely to the end.

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with Thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more.[*Page* 57]

Open now the crystal fountain
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through;
Strong Deliverer, be Thou still my Strength and Shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside,
Death of deaths and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises I will ever give to Thee.

—*William Williams*
[*Page* 58]

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." Psa 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[*Page* 59] I went out 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? Not 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.[*Page* 60]

But when the storm beats 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[*Page* 61] 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.

I have read that a famous scientist was in the habit of visiting a zoological garden in London. Among the many things that always interested him was a large snake—a boa constrictor. It was kept in a large glass case so that inspection of the reptile was perfectly safe from the outside. The scientist, we are told, was in the habit of knocking on the glass in order to awaken the snake. Instantly, when the knock was heard, the snake would raise its head and strike at the glass with its fangs. The scientist, instinctively shrank back, fearful of being struck, though he knew there was absolutely no danger. So sometimes is it with the believer's relationship to death. Even though he knows the sting is removed, nevertheless the experience of death is somewhat of a dread. The soul naturally recoils at the thought of death.

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[*Page* 62] 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."[*Page* 63]

"Mamma."

"Yes."

"Is your face turned towards me?"

"Yes."

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

Ah, yes, in the day-time 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, howsoe'er defended,
But has one vacant chair!

—*Henry W. Longfellow*
[*Page* 64]

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."[*Page* 65]

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, "Mamma, 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 valley 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,[*Page* 66] 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.
[*Page* 67]

* * * * *

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

For tho' 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*

Some one 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 your feet stand[*Page* 68] 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.[*Page* 69]

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

—*Maltbie 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 on 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, a, 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 known to Greek students, the preposition gives the word, as it[*Page* 70] 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-negatived 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 sting 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[*Page* 71] 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 to 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![*Page* 72]

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. Lyte*

CHAPTER FIVE

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." Psa 23:5

There is a variety of senses in which the truth of this verse may be understood.

It is said that in the ancient days a shepherd's tent was a kind of city of refuge. The man who had unwittingly slain another could find refuge in a shepherd's tent from the avenger of blood. The fugitive was permitted to stay a given length of time within the shepherd's care, during which time he was as safe from the pursuer as though he were in the actual city of refuge. The pursuer might be raging with fury outside of the door of the tent, but the fugitive could eat with perfect safety and peace in the presence of his enemy. How like Christ in His relation to the believer!

One day Charles Wesley stood looking out of a partly open window at the fierce storm howling without, when a young robin, quickly[*Page* 74] passing some other birds, flew to his breast, seeking shelter from its foes. It was then he wrote that wonderful hymn, the opening words of which are:

Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly!

Is not this a picture of this verse of the Psalm? "And a man (Jesus Christ) shall be for a hiding place and a refuge from the storm." Are we not safe in Him from all our foes? "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."

We are told that in David's day it was the custom of conquering kings and princes to bring the royal captives of the contending defeated army into a large banqueting house. To each pillar in the house a prisoner of royal blood or a commanding officer was chained. The banquet tables were heavily laden with good things of which the victors partook. Feasting and jollification were indulged in, and joy and gladness were manifest in the presence of defeated and chained enemies. Are we not made "always to triumph" over all our foes in Christ? Are we not made "more than conquerors" in Him who hath "led captivity captive"? "Ye shall eat your meat in quietness, and nothing shall make you afraid."[*Page* 75]

Or, again, it may be that reference is made in this verse to the grazing of sheep in fields full of snakeholes or of poisonous plants. A sheep raiser in Texas once told the writer that he lost a great many sheep because snakes would come up through holes in the ground and bite the sheep as they grazed, poisoning them. After losing many of the flock he finally discovered a remedy. A mixture of some kind was poured down the holes, which killed the snakes, and after that the sheep were able to graze in peace and safety. Hath not Christ abolished death for the believer? Has He not deprived death of its sting and stripped the grave of its victim? Hath He not overcome that old serpent, the Devil? Do we not overcome the dragon, that old serpent, the Devil and Satan, the accuser of the brethren day and night—do we not overcome him by the blood of the Lamb?

Whichever of these meanings may be adopted as indicating the teaching of this verse, we may be certain that the truth the Psalmist desires to express is this: That God gives His children victory over all their foes, and makes them more than conquerors over all their enemies. Thus shall we "eat our meat in peace and quietness, and nothing shall make us afraid." "Why do the heathen rage?...[*Page* 76] He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh"—and so shall we.

On the Rock of Ages founded,
Who can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou mayes't smile at all thy foes.

—*Rev. John Newton*

"*Thou Anointest My Head with Oil: My Cup Runneth Over*"

A shepherd must needs be a physician also. In the belt of the shepherd medicines are always carried. Sheep are very susceptible to sicknesses of many kinds, particularly fevers. Ofttimes at night as the sheep passed into the fold the shepherd's knowing eye would detect that one or another of them was sick and feverish. Perhaps it had been bitten by a serpent or torn by some wild animal. He would take the feverish sheep and plunge its head into clear, cold water, plunging the head so far into the pail that the water would run over, or anoint the bruise with mollifying ointment. Doubtless David is thinking of this experience of his shepherd life.

Or, again, David may be referring to the bountiful water supply provided for the sheep and applying it to the rich provision God has made for the believer. Not only is there grace enough for oneself, but with the believer as a channel, an abundance for others.[*Page* 77]

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find!

—*Charles Wesley*

This is the wonderful truth taught by Jesus in the Temple: "Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, from within him shall flow rivers of living water." Here we see how the believer may come to Christ for the quenching of his own thirst, and then draw on, or drink more deeply of, Christ for the quenching of the thirst of others. "Thou, O Christ, art all I want, more than all in Thee I find." Here we have the personal and relative side of a consecrated life of service.

My cup is to "run over." No selfish religion must I claim. I am to be satisfied with Christ first myself, then I am to take from Him so large a supply that others with whom I come into contact may also partake of His fullness. No hermit, no ascetic, monk, or recluse would the Master have me be.

There are hermit souls that live withdrawn
In the peace of their self-content;
There are souls, like stars, that dwell apart
In a fellowless firmament.
There are pioneer souls that blaze their paths
Where highways never ran[*Page* 78]—
But let me live by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.

Let me live in my house by the side of the road
Where the race of men go by—
The men who are good and the men who are bad,
As good and as bad as I,
I would not sit in the scorner's seat,
Or hurl the cynic's ban—
Let me live in the house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.

I see from my house by the side of the road,
By the side of the highway of life,
The men who press with the ardor of hope,
The men who are faint with the strife;
But I turn not away from their smiles nor their tears—
Both parts of an infinite plan—
Let me live in a house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.

—*Sam Walter Foss*

CHAPTER SIX

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." Psa 23:6

The writer was once called to speak with a Scotch Presbyterian elder who was rapidly passing from this life. I had read to him this last verse of the Psalm, when, turning in his bed, he said to me in words that were almost his last, "Take my Bible and read that verse to me from 'The Psalms in Metre' in the back of my Bible." I took his Scotch Bible from a table close by and read:

Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me,
And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling place shall be.

—*William Whittingham*

Some one has well said that "goodness and mercy" are God's two collie dogs to preserve the Christian from all danger. Others have likened "goodness and mercy" to the Christian's footmen to wait upon him daily. "The house of the Lord" is doubtless here contrasted with the tent of the shepherd, just as the words[*Page* 80] "dwell for ever" are contrasted with the fact that the fugitive was allowed to stay in the shepherd's tent only a limited time.

This verse expresses the confidence of the Christian with regard to the future. It is the Christian's confidence that in the Father's house a mansion is prepared for him, and that when the earthly house of this tabernacle is taken down and dissolved by death he has a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. This is surely a grand provision for old age, a life insurance worthy of the name, a home for the winter of life, and a blessed assurance with regard to one's eternity. How poor indeed is that soul that cannot say, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," for the grave is not the terminus but the passageway that leads to endless light and life, into the glory and beauty of the house of the Lord in which the believer shall "dwell for ever." Beyond the night of death lies the perfect day; beyond the valley of the shadow lie the plains of peace.

One cannot help but wonder if you, reader, have such a confident hope with regard to your future life. Only those who are able to say "The Lord is my shepherd" are able to say "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."[*Page* 81]

A famous Scotch preacher tells us that a demented boy, who was in the habit of attending one of the classes in his Sunday school, was sick unto death. The minister was asked to go to see the boy. He went to the house, and in speaking with the lad and after reading the Scriptures he was about to leave, when this boy, with only half his reasoning power, demented and partly idiotic, asked the great preacher if he wouldn't kneel down and recite for him the Twenty-third Psalm. In obedience to the boy's request he knelt and repeated the Twenty-third Psalm, until he came to the last verse which, as you know, reads "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." But the preacher did not repeat this last verse, for he was saying to himself while on his knees, "this verse can hardly be true of this boy, surely goodness and mercy has not followed him all the days of his life, and further, what does he know about the determination of this verse—to dwell in the house of the Lord for ever?" And so the great preacher was rising from his knees, having omitted the last verse, when the boy reached out his hand and, placing it on the shoulder of the minister, pressed him again to his knees and repeated the last verse of the Psalm—the verse the preacher[*Page* 82] had omitted, as it is written in the Scotch hymn book:

Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me;
And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling place shall be.

—*William Whittingham*

This was a lesson the preacher never forgot. Can you, my reader, you, with all your senses, your keenness of brain and intellect—can you say what this idiotic boy could say: "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever"?

I am reminded in this connection of one of Bunyan's characters in the "Pilgrim's Progress." He is referred to as "Mr. Feeble Mind." This character in speaking of his immortal hope—that hope which lies beyond the valley of the shadow and the grave—expresses it in this way: "But this I am resolved on: to run when I can, to go when I cannot run, and to creep when I cannot go. As to the main, I thank Him that loved me. I am fixed. My way is before me. My mind is beyond the river that hath no bridge, though I am, as you see, but of a feeble mind." Mark that wonderful expression, will you?—

"My mind is beyond the river that hath no bridge."

Is yours? You—man, woman, with all your[*Page* 83] senses, of strong and sound mind, can you give expression to an exclamation of faith like that?

There are some of my readers on whose head time has laid its hand and whitened their hair to the whiteness of that winter in which all their glory must fade. Their sun of life is going down beyond the hill of life. The young may die; the old must die. Oh, the pity of it, to see the old and gray with no eternal life insurance for the winter of life! The gray head is indeed a crown of glory if it be found in the way of life; otherwise it is a fool's cap. Reader, may your eventide be light, and may your path be as the path of the just that shineth brighter and brighter unto the perfect day!

Thus we see that the grave is not the end. We pass through the grave only in order that we may place our last climbing footstep upon the threshold of our Father's house, to go out no more. Then we shall dwell for ever there. Beyond the grave lie the Plains of Peace, the Homeland—with all the loved who have gone before—those whom we "have loved long since and lost awhile."

Is the way so dark, O wanderer,
Is the hillcrest wild and steep,
Far, so far, the vale beyond thee,
Where the homelights vigil keep?
Still the goal lies far before thee,
Soon will fall on thee the night;[*Page* 84]
Breast the path that takes thee onward,
Fight the storm with all thy might.

Tho' thy heart be faint and weary,
Tho' thy footsteps fain would cease,
Journey onward—past the hillcrest
Lie for thee the Plains of Peace!

Is thy path so rough, O pilgrim,
Passing on thy way through life;
Deep the sorrows that beset thee,
Great the burden, wild the strife?
Tho' the hill of life be weary,
Tho' the goal of rest be far,
Set thy whole heart to endeavor,
Turn thy soul to yon bright star.

From the toiling, from the striving
There at last shall come release;
One shall bring thee past the hillcrest,
Home unto his Plains of Peace;
One shall bring thee past the hillcrest,
Home, Home, Home unto His Plains of Peace!

—*Clifton Bingham*