

sermon preached at Ebenezer, Clapham by Mr. J. Delves on
 Sunday morning, 17th April 1955

Text: "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 v.4.

I felt, while we were singing that sacred hymn, (469) how wonder-
 ful it would be if by God's sovereign mercy and grace, we were each
 brought to speak that language before our dying hour. The prayer in
 the last verse is particularly relevant;

"Dear Saviour, help us now to seek,
 And grant thy Spirit's power,
 That we may all this language speak,
 Before the dying hour."

Surely no mercy or privilege or happiness can be greater, than to be
 rightly and graciously prepared for our latter end, and to feel, in
 some measure, when we come there (although it may not always be so in
 the confidence of it) to "fear no evil". "Yea, though I walk through
 the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." The secret
 of this is the Lord's presence in "the valley". "For Thou art with me".
 When that is felt sweetly there is no evil to fear - the only evil to
 fear, actually, is sin, because "the sting of death is sin"; but in
 the case of the Lord's dear people whose sins are washed away, there
 is no sting, and death, therefore, is as a "shadow". There is no sting
 in a shadow, therefore here the Psalmist feels, in a very sweet and
 blessed way, all terror to be removed from him; he enjoyed a sweet and
 holy confidence in the prospect of changing worlds, and was, we must
 conclude, very graciously prepared to pass through the valley of that
 shadow.

O what mercies the Lord has shown to us - He has revived us, has
 come to us like a refreshing rain, commanded His blessing upon this
 Sanctuary by granting us a replenishing and godly additions to the
 church, so that by His goodness and mercy we have hitherto been main-
 tained, and have not been without a witness of the Lord's consider-
 ation of us. But when one and another are taken home, it is our
 wisdom to hear the Lord's voice saying, "Therefore be ye also ready:
 for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh".

My mind went to this Psalm yesterday; its language is very
 beautiful and indeed the Psalm is very choice. The author reveals
 what the Lord is to His people, and, in the case of the Psalmist here,
 what the Lord was to him in a personal way. It shows that he had a
 personal religion, a personal knowledge of God, and of the blessings

of His grace, and that at this particular time he enjoyed the sweet confidence of faith in prospect; he could look, as it were, beyond the grave with a composed, quiet frame of mind, believing that ere long he would "dwell in the house of the Lord for ever". He could look back to days that were past, and forward to a blessed future; he could say "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever". O what a sweet place to be in, thus resigned to the will of God, lying passive in His hand and knowing no will but His. It is a beautiful Psalm. Alas! it may be that many sing it or read it without any personal, gracious, living experience of its blessings, but where that experience is truly known then it is indeed very, very blessed.

"The Lord is my Shepherd"; David said, "I shall not want". We shall not want any thing beside; true godliness and a knowledge of the Lord felt and enjoyed brings contentment, and if the Lord is our Shepherd we shall not want, because He has every provision for us, for time and eternity, and that provision is in the gospel. "He restoreth my soul"; "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake". Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death".

What are we to understand by the valley of the shadow of death? It is that which is before us all, without exception. Usually I believe it is looked upon as referring to the article of death, passing through death, although it can be applied to extreme circumstances of danger, trouble or affliction. But it would seem here that the Psalmist was brought to such a sweet confidence in his soul's feelings, and being able to visualise the end of life and his interest in the Lord's mercy and grace feels a sweet composure, believes that he will be brought well through, thus he could say, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil". A blessed place to be in! I believe the Lord's dear people lay up many prayers against the day of their death, we cannot escape it, it is our injury to attempt to put it from us, but it will be our mercy if we are helped by God's grace, to truly pray that prayer,

"Prepare me, gracious God,
To stand before Thy face;
Thy Spirit must the work perform,
For it is all of grace".

Years ago I used to hear a good man say, 'Lord, when we come to die, may we have nothing to do, but to die'. What a mercy that will be! It is to be feared that many people in religion rest upon a vain confidence and "walk in sparks of their own kindling". But the Lord's people cannot do this, they have many searchings of heart as to how

matters stand with them. This is often their prayer, "Say unto my soul, I AM thy salvation". It may not cost us anything simply to be religious, but it must cost us something to possess a real experience of the truth, because it means an inward bringing down, stripping, wounding, killing having to know ourselves as lost and guilty sinners in the sight of a heart-searching God. Where this is the case and where mercy is manifested and the blessings of the gospel are revealed and made known in their measure in the soul's experience, one can come into this Psalm and say, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want". Have you had a moment when you could feel able to say, 'I believe it will be well with me? I have a hope the Lord has forgiven my transgressions, and I shall stand before Him without spot in that great day'? "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil".

Death will be our last enemy. We shall have enemies all the time we are here in this earthly pilgrimage. One hymnwriter says,

"Mighty enemies without,
Much mightier within."

We may not have mighty enemies without in one sense, and yet we may, but we shall have mighty enemies within; unbelief, sin, pride, rebellion, and a number of other things continually rising up. What a seed-bed of iniquity is the human heart, fallen through sin! Death is designed to be as an enemy because in this sense, it is a divine punishment; it was what God said to Adam in the Garden of Eden, in relation to his disobedience in eating of the forbidden fruit, "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die". Evidently that referred to body and soul, and so it came to pass. So it has since been, except for one or two very rare instances. Man is mortal, and death is attended with fear and dread; I believe it has been so with many of the Lord's people at times. We read of those "who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage". Some of the Lord's people have more fears about their end than the ungodly, for we read of them, "There are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm"; because their eyes are not opened to the tremendous issues of eternity. But in the case of the Lord's people, their faith is sometimes shaken and they find the "days of darkness to be many" they dread a false confidence, they must have a living token from the Lord Himself and they cannot rest on anything other than the Spirit's gracious witness that it will be well with them. They may have many fears, they do, yet said the Psalmist,

"What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee". When the Lord favours us in our souls all those fears are removed, all fear of death is removed because the prospect of heaven is before the view of faith and we are enabled to rejoice in the inheritance that the Lord has laid up for us.

"The days of our years" said the Psalmist, "are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away". I believe all, more or less, prove this to be true, and our aged friends realise the truth of this. What a mercy to be favoured to come into this Psalm and thus to lie passive in the Lord's hands, to have something real to live and die with, to be enabled to put our trust and confidence in the Lord, and feel that our times are in His hand, then all will be well. You see, the Lord's people cannot take things for granted (as some do). They cannot rest in what may be termed a mere form of religion, they need God, they must have Him, they cannot do without Him, they need that which only His grace can give, and when that is granted them, then what joy there is, joy in the gospel, joy in the Lord's presence. All fear is removed.

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil". The valley is also a low place. We have to go down to get into a valley, sometimes very deep. The Lord's people are often in the valleys in this sense, that they are brought down into very low places in their feelings, sometimes under great despondency of mind and heart, like the Psalmist when in a later Psalm he said, "O my God, my soul is cast down within me". He was in a low place then! Some of you may feel like that now, as though you were in a deep valley, that is in your soul, and it may be in your circumstances too, for often the two things go together. This is what the Lord has appointed to us here - valleys - we have to go down into the depths; but if the life of God is in the soul, there will be a crying unto Him from the depths, from the deep valleys. "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord", said the Psalmist. We find Jonah saying, when tossed about in the depths, in the whale's belly, "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came in unto Thee, into Thine holy temple". Some here have been helped to pray when they have been in the depths, in the valleys, in these deep waters, and have found the Lord come to their help and deliverance.

A valley is not only a low place, but it is usually a very

lonely place too. Have there not been occasions with some of you when, as the hymnwriter says,

"It is decreed that most must walk
The darkest paths alone".

You are not alone. When Bunyan's Pilgrim went down, in one instance, as far as I can remember, into the valley, he said he had never breathed a sweeter air. If the Lord is with you in these depths you can breathe a sweet air, feeling like the Psalmist, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me".

The valley may indicate, not only a lonely place, but also a dark place; usually the deeper you go into a valley, the darker it becomes. Perhaps there have been times when you have gone down into some of these deep valleys, feeling something like Job where he says (in the 23rd chapter) "Behold, I go forward, but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him: On the left hand, where He doth work, but I cannot behold Him: He hideth Himself on the right hand, but I cannot see Him:" Yet even in his case, the Lord had not forsaken Him, and faith had not entirely gone from him, for he said, "He knoweth the way that I take: when He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold".

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me". This valley then, is a place of trouble, distress, affliction, and sometimes of great danger. The sheep get down into deep and dangerous places where they are liable to injury, and need the Shepherd's attention and protection; the rod and staff are necessary to comfort and reassure them. So it is with the Lord's sheep, with His redeemed people.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death". But to come to the article of death itself. It is not all the Lord's people who are favoured with the light of His countenance so as to

"pass the river telling
The triumphs of their King".

Some are so favoured. I have seen some in this way with their countenances shining, full of the joy of the gospel, ready to depart: but the salvation of our immortal souls does not stand upon that, although it is confirming when it is so, but we believe, in the cases of the Lord's dear people, their hope is built upon Him, and that the Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of their hope and confidence in view of their impending departure. What a wonderful mercy to be rightly brought to our end. May the Lord have regard to us in this and not

leave us to a false or vain confidence in relation to our future destiny, but may He bring us to this verse, in a right way, and enable us sometimes so to express ourselves, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil".

I think I shall not forget feeling the comfort of this once, during the last war, when bombs were falling and I was standing in the corridor of our house, not knowing what might come upon us at any moment; it was just as though the Lord kindly whispered this in my heart, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me". It brought such a rest into my spirit at that moment and a committing of myself into the Lord's hands. It is very sweet when the Lord's voice is heard in mercy and we can, in our humble measure, just enter a little into this. This is the secret then, the great secret, the Lord's presence in the valley.

Some people may not fear evil where there is evil to fear, and sometimes the Lord's people fear evil where there is no evil to fear, but when the Lord condescends to come and bless them with a confidence, bring them into conformity with His gracious will, give them to feel that the Lord God of heaven and earth is their God, the God of Jacob, that Jesus is their Jesus, they can fall into His blessed hands. There is nothing to fear then.

This is the great secret, beloved friends, "For Thou art with me". That is the only thing that can remove the fear, the terror of death. "For Thou art with me". The Lord's presence is quietening; at such a moment you can "be still, and know that He is God", know that He is your God, and prove that "in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength". His presence is reconciling, O sweetly reconciling; it removes all rebellious feelings, all resentment against the Lord's dispensations and brings a holy resignation to His divine will. His presence is confirming, it is reassuring, brings into your heart a blessed assurance that it will be well when the moment shall come when these eyestrings shall break in death. You can, at such a time, feel that the Lord is your Refuge and Strength, even in the valley of the shadow of death.

"Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me". By the rod and staff here, we do not understand formidable weapons but instruments to inspire confidence in the Shepherd. This is the Lord's rod and staff, the rod and staff of the shepherds which they have in their hand when they go forth before the flocks to lead them. When the sheep see the rod and staff in the hand of their shepherd that is to their comfort. We understand the rod and staff to indicate the Lord's power to support His people in their felt weakness and dependence upon Him. It is the rod and staff of His gracious word and promise to comfort them and remove their fears; it is the rod and staff to guide them in the wilderness. The sheep of Christ keep their eye fixed on the rod and staff of the Good Shepherd, His word and promise, that will guide them through their pilgrimage here and bring them to their journey's end.

May the Lord look upon us! Mercy and judgment have attended us these many years, many mercies have attended us and the Lord has maintained and preserved us. May the Lord give us to hear His voice and be resigned to His sovereign will. Amen.

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