

## "THOU ART WITH ME"

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Psalm 23:4.

It is doubtful if any words in the Old Testament have a firmer grip on the heart of humanity than the ones in this verse. It has been used by men everywhere in the extremities of life. Augustine called this chapter the "Martyr's Psalm" because multitudes of martyrs faced wild beasts, the sword, the stake, with this song on their lips.

We have seen that the daily responsibility of the shepherd is to lead his flock to food and drink. It is sometimes necessary for shepherds in Palestine, in leading the flocks from one pasture to another, to lead them through a dark ravine, or a narrow valley. Some of these valleys are so deep the sun only reaches them for a brief period at noon-day. In these narrow valleys there are dens and caves in the rocks where wild beasts lurk, ready to spring forth upon the sheep. Robbers might hide there, ready to steal the sheep when they come through. Poisonous serpents are in the way. Death might lurk everywhere, but there is no fear in the sheep for the shepherd is with them. The shepherd is there with the flock, with a clear eye, a brave heart, a stout arm, ready with club or staff to spring to the defense of his helpless charge.

No life is immune to the dark and painful experiences. They come to all alike. The right way, which leads to the desired destination, passes through dark and dangerous ravines. It winds along the walls of the cliffs which are difficult and dangerous to travel. We all go through hours that are dark and mysterious, and fraught with danger and sorrow. Indeed, sometimes death would be preferable to some of life's experiences. Most of us will have experiences where fear will face us, where tears will trace our cheeks, where troubles will test us, where darkness will distil despair.

There is the valley of sickness. Many of God's children go into the shadow of ill health. They go down into this ravine and lose heart even to despair. A weak body or a chronic ailment often brings us into the shadows. Yet, even in this valley of physical affliction our Saviour walks with us and says as He did to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

There may be the valley of financial loss. Even ruin may become a thing of beauty when the Shepherd is with you in the valley.

There is the valley of dishonor. Even a Christian may sometimes be snared by Satan and led astray into such a dark valley. But, even in a time of disgrace and dishonor the Good Shepherd can lead you out of the valley.

The valley of age sometimes brings shadows. Old folk frequently feel so helpless and dependent, yet as the Shepherd walks with them through the valley He is able to crown the aged one with a crown of glory and to use the testimony to help and strengthen others.

There is the valley of bereavement into which many of us have gone. The shadows are very dark when we have to say goodbye to father or mother, brother or sister, husband or wife, as they close their eyes in death. Many times the heart is so heavy that we want to die and follow the dear one into the Land beyond. The shadow is so black you wonder how the sun can shine and how the birds can sing. Many times we feel like crying as David did, "O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee!" Night seems to have settled down forever, and yet those of us who have experienced it know that probably in this experience, above any other in life, the Saviour is nearest and dearest. In a time when tears are on the cheeks He gives a peace that passeth all understanding.

"Yea, though I walk." A walk means a firm step; a step in assurance. This is not a

faltering step. This is not the step of a creeping man walking in fear—a fear that shapes a thousand dread dangers; a fear that hears a thousand evil whispers.

It is a walk—a walk in safety, a walk in serenity, a walk in sureness, a walk in satisfaction, a walk in security.

A walk means progress, and yet sometimes we get so weary of this world of woe and wickedness, and so homesick for heaven that we would rather run than walk. When Archbishop Laud was nearing the end of life, he became so eager to go home that he cried out, "Lord, I am coming as fast as I can."

"Yea, though I walk through." Through! Not walk in, not stay in, not remain in, not live in, not camp in, not wander in, but walk through. Through! Thank God there is a way out on the other side. Did you ever ride on a train when it plunged suddenly from sunlight into the darkness of a tunnel? Was there a little shock at the suddenness of the change? But there was no fear. Why? Because you knew there was a way out on the other side.

Through! Through the shadow into the sunshine. Through the darkness into the brightness. Through the darkness into the daylight. Through the gloom into the glory. Through the twilight, and the dark, into God's tomorrow. Through the midnight of human experience into an eternal mid-day, for there is no night there. Through the valley into the vision beautiful. Through the ravine into the rapture glorious. When we go through the valley we come out into the company of the dear ones who have gone on before.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley." There may be shadows in the valley when there is sunshine on the hills, yet the valleys are the fruitful places. The valley of the shadow of death is fruitful to God's people: fruitful in rest, comfort and joy.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." There is one dread word here—death. It is a word that brings terror to many, yet the four words soften the one—"the shadow of death." This is not the valley of death. It is the valley of the shadow of death. Certainly the shadow cannot be the same as the object itself. Of course there must be substance when there is a shadow, but we shall never know the substance of death. That was experienced by Christ. All the horror of death was endured by Him. Death in its substance means separation from God. A Christian may go through the shadow of death, but he will never experience the substance of death. A Christian may feel the stroke of death, but he will never know the sting of it.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." There is courage here; courage because of a Presence with us. This is the antidote to fear. We have the Saviour's presence, and He knows every path we must travel. What a difference it makes to have Him with us!

"Thou art with me." That is companionship. Notice the change in pronoun here. Up to now it is "Thou art with me." When we are in the green pastures and by the quiet waters we talk about Him, but when we get into the shadows we talk to Him. "Thou art with me." What confidence is here! This is unshakable certainty. The Good Shepherd is with the sheep.

Go back to the words, "Yea, though I walk." That little personal pronoun "I" is one of loneliness so far as human companionship is concerned. When we enter into the valley we say goodbye to all who are near and dear to us. Dear ones cannot go with us. They cannot hold us back, but out of the shadows comes One Who takes the hand to lead us through the valley. We came into this world to be welcomed by a mother's love, and when we go out of it we shall be accompanied by a Saviour's love.

"Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,  
For I am thy God, I will still give thee aid;  
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
Upheld by My gracious, omnipotent hand.

"The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,  
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;  
That soul, tho' all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!"

"Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." This Psalm has brought comfort into the sick room in both home and hospital. It has been quoted at bedside and at graveside. It has brought its consolation into the bereaved family circle. It teaches us of God's care and hushes our fears to rest. It even brings gladness in a time of sadness.

This Psalm brings food to the famished, freedom to the fettered, firmness to the fickle, force to the feeble, and favor to the faulty.

This Psalm feeds us in green pastures and at a prepared table; it leads us by still waters and through the shaded valley; it deeds to us daily goodness and mercy; it reads to us our title to a mansion in the sky; it needs from us only faith and trust for permanent peace.

This Psalm lightens the pathway of the pilgrim; it brightens the highway to heaven; it tightens the hold of the Saviour's hand on us.

This Psalm strengthens the saint all the days of his life; it lengthens his joy to eternal duration with its "forever."

This Psalm urges our footsteps in the paths of righteousness; it merges for us peace with power and protection with provision; it purges from us every anxious care. It brings sympathy and strength to the sorrowing; it sings its way through the valley of the shadow of death; it wings its way into the Father's house; it rings the bells of heaven in happy human hearts.

"Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Rod and staff are not synonymous. The rod was about two and a half to three feet long, and the staff was about six and a half or seven feet long. A rod speaks of authority, a staff of aid; a rod was for defense, a staff for direction; a rod was used to govern, a staff was used to guide; a rod was used to rule, a staff was used to restore; a rod was used for the enemies of the sheep, the staff was used for the sheep.

The word "staff" means "stay" or "support." The staff was used after the flock was led out of the fold. It guided them over right paths to a safe and sure pasture. Thus the staff becomes a symbol of direction and guidance. Oftentimes the staff was used to help the sheep through the brush, drawing aside the thorn bushes and making plain the path to be followed. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord." The staff was used to pull sheep out of thickets or bogs where they had been caught or had fallen. It is a great comfort to know that our Shepherd will not leave his sheep in the ways of discomfort. Both the rod and the staff may be used in the case of a wandering sheep. A rod may be used in discipline on a sheep that persists in going the wrong way.

The rod and staff are symbols of the presence of the shepherd. These words cannot be separated from those which precede—"Thou art with me." It is the personal presence of Christ symbolized in rod and staff that gives comfort. The comfort of the Christian is "Jesus Only."

The world does not have any comfort. The world says, "Pack up your troubles in your old

kit bag and smile, smile smile;" "Cheer up, old man, it might have been worse;" "Don't worry, others are in a worse fix;" "Guess you'll just have to grin and bear it;" "Keep a stiff upper lip." There is no comfort here. It is only the presence of the Saviour that can lighten the dark hours of life's experiences. Through His death on the cross He has become the Victor over everything that distresses us.

Our part in this comfort is faith. Faith crowds out fear as light crowds out darkness. You cannot scold fear out of people. You cannot drive fear out of children by punishment. There is no way in which we can demonstrate the harmlessness of the dark. Faith is the only way of victory over it.

Comfort is a state of ease and satisfaction. It means to strengthen a man in the use of all his energies. We can do all things through the Good Shepherd Who strengthens us. The one who has the Lord as his Shepherd will not lack anything in time or in eternity. If you are His sheep, your every need is supplied right now. There is not a single thing that you really need that you do not have right now. You may not have all you want; you do have all you need. Remember that sometimes we want what we do not need, and sometimes we need what we do not want.

In a time of sickness His presence alleviates the suffering and soothes and quiets the soul. In every sickness He says, "My grace is sufficient for thee." Sickness with His sufficient grace is better than health without a knowledge of that grace.

In the day when a dear one dies we become perplexed. We sometimes say in our hearts, "How can God permit such a thing to come to me? What have I done that should bring such sorrow into my life?" We are bewildered. Human reasoning cannot bring us comfort, yet that is the time when the Lord draws nearest. Those of us who have gone through bereavement know how precious He can be in that hour. He gives us a peace that passeth understanding. If you have not gone through this experience, you do not understand how precious the Lord's comfort is.

Contentment, courage, companionship and comfort are offered to all who will receive Christ as their personal Saviour.