

The Flock Passing Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death

by John MacDuff

The Valley of the Shadow of Death is a reminder of God's presence and comfort in the midst of suffering, and it is a passage to the heavenly Canaan where there will be no more death, sorrow, or pain.

Scripture: Psalm 23:4, Romans 8:38, 1 Corinthians 15:55, 2 Corinthians 5:8, Hebrews 13:5, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Gods Presence", "Eternal Life"

Description

John MacDuff preaches on the well-known verse from Psalms 23:4, highlighting the comforting imagery of walking through the valley of the shadow of death with God's presence as a Shepherd guiding and comforting believers. He delves into the symbolism of the valley, the assurance of God's presence, and the twofold support of faith and God's promises that provide comfort in facing death. MacDuff emphasizes the victory over death through Christ's sacrifice, the importance of seeking God's companionship throughout life, and the hope of entering into eternal life beyond the valley of death.

Transcript

"Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff they comfort me" --Psalm 23:4.

There is perhaps no verse in Scripture with which we are more familiar than that which heads this chapter--no Bible figure which has made a more lasting and indelible impression. The picture of life, with a dark valley at the end of it, was hung up long ago, in the halls of memory, when infancy first learned to repeat or sing the Shepherd-psalm. Other mental scenes and pictures have come and gone--other Bible symbols may have made a transient impression--but this remains. And as Luther ever associated the appearance and scenery of the figurative Death-valley with that of his own valley of Augsburg, so each Bible reader has doubtless had his own mental picture suggested by some scene of his youth--perhaps some dark, lonesome Highland glen, with mist and rain-clouds muffling the mountain-tops, and a sluggish stream, amid the deepening shades of eventide, wending below.

We need not stop to inquire or conjecture what spot or locality suggested to David the world-wide emblem--what his prototype was of that Valley which, through his inspired lips, has now found enduring place in all Christian teaching and symbolism. His thoughts may possibly have reverted to some scene memorable in the days of his boyhood, when he fed his father's flocks in the valleys around

Bethlehem--some deep gorge among the mountains of Judah, through which amid gloom and storm he had himself conducted his fleecy charge. Or if, as some are disposed rather to conjecture, the psalm were written in his declining years, during the rebellion of Absalom, when he took refuge beyond Jordan--he may have thought of some glen amid the fastness of Gilead, through which he had seen a shepherd conducting his flock out of the pastures of the wilderness. Or in the same spot of his exile, where the border river frets its way along a tortuous valley overhung with precipices, he may have seen the patient shepherd with the sheep slung on his shoulder, and with rod and staff in hand, fording the impetuous stream. One or all of these familiar incidents may have presented to his mind the picture of Death--as a dark valley through which the flock of God have to pass, on their way to the heavenly fold.

But be this as it may, the image, at all events, has passed into all languages and all hearts. How many tears has this one verse dried! How many eyes, when dimmed by the haze of death to other familiar scenes--when the faces of loved relatives were eclipsed in the gathering darkness--how many eyes have gazed on this valley, made radiant with a presence and companionship better than all earthly friends! How often has the ear drunk in the heavenly music of this sublime soliloquy, or the faltering tongue lisped it, until the note of the earthly psalm blended with the songs of the seraphim!

Come and let us gaze on this picture. Let us stand by the mouth of this Valley, under the solemn conviction that we must one day tread it. Shall it be with or without the Heavenly Guide? The other expressions of the psalm may not come home to us. We may, alas! know nothing of "The Lord our Shepherd." We may be strangers to "the green pastures and still waters;"--the restoring of the backslider; and the leading in the paths of righteousness and peace. But "the valley of deathshade" all must tread. We imagine it, with reference to ourselves, (and so it is) a solitary valley; but in reality it is ever densely thronged--filled with a continuous stream of human beings. It is computed, that every hour upwards of 3000 of our fellow-creatures cross its entrance. 3000 pallid pilgrims are hourly crowding and hurrying along its silent gorges! Let us visit the place, and ponder whether we be ready to join that band of silent travelers.

The verse suggests three topics for consideration: The Valley, The Presence, and The Twofold Prop.

1. THE VALLEY. "The valley of the shadow of death." Death is a gloomy experience even to the believer. They are false to the deepest and truest emotions and sensibilities of humanity, who would venture to aver otherwise. We must not attempt, even in the case of those who have "gotten the victory over death," falsely to gild the tomb, and to strew flowers around the sepulcher. Death, as the wages of sin, even to the Christian, is an enemy. All have a natural dread of death--a natural shrinking from dissolution. You may get at times some bold, defiant spirits--some hardened desperadoes in guilt--who, with seared conscience, can meet their end without a shudder. Such wicked "have no bands in their death, their strength is firm." But these exceptional cases do not affect the great law of common humanity--"Skin for skin, all that a man has will he give for his life." It must be, it is a solemn thing, when that which we have often spoken of, thought of, tried to realize, has really overtaken us. When we feel the dimming of the eye, the dreamy insensibility, the gathering darkness, the prospect of severance from all that has long bound us to life; and going on the long voyage to that strange land, from which no voyager that ever set sail has returned. It is not poetry, but nature which dictates the words--"It is a dread and awful thing to die." But, while the believer, as a member of our common humanity--a child of our common nature--instinctively recoils from death: as a child of God, a child of grace, he can say, "I will fear no evil."

Observe how beautifully and significantly the psalmist speaks of death while looking to his Covenant-Shepherd. He calls it not "the Valley of death," but the "Valley of the shadow of death." The substance of death is taken away, and the shadow only remains. To the believer, the King of Terrors is a vanquished enemy. The iron crown has been plucked from his brow and rolled in the dust. We know not if he who sang this Shepherd-song knew by prophetic teaching all the wondrous secrets of that conquest; but we, at least, in taking his words into our lips, can weave into them a gospel meaning. We can go to the sepulcher of Jesus and see the grim foe chained as a trophy, to the chariot wheel of the conquering Savior. Blessed truth! Christ, by dying, has taken the sting of death and cast it into the flames of His sacrifice. He is sublimely represented, in the ages of past eternity, as looking down the long vista of the future; His eye settles on the world loaded in chains, and its millions doomed to everlasting destruction. In holy ecstasy He exclaims, as longing, if possible, to annihilate intervening ages, in order that He might complete the conquest, "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O death, I will be your plagues! O grave, I will be your destruction!" By His vicarious sacrifice and sufferings as a Surety-Savior, He has flooded the Valley with light. The dark rolling mists have resolved themselves into golden clouds. The apostle, in speaking of the wages of sin, takes no account of temporal death--the death of the body--the crumbling of the outward, perishable, corruptible framework. That is a mere transient incident in the believer's experience--what the best of the old commentators calls "a parenthesis in his being." With eternal death and death's Conqueror in his eyes, he exclaims, "Jesus Christ, who has ABOLISHED DEATH!" Can we say in the prospect of that solemn hour, "I will fear no evil?" It is seated at the foot of the cross of Calvary, and entering the Savior's vacant tomb, that we can echo the same apostle's uplifting chord, "I am persuaded that...death shall not separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

2. THE SHEPHERD'S PRESENCE. "You are with me." Here is another element of support in passing through the Valley--not merely the blessed persuasion that the curse of death, as one of the penal consequences of the fall, has been removed and cancelled, but there is the promised assurance of a real companionship in that closing scene. The Shepherd, who has gone before the flock in the wilderness, will not forsake them in the swelling Jordan.

And this is no mystical figure--no mere poetical or sentimental illusion. It is a wondrous fact. Thousands who have passed through the Valley can bear witness to it--the felt nearness of the Savior. No one who has had any experience of deathbeds but can testify, that there is often the sublime consciousness of a PRESENCE there--as if the dying pilgrim rested on a living Arm, and that Valley became a Peniel, where, like the patriarch, the wrestling soul saw God face to face! How can we with sure warrant look forward to a similar experience? It is by having God as our Shepherd now, if we would have Him as our Shepherd then. What was it that gave David this confidence in the prospect of treading the Valley of death? It was the conscious nearness--the realized presence of that Shepherd in life. He was even then rejoicing in this companionship and love. See how near he felt Him to be! Observe the phraseology of the verse--the form of utterance of this sheep of the ancient Hebrew fold. It is not "I will fear no evil, for You are to be with me," nor is it "for God is with me," but "You are with me." He seems to look up with confiding faith to Him who was even then at his side. He speaks not of a remote Being, who would meet him at the valley-gates--a mere guide through the gloom of that strange gorge at the end of life, but who at other times is unknown and distant. It is the Shepherd of whom in the opening strain of the song he said, that Shepherd is mine--"The Lord is my Shepherd." It is He whose guiding hand had led him by the green pastures and the still waters, and the paths of righteousness. Let us not delude ourselves with the thought that a God unknown and unsought now, will be found at a dying hour; that we can insult our Shepherd by refusing His guidance

and companionship until we reach the very confines of the Valley, and then give to Him the dregs of a worn life--the remnant of a withered love! If we would have peace and comfort in the thought of that last day's journey, let us test ourselves with the question-- "Can I even now look up to the face of the Lord my Shepherd and say, 'You ARE with me?'"

And who is this who is specially the Shepherd and Companion and Guide of His flock in their journey through the valley-gloom? It is He of whom we have found it elsewhere said, "He goes before them." Cheering thought to the dying believer--there is ONE with him who has known that valley, by having Himself trodden it; One who has experienced far more terrific shadows than ever can fall upon His people. When He trod it--He trod the wine-press--He trod the valley--"alone." No star glimmered on His path--no rainbow gleamed through the misty storm-clouds. The words awoke only their own lonely echoes--"My God! my God! why have you forsaken me?" Christ has sanctified that Valley--He has left in it the print of His footsteps--He has been there, as elsewhere, a Brother man. He stoops from His throne in Heaven, and whispers in the ear of every pilgrim of mortality, "Fear not! I am He that lives and was dead!" Let us pass to the remaining topic.

3. THE TWOFOLD SUPPORT. "Your rod and Your staff they comfort me." Oriental writers tell us that the shepherds of the East have generally two staves--one for counting the sheep, the other, with a crook at the end of it, to assist in rescuing them from any perilous position, if they fall over the precipice or are swept down the stream. These two props may be taken symbolically to denote the rod of Faith and the staff of the Promises. As Moses smote the waters of the Red Sea with his rod, and these divided, so that the people went through dry shod--so when the believer comes to the typical Jordan in the Dark Valley, Faith smites with its all-conquering rod the threatening waves, and he passes through.

Let faith exalt her joyful voice,

And thus begin to sing,

O Grave, where is your triumph now,

And where, O Death, your sting?

And what is this Faith which thus waves her triumphal rod, and sings her triumphal song? but just that elevating principle elsewhere spoken of as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen;" which enables the believer to penetrate the future, and to regard death and its accompaniments only as a narrow river lying between him and the true land of Promise?

But besides the Rod of Faith, there is the Staff of the Promises. Without something to guide us in crossing the muddy, swollen stream, we may cut the feet on the rugged rocks, or slip on the rounded stones, or sink in the deceptive hollows. The staff enables us to find sure footing, and in safety to reach the opposite bank. So it is with the Christian in the turgid river of death. Without his staff he might be engulfed by the raging waters. But this staff of God's promises ensures his safety. He feels step by step for the solid rock. "The Lord upholds him with his right hand."

And here again, let us observe, it was the present leaning on the rod and the staff which gave David the sure guarantee of comfort at the last. He does not say, "They shall comfort me," --as if this rod and staff were something unknown in the wilderness, which the Angel of Death gave to help him through the closing scene of all. No. "They comfort me." 'I am leaning on them every step of my heavenward way; and the

props I so value now, will not fail me then.'

And was the psalmist deceived? Did the song of life prove a delusion when the hour of death came? Could he sing it so long as his journey was carpeted with flowers, and radiant with sunshine? but did his faith forsake him, and his rod and staff give way, and his song melt into a wail of terror, when the shadows fell around? We have his last words recorded. We have the very hymn which this Hebrew minstrel sang, when the valley-gloom was beginning to darken his path, and the sound of the waters of death fell on his ear--"He has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered and in all things, and sure. This is all my salvation, and all my desire."

And God is still faithful who promised, "As your days, so shall your strength be." There is no part of that promise more faithfully fulfilled than in His giving dying grace for a dying day. Often have we seen those who, during life, shrank at the thought of the dark valley--who trembled as they grasped the staff in the prospect of dissolution--through fear of death, all their lifetime subject to bondage--yet, when the Valley is reached, the clouds seen in the distance are glorified with heavenly light; their terrors are at an end; the storm is changed into a calm; they "fall asleep." The fruit drops when it is ripe. As we have seen it somewhere finely said, God gives a parable in nature for those who have an unnecessary dread of death. Try to wrench the foliage off a tree--strip it of its verdant leaves when summer is "not yet." They resist your efforts; or, if they be removed, you leave a gash and wound where the immature unripe leaf has been forced away. But allow the same leaves to grow, until autumn has covered them with golden glory and they have fulfilled their uses, and see how gently they fall! No rude blast is needed to sweep among the branches of the forest: at the touch of evening's gentle zephyr they strew the ground. So it is with believers ripe for heaven, who have finished and fulfilled their earthly destiny. In life's autumn evening death comes, but he comes like a gentle zephyr. The golden leaves drop without effort from the earthly bough. How gentle that dismissal of the spirit in the silent changer of dissolution! "Our friend Lazarus sleeps." "He was not, for God took him."

We close with two practical thoughts. 1. Ponder our personal interest in the subject. Let each think, 'That Dark Valley must be trodden by me!' I may not have another inch or acre in this world I can call my own, but that common heritage shall at last be mine, "the house appointed for all living." Ay, and not only so; but, in a solemn sense, we have all already entered that Valley. Life is but a highway leading to death. Sin has rendered us heirs to these gloomy mansions. That infant's wailing cry is the first projected shadow of the Valley. That playful child's tottering steps are on the way to the Valley. That youth in the pride of early life, if he had eyes to see it, could decry the Valley in the blue hazy distance, and, as he proceeds on the journey, it will get nearer and nearer. The path of honor--riches--ambition--glory--'leads but to the grave!'

And you who have passed life's mid-day, how befitting especially that you should often and solemnly meditate on the gradual approach of that night of darkness! How important now, really to ascertain whether you have in truth found your Shepherd-Guide; how important to cleave more closely to Him as the evening shadows are beginning to fall! The sheep, in broad day and in the open common, fancies itself independent of the shepherd. But when the sun is set, and the howl of the wolf is heard, and night dulls the landscape, how needful to keep near his side! So be it with you. As the shadows of life's closing day are beginning to fall, seek to cling more closely to your never failing Protector and Guide. Have the staff of promises ever near at hand; that, when, like aged Jacob, you come to a dying hour, you may lean on that staff, recounting the Divine faithfulness--glorying in the Divine presence--saying, "I have waited for your salvation, O God."

2. Connect the Valley with the Heaven to which it leads. That Valley of the Shadow of Death, is like the Valley of Achor, spoken of in Hosea--It is a "door of hope." Achor was one of the entrance-ravines from the wilderness to the Promised Land. Death is the valley leading to the true Canaan; or, to employ a homely illustration, it is like emerging from some long tunnel, after miles of gloomy darkness, into the bright sunshine of some festive city, whose bells are ringing their merry peals, and in whose streets gay groups are gathered. It is the great festive day of heaven--"the city which has foundation." A moment before, in closing our eyes on the earthly scene, our ears listened to stifled sobs; now, we hear the bells of glory ringing the joyous chime--"there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away!"

Let us ever view death as the entrance into life--the exodus of the soul from its bondage to the true Canaan. Let us not misname death by calling it "dissolution;" and the grave, "the long home." Our loved and lost, if they have died in Christ, have only then in truth begun their real life. Death is to them the birthday of their everlasting joys. A dying chamber is generally full of tears. To them it is rather full of angels. We do not call that dying in nature, when we see the beautiful virgin blossom of early spring fall from the fruit tree. That fruit is not destroyed. It has not perished. No, the dropping of these delicate blossoms indicates only a step in its further development--a step onward in its progress to perfection. So, when loved ones drop their blossoms in the grave, it is only that they may expand in fuller and nobler portions in a heavenly world. The blossom of the earthly spring-time are gone. They lie withering in the ground. But the immortal fruit remains, and that is imperishable!

Reader, again let me ask, Are you prepared for that solemn hour, which must sooner or later come, when life with all its opportunities and responsibilities is at an end--when we shall feel that our moments are numbered--that the sand-glass has reached its last grain--that the die is about to be cast, and cast forever? You may not, as yet, have had any startling warnings on the subject of mortality. Death may have been going his rounds elsewhere, but your circle is unbroken. Disease has blanched other cheeks--the arrow from the last enemy has paralyzed other arms--but you are still strong. Others have been hovering for years at the entrance to the Valley--but life to you is still blooming with flowers. "Death's dark valley" is in the far horizon. But come it will, come it must. It may be suddenly--it will be unexpectedly. Do not imagine that, as you get older, you will be more disposed to think of your preparation for your great change. Alas! if that preparation be neglected now, we fear with most, as life advances, there will be a growing disinclination to believe death to be nearer. They are like men walking backwards to the grave that they may not see it--that the unwelcome thought may not disturb the dream of the present. Oh, terrible will it be to tread that Valley with the curse alike of temporal and eternal death brooding over it. To have the shadow of death and the reality of death.

Death, stripped of his sting, is still formidable. What must it be to confront the last enemy with the sting unplucked away--DEATH and what is AFTER DEATH! Speaking of the wicked, the Psalmist says, (Psalm. 94:14) "Death shall feed upon them;" [or, as that has been more literally rendered, "Death shall lead them into his pastures."] Death, which conducts the believer through the dark Valley to the pastures of the blessed, drives the ungodly into his own pastures--the bleak and dreary wastes of an immortality undone! The Achor, the Valley--which to the believer is "the door of hope," is to the unbeliever the gloomy portal of despair. It decides his fate. An infinite future is from that moment sealed. It is literally "the valley of decision." He that is unjust will remain "unjust still," and he that is filthy will remain "filthy still." Be it ours now to flee to Him who has vanquished death. Let us be able personally to appropriate the words of the sweet Psalmist of Israel, "Yes, though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

"The Valley of the shadow of death!" It is the portico of our Father's house. As we stand under the porch, the archway over our heads projects a shadow. We are for a moment out of life's sunshine. But the next! the door opens; and better than the blaze of the earthly sun is ours. The darkness is past, and the true light shines

O change--O wondrous change!

Burst are the prison bars,

This moment there, so low,

In mortal prayer, and now,

Beyond the stars.

O change--stupendous change!

Here lies the senseless clod;

The soul from bondage breaks,

The new immortal wakes,

Awake with God!

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Christ is coming! Let creation

From her groans and travail cease;

Let the glorious proclamation

Hope restore and faith increase;

Christ is coming! Christ is coming!

Come, Thou blessed Prince of Peace.

Earth can now but tell the story

Of Your bitter cross and pain;

She shall yet behold Your glory,

When You come back to reign;

Christ is coming! Christ is coming!

Let each heart repeat the strain.

Though once cradled in a manger,

Often no pillow but the sod;

Here an alien and a stranger,
Mocked of men, disowned of God.
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Come, You blessed Prince of Peace!
Long Your exiles have been pining,
Far from rest, and home, and Thee;
But, in heavenly vestures shining,
They their loving Lord shall see;
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Haste the joyous jubilee.
With that blessed hope before us,
Let no harp remain unstrung;
Let the mighty advent chorus
Onward roll from tongue to tongue:
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come!

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