

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Spurgeon himself walked through dark valleys. Tempests howled around him, burdening and casting him down. These words are born of his experience. He also endured a kind of loneliness as the bearer of others' burdens.

The Shepherd's flock—whether undershepherds or sheep—can profit from Spurgeon's words. Consider this a tract for the depressed, the discouraged, and the overwhelmed.—The Editor

*by Charles Spurgeon**

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. ([Ps. 23:4](#))

I intended that this choice promise should be kept in store until I came near the river of Jordan, and then, in my last hours, I would enjoy its sweetness and sing with joy—

Yea, though I walk through death's dark
vale,
Yet will I fear no ill:
For Thou art with me, and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still.

The other day I found that I needed to eat this heavenly loaf at once, and I did so. I sucked honey out of it some days ago when a tempest howled around me, and I hope that every believer who is burdened and cast down may find it as precious as I have found it.

This verse is no doubt very applicable to the experience of a believer when he comes to die, but it is for the living, too, and if your soul is cast down within you, and you are walking through the valley of death-like shade, I invite you to consider its truths. The words are not in the future tense, and are not therefore reserved exclusively for a distant moment.

David was not dying. He is lying down in green pastures, and following his Lord by still waters; and if a cloud has descended upon him, and he feels himself as one threatened with death, he nevertheless expects goodness and mercy to follow him through all his days.

I call your attention, first, to the pass and its terrors—the valley of the shadow of death'. Get the idea of a narrow ravine, upon the higher Alps where the rocks seem piled to heaven, and the sunlight is seen above as through a narrow rift. Troubles are sometimes heaped on one another, pile on pile, and the road is a dreary single-file pass or defile through which the pilgrim on his journey to Heaven has to wend his way.

Set before your mind's eye a valley shut in with stupendous rocks that seem to meet overhead, dark as midnight itself. Through this valley or rocky ravine the heavenly footman has to follow the path appointed for him in the eternal purpose of the Infinite Mind.

Part I: The Valley

A Gloomy Ravine

Our first observation about it is that this ravine is *exceedingly gloomy*—its chief characteristic. It is the valley of the shadow of death. The joy of life has been like the sun under an eclipse; and in the chill, dark, damp shade of a terrible sorrow a believer has cowered down and shivered beneath the icy touch of doubt.

I speak to some young hearts who, I hope, know nothing about this gloom. Do not want to know it. Keep bright while you can. Be as larks, and mount aloft. But there are some of God's people who are not much in the lark line; they are more like owls. They sit alone and keep silence; or if they do open their mouths it is to give forth a discontented hoot. Such mournful ones need all the gentle sympathy we can afford them.

But those who are cheerful do, many of them, occasionally pass through the dreary glen where everything is doleful; and their spirits sink. I know that wise brethren say, 'You should not give way to feelings of depression.' Quite right, yet we do.

'But surely,' you say, 'desponding people are very much to be blamed.' I know they are, but they are also to be viewed with compassion, and if those who blame them furiously could once know what depression is, they would realise the cruelty of scattering reproof where comfort is needed. There are experiences which are full of spiritual darkness; and I am almost persuaded that those of God's servants who have been most highly favoured have suffered more times of darkness than others.

The covenant was never known to Abraham so well as when a horror of great darkness came over him, and then he saw the shining lamp moving between the pieces of the sacrifice. A greater than Abraham was early led of the Spirit into the wilderness, and again before He closed His life He was sorrowful and very heavy in the garden.

Blessed be God for mountains of joy, and valleys of peace, and gardens of delight; but there is a Vale of Death-shade, and many of us have traversed its tremendous glooms.

A Dangerous Ravine

Our second observation is that this valley experience is *dangerous*, as well as gloomy. In journeying through the passes of the East an escort is usually needed, for robbers lurk

among the rocks. The name of the Khyber Pass is still terrible in our memories, and there are Khybers in most people's lives.

You that are beginners, I do not wish to frighten you; but on the way to Heaven there are 'Cut-throat Lanes' where, when the enemy finds your spirits down, he pounces with temptation, and before you know it you may be wounded. There are spots in the valley where every bush conceals an adversary, and temptations spring out of the ground like fiery serpents, and where the soul is among lions. If you have not yet come to that part of your pilgrimage I am glad of it, and I hope that you may be spared it in answer to the prayer—'Lead us not into temptation.'

But if you are called to walk through this dangerous ravine what will you do? Say this to yourself—'Yea, though I walk through that dangerous pass of which I have heard, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.'

You who are placed in positions of great trial and temptation need not wish for an easier pathway, for it may be that you are safer now, being on your guard, than those who are not fiercely tried, and are in peril from sloth and spiritual indifference. The cold mountains of trial can be safer than the sultry plains of pleasure.

A Mysterious Ravine

Our third observation is that this terrible pass is *shrouded in mystery*. It is this that gives rise to the gloom. You do not always know what the depression is about. You cannot discern the form which broods over you. You cannot grasp the foe. It is of no use drawing a sword against a shadow.

Bunyan represents the pilgrim as putting up his sword when he came into the valley of the shadow of death. He had fought Apollyon with it, but when he came into the midnight of that horrible defile it was of no use to him, because everything was so veiled and

blackened in the dark. Hobgoblins, as he called them, hovered around—strange shapes and singular forms of doubts which he could not combat with reasoning or overcome with argument.

In the valley of shadow the believer does not know what the trial is, and yet a strange, joy-killing feeling is upon him. All is suspense, surmise, and uncertainty.

That which frightened Belshazzar when the handwriting was upon the wall was the sight of the hand, but he could not see the arm and the body to which the hand belonged. So, sometimes we cannot understand God's dealings with us. We have come to a place where two seas meet, and we cannot discern the current.

Such things happen to God's people now and then. And what are they to do when they get into these perplexities, these mysterious troubles, that they cannot at all describe? They must do as this blessed man did, who in the peace and confidence of faith went on his way singing—

Yea, though I walk through the valley shaded by the mysterious wings of death, and though I know nothing of my way, and cannot understand it, yet will I fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thou knowest the way that I take. There are no mysteries with my God. Thou hast the thread of this labyrinth, and Thou wilt surely lead me through. Why should I fear? Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. Gloom, danger, mystery, these three all vanish when faith lights up her heavenly lamp trimmed with the golden oil of promise.

A Lonely Place

Our fourth observation is that the narrow pass is a *lonely, solitary* place. It is as if the traveller walked alone. Loneliness is a very great trial to some spirits; and some of us

know a great deal of what it means, for we dwell alone. But you will say, 'Do you not mingle with crowds?' Yes indeed, and there is no loneliness like it. When your work sets you on a mountain all alone, you will know what I mean. For the sheep there are many companions; but for the shepherd few. Those who watch for souls often come into positions in which they are divided from all human help. No one can guess the burden of your soul.

Some of you are in a position in which you complain, 'No one was ever tried as I am.' Or possibly you murmur, 'There may be many who are more troubled than I am, but none in my particular way.' Just so—and that is an essential part of the bitterness of your cup, that you should lament that you are alone. But will you not say, with your divine Master, 'You shall leave me alone, and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me'? Now is the time for faith.

When you trust God, *and a friend*, there is a question whether it is God you trust or the friend; but when the friend has left you, and only God is near, no question remains. If you and I are walking together, and a dog follows us, who knows which is the dog's master? But when you go off to the left and I turn to the right, all will see who owns the dog, by seeing whom he follows.

If you can trust God when you are utterly lonely, then you really trust Him; you are a believer and there is no mistake about it. It is profitable to be driven into loneliness, that we may prove whether we are solely trusting God or not. It is a bad thing to be standing with one foot on the sea and the other on the land.

We must get both feet on the Rock of Ages, or the foot which stands upon the sea of changeable self will be our downfall. My soul, wait thou only upon God! Yea, though I walk through the dark valley, unattended by human companion, I will fear no evil, for my God is near.

An Oft-trafficked Pass

Our fifth observation is that this dark valley is an *often-walked* pass. Many more go by this road than some people dream. Among those who wear a cheerful countenance in public there are many who are well acquainted with this dreary glen; they have passed through it often, and may be in it now. When I wear the sackcloth of sorrow, I try to wear it under my outer garments where no one shall see it, for has not the Master said, 'Thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast'? Why should we cast others down? There is enough sorrow in the world without our spreading the infection by publishing our troubles.

Story books are sent me to review, and when I perceive that they contain harrowing tales of poverty, I make short work of them. I see quite enough of sorrow in real life; I do not need fiction to fret my heart. If men and women must write works of fiction at all, they might as well write cheerfully, and not break people's hearts over mere fabrications.

Some like to tell the story of their sorrows. But if my own heart is bleeding why should I wound others? Sometimes it is brave to be speechless, even as the singer puts it—

Bear and forbear, and silent be;
Tell no man thy misery.

It is surely true that a great number of God's best servants have trodden the deeps of the valley of the shadow; and this ought to comfort some of you. The footsteps of the holy are in the valley of weeping. As surely as this Word of God is true, your Lord has felt the chill of the death-shade. He says, 'Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness.' The footprint of the Lord of life is set in the rock for ever, even in the valley of the shadow of death!

A Hallowed Ravine

Our sixth observation is that this valley, dark and gloomy as it is, is *not an unhallowed pathway*. No sin is necessarily connected with sorrow of heart, for Jesus Christ our Lord once said, 'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death.' There was no sin in Him, and consequently none in His deep depression.

We have never known a joy or a sorrow altogether untainted with evil; but grief itself is not necessarily sin. A man may be as happy as all the birds in the air, and there may be no sin in his happiness; and a man may be exceeding heavy, and yet there may be no sin in the heaviness. I do not say that there is not sin in all our feelings, but still the feelings in themselves need not be sinful.

I would, therefore, try to cheer any brother who is sad, for his sadness is not necessarily blameworthy. If his downcast spirit arises from unbelief, let him cry to God to be delivered from it; but if the soul is sighing, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him,' it is not a fault.

If the man cries, 'My God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee,' his soul's being cast down within him is no sin. Heaviness of spirit is not, therefore, on every occasion a matter for which we need condemn ourselves. The way of sorrow is not the way of sin, but a hallowed road sanctified by the prayers of myriads of pilgrims now with God—pilgrims who, passing through the valley of Baca, made it a well.

Part II: The Traveler in the Valley

The second part of this discourse will consider the attitude of the pilgrim as he passes through his valley.

A Calm Heart

First, we notice that *the pilgrim is calm about what lies ahead*.

The outriders of trouble are often of a fiercer countenance than the trouble itself.

We suffer more in the dread of trial than in the endurance of the stroke. Here we have a man of faith who is calm in the expectation of trouble: 'I shall walk,' says he, 'through the valley of the shadow of death. I expect to do so, but I will fear no evil.'

Have you, my friend, a trouble drawing near to you? Then look bravely at the future. Let not your heart fail you while waiting for the thunder and the hurricane. David said, 'Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.'

Encamped enemies generally trouble us more than actually contending foes. When once the enemy raises the war-cry, and comes on, we are aroused to valour, and meet him foot to foot, but while he tarries and holds us in suspense our heart is apt to eat into itself with perplexity. Pray to be calm in the prospect of trial: it is half the battle. Is it not written of the believer, 'He shall not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord'?

A Steady Pace

Secondly, we see that *the pilgrim is steady in his progress*. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley,' says he. He does not run in haste: he walks quietly along. We are generally in a hurry to get our trouble over. Cries one, 'I feel in such a horrible state of suspense that I must end it one way or another.' But, my dear friend, faith is not in such a frightful bustle, for—'He that believeth shall not make haste.'

Faith is quick when it has to serve God, but it is patient when it has to wait for Him. There is no flurry about the psalmist. 'Yea, though I walk,' says he—quietly, calmly, steadily. So David in effect declares—I shall walk through the valley of the shadow of death as quietly as I walk in my garden in the evening, or go down the street about my business. My affliction does not ruin me for duty, I am not flurried and worried about it.

May God give you, my dear brothers and sisters, this calm faith. I pray that He may give it to me, for I greatly need it.

A Bright Expectation

Thirdly, we see that *the pilgrim has a certain expectation*. He says—'Yea, though I walk *through the valley*.' There is a bright side to that word 'through'. He expects to come out of the dreary pass to a brighter country. He says within himself, 'I shall come out on the other side. It may be very dark, and I may go through the very bowels of the earth, but I am bound to come out on the other side.' So is it with every child of God.

If his way to Heaven should lie over the bottom of the sea, hard by the roots of the mountains where the earth with her bars is about him, he will traverse the road in perfect safety.

Providence makes special preparation for every tried saint. If you are God's servant, and are called to trial, some singular providence, the like of which you have never read of, shall certainly happen to you to illustrate in your case the divine goodness and faithfulness. Oh, if we had more faith!

Let us be sure that if we walk in at one end of the hollow way of affliction we shall walk out at the other. Who shall hinder us when God is with us?

Without Fear

Fourthly—and this is the main point about this pilgrim and his passage through the valley—we see him *renouncing all fear*. He says, 'I will *fear* no evil.' It is beautiful to see a child at perfect peace amid dangers which alarm all those who are with him. I have read of a little boy who was on board a vessel buffeted by the storm, and everyone was afraid, knowing that the ship was in grave danger. There was not a sailor on board, certainly not a passenger, who was not

alarmed. This boy, however, was perfectly happy, and was rather amused than frightened by the tossing of the ship. They asked him why he was so happy at such a time. 'Well,' he said, 'my father is the captain. He knows how to manage.'

He did not think it possible that the ship could go down while his father was in command. There was folly in such confidence, but there will be none in yours if you believe with an equally unqualified faith in your Father, Who can and will bring safely into port every vessel that is committed to His charge. Rest in God and be quiet from fear of evil.

A Well-found Courage

Fifthly, we note that this pilgrim, in divesting himself of fear, is *not at all fanatical or ignorant*, since he gives good reason for his attitude. 'I will fear no evil,' says he, 'for thou art with me.' Was there ever a better reason given under Heaven for being fearless than this—that God is with us? He is on our side. He is pledged to help us. He has never failed us. Where, then, is there room for terror when the omniscient, immutable God is on our side?

Let the heavens be dissolved, and the earth be melted with fervent heat, but let not the Christian's heart be moved: let him stand like the great mountains, whose foundations are confirmed for ever, for the Lord God will not forsake His people or break His covenant.

'I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.' There is something more here than freedom from fear and a substantial reason for it, for the true believer *rejoices in exalted companionship*. 'Thou art with me.' Thou—Thou—Thou—the King of kings, before Whom every seraph veils his face. 'Thou art with me.' How brave that person ought to be who walks with the Lion of the tribe of Judah as his guard!

A Spiritual Awareness

Trembling brother, you would feel perfectly safe if you had your eyes opened to see the companies of angels that surround you. You would rejoice in your security if you saw horses of fire and chariots of fire encompassing you. But such defenses are as nothing compared with those which are always around you. God is better than myriads of chariots. 'The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels'; but the glory of it is that 'the Lord is among them, as in Sinai.'

God is with every one of His children. We dwell in Him, and He dwells in us. 'I in them, and they in me,' says Christ. A vital, everlasting union exists between every believing soul and God, and what cause can there be for fear? 'Thou art with me.' Oh for grace to be courageous pilgrims, and to make steady progress with heavenly company as our glory and defense.