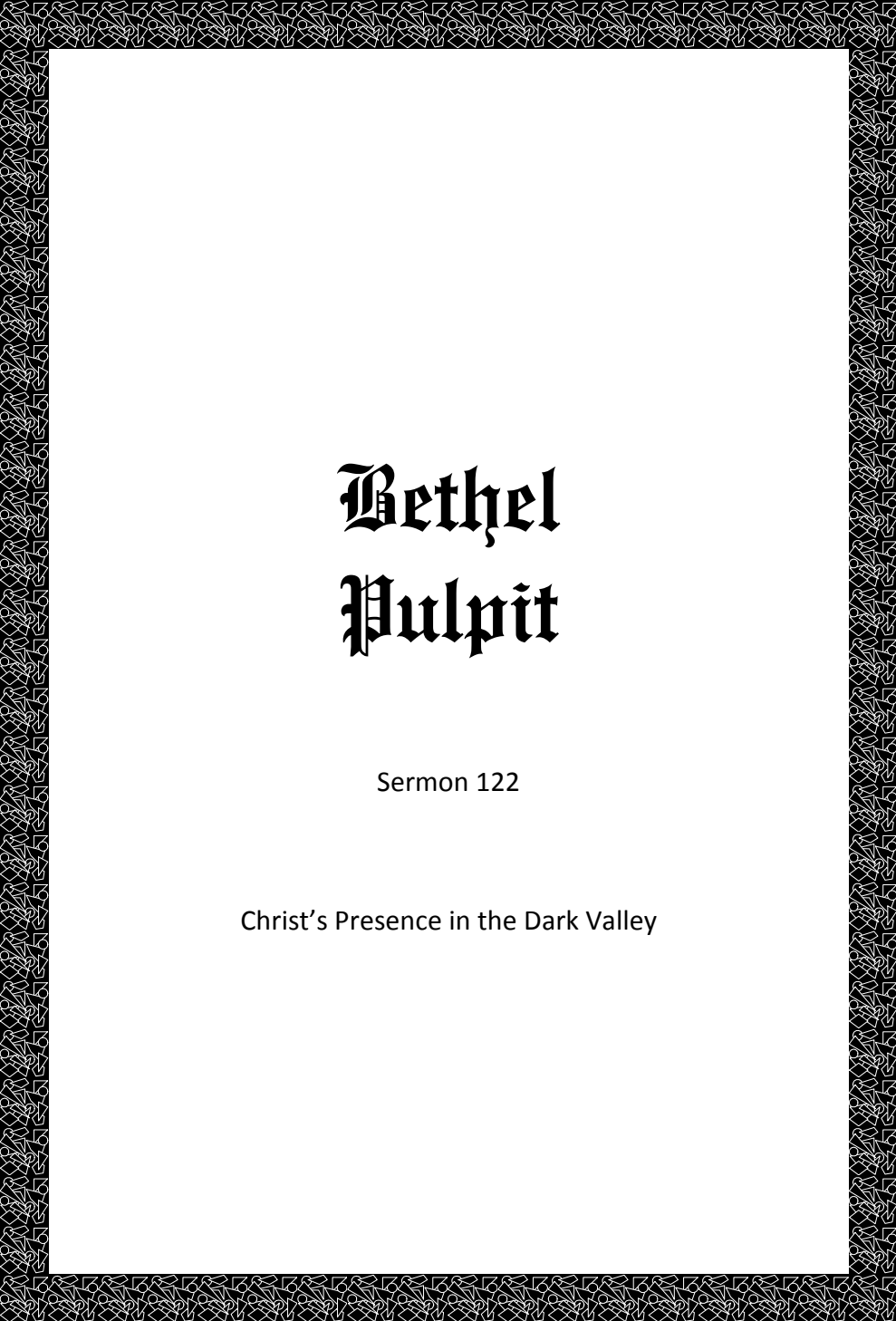




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 122

Christ's Presence in the Dark Valley

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Thursday, 23rd February, 1995**

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. 4).*

Often have I referred to this as a well-known Psalm, a little-known Psalm. Everyone knows the twenty-third Psalm, but how few know the blessed, sacred experience, not just to know the Psalm, but to know the Shepherd! And especially these gracious leadings. “He leadeth me.” That is real religion: He and me; something so close and intimate and personal. “He leadeth me.” That is a good prayer: “Lead me, O Lord, in Thy righteousness ... make Thy way straight before my face.” “Lead me in Thy truth, and teach me: for Thou art the God of my salvation; on Thee do I wait” – or perhaps some of us say, *would* I wait – “all the day.”

O these gracious leadings! In the fortieth of Isaiah, He calls them His *gentle* leadings. “He shall *gently* lead those that are with young.” And here, “He leadeth me.” O to be led by the Shepherd, and to know His voice, and to follow Him, to go after Him as He leads you out of the world, leads you to Himself. We do want to be led beside those still waters and those green pastures and to be led beneath “the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.” The preciousness of the Saviour, the preciousness of the Shepherd in leading you.

Sometimes you want Him to lead you in providence, to show you the way you are to go. “That which I see not teach Thou me.” Sometimes you want Him to lead you in His holy Word, that you might find the good, green pastures there. “He leadeth me.” It is a wonderful thing to be divinely led, because the Lord’s leadings always end in heaven. O what a beautiful word we read together this evening: “When He putteth forth His own sheep, He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him”! Now perhaps the Lord has put some of you forth in a way of gracious exercise or concern. Well, He goeth before you. Perhaps the Lord has put some of you forth to walk in a way of difficulty and trial. He goeth before you. What a word is that: “Behold, He goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see Him”! He says, “I will go before thee, and make the crooked places

straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron.” These gracious leadings. “He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.” It was not an easy way; it was not the way they would have chosen; but it was the right way, and it ended in heaven. It is a wonderful thing if we know anything of these gracious leadings.

Well then, the verse I have read to you this evening speaks of being led through the dark valley, the valley of the shadow of death. Of course, people usually tend to speak of this as of death, the end of our life, and of course that is true, and of course that is one application of it. But it seems that the meaning rather here is that dark valley through which the Lord often leads His people. It may be some of you can say this evening, “David, I too this evening am walking through that dark valley.” He calls it “the valley of the shadow of death.” Why does the Lord lead His sheep into the dark valley? One thing is so that they might cling and cleave more closely to Him. Another is that they might realise their weakness and learn more of dependence. Another is that they might be humbled. Another is that they might learn to pray. But all the sheep of Christ’s fold will sooner or later be brought into this valley. The Lord Jesus calls Himself the Lily of the Valley. It is when you are brought down into the valley that you realise something of the heavenly beauty and fragrance of Christ the Lily.

Sometimes it will be providential, something in your family, or business, or the church of God, or your relationships with other people, or physical trouble, illness and distress, or disappointment, loneliness or pain. Then sometimes it will be the valley of humiliation, as you are sorely tempted by Satan, as you know darkness in your soul, as you look for comforters and cannot find them. For the Lord has “decreed that most shall pass the darkest paths alone.” So you are brought into these dark valleys and sometimes you cannot see the way before you. But the dear Shepherd of the sheep Himself passed through the dark valley in His sacred humanity. Then there is the dark valley when you come right to the very end.

Now perhaps some of you tonight, the various things you have, the burdens, the things which trouble you and perplex you, you feel you are walking in this valley. It seems to you the valley of the shadow of death.

You wonder if your hope is going to die in it, your expectation going to die in it. You wonder if you are going to die in it.

The Lord has put a few very simple, sweet, sacred things here for the encouragement of His sheep, His lambs, as they are brought into this valley. One thing is this: the word *through*. “I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death.” That means there is the other side, beloved friends. It means you are going to be brought safely through to the other side. It is like that other word, “When thou passest *through* the waters, I will be with thee.” Unbelief looks at the dark valley; faith looks at the word *through*, the other side. “Let us pass over unto the other side.” O what a dark valley that was for the Lord’s immediate disciples. We read they “were in jeopardy.” Humanly speaking it seemed certain death, destruction and despair – and some were hardened seamen. But “let us pass over unto the other side.” And then the darkness and the storm and the tempest, and then we read, “And they came over unto the other side.” That is through the valley. There is the other side. Whether you think of it as this trial you are in – He says, “I am with thee, Israel, passing through the fire” – or whether you think of it as the last, dark valley of death, there is a going through for the sheep, the lambs of Christ’s fold, safely to the other side into the promised land of peace. “*Through* the valley of the shadow of death.”

Now there is another thing here. It may be dark, but it is only the *shadow* of death. There is not any real death for the believer. It is the *shadow* of death. The shadow of the fiercest beast on earth cannot bite you. “The shadow of death.” If you take it concerning literal death at last for the sheep, the lambs of Christ’s fold, the sting has been taken from death. “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” And death for the believer is only a shadow. Wherever there is a shadow, there is light beyond which shines. That is it: the light beyond, the glorious Saviour Himself who is the Light of the world. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” Well, you may feel you are in it this evening but may you see that it is only a shadow. May you see that you are passing through. But if the Lord has appointed it, you have to go through it. You cannot turn back. There is not any escape. You cannot climb the steep ravines on either side. It is going through the valley.

Now this is the blessedness of the verse, the sweet assurance of the Lord's gracious presence: "Thou art with me." And there is not a more simple or a more sweet word than this in all Scripture: "Thou art with me." That is the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; that is the great Shepherd of the sheep; that is the sweet assurance of His abiding presence. "Thou art with me." May a few of you this evening in the various things that you have, the various problems, the perplexities and troubles, be blessed with the sweet assurance that amid it all and despite it all, the great Shepherd, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is with you, that you might find a resting place here, that you might find a pillow on which you can lie down. "Thou art with me." Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if we could say it feelingly, graciously, this evening? "Thou art with me."

In the thirteenth chapter to the Hebrews we read: "So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my Helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me." So here: "I will fear no evil." It does not say there will not be any evil, but it says the sheep and lambs of Christ's fold do not need to fear any evil, because that evil can never really harm them. It is a beautiful word, isn't it? "I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me." I will not fear the evil one himself, for Thou art with me. I will not fear the evil of temptation, not even fear the evil of my unbelieving heart, though it grieves me. I will not fear the evil of wicked men, not fear the evil of those who oppose, not fear the evil of a gainsaying world. O may the Lord bless some of you with the sweet assurance that He is with you! If He is with you, it is on the ground of the atonement. If He is with you, it is in ties of blood which cannot be broken. If He is with you, then it means He is with you for ever, despite your sins and faults and failures. He is with you never to leave you nor forsake you. The old hymn which was so well-known years ago:

"Should earth against my soul engage,
And hellish darts be hurled,
Then I can smile at Satan's rage,
And face a frowning world.

"Let cares like a wild deluge come,
And storms of sorrow fall;
May I but safely reach my home,
My God, my heaven, my All."

“I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me.” The Lord bear the witness and grant you the sweet assurance of it and cause you to feel His kind, gracious presence and enable you to speak this language of faith: “I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me.” It is not a soldier away from the battle-field saying, “I will fear no evil.” This is right in the heat and burden of the battle.

“I will fear no evil.” But there is a good, solid reason for it: “For Thou art with me.” Did you notice He puts a *Yea* at the beginning? *Yea*, a little, sweet confidence, a little, sweet assurance of faith. “Yea.” There are one or two places in Scripture where we have that *yea*. Mind you, usually it is the Lord speaking and it is spoken about the Lord. For instance, “Yea, He loved the people; all His saints are in Thy hand: and they sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words.” “Yea, He loved the people.” Yea, He did, with an everlasting love, despite all their sin and failure and guilt. “Yea, He loved the people” so much that He sent His beloved Son to bleed and die for them. “Yea, He loved the people” and sends the Holy Spirit to quicken them into newness of life and bring them all to Jesus so they all sit down at His feet, every one of them. “Yea, He loved the people.”

There is another one. “The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.” He puts a *yea* on it, the certainty, the confirmation, so that if this poor soul, so sinful, guilty, unworthy, says, No, Lord; it cannot be me, then the Lord says, Yea, it is. “Yea, I have loved thee,” and it is with an everlasting love, and it is because of this that with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. And here, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear not evil: for Thou art with me.” It is a wonderful thing, a holy God and Saviour dealing with a guilty sinner, and it is a wonderful thing that it is for ever. And then there are those times when He specially makes it known and felt in the hour of trouble and need.

“Thou art with me: Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.” Some of you have heard a talk given on “the eastern shepherd” – the rod to fight against the enemies of the sheep; the rod to beat against the side of the dark valley to assure them that the shepherd they cannot see is there; the staff to count them to make sure they are there at night; the staff to pull

them back, to draw them back when they are in danger of stumbling and falling.

“Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.” I just want to pause here. I do not know whether you will follow me on this altogether, but I have had a fear for many years that we should not be so swallowed up with the imagery of some portions of the Word of God that we miss the reality. When I was at Haslingden, before I came down to Luton, I heard a minister at one of the week evening services preaching on John 15, Christ the true Vine, and he went into so much detail about vines and keeping vines (and he was a good man), that it ended up like a lesson in horticulture, and the gracious teaching seemed so much in the background. We do not want to be swallowed up with the analogy and lose the reality of it.

What does it mean, “Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me”? One or two things.

First of all, the rod and the staff were emblems of *the sovereignty of the shepherd*, emblems that he *was* the shepherd, emblems that he was over the sheep, emblems that he was in control, emblems that he was their lord and master. Well, if you are walking through trying paths tonight, may you keep your eyes fixed on this: the sovereignty of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He has an undisputed right to lead you where He will. But may you see that He is your Lord and Master. May you see that He is in charge, in control of all things and of the whole of His flock, and of your life, your life’s minutest circumstance. “Thy rod and Thy staff.” May it be a comfort to you. “My times are in Thy hand.” “All must come, and last, and end, as shall please my heavenly Friend.” Your Shepherd, your Saviour is in control, ordering all things by the counsel of His own will, making no mistake in His gracious leading.

“Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.” Now another thing. The rod and the staff are emblems of *the Shepherd’s loving care*. That is why He carries the rod and the staff, because He cares so deeply for His sheep, for their welfare. He knows your pains; He knows your sorrows; He knows the heavy burden of your heart. And that is why He carries this rod and why He carries this staff, because He cares for you. It is a beautiful truth if it enters your heart. May you walk it out tonight. “Casting all your

care upon Him; for He careth for you.” Now that will be a comfort to you, the loving, tender care of the great Shepherd of the sheep.

“Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.” The rod and the staff are emblems of *the protection of the flock*. The sheep, the lambs are safe. The good Shepherd who died for them, laid down His life for them, will not let any of them perish. That is why He carries the rod and the staff, to overthrow every enemy, every foe. Yes, beloved friends, it is: “A sovereign Protector I have, unseen, yet for ever at hand.” How many of the sheep of Christ’s fold have delighted over the years to sing that from a full heart, and it is still true today. “A sovereign Protector I have, unseen, yet for ever at hand.” O this will be a comfort to you, this divine protection, this sovereign protection.

“Thy rod ... Thy staff,” they are emblems of *the safety, the eternal security of the sheep*, the lambs of Christ’s fold. They can never perish while the Shepherd can save. They can never perish while the Shepherd carries His rod and carries His staff. O He says, “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.” How safe, how secure they are, even in the valley of the shadow of death – whether you take it as trouble or whether you take it as the last, dark valley which leads them into the heavenly pastures above. But the safety, the security of the people of God!

“Thy rod and Thy staff,” emblems that this Shepherd who cares, this Shepherd who protects, *is with them*. They are emblems of His love even when the rod corrects them and even when the staff blocks up their way. For He says, “I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.” O the rod and the staff, the emblems of *the Shepherd’s love*! “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” And greater love hath no man than this, that the Shepherd should lay down His life for the sheep. He says, “No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of My Father.” O what sublime truths, what sacred truths! It is no wonder our hymnwriter, singing of these truths, says,

“Enough, my gracious Lord,
Let faith triumphant cry;

My heart can on this promise live;
Can on this promise die.”

Well, you may feel to be a poor, weak, helpless, wandering sheep, but may the Lord give you the sweet assurance of His love, His protection, His tender care, His gracious leading, that you might feel and say, “*All is well if Christ be mine.*” And then in the midst of all these things that trouble and perplex you and make your way dark, O may you prove, “Though dark be my way, since He is my Guide, ‘tis mine to obey, ‘tis His to provide.” “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.”