
THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

THE 23rd PSALM has language particular to it that seems to join it to the physical passing from this life into the next, with the reference to death as a shadow and a valley. Of course, death is the last great enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), and though shadows cannot hurt, they certainly can frighten. Yet in this particular psalm there might be a better rendering that will not only agree with Bunyan's allegory but also more importantly give us an accurate understanding of what the Psalmist is trying to tell us.

As Christian leaves his encounter with Apollyon, we are told that he enters yet another valley called the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Rather than a time of actual death, this seems to refer to a time of spiritual abandonment by God in Christian's walk along the way. A key reference is found in Jeremiah 2:6, where Israel's wanderings through the wilderness—a land of deserts and pits and drought—was likened to “the shadow of death.”

Puritan writers often referred to what they called “the dark night of the soul.” It is the time of life when it seems that God has withdrawn Himself and His presence has departed. It is a time of inward shadow, the loss of any semblance of assurance and a dark frame of mind.

Isaiah spoke to this very thing: “Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? Let him trust

in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God” (Isaiah 50:10).

There is much to be commended from what is sometimes called “gospel music.” Usually happy, effervescent themes of Heaven and unending eternal bliss prevail; however, one wonders what the writer had in mind when he penned,

As I travel down life's pathway,
Jesus leads me all the way.
No more trouble, no more sorrow,
O it makes me want to say...

Whatever is being described here, in all reality is not the Christian experience. Edward Mote wrote differently in the great hymn, “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand.” The second stanza begins, “When darkness veils His lovely face I rest on His unchanging grace ...” This writer understood the full scope of the life of the believer. This is a part of Christian reality, when God withdraws Himself from the experience of the believer and a period of spiritual gloom prevails.

Bunyan would have us understand that, however treacherous this path has become, however deep the ditch on one side and dangerous the quagmire on the other, we need to remember that there are others on the same way experiencing the same kinds of things, because “there hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man” (1 Corinthians 10:13).
