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# CHRIST'S PASTORAL PRESENCE WITH HIS DYING PEOPLE.

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“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 xxiii. 4.

IN this exquisite, sacred pastoral, the Psalmist of Israel celebrates, in touching strains, the constant and tender care which God exercises towards his covenant people. Under the beautiful imagery of a shepherd, leading his flock to green pastures and beside still waters, he is represented as conducting them to the rich provisions and the refreshing rest of the gospel. When, like wandering sheep, they deviate from his ways, he seeks them in love, collects them again with the pastoral crook, and guides them once more in the paths of righteousness and peace. When, in their waywardness and folly, they backslide from him, he still remembers his covenant, is faithful to his promises, and saves them for the sake of his own great name; and when they come to pass through the valley of the death-shade, his cheering presence dispels their fears, and his powerful grace proves their solace and support.

Though it be true that Jehovah, the triune God, is the Shepherd of his people, there is a peculiar and emphatic sense in which Christ is represented in the gospel as sustaining the pastoral relation and discharging its functions. The Evangelist John reports him as declaring,



“I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.” The Apostle Paul speaks of the God of peace as having brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that Great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant. The Apostle Peter reminds believers that whereas they were in their natural condition as sheep going astray, they are now returned unto Christ as the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls. And the same apostle exhorts presbyters to feed the flock of God in view of the reward which the Great Pastor would eventually confer upon them: “And when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.” These passages make it sufficiently evident that the Lord Jesus is peculiarly the Shepherd of his people.

The pastoral relation is a comprehensive one, including the three offices which Christ, as Mediator, sustains: those of a Prophet, a Priest and a King. As it is the province of a shepherd to feed his flock, to rule and protect them from their enemies, and, if necessary, to lay down his life in their defence, the prophetic function, by which Jesus feeds his people, the kingly, by which he rules and protects them, and the sacerdotal, by which he redeems them through his death, are all embraced in his pastoral office. It touches the interests, the experience and the hopes of believers at every point, both in life and in death. It involves the application of a Saviour's power, love and mercy to their every emergency and their every need. With infinite tenderness compassion and vigilance, the great Pastor follows his sheep through every devious path of life, and extends to them his succor when they faint under burning suns, in the horrid wilderness, and amidst the glooms and terrors of the shadow of death.

I. In the first place, it may be remarked in attempting to expand the comforting truths suggested by the text, that the pastoral presence of Jesus is a protection to the dying believer from the fears of evil which would otherwise distress him. "When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." I have no objection to render to the view which makes these words applicable to those critical passages in the life of God's people, which may not inappropriately be described as the valley of the death-shade. This was evidently the interpretation of that masterly delineator of Christian experience, John Bunyan, in his immortal allegory. He represents his pilgrim as struggling with the dangers and conflicts of the valley of the shadow of death before he comes to the crossing of the last river. And it cannot be disputed that there are seasons in the experience of the believer, when, pressed by his besetting temptations, pursued by the malice of the devil, and fascinated by the enchantments or persecuted by the fury of the world, he encounters terrors which are akin to those of death itself. In these fearful exigencies, these periods of conflict, depression and anguish, he appears to be passing down into the darkness and gloom of the valley of death; and it is the pastoral presence of Christ in the hour of despair which dissipates the fear of evil and lights up the soul with returning joy and peace. But although this be true, I see no reason for disturbing the ordinary interpretation placed upon the words of the text—an interpretation which makes them specially applicable to the passage of the believer through death, and one which has proved a charm to dispel the apprehensions of ill from the bosoms of thousands of Christ's people amidst the doubts, the strifes, the agonies of the dying hour.

There are three great and notable epochs in the earthly history of the believer in Jesus. The first is that in which, at the creative fiat of the Almighty Maker, he springs from nonentity into being, and is confronted with the duties, the responsibilities and the bliss or woe of an immortal career. The next is that in which, by virtue of a second creation and through the wondrous process of the new birth and conversion, he passes from the kingdom of Satan and of darkness into the kingdom of grace and of light. From being a bondsman of the devil, a slave of sin and an heir of hell, he becomes, by a marvellous transformation, a subject of God, a citizen of heaven, and an inheritor of everlasting possessions and an amaranthine crown. It is a transitional process which awakens the pulse of a new life, engenders the habits of holiness, adorns the soul with the rich graces of the divine Spirit, and inspires the joyful hope of eternal felicity beyond the grave. The third, and it is the most solemn and terrible crisis of his being, is that of death, in which the believer passes through nature's closing conflict and the awful change of dissolution to the experience of an untried existence. The transition is suited to alarm. It is nothing less than one from time to eternity, and it is accomplished in the twinkling of an eye. At one moment he is surrounded by the familiar objects of earth, and looks upon the faces of his weeping friends who cluster around the bed of death, and in the next he opens his eyes upon eternal realities and the blaze of God's immediate presence. Nature, constructed originally for an immortal life, instinctively recoils from so violent and revolting a change as that which death involves. It shrinks back in terror from the vision of the coffin and the shroud, of the corruption and the worms of the grave. The circumstances attending

the dying process are such as are suited to appal a conscious sinner, and fill him with consternation and dismay—the cruel rupture of earthly relations, the sudden withdrawal of accustomed scenes, the forced abandonment of wonted pursuits, the absolute loneliness of the passage, the dread neighborhood of the flaming bar and the rigor of the last account. My brethren, how shall we, without apprehension, encounter so tremendous a change? The text furnishes us an answer which illumines the gloom of the dying chamber, and lights up the darkness of the grave. The pastoral presence of the Lord Jesus is an antidote to the fears, and a preventive of the evils, of death. There are two modes by which this blessed result is accomplished:

1. In the first place the Great Shepherd accompanies the believer in his last passage as the Conqueror of Death. That which chiefly renders death an object of terror is the consciousness of guilt. The groans, the pains, the dissolution of our bodily organisms, are confessedly dreadful and repulsive; but the great poet was right when he intimated that it is conscience, a guilty conscience forecasting the retributions of the future, which makes cowards of us all. It is this which leads us to shrink from the dying bed as an arena of battle, and from the last struggle as a hopeless conflict with an evil which the startled imagination personates as a monarch and invests with power to destroy. Death becomes the king of terrors. Were there no sin, the change which might have been necessary to remove us from the present state and to adapt us to another would have been an easy and delightful translation, a euthanasia, disquieted by no apprehensions of the soul, and disturbed by no pains of the body. But sin has clothed death with its tyrannical prerogative as a universal and remorseless despot, con-

verted the world into a melancholy theatre of his triumphs, and transformed the earth into a vast graveyard, whitened with the monuments of his sway. The removal from the present state becomes a passage through a valley of tears peopled with shapes of terror, and encompassed with the darkness of the death-shade.

Christ has subdued this dreadful monster. He conquered death by conquering sin, and he overcomes sin by his dying obedience to law. This is the statement of the apostle in his argument touching the resurrection of the body: "The sting of death is sin." The power of death to inflict torture, to poison our happiness and blast our hopes, lies in the fact that we are guilty, and are, therefore, completely subjected to his tyranny. "The strength of sin is the law." The punishment of our guilt is penal. Our dying sufferings are the penalty of a broken law; and sin, in inflicting them upon us, throws itself back for the enforcement of its authority upon the irreversible sanctions of that majestic and eternal rule which we have outraged and insulted. Christ has stripped sin of this strength. He has unnerved the cruel monarch, and rendered him powerless to destroy his people. The glorious Redeemer, moved by compassion for our wretched estate, came down to our relief and stood forth as the champion of his church in her conflict with death. He assumed our guilt, took the sting of death in his own soul, underwent our penal sufferings and, in accordance with the law of substitution, relieved us from the obligation to suffer the same punishment, and has enlisted the divine justice on the side of our deliverance. Christ has died penally for his people. God accepts the vicarious sacrifice, and the believer cannot die in the same way. Justice cannot demand a double payment of the same debt. Death is divested of its

penal feature, and is transformed from a curse into a blessing, from a passage to execution into a translation to bliss. In the tragedy enacted upon the cross, Jesus, the representative of his people, engaged in a mighty wrestle with Death. He fell, but his fall crushed out the life of his dread antagonist. He died, but death died with him. He was buried, but he dragged death down with him into the grave; and there, despoiling the tyrant of his diadem, he unfurled over his crownless head the ensign of his people's salvation, and, in their name, took undisputed possession of his whole domain. It is true that the believer must still pass through the dying change, but the curse of it is forever gone. It is no more death in its true and awful sense as the penalty of law. "I," says the divine Redeemer, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and he that liveth and believeth in me shall never die." "He that keepeth my sayings shall never see death." It is true that the believer must die; but in dying he is privileged to suffer with his Master, that he may rise and reign with him. It is true that the believer must die; but death now constitutes part of a wholesome discipline which prepares him for glory; it is a process by which he is purged from dross, casts off the slough of corruption, and is purified for his admission into the holy presence of God and the sanctified communion of saints. It is true that he must walk through the dark valley; but the Conqueror of Death descends into it by his side, illuminates its darkness by the radiance of his presence, protects him from the assaults of a now powerless foe, and bearing in his hands the keys of death and the invisible world, peacefully dismisses the departing saint from sin to holiness, and from the stormy trials of earth to the joy and peace of an everlasting rest.

2. It may be observed further, that the pastoral presence of Jesus with his dying people is manifested by the tender ministration of his sympathy. There were two great ends which the Saviour contemplated in his sufferings and death—the one that he might redeem his people from sin and everlasting punishment; the other that he might be qualified by experience to sympathize with them while themselves passing through the afflictions of life and the pains of the dying hour. To achieve these results, he became incarnate, partook of our nature, and was made bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. Not merely a legal substitute, but possessed of the sublime and tender spirit of a priest, he consented to be compassed with sinless infirmity that he might be capable of compassion for the weak, the wandering and the dying. An infirm human being, struggling under the burden of assumed guilt, and confronted by the terrors of divine wrath, is it any marvel that he looked forward to death not without fear? One of the most affecting and pathetic passages in the Scriptures is that in which the apostle, discoursing of the priestly sufferings of Jesus, tells us that in the days of his flesh he offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared. For it must be remembered, that the form of death which Christ encountered, while it included the experience of our sufferings, embraced incomparably more. In his own person, perfectly innocent, and in his character stainlessly holy, he merited intrinsically the admiration of his fellow-men, and the approval of his God. So far from deserving to die, he was entitled, on the naked score of retributive justice, to the highest and most blissful life. And yet condescending, in boundless mercy, to be treated as putatively

guilty for the sake of dying men, he underwent a form of death, the least element of which was the pains of dissolution—a death which involved the experience of infinite wrath and the intolerable pains of hell. The cup which was placed in the hands of Jesus in Gethsemane was one which was never offered to any other human being on earth. The trembling and consternation of his human nature as he took that chalice of woe, his thrice-repeated prayer to be relieved, if possible, from the necessity of drinking it, and the bloody sweat that swathed his body like a robe, attested an anguish of soul which none but he was ever called upon to bear. The Sufferer, who, for us, expired on the cross of Calvary, endured a species of death which was as singular as it was comprehensive and exhaustive. In body, he suffered the keen and protracted tortures of crucifixion; and in spirit, reviled by foes, deserted by friends and abandoned of God, he descended alone into the valley of the death-shade, which was not only veiled in impenetrable gloom, but swept by the tempests of avenging wrath. Furnished with such an experience, the Good Shepherd ministers with exquisite sympathy at the couch of the dying believer. He knows his doubts, his apprehensions, his fears; and, moved by a compassion which naught but a common suffering could produce, he makes all the bed under the expiring saint, smooths his last pillow, and “wipes his latest tear away.”

II. In the second place, the Psalmist beautifully portrays the consoling influence of Christ's presence upon the dying believer when he represents the pastoral staff as affording him protection and comfort. “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” The staff, the appropriate emblem of the pastoral office, may be regarded in two aspects. As a rod, it is a powerful weapon of defence;

and as a staff, it is an instrument of support. It is at once, therefore, the symbol of protecting power and of supporting grace. When at even-tide the oriental shepherd had folded his flock, and missed from the number some crippled ewe or tender lamb, he failed not, albeit through night and storm, to go in quest of the wanderer as it strayed amid the jagged rocks of the mountain-side, or the terrors of the howling wilderness. And when he had found it, he gathered it compassionately in his arms, laid it upon his shoulders, and took his way homeward rejoicing. But often he was compelled to pass through some deep and gloomy gorge, infested by wild beasts and rendered dangerous by the swollen torrent dashing fiercely through it and making the passage hazardous and the foothold insecure. Then, when from some neighboring thicket the young lion sprang forth and roared upon his prey, wielding his shepherd's staff as a weapon of defence, he protected the precious burden he carried, and beat back the assailant to his lair; or, as he stepped from one slippery rock to another, through the rapid current, he used his staff as a supporting prop, and stayed both himself and the feeble wanderer which he conducted to the folded flock. Thus it is, my brethren, with the Great Shepherd and Bishop of souls, when, in the night of death, he leads the feeble and dying members of his flock through the valley of the death-shade to the heavenly fold. There are two difficulties which the believer has not unfrequently to encounter when he comes to die:

In the first place, he is liable to the last and desperate assaults of the adversary of souls. Baffled by the power of the everlasting covenant in his attempts to compass the destruction of the believer, he meets him at the bed of death, and taking advantage of his helplessness, en-

deavors, if he cannot destroy him, to mar the peace and becloud the prospect of his latest moments on earth. He showers his fiery darts upon him, injects doubts as to his acceptance with God, conjures up from the past the apparition of his sins, and calls up before his appalled imagination the vision of an angry Judge, a fiery bar, and a night of eternal despair. But another and a greater than Satan is there. The Chief Shepherd is also in that chamber of death. Standing at the dying bedside, and lifting his pastoral staff as a rod of defence, he wards off from his agonized servant the incursions of the powers of darkness, and beats back the assaults of his satanic foes.

Another difficulty which is apt to disturb the peace of the departing believer is derived from his vivid remembrance of his sins, and his consequent fear that he is not prepared to meet his God. In the solemn and honest hour of death, his soul, conscious of its dread proximity to the judgment seat, takes a minute and impartial survey of the past. His memory, quickened into an energy which only death can impart, with lightning rapidity sweeps, as at a glance, the whole field of his earthly history. There is no glozing process then by which the hideous features of his sins can be painted or concealed; no apology for his crimes which will stand the scrutiny of the death-bed, or abide the breaking light of the eternal world. All his acts of youthful folly, all his broken vows, all his unredeemed promises to his God, all his fearful backslidings, all his sinful thoughts, words and deeds, now crowd into his dying chamber, throng around his dying bed, and threaten to go with him as swift witnesses against him before the final bar. The billows of a fiercer death than that of the body dash over his head, and, struggling in the torrent which threatens to sweep him

through the last valley downward to a bottomless abyss, he cries in his extremity to the Redeemer of his soul. Never deaf to the appeals of his dying people, the Great Shepherd hastens to his relief with the succors of his supporting grace. He whispers to the sinking believer that he died to save him, that his blood has cleansed him of all his sins, and that his perfect righteousness, his atoning merit, is a ground of acceptance, a foundation that will not fail him when the wicked and unbelieving shall be driven from the divine presence like the chaff before the storm. It is enough. The dying believer, with the hand of faith, grasps the pastoral staff that Jesus thus extends to him, and, leaning upon it, passes in safety through the glooms and dangers of the death-shade, emerges into the light of heaven, and is satisfied with the beatific vision of God.

Fellow-travellers to the dark valley, let us believe in Jesus as our Saviour. Let us put our trust in him as the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls. So when we are called to die, no guilty conscience will break our peace, no condemning law will thunder upon us, no frowns of an angry Judge will deepen the awful shadow of death; but we will fear no evil, for Christ will be with us; his rod will protect us in our last conflict, his staff will support us in our latest pang.