

Bethel Christian Fellowship
Fair Lawn, NJ

The Story Of The Pilgrim's Progress (15):
The Valley Of The Shadow Of Death

February 26, 2017

In the Valley of Humiliation, Christian's battle with Apollyon has been fierce. But an even worse ordeal lies ahead. He must now enter the Valley of the Shadow of Death. "This Valley," writes Bunyan, "is a very solitary place. The prophet Jeremiah describes it as a wilderness, a Land of Deserts and Pits, a Land of Drought and the Shadow of Death, a land that no one (except a Christian) is able to pass through and where no one lives. Here, as you will see, Christian's testings were even more severe than those he encountered with Apollyon."

1. Q. What does the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" mean?

A. In the passage that Bunyan is quoting from the book of Jeremiah (2:6), the phrase "shadow of death" is the translation of a single, difficult word in the Hebrew text. It appears seventeen other times in the Old Testament, most notably in Psalm 23 (v. 4). In each instance, it's used as a figurative expression for utter darkness, and is usually associated with fear and despair. For example, one noted Old Testament scholar has made the following observation: "It connotes terror (Job 24:17, twice), deep gloom (Ps. 107: 10, 14), deep distress (Isa. 9:2; Ps. 44:19), and extreme danger (Ps. 23:4; Jer. 2:6)" (Bruce Walkie, *The Psalms As Christian Worship*).

In the beloved twenty-third Psalm, both the NRSV and the NIV (2015) translate "*the shadow of death*" as "*the darkest valley*." This fits well with the shepherd metaphor, because there are times when the shepherd leads the flock through deep ravines where the steep and narrow slopes keep out the light. The darkness represents the dangers, troubles, and uncertainties of life. On the "highway to heaven" there are no detours around such valleys. God leads us through them to strengthen our faith, build our character, and prepare us to help others.

2. Q. How does Christian first hear about this Valley?

A. From two men who have already seen the dangers that are ahead. They were descendants of the faithless spies who brought an evil report concerning the Promised Land (Numbers 13). Like their ancestors, they tell Christian they've seen enough:

"But what did you see?"
"What did we see? Why, the Valley itself, which is pitch black. We could see Hobgoblins, Satyrs, and Dragons of the Pit. We could also hear in that Valley continual howling and screaming—it sounded like people in indescribable misery who were bound in affliction and chains. We also saw the depressing clouds of confusion hanging over the Valley; and death, with wings spread, was hovering over it all. It is absolutely dreadful and in complete chaos."
"From what you have said," replied Christian, "I'm still not convinced that this isn't the way to my destination."
"Have it your way," they said, "but we won't choose it for ourselves."
So they left, and Christian went on his way with his sword still drawn for fear that he might be assaulted.

3. Q. What can we learn from Christian at this point?

A. We learn that we are called to walk by faith and not by sight, even when things look their worst. We learn *not* to listen to the disheartening voices of those whose hearts are filled with doubt and unbelief. We also learn to be on our guard against the demonic forces of evil that make their home in this Valley – the Hobgoblins, Satyrs and Dragons of the Pit. They are not to be taken lightly.

In the King James translation of the Bible, Isaiah refers to one of the demonically inspired gods of the heathen as “satyrs” (Isa. 13:21; 34:14). The NIV translates this same word as “wild-goats,” which became associated with Israel’s worship of “goat-idols” (Leviticus 17:7; 2 Chronicles 11:15), or their “sacrifices unto devils” (KJV). This kind of demonic assault on Israel’s faith ultimately proved to be their ruin. The point of Bunyan is that when we go through these dark valleys, we are especially vulnerable to the ploys of the devil. This is all the more reason to be aware of his schemes (Eph. 6:11) and to be spiritually alert: “*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8).

4. Q. What is the only way for Christian to pass through this Valley?

A. He must travel along an unusually narrow pathway that is between a “very deep ditch” and a “very dangerous quagmire.” When he tries to avoid the one he almost falls into the other, and vice versa. “*Christian went on in this way, and I heard him sigh bitterly. For, in addition to the dangers already mentioned, the pathway was so dark that often when he picked up his foot to go forward, he had no idea where he should put it down next.*”

The enemy, of course, is behind all this discouragement and fear of uncertainty. Yet Christian faithfully presses forward with the confidence that even though he *does not know* what lies ahead, he *does know* that he’s on the right path, and that he must stay in the center of this path. This is the kind of faith that Job demonstrated when he said, “*He knows the way that I take, and when He has tried me, I will come forth as gold*” (Job 23:10). It’s also the same confidence that David expressed when he wrote: “*Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life . . . The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me; Your steadfast love endures forever. Do not forsake the works of Your hands*” (Ps. 138:7-8).

5. Q. What else lies alongside this narrow pathway?

A. Bunyan will soon tell us: “*The mouth of hell was beside the way about midway through the Valley.*” Up until now, Christian has been walking with his sword drawn, but the sparks of hell will force him to use another spiritual resource: “*So much fire and smoke continually came out, with swarms of sparks and hideous noises (things that gave no heed to Christian’s Sword as did Apollyon) that he was forced to put his Sword away and use another weapon called All-prayer. So I heard him cry out, ‘Oh, Lord, save me!’ . . .*”

In our darkest hours, there are times when our only course of action is to resort to “All-prayer” (all kinds of prayer). “All-prayer” is so named because of the use of the word “all” in Ephesians 6:18, a passage in which Paul brings his teaching on spiritual warfare to a conclusion: “. . . praying at *all* times in the Spirit, with *all* prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with *all* perseverance, making supplication for *all* the saints . . .”.

An important part of “All-prayer” is a simple yet persistent S.O.S. – like the one prayed by the psalmist in Psalm 116:4: “*Oh, Lord, save me.*” This is the very prayer echoed by Christian, which he will continue to pray “for quite a while.” Learning to pray at all times, with all kinds of prayer, is an indispensable means that God’s Spirit uses in leading us safely through such dark times. The acronym **A** (adoration), **C** (confession), **T** (thanksgiving), **S** (supplication) is always a good place to begin.

6. **Q.** How much longer will this go on?

A. Things will get worse before they get better. Christian will experience these “terrors of sight and sound for several miles.” He then hears a band of fiends approaching him but turns them back by crying out, “I will walk in the strength of the Lord.” Then he no longer knows his own voice and thinks that the blasphemous thoughts that he now hears come from his own mind. He then hears a man’s voice saying, “*Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death I will fear no evil for Thou art with me*” (Ps. 23:4). He now knows that he is not alone, and hopes to have close companionship shortly. Finally the day breaks and he can see the hazards more clearly, and even though the second part of the Valley is more dangerous than the first, he now has light for his path and will reach the end of the Valley safely.

7. **Q.** But what will Christian do before continuing on his way?

A. He will pause to reflect upon God’s faithfulness in leading him through this dark valley, and then give Him all the praise. This is perhaps the most instructive part of the story. In the words of Bunyan, “*Before long, it was daybreak, and Christian rejoiced. For he turns ‘the shadow of death into the morning’ (Amos 5:8, KJV) . . . Looking back, he was deeply moved by his deliverance from all the dangers he had encountered on this desolate Way. The sun’s rising was also another mercy to Christian, for though the first part of the Valley of the Shadow of Death was dangerous, the second part that he now faced was worse . . . But as I said the sun was rising. Christian said, ‘He lighted the way before me and I walked safely through the darkness’ (Job 29:3).* Knowing this, he then sings a song of thanksgiving. The Lord Jesus Christ has kept him safe, and the Lord Jesus Christ will get all the praise and glory.

*“Oh, world of wonders (I can say no less),
That I should be preserved in the distress
That I have met with here! Oh blessed be
The hand that from it has delivered me!
Dangers in darkness, devils, Hell, and sin
Surrounded me, while this vale I was in.
Yes, snares and pits and traps and nets did lie
About my path, so that vain, foolish I
Might have been caught, entangled, and cast down:
But since I live, let Jesus wear the crown.”*

When we go through our darkest valleys, there is always something for which we can give God praise. We can praise Him because He is faithful, and will never test us beyond our limits. We can praise Him because His grace is always sufficient. We can praise Him because His promises of guidance and protection are certain. Most of all, we can praise Him because of His abiding presence through such times: “*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me*” (Ps. 23:4, NIV 2015)