

to others, the rod is the rod of faith which divides the river of death that we may pass over dryshod, as the rod of Moses divided the Red Sea; and the staff is the staff of promise on which we lean in going through the divided waters. According to others, while the staff symbolizes divine support, the rod (as an instrument for *beating* the sheep) represents affliction, which God so largely employs to comfort his people. It is surely not necessary to argue against such fanciful interpretations. The "rod" and "staff" are obviously the shepherd's instruments; part of his equipment for guiding and defending his flock, and delivering them from entanglements or dangerous positions. The "rod," with iron-studded head, is to the present hour the Syrian shepherd's weapon against beasts of prey. To this there is allusion in another psalm, in which David conceives of God as his defender against enemies, whom he likens to fierce beasts of prey: "Thou hast smitten all mine enemies upon the check-bone; thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly." The "staff" or crook is the short pole, with bent or hooked end, by which he extricates a sheep from the entanglement of bushes or rocks; for a sheep will climb where a shepherd cannot follow. With "rod" and "staff" he is equipped for shepherd-service. Thus is symbolized the ability of the Divine Shepherd to conduct us in safety through all the evils and dangers of the valley of death-shadow. The thought is a very simple one. I am within the scope of his blessed power; he cares for me; he thinketh upon me; he is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that I ask or think; all the resources of the universe are under his control. And hence arises comfort to the heart even in the thickest midnight gloom—comfort that means strength, and courage, and patience, and hope, and even gladness—comfort that sometimes breaks out into triumphant song. I am under the guidance of Jehovah; he has led me hither; he protects me through the darkness; and in good time he will bring me forth into his own light. A grand picture this of a man trusting in God and quietly waiting for his salvation.

The spirit of the verse is that of fearless courage in going forward to encounter the

dark unknown. It is not possible to evade entering the valley; but it is possible to be in it and not to fear, realising a Divine Presence in the gloom, aware of a Love and Power on which we may securely count. And so this verse, breathed three thousand years ago from the heart of one whom God had comforted, comes down through the ages as God's great *Fear not* to his people when he leads them into the darkness; yea, rather his great Fatherly assurance that all things shall work together for their good. It is laid up in the Book for the use of all future ages, a promise, and strength, and joy for whatever evil days may come. Just like those snatches of song and sudden bursts of exultation that lie scattered throughout the Apocalypse—like that great *Alleluia* which is to be uttered when the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth—so this verse, mighty for the past, is written for times still future, and lies waiting till there shall be hearts and lips to sing it.

What will *they* do in the valley who have no God to trust in? What will *they* do who have said to him, *Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways?* The fool hath said in his heart, *There is no God.* What will his creed do for him *there?* At present, with fortune smiling and all things going well, it is an immense relief to him to get rid of God; a relief from those distressing mental sensations he experiences when he reflects,—sensations, of shame, self-reproach, self-condemnation fear, remorse, and so on, which no one can altogether shut out who is living in sin. And then, too, it is not only an immense present relief, but the removing of a tremendous dread. If only there were no God! Then there would be no judgment to come, no retribution, no undying worm and fire that never shall be quenched, nothing to terrify in that veiled Hereafter which sometimes seems so dread and awful, and the thought of which sometimes makes the heart so strangely palpitate. But oh, my fellow-sinner, when you have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death, toward unknown realms for which you have made no preparation, and in which you have no friend, what will you do without God *then?*