Death's Shadow

Who among us has not walked in the darkness of death's shadow? Some of us have walked there hand in hand with a loved one, taking that one to eternity's gate and watching as he or she passes through into the next world. Some of us have personally walked in the shadow through illness or injury, only to re-emerge into the light of earthly life by virtue of recovery. Casting its pall upon us, death seeks to darken our hearts to some crucial spiritual truths which, when carefully considered, remind us that death, in reality, carries little sway over the Christian soul.

While the word ,"shadow" is used many times in the Bible, "shadow of death," as used in the Old Testament is a distinctive term translated from its own Hebrew word. It is differentiated, it would seem, so as to give death its proper due, for it casts a shadow unlike any other of life's experiences. No other physical, mental or emotional strain can challenge the spirit and test faith like death.

Considering the context of the book, it's not surprising to find that the Hebrew word for "shadow of death" is most commonly used by Job. At the height of his grief he wished that the day of his birth had been stained by the shadow of his death (Job 3:5). Later, he offered this description of the passage from this life to the next:

> "Are not my days few? cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little. Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death; A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, where the light is as darkness." (Job 10:20-22)

Gloomier words were never spoken. Were we to stop here and consider nothing further regarding death's shadow, we would find ourselves wallowing in deep despair, blinded by death's finality and swallowed up in darkness with no hope in sight. But we must not stop here. We cannot stop here. We need not stop here.

The existence of a shadow implies the presence of light. When midnight falls in a secluded area under cloudy skies, there is nothing but blackness in that place. There are no shadows. Yet, as the dawn breaks, the shadows that appear do so because of the rising of the light of the sun.

Yes, death is a shadow, but on the other side of the shadow is light. Isaiah prophesied, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." (Isaiah 9:2). Matthew wrote that this prophecy applied to Jesus Christ (Matthew 4:12-16). John wrote of Jesus that He "was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." (John 1:9).

When David penned those oft-quoted words, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," (Psalm 23:4), he wrote them as one who was walking in the shadow but was not consumed by it. His hand was in God's hand. He was moving toward the light and through the shadow, not the other way around.

The shadow of death is real. We see it all around us every day. We have walked in it. It's cold and lonely and even frightening. But it is only a shadow. It need not be a constant dwelling place. We can have access to the Light who is beyond the shadow through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's why the Christian soul is neither overtaken by death's darkness nor beaten down by its gloom. Instead, the child of God can exult and with the apostle Paul exclaim, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Corinthians 15:55-57).

In the words of Edward Bickersteth, Jr., in his hymn, "Peace, Perfect Peace":

Peace, perfect peace, Death shadowing us and ours?
Jesus has vanquished death, And all its powers.

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