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"Thy way was in the sea,
And thy paths in the great waters,
And thy footsteps were not known.
Thou leddest thy people like a flock.
By the hand of Moses and Aaron"
(Psalm 77:19,20)

What a strange juxtaposition of similes! It would be difficult to have a greater contrast than is presented in these two verses - the pilot through the sea, and the shepherd with his flock. The sea in a rage and an uproar, the tempest and the storm - and, right alongside of it, the shepherd and his flock. One a picture of unrest, disturbance, anxiety, stress, mighty forces in action; the other of tranquillity, restfulness, calm. What a contrast! - and yet brought together in one statement as to what the Lord is to His people - a pilot, a shepherd.

You need to read the whole psalm to get the full value of that. The first part of the psalm is a record of distress, perplexity, bewilderment, a crying out in trouble, reaching the agony of "Hath God forgotten to be gracious?" "Is his lovingkindness clean gone for ever?" - questions about the Lord. And then the writer recollects and says, "This is my infirmity... I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High"; and the whole tone changes. Recollection and review, as to how it all worked out in the long run, brings reassurance, leading finally to this summary at the end. And yet it is only an introduction - because undoubtedly the last two verses of this psalm are an introduction to the next one, that great historic record of the Lord's dealings with His people - Psalm 78. What a long psalm it is, recounting the movements of the Lord's people and the Lord's guidance and dealings with them. The psalmist has worked up to that in this way. With all there is here for most helpful, encouraging, reassuring meditation, we can at the present time only look at the gist of the matter.

I am going to change the metaphor again, from the pilot through the storm, and the shepherd with his flock, to the mountaineer. There are three peaks which every child of God has to master - peaks that are suggested by this psalm. We are not really qualified for the service of the Lord, nor for life itself in relation to the Lord, until we have mastered these three peaks. They will challenge us; they may challenge us again and again; but somehow or other we have got to be the masters of them and they have got to be things that have lost their terror for us, have lost their dread, have lost that which makes them for us things that defeat and weaken.

Divine Purpose Governing All

The first of these peaks which arises out of this psalm so clearly is Divine purpose governing all. You know how this mountain presented itself to Israel at the beginning of their history. When the psalmist refers to 'His way in the sea' and 'His paths in great waters', what is he talking about? Undoubtedly about the Red Sea as it confronted them. What a terror, what a dread there was that night! We may picture how the East wind howled and the water lashed. What a dread that sea was to the people - with what fear and trepidation did they approach its bank! The waters piled up as a wall on the left and the right served little to abate their terror. It was a terrible night, the passing through the Red Sea. It was, in a sense, a veritable mountain to be negotiated - and a mountain of, for them, terrible possibilities. But do you notice what the psalmist says? He says (Ps. 77:16) that these waters were - well, our translation does not give us the exact word. They were troubled, they were in anguish, they were groaning, and the original word which is used to describe the state of the waters suggests that they were in travail, the sea was in travail, and the nation was born in that sea that night. A nation was born in the Red Sea that night, and the waters were in anguish. It is a picture.

You see Divine purpose working in the tempest: behind the fear, the terror, all that seemed so awful that night, Divine purpose was governing, producing a nation, bringing a nation to birth - "paths in the great waters". That is one thing that we have sooner or later to settle, that the raging, the terror, the dread, the threatening, the thing that seems to mean our undoing, is being governed by Divine purpose to produce something of very great value to the Lord. The recollection of this saved the psalmist when he was crying out with those questions - "Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Is his lovingkindness clean gone for ever?" The psalmist was in a state of distress. I think he was expressing the state of the people at that time, and wondering whether the Lord had not forsaken His people altogether and left them. Then he says, 'Let us look back - let us go back to our beginning as a nation. Were we not born in a threat? Did we not begin our history in what seemed to speak destruction?'

Was it not in the most terrible tempest that we, by the mighty power of God, came out His people, delivered, saved, set apart?' That recollection saved the psalmist in his hour, and we too have to reach the place where we say, with every new tempest, raging, threat, dread, fear, onslaught, whatever it is - God has something in this; purpose governs.

But then that involves something else, carries something else with it.

Divine Wisdom Dictating

The second mountain peak is this - Divine wisdom dictating. It is not only that there is purpose which is the end, but that there is wisdom dictating the way to the end. The psalmist looked back and saw, and said to himself, 'Ah, at the time we could see no wisdom of God at work, the way we were going seemed to be such a confused way, a contradictory way, everything seemed to be anything but the dictating of Divine wisdom; but now I can see: God chose the way, the method, the means which He knew would most effectively reach His end, and we have to negotiate that mountain.' It does seem so strange, the way the Lord goes. What is the Lord doing? Why? All the questions come up. But wisdom is dictating the way to the end.

Divine Love Controlling

And then, Divine love controls. It controls the end, the way, the motive - yes, the Pilot; but He is not a disinterested detached pilot, just doing his job without any heart-relationship to the people in his care. The metaphor changes at once, as though to say, 'Ah, there is something more in it than that. God is not just negotiating through difficulties in a cold, detached way. He is a Shepherd.' And if there is one picture in the Bible of a heart-relationship to others, it is the picture of the shepherd. God's heart is bound up with His people, and the psalmist says an interesting thing here. "Thy way was in the sea, and thy paths in great waters, and thy footsteps were not known." What does he mean?

Go back again, after it is all over, to the other side of the Red Sea. The wind has quieted down, and the tempest has come to rest. You look to see where His 'footprints' are, and you cannot find them. You cannot say, 'He did it like this and that'. You cannot find out just how He did it. The fact is that He did it, and that is all; you cannot explain, define, mark it out. The psalmist is saying - 'That is how God does things'. He does the most wonderful things - things which involve the whole question of life and death for us; and when He has done them, you just cannot see any trace of how He did it - but it was done. Do we not have to say that? We come up against a situation like the Red Sea, and say, 'How are we going to master this? What is the Lord going to do with this one?' He just does it. We look back, again and again, and say, 'The Lord has done it, but how, I do not know'. "Thy footsteps were not known." You cannot trace out how the Lord does things, but He does them. He brings the mighty tempest to serve His end, by His wisdom, in His love, because He is the Shepherd of His flock - because His heart is bound up with them. It matters to Him about us.