

"THE STEPS OF A GOOD MAN"

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way." Psalm 37:23.

The Psalms are as a mirror in which are reflected the joys and struggles of the human heart. One cannot read many of them without seeing his own inner life unveiled in its ever-changing experiences. Shadow succeeds sunshine, sorrow follows rejoicing, and all the varied phases of the inner life are set forth faithfully.

Evidently the thirty-seventh psalm was written in David's old age, and therefore what he wrote was supported by his experience and his honor. His declarations are upheld by all the strength and veracity of "the man after God's own heart." David looked back over his own checkered career and varied experiences and, despite the sins and failures which marred the whole, discerned the manifold grace of God with which he had been guided and guarded.

The subject of this psalm is that ever-present and perplexing theme of the prosperity of the wicked and the afflictions of the righteous. It is a strange problem, and one very perplexing to faith. However, on that account we must not yield to repining and fretting, which are most impressively forbidden in the psalm, while a cheerful trust in the Lord is urged upon us. There are worse things than being poor, and there are better things than being rich. The days of the wicked are numbered, and if his fields are greener than those of the righteous, they are the more nearly ready for the sickle. Virtue alone is immortal. "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace" (Psalm 37:37).

It is comforting to know that the Lord is interested in our steps, and that He is willing and ready to order them. Getting God's guidance has been a perplexing matter with a great many earnest children of God. Frequently many of us have yearned for some direction from the Father above so that we might pursue the right course and make the right decisions. Many times we are face to face with situations that are extreme in character and we feel as though we are in total darkness. The feeling sweeping over the soul at times of extremity is expressed by David in Psalm 31:3; "For thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for thy name's sake lead me, and guide me."

The man who is mentioned in our text is described as "a good man." That is a plain, matter-of-fact way of stating a great truth regarding him. This verse does not apply to every man, for all men do not bear the title "good." According to the standards of men, the human race is divided and subdivided into numerous classifications, but according to God there are but two great classes, the good and the evil. The Bible does not recognize any other. The line of demarcation between them is sharply drawn in the Scriptures. Men are either saved or unsaved. According to God's Word "a good man" is one who belongs to God and is at His disposal. Such a view of our relationship to God lends dignity and nobility to life.

What kind of a man is a good man?

1. He is righteous.

"A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked" (Psalm 37:16) The righteousness which he possesses has been imputed to him by the Lord. He is therefore one who does rightly. He lives righteously and loves righteousness.

2. He is upright.

"The Lord knoweth the days of the upright: and their inheritance shall be for ever" (Psalm 37:18). An upright man is one who is erect; straight in both his character and his conduct. There is nothing shady or mean about him. He goes on walking circumspectly. Being sincere, he is without duplicity or debasement. He is free from black shame and crimson guilt.

There is no disparity between what the upright man professes to be and what he is. Many a man has a good creed which he denies by his bad conduct. Such a man ought to bring his conduct into conformity to his creed. The havoc which is being wrought in the realm of religion by the inconsistent lives of the professors of Christianity is appalling and heart-breaking.

3. He is merciful.

"The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth" (Psalm 37:21). Mercy is a quality which exists in the hearts of the righteous. Mercy also has reference to the inner nature and disposition. It often expresses itself in merciful actions. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

4. He is frail.

"Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand" (Psalm 37:24). He may, like Joseph, fall into misfortune. Many a good man has had his good name dragged through mire and dirt through no fault of his own. Walk as carefully as you may in this world, you shall nevertheless find yourself open to the malice of the evil-disposed. Or, like Job, the good man may fall into despondency. He may for the time being lose his joy, but that is not to suppose that he has lost his salvation. Many things combine to cause the man of God to fall, but he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholdeth him. This assurance of promised help will not make the child of God careless of his conduct, but it will strengthen him in the hour of testing. The Lord affords personal assistance and upholdeth him with His hand.

God does not intend that His people shall dwell in the realm of uncertainty as to His perfect will. He is more willing to lead us than most of us are willing to be led. "Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself" (Ephesians 1:9). Since we are His servants, our wills are not to prevail, but His will. The will of the servant ought never to be matched with the will of the master. The servant is not to go his own way, but the way of another. But the master must reveal his will and give the directions. This God has done for His own.

Many times in His Word God has promised to guide His people. Listen to these statements:

"The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way." Psalm 25:9.

"I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye." Psalm 32:8.

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." Proverbs 3:5.

"A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps." Proverbs 16:9.

"They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them." Isaiah 49:10.

With such promises as these, how could any one doubt the fact of the guiding hand of God in the affairs of life? His Word never fails, and we can praise God that His promises are sure and eternal. We may count on our Heavenly Father to the uttermost. "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Romans 8:32.

As one drives along the highway at night, he is impressed with the great revolving lights which turn constantly for the purpose of guiding the aviators. It is the story of man caring for man. If we do this among ourselves, how much more may we expect it of our Father in heaven? He has sent a Guide, and His Word says, "And the Lord shall guide thee continually" (Isaiah 58:11).

"There is a guide who never falters,
And when He leads I cannot stray;
For step by step He goes before me,
And marks my path;
He knows the way."

It is very doubtful if there was ever a time when God's people stood more in need of definite and positive guidance than now. In spite of the constant and rapid increase in lawlessness, with the onrushing apostasy, with the outcry of injustice, and with the international confusion which prevails, the people of God need to know and to do His will as never before.

I. The Conditions.

It ought to be apparent to all persons who desire to experience and enjoy the high spiritual privilege of guidance that certain conditions must be met. Our business is to search the Scriptures in an effort to discover them and to follow them. To discover the will of God for the details of life requires much exercise of heart, and herein lies the greatest discipline of Christian experience. If we are to enjoy divine guidance, a proper relationship to God must exist. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Romans 8:14). The basis of this great and needed blessing is sonship. When by His grace we are born again and brought into the family of God, then we may expect the guidance of God. An unregenerate man is not capable of self-guidance. The prophet wrote, "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). The natural man is led by Satan. He is deceived by Satan who transforms himself into an angel of light.

In addition to a right relationship to the Heavenly Guide, there must be the proper acknowledgement of Him. "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:6). The soul which never acknowledges the Lord has no right to expect much from Him. We need to acknowledge that we are wholly incapable in ourselves and that in all things we are dependent on God.

II. The Course.

"The steps of a good man are ordered of the Lord: and he delighteth in his way." Many people never think of this glorious fact; some deny it altogether; and many others forget it and thus lose the comfort of it.

What can this mean but that all the life, with its vicissitudes, its comings and its goings, its activities and its varied experiences are controlled by the Lord? What could be more restful to the soul than to know that it is in the keeping of the Lord? With a living and loving God superintending all things we are at peace.

Notice how minute the divine ordering is. It is not the leaps and bounds, the runnings and the rushings, but the steps that are watched. One step at a time is all that any of us can take, and there is no joy to be compared with that of knowing that each such step has been planned for us, and that in each one we may find the loving provision of our Father. God orders the very details of the lives of His children. Has He not said, "The very hairs of your head are numbered"? Not only our steps, but our stops are ordered of

the Lord. It is not always easy to reconcile "Go ye into all the world" with "Go into the wilderness and there I will talk with thee." A sick-bed may be as much a part of the divine plan of life as a missionary tour. Our duties, too, are appointed of the Lord.

Scripture, history and experience abound in undeniable proof of the fact of God's guidance. How does God guide? God guides by His Word. God never belittles His Word nor at any time does He act contrary to it. He delights to honor that which He has revealed. His Word is the supreme means of divine guidance. Whenever it speaks plainly on any problem the child of God need not seek further. His Word is authoritative and final.

When any Christian says that he felt led to do something that was contrary to the will of God, it was due to the influence of Satan in his life. God never guides any man contrary to what He has revealed in His Word.

Then God guides by the Holy Spirit. "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come" (John 16:13). "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). When we are too weak to know and understand, He is present to help. Men have experienced very definite guidance by the Spirit. "Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot" (Acts 8:29). "Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13:1-2). The whole secret of divine guidance is in an absolutely surrendered will, a will given up to God, ready to obey Him at any cost. Until the will is right, nothing is right, and a man's will is never right until it is dedicated to God. The real coronation day in a man's life is the day when he puts the will of God above everything else saying, "Not my will, but thine, be done."

III. The Caution.

Our happiness and usefulness are bound up in our absolute surrender to the divine will. We have tried time and again to manage our own affairs and have just as often failed to do so wisely. Thomas Watson, that prince of Puritan divines, said, "Never did saints carve for themselves but they cut their own fingers."

This whole question of divine guidance is of such a delicate nature that we need to exercise extreme care and also be our guard. It is so easy to go off on a tangent. As in the case of Balaam in Numbers twenty-two, let us not mistake God's permission for God's will. Christians are often like persistent children who beg their parents to such an extent that they finally grant permission to follow a certain course, but it is against their will. Sometimes God may permit us to do this to teach us how far astray our own wills can take us. Then we come back to Him in penitence.

We must be careful lest we mistake the voice of desire and prejudice for the will of God. We are usually prejudiced in our own direction and this in itself hinders the clear leading of the Spirit. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord."