

Steps in Spiritual Growth

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The central books of the Bible (the Hagiographa) are perhaps not so widely read or known (the Psalms excepted) as other parts of the Scriptures. They are not exactly doctrinal, but nevertheless contain much of great moral value, the importance of which as the inspired word of God, should not be neglected by the saints of this dispensation. As subject to the Holy Spirit many essential lessons may be learned.

There would seem to be moral order in the five books — Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and it this more order which is in mind in this paper.

In the preceding book of Esther we see the way in which God, although apparently out of sight, deals with the *nation* of the Jews, whereas in Job we have God's direct dealings with *one man*. Job's name bears the meaning of "one that is hated." Would this refer to Satan's attitude towards the man whom God could so commend? (Job 1). That there existed some measure of hatred against Job from others is evident from his twice repeated reference, (Job 16 and Job 31). Bildad the Shuhite also refers to those who hated Job (8). But Job had a greater enemy than either Satan or men — it was *himself*. He suffered intensely under the hand of the adversary, and through the misunderstanding of men, but his real difficulty was the pride of the flesh — the actions of which gave him importance *before men*. It was something which had never been judged in the *presence of God*. God's dealings with Job were in relation to this, and how successful those dealings were! The moment came when Job said, "I have *heard* of Thee . . . but now mine eye *seeth* Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42). The "end of the Lord" was reached — He who "is very pitiful and of tender mercy" (James 5: 11). Job had said "I know that thou canst do everything, and that no thought can be withholden from Thee." God is magnified before him, all pride of self has gone, and God is free to bless him abundantly.

Have we learned these lessons, brethren? They comprise an initial, yet essential step, in the pathway of spiritual growth. The greatness of God and the worthlessness of the flesh are truths learned only in the presence of God Himself!

In the first Psalm we have the characteristics of the godly man, features perfectly displayed in Christ as a Man here. The Psalms are replete with prophetic references to the glories and the holy feelings of the Lord Jesus Christ — the Messiah. The first verse of Psalm 1 speaks of that which is negative; the New Testament shows us the precious, *positive* movements of the One in whose heart the will of God was ever enshrined (v. 2). As *walking* before His God He says, "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4: 34). John Baptist "looking upon Jesus as He *walked*" said "Behold the Lamb of God." Isaiah could speak of Him prophetically — "How beautiful . . . are the feet of Him that bringeth good tidings." Peter exclaims — "Who went about (or, 'went through') doing good, and healing . . . for God was with Him." He *stood* in holy Manhood on Jordan's banks, unknown to men, yet heralded by John as pre-eminent in Person and in service. He *stood* as the Vessel of grace at the behest of a blind beggar; He *stands* in marvellous patience, waiting in unwearied love, available to the overcomer in Laodicean conditions. He *sat* on the well of Sychar that He might fill an empty heart with eternal refreshment — living water springing up and producing worship to God. He "*sat* down to meat" in the Pharisee's house in order to bring forgiveness to the sin-burdened heart of a contrite woman. He *sat* on a mountain to set before His disciples the principles of that kingdom in which the will of God would have sway, that will which had been the motive of His every word and

deed.

Whilst we recognize with adoring hearts the absolute and unique perfection which marked our Lord in His pathway here, we see in that pathway features which should mark His own in this world. Peter says, He has left "us an example, that we should follow His steps." In Psalm 139 we read, "Blessed are *they* that keep His testimonies . . . *they* walk in *His* ways." Romans 10 reads, "How beautiful are the feet of *them* that preach the gospel of peace." Thus the features so precious seen in Christ may, in the power of the Spirit of God, be seen in measure in the lives of His people. As living "by the faith of the Son of God," and in the energy of the Holy Spirit, a further step in spiritual growth is reached.

Proverbs is written that we might "know wisdom and instruction." It has been aptly said that every failure, personal, domestic, industrial, national, inter-national, and in the profession of Christianity can be traced to the *non*-observance of some Proverb. James, in his most practical epistle, has much to say about wisdom, contrasting the wisdom of this world with the wisdom which is "from above." Paul, in 1 Corinthians, is in accord with Proverbs 8 and Luke 11: 49 in personifying wisdom as Christ Himself — "Christ . . . the wisdom of God." Again he says, "But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom . . .".

Thus our attention is once more directed to Christ, and in Him we are in touch with an inexhaustible supply of "wisdom from above." As walking in wisdom's paths, adoringly recognizing His rights as Lord, spiritual growth is assured.

Ecclesiastes gives us the experiences of a man who, with great riches and power, explored every avenue of potential satisfaction "under the sun," only to find "vanity and vexation of spirit." Searching out "acceptable words;" "words of truth" and "words of the wise," he saw the end of all was to "fear God, and keep His commandments." Is not this an essential exercise if we are to walk here to the pleasure of God? John would emphasize this when he says "The word passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 John 2: 17). The scene described by the Preacher as "under the sun," and by John as that which "lieth in wickedness," is moving swiftly on to judgment. There is no satisfying portion in it for the children of God whose commonwealth "is in heaven." Paul, who had himself arrived at the conclusion that things of earth were worthless, exhorts "Set your affection on things *above*, not on things on the earth." How blessed to know that the "things above" are centred in Christ who is sitting "on the right hand of God." Whilst we await the moment when we shall, in response to love's voice, leave this scene for ever, may we be delivered in spirit from it now! A right judgment of *this* world, and an increasing appreciation of the sphere in which Christ is supreme, is essential to spiritual growth.

Finally, in the Song of Solomon, we are introduced to an atmosphere of reciprocal affections. Failure and lethargy may mark the love of the spouse, but the love of the Beloved is constant and unflinching. How blessed to see her growing appreciation of that love! She had said "My Beloved is mine, and I am His;" later she says, as rejoicing in *His* own portion — "I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine." Again — "I am my Beloved's, and *His desire* is towards me." What a portion is ours! "To know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge." Well may we sing

"Love divine, our present portion.

Heaven's choicest store."

As in the conscious enjoyment of that boundless love, brought to us at such infinite cost, the sufferings of Calvary, may we say from our hearts

"And we love Thee, blest Lord,
E'en now, though feeble here,
Thy sorrow and Thy cross record
What makes us know Thee near."

"Yet still we wait for Thee,
To see Thee as Thou art;
Be with Thee, like Thee, Lord, and free
To love with all our heart."

These then are the spiritual lessons we may learn from these Old Testament writings.

Learning in the presence of God His greatness and our unworthiness.

Meditating upon the holy movements of Christ as a blessed Man here, and by the Spirit's help, following His steps.

As subject to Him drawing from the supplies of wisdom which are found alone in Himself.

Having a true judgment of this present scene, and our affections set on Christ above.

Our hearts held in the intimacy of the love of Christ, the charm and constancy of such love producing a response for the joy of His own heart.