

## "His steps" and "Following his steps."

Psalms 16 and 17

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The statement that Christ has left us an example, that we should "follow His steps," is made by the Apostle Peter in his first epistle (1 Peter 2: 21). It is one that obviously could not be made until He had been manifested, and thereby His steps had been uncovered before human eyes. In earlier days however the Lord had said, "Ye shall be holy for I am holy" (Lev. 11: 44, quoted in 1 Peter 1: 16); and in other Old Testament passages a similar thought is enforced. The two Psalms before us illustrate the point. Psalm 17, especially its last verse, breathes a spirit which reveals to us a saint who is in the steps of his Lord.

The path trodden by our Lord Jesus on earth was one of perfect and unsullied light. Having become Man, He was characterized by every grace and perfection that is properly human, when manhood is seen according to the pleasure of God. Being God, there was of course displayed in Him every Divine perfection: but having become Man there was equally seen in Him every human perfection also. These human perfections are specially set before us, according to the spirit of prophecy, in Psalm 16. The perfect light of His humanity is, so to speak, broken up into the prismatic colours that compose it.

The opening words of the Psalm formulate a prayer, expressing complete *dependence* upon God. Man was originally made a dependent creature; and the attitude of independence of God which he took up was the very essence of his sin. Perfect dependence marked our Lord.

He did indeed live by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God, and not by bread alone. This it is what explains those remarkable sayings of His, found so plentifully in John's Gospel — the Gospel which emphasizes His Deity — such as, "I can of Mine own self do nothing." His whole life below was thus lived in dependence, which becomes a bright ray of His human glory.

But behind this beautiful dependence upon God lay His absolute *confidence* in God, set forth in the latter part of the verse "for in Thee do I put My trust." We can discern in Genesis 3 how the serpent aimed his first blow at Eve's confidence in God in order to entice her into independence of God. The adversary knew right well that no one will preserve an attitude of dependence upon One whom they do not trust. If confidence goes dependence goes. Here too our Lord was pre-eminent. Who knew God as He knew Him? His knowledge of God was absolute, hence His trust in God was absolute. Another bright ray of His glory.

This is followed by a word expressive of His whole-hearted *subjection* to God. He "said unto the Lord, Thou art My Lord." Jehovah was His Master in everything. This too sprang out of His trust; for we not only depend on those we trust but we are glad to accept guidance and direction from them. The Lord Jesus took the subject place in everything. He came down not to do His will but the will of the One who sent Him. Hence His whole pathway was characterized by obedience. Adam became disobedient unto death: He was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. His whole life may be summed up in the one word, *obedience*; and His death may be viewed as that great act wherein His perfect obedience was crowned and consummated. This is the viewpoint of such a scripture as, "By the obedience of One shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5: 19).

There was no thought of inferiority in this place of subjection and obedience which our Lord took. Even amongst men, in the business world for instance, we often see subjection without any inferiority. Again and again has the young man in the subject place ultimately proved himself not only the equal but actually the superior of the seniors above him. Our Lord Jesus was "equal with God," for indeed He was God. Yet He took the servant's place that the will of the Godhead might be done, and the glory of the Godhead displayed.

Having taken this subject place the Lord Jesus was marked by a beautiful *lowliness* which was in keeping with it. The words in verse 3, "to the saints," are to be read, we understand, as in contrast to the words in verse 2, "unto the Lord." There is what He said to the Lord, and what He said to the saints, who are acknowledged as "the excellent." He speaks to them as those in whom is all His delight. What lowly grace was this! The mighty Son of God was amongst us as Man, and He delighted in and acknowledged humble and obscure people such as Zachariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Simeon, Anna, Peter, John, James, and the rest. To Him they were a people of excellence and delight.

Nor are His saints today any different in His estimation. Let us get this fact well engraved on our hearts, so that it may control our attitude towards them. Let us have very great care how we treat them. If He found all His delight in such, who am I, or what are you, that we should wish to consider such associations as beneath our dignity?

Having thus associated Himself with the saints, finding His delight in the excellent, He was wholly separate from all that was not of God. This was His path, and this is our path, wholehearted identification with the Lord and His saints, and wholehearted separation from the world and its religion.

Verse 4, be it noted, does not speak of the shocking wars and fightings which mar the earth, nor of its lustful pleasures, nor of its crimes. It does speak of its false religion. Here indeed lies the fundamental error of this poor world, and from that error our Lord was completely separate. He had nothing to do with it. There was absolutely no compromise. Jehovah was His all-sufficient portion.

And having Jehovah as His portion He was completely satisfied. In the midst of an unhappy, complaining, dissatisfied world He was filled with satisfaction: so much so that, though Himself the object of opposition and persecution, He could speak of "a goodly heritage," and even of "pleasant places," and He turned in blessing and thanksgiving to Jehovah. Satisfaction is the necessary prelude to worship. The cup must be filled to the brim before it can overflow.

And then we see Him as the One who was wholly and always devoted to Jehovah. There was nothing partial about His *devotedness* as there is with ours. He set Jehovah before Him always. Only one consideration weighed with our blessed Lord. The will of the Father was His one care and His constant delight.

We have just summarized these beautiful features which marked the Lord Jesus under seven heads; we might equally well summarize them under five heads, as follows:

1. Jehovah was His Lord (ver. 2).
2. Jehovah was His portion (ver. 5).
3. Jehovah was His counsel, or direction (ver. 7).
4. Jehovah was His Object (ver. 8).
5. Jehovah was His end (ver. 11).

His path as Man was one of such unsullied light and perfection that on that ground alone, the only fitting place for Him was the right hand of God. He has that place also on other grounds, as the Epistle to the Hebrews shows. He is there because of the surpassing glory of His Person, because of the greatness of His priestly office, and because of the perfection of His atoning work. But He is also there because of His human perfections, as tested and proved in the race of faith; and it is of that perfection that we read in Psalm 16.

The path of faith that He trod truly led Him into death, and *through* death it was proved to be a path of life. The paradox is complete enough; but the life is discovered to be life in resurrection and hence beyond the power of death for ever. The perfect Man is not merely in Jehovah's presence for there indeed all the saints will ultimately be; He is also at Jehovah's right hand, where are pleasures for evermore; and that is a place where saints will never be. It is a place of pre-eminence reserved for Him alone.

Now we turn from our brief contemplation of the pre-eminent One to consider the case of the saint upon earth, left to follow His steps in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, amongst whom he is responsible to shine as a light in the world. Psalm 17 brings this before us. It opens with a cry from the saint to Jehovah that He would hear the right; for at the moment right is being pilloried in the world, and "the paths of the destroyer" rather than "the path of life" is before our eyes.

Quite a different atmosphere pervades Psalm 17. The lovely picture of perfection that delighted us in Psalm 16 is not here: in place thereof we have a picture of a saint in the midst of evil, struggling against it and oppressed by it, yet finding his resource in God, counting upon Him, and being sustained so that in measure he displays the same likeness as his Lord. In Psalm 16 we have One who set Jehovah always before Him: consequently He was at His right hand and He could confidently say, "I shall not be moved." In Psalm 17 the saint speaks very differently. If he were to say, "I shall not be moved," he would be greatly mistaken, and ere long have to withdraw his words. If he knows anything rightly as to himself he has the rather to say, "Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps be not moved" (ver. 5, margin). These very words however breathe that spirit of confidence and obedience which are so pleasing to God.

In the latter part of the Psalm there is a very striking contrast pursued between the wicked and the godly. Verses 9 to 14 are filled with the dark picture of the one, whilst one brief verse (15) contains the bright picture of the other. The contrast is very complete, and the saint is seen in a light which shows that he is in the steps of his Master. Perhaps the simplest way for us to note the contrast will be to take the last verse step by step, in its five details.

"As for me," says the saint, "I will behold THY FACE." That is the prospect before him, whatever may be the occupations and prospects of the world. And what are those occupations and prospects?" *They have set their eyes bowing down to THE EARTH* (ver. 11). Earth is the one and only sphere before the vision of the world. An improved earth, an enjoyable earth, an earth where everybody can gratify his desires to the full, and some kind of a heaven (if heaven must be brought in, to satisfy popular demand) which shall be as much as possible like an earth where all can gratify to the full their natural desires, is all that enters their thoughts. The picture of "Muckrake" drawn by Bunyan in his great allegory was a very accurate one. Poor "Muckrake" had no eyes for the crown of glory held not far from his head. He was absorbed in the sticks and stones and dirt of the earthen floor.

The saint is not "bowing down," nor does earth fill his vision. On the contrary, he is lifted up for he is to behold the very face of Jehovah. He is to live in the light of His countenance; that is, in the blessedness of the full knowledge of Himself. We know Him now as revealed to us in Jesus, and we are

to live for ever before Him in love. The right hand of God is reserved for Jesus, but His face and His presence are to be ours for ever and ever.

You have noticed of course how persistently modernistic religion concentrates on the earth. Anything that has a tinge of heaven about it is ridiculed as far away and unpractical, in fact a kind of dope to prevent people being occupied with what professes to rectify the inequalities of earth. "Earth, give us earth," is their great cry. Earth they shall have right enough — six feet by three in due course. We know a heavenly; Christ, a knowledge impossible to the Psalmist in his day.

The Psalmist did, however, anticipate beholding Jehovah's face "in *righteousness*." He knew that God had a way of establishing men before Him in righteousness, though perhaps that way was not as yet quite clear before his eyes. Who could behold God's face except in righteousness? Except we can stand before Him, and in the light of His face, on a righteous basis we cannot stand there at all. The world knows nothing of this righteousness; they are characterized as "*the wicked*" (ver. 13). In Psalm 16 we see the Righteous One — intrinsically righteous was He. In Psalm 17 we find a saint who can stand before God in righteousness — not intrinsic but imputed: he stands before God in the righteousness of Another. His righteousness was wrought out by the Perfect Man of Psalm 16, when He trod the path of life, which led Him into death, and forth into resurrection. We share the Psalmist's faith, thank God! Righteousness is ours, and we shall live in the light of Jehovah's face, known to us as Father.

Hence the words follow, "*I shall be satisfied*." Of course we shall be! The words however carry us forward into the future. The Lord Jesus was the satisfied Man even in the midst of circumstances which were wholly contrary and antagonistic, as we have seen. We alas, are not that, though there is no real reason why we should not be, for all things that pertain to life and godliness are ours. Still the plain fact remains that again and again we fail to utilize our resources and become dissatisfied and cast down. Notwithstanding we are going to reach absolute satisfaction when God's work with us and in us is finished.

The world is not satisfied and never will be. The wicked are described as being like "*a lion that is greedy of his prey*" (ver. 12). The wild beast knows not what it is to have restraint upon his passions. He ravens and slaughters more than enough to satisfy his cravings, and yet is not satisfied and slaughters again tomorrow. Man in his unconverted state is like this. The Apostle who speaks so much of practical Christian life has said, "Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4: 2, 3). This is indeed the way of the world, but let us see to it that we keep quite clear of this greedy, unsatisfied spirit.

By faith, and by the Holy Spirit given to us, we have been put into touch with that which can satisfy us whilst in this world of dissatisfaction. We travel on to the moment and to the place where we shall be satisfied fully.

That moment will be when the resurrection world is reached, or, as the Psalmist puts it, "*when I awake*." It is true of course that resurrection was not set before the saints of Old Testament times as their goal and hope as it is before the saints of today. Christ had first to appear. Then it could be said, "Our Saviour Jesus Christ . . . hath abolished [or, annulled] death, and hath brought life and immortality [or, incorruptibility] to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1: 10). Still, though the resurrection world was not fully and clearly set before their faith, they had glimpses of it. They anticipated a day when a heavenly country should be theirs, fairer than all the scenes of earth.

In contrast to this the wicked are described as those who "*have their portion in this life*" (ver. 14).

With them it is all earth and greed and this poor life which is bounded by the grave. How great the contrast between such and that perfect Man who said, "The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of My cup." There will be no small contrast too between the world and ourselves if we let go, and even "hate," life in this world, to "keep it unto life' eternal." God give us grace to keep our eyes fixed on the resurrection world.

But the Psalmist reached his climax when he added the three closing words, "*with Thy likeness.*" Not only did he anticipate being in the resurrection, but also being there with the likeness of Jehovah stamped upon him. In so saying he remarkably anticipated what the New Testament reveals, for at least he saw that he would be in Jehovah's likeness when he beheld Jehovah's face. We can go further than that of course, for we know Jehovah as Father, revealed in Jesus; consequently we can say, "We know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3: 2).

Seeing Him, and being like Him, go together. Even now the more we really see Him by faith the more we are transformed into His likeness. When we fully see Him as He is, we shall be fully like Him. Indeed we must be fully like Him to see Him as He is, for without holiness no man shall see the Lord. The two thoughts occur again in Revelation 22: 4. It says, "They shall see His face:" and then it adds, "His Name shall be in their foreheads." That is to say, That which He is shall be most prominently displayed in them: for the forehead is the most prominent and visible part of a man.

And what of those who live without the knowledge of God? Well, once more the contrast is complete. The wicked who have their portion in this life are spoken of as, "*the men of this world.*" This world, this present evil age, claims them, and they bear its stamp on their foreheads. They are in its likeness.

The phrase, "a man of the world," has passed into current use even in the world. Two business men, neither making any profession of Christianity, are talking. The name of a third comes up, and one of them enquires, "what kind of a man is he?" "Oh," says the other, "he's a regular man of the world." No more is said, but the effect of that remark is to put the enquirer on his guard; for if he is a man of the world, he is not likely to be too careful of what is strictly true, and straight, and honest.

As believers we are not "men of the world," though we are men, and in the world. We are men who have been called, and taken out of the world-system, and now sent into the world to display the character of Christ, and serve in His interests. This is our high and holy calling.

We may depend upon it then that the stronger the contrast that exists between the Christian and the men of the world the better it is for both the Christian and the world; the more the Christian will be worthy of the great Name that is called upon him, and the more the world will have the opportunity of seeing the excellence of Christ translated into human life.

The blessed, holy Man of Psalm 16 is seated at the right hand of God awaiting the moment when He shall arise that His enemies may be made His footstool. We are left here for a season that as royal priests we may show forth His excellencies, while we wait for His advent. Then we shall behold His face in righteousness, and awaking with His likeness, shall be satisfied absolutely and forever.