

## The man that well-nigh slipped

Psalm 73.

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The writer opens this beautiful Psalm with a simple but blessed statement concerning God, and closes with a happy conclusion concerning himself. "Truly God is good" is the statement of the first verse; "it is good for me to draw near to God" is the conclusion of the last verse. Accept the statement and we must agree with the conclusion.

The statement, however, is not a general declaration of the goodness of God toward His creatures — true as that would be — but it is the assertion that "God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart." The great object of the Psalm is to prove the absolute goodness of God to His people in spite of the trying circumstances they may have to pass through, the sorrows with which they may be faced, and the sufferings they may be called to endure.

This truth, however, must be learnt experimentally. Hence the Psalmist recounts the experiences by which he learned these two great truths. First, that in spite of prevailing evil God is good to His people, and hence, the second truth, that, in the midst of prevailing evil, God is the resource of His people.

The Psalmist opens the story of his experiences by telling us that as he passed along his way, through an evil world, there came a day when his feet were almost gone, and his steps had well nigh slipped (verse 2). It is written, "Narrow is the way that leadeth unto life" and this was as true for the godly Psalmist in his day, as for the Christian pilgrim in the present day. A narrow path needs but a single false step on either side to miss the way. It is not necessary to commit some grave fault, of which others can take account, in order to slip from the narrow path. The path of the Psalmist was not marred by any gross failure that would have disgraced him in the eyes of the world; no angry and impatient words had passed his lips that would have betrayed the state of his heart, and yet he had well nigh slipped. Had we not his own confession none would have known this from his conduct and speech.

However in spite of all appearances to the contrary, he confesses that he had well nigh lost confidence in God. His feet had almost slipped from the rock (verse 26, margin). Moreover he lets us know how it came to pass that his confidence in God was so severely shaken. The secret comes out. *He was occupied with evil when out of touch with God.* Hence he had a limited and perverted view of the evil. He saw the prosperity of the wicked and he saw the adversity of the godly, and in result he envied the portion of the wicked, he deprecated the portion of the godly, and he well nigh lost confidence in God.

In verses 4 to 12 he draws a solemn picture of the wicked. We must, however, remember this is a description of the wicked as seen by a saint when, for the moment, out of communion with God; so that, while all that he says is true, it is not the full truth. Still it is true that the wicked are characterized by "pride" and "violence," "corruption" and "oppression." Not only do they persecute the godly, but they are blasphemers who "set their mouth against the heavens." They say God takes no notice of the affairs of men, there is no knowledge in the most High, and yet withal they prosper and increase in riches.

This then is the picture presented by a soul out of communion. The wicked prospering, the godly

suffering, and God indifferent. The government of God apparently clean gone from the earth.

In the following verses (13 and 14) he describes the solemn effect upon a godly soul of occupation with evil when out of communion with God. He is tempted to think it is all in vain to have a clean heart and innocent hands. What profit is there in restraining my thoughts, and refraining from wickedness, when after all the wicked prosper and I am plagued and chastened every morning?

There are two snares to which the saint is ever exposed and by which our feet can slip from the rock of heart confidence in God. One, by occupation with evil when out of touch with God, the other by indifference to evil under the plea of love. If like the Psalmist we are occupied with evil apart from God, we shall lose confidence in God. If we are indifferent to evil we shall become nauseous to God. Indifference to evil in the church is indifference to the glory of Christ. Indifference to evil in the world is indifference to the rights of God.

It was the first of these two snares in which the Psalmist was caught: the result being he was thoroughly cast down and depressed. He is tempted to think (for mark it is not what he says but his inmost thoughts that he is laying bare) that his godliness is all in vain, for apparently it only involves him in fresh sorrows morning by morning.

However, in this the darkest moment of his experiences, Divine affections assert themselves (verse 15), proving indeed that, though his steps had well nigh slipped, yet, Divine life was working in his soul. Hot and angry thoughts were rushing through his mind, but love to the people of God, the proof of faith in God, held his lips. He says, "If I will speak thus; behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children." But though he puts a seal upon his lips, yet a turmoil of painful thoughts disturbs his inward peace. He knows not how to reconcile the goodness of God to His people with the suffering state in which they are found, while at the same time the wicked prosper (verse 16).

But there is a limit to the conflict of his soul. It goes on "until" he returns to that secret place from which in spirit he had wandered — "Until," as he says, "I went into the sanctuary of God" (verse 17). The sanctuary speaks of the presence of God. Outside the sanctuary he looks at evil without God, inside he views everything, and everyone, with God. What a difference this makes! Outside all had been viewed in relation to time, inside all is viewed in relation to eternity. The wickedness of men, the goodness of God, the prosperity of the sinners, and the sorrows of the saints are no more viewed in connection with the passing moment, but in relation to the great end to which all is moving Man — ever short-sighted — can take but a short view: God, with His far-reaching vision, sees the end from the beginning. It is true the Psalmist still views the evil of men, but now he views it with God, and at once the momentary prosperity and passing triumphs of the wicked fade from his view, and he sees instead the fearful end to which they are hastening.

This, however, is not all, for in the sanctuary we learn many truths. Thus it is that he discerns a second great truth that, though God apparently takes little notice of the prosperity of the wicked, or even the afflictions of the godly, yet actually God and His government are working behind all (verses 18-20). Thus he is brought to confess, "*Thou* didst set them in slippery places: *Thou* castedst them down into destruction . . . *Thou* shalt despise their image." It looked, indeed, as if the Psalmist had been in the slippery places, for had not his steps well nigh slipped? and on the other hand the wicked appeared to be firmly established on a rock, for did they not prosper in the world and increase in riches? Actually the godly soul was on the rock though shaking; and the wicked were in slippery places, though prospering. Viewing the prosperity of the wicked apart from the sanctuary the godly man was cast down; viewing the wicked from the sanctuary he sees, that in the end, they will be cast down. Away from God the prosperity of the wicked appeared very real and lasting, in the sanctuary it

was but an evil and passing dream.

The sanctuary has, moreover, still deeper lessons for the soul. He has seen the true character and end of the wicked; he has discovered the government of God at work beneath things seen; now he must look beneath his outward walk and ways and learn the secrets of his own heart (verses 21, 22). The exercises come nearer home. If the sanctuary exposes the character of the sinner, it will also discover the hidden springs of evil in the heart of a saint. All is laid bare in the light of the sanctuary. "When my heart was in a ferment," he says, "then I was brutish and ignorant, I was as a beast before Thee" (verses 21, 22 N. Tr.). The brute beast acts without the slightest reference to God, and the saint is brought to own that if he leaves God out of his thoughts he will not only sink beneath what is proper to a natural man, but he will fall to the level of a beast.

Having plumbed the evil of his own heart, God can at once teach him brighter and happier lessons. For the sanctuary is a retired and sacred spot where the deep things of God can be unfolded to the soul. As indeed was the happy experience of another soul, in a later day, when she found the sanctuary of God in the presence of Jesus and, sitting at His feet, heard His word. The Psalmist has been led into the depths, he shall now ascend into the heights. He has learnt something of his own heart, and thus he is **prepared** to learn the heart of God. Never are we more ready to learn the goodness of His heart than **when we** have discovered the badness of our own hearts. The discovery of what is in us opens the way for the revelation of what is in Him. Hence the Psalmist's thoughts are carried away from all that he had been before God to delight in all that God was for him. He can say, "I was as a beast before Thee, *nevertheless I am continually with Thee.*" When hot and bitter thoughts were raging in his heart, even then he was the object of God's unwearied care. He says, as it were, "God was out of my thoughts, but I was never out of His thoughts" — "I am continually with Thee."

Furthermore he not only had a place in the heart of God, but he was held by the hand of God, for he can say, "Thou hast holden me by my right hand." I wandered, I behaved like a brute, I let go of His hand, but never did He let go of mine. I well nigh slipped, yea, verily, I should altogether have slipped, but He held me by my right hand. His heart of love set me as an object before Him, and His hand of power held me fast.

Learning thus with great delight all that God had been for him in the past, in the day when his feet had well nigh slipped he can look on with the utmost confidence to all that God will be for him in the future. He can say in every step of the pilgrim journey, "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel." No need for me to weary my heart in seeking to unravel all the perplexing questions of my pathway through this evil world, for God Himself will guide me; and at last, when the end of the journey is reached, when man's small day is done, and the day of glory dawns, "Thou wilt receive me" (verse 24)

Happy indeed for the saint who has so learned God in the secret of the sanctuary that he can say, His heart cares for me, His hand holds me, His wisdom guides me, and His glory will welcome me.

He who knows God thus has found in God the satisfying portion of his soul. Not only is he an object to God, but now God becomes the one Object to him. He can say, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee." But what about the prosperity of the wicked, their riches and their ease which once he had envied? "Oh," the Psalmist would say, "speak no more of those things, I have been into the sanctuary, I have learned the heart of God and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Him." As we sometimes sing: —

"I have seen the face of Jesus  
Tell me not of aught beside."

But we may say, "You are evidently a poor weak thing in the midst of a world where all is against you." "I know it," the Psalmist seems to reply, "for I have learnt by bitter **experience** that my flesh and my heart faileth, for time was when my feet had well nigh slipped, but I have been into the sanctuary and I have found a resting-place for my poor trembling heart" — "God is the rock of my heart and my portion for ever" (verse 26, margin). The heart that was once envious of the wicked has found its satisfying portion in the heart of God. The feet that were almost gone are firmly set upon the rock.

Truly God is good to His people (verse 1); and it is good to draw near to God (verse 28); and the one who draws near to God becomes a witness before men. "I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works."