

Life's Slippery Places

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"When I said, My foot slippeth, thy mercy, O Lord, held me up" (Psalm 94:18).

Two sentences that I have come across in recent reading have reminded me of this fine testimony given out by the psalmist. In the first one the author says: "Make no mistake about it—it's a slippery world we live in!" In the second the writer, a man who is in close and constant touch with people, declares: "Millions of people in this rapid and turbulent age are wobbling badly."

If we were to tell the truth, I wonder how many of us would have to say: "I could use a lot of things but one thing that I greatly need is just the ability to keep my balance, to maintain my equilibrium, to be kept from being swept off my feet."

It is to such persons that I want to speak today. It is to such persons that our text comes: "When I said, My foot slippeth, thy mercy, O Lord, held me up." Within an inch of losing balance, and then—the reinforcing help of God!

We see this truth within a broad and magnificent context in the ninety-fourth Psalm. It is a dark hour in Israel. People are not getting their rights. There is a lot of cheating going on. Men without principle or honor are having a field day. Crime is frequent and cruel.

Moreover, the wicked in power are overconfident. The longer they seem to succeed the more presumptuous and high-handed they become. They say, "The Lord shall not see, neither shall the God of Jacob regard it" (Psalm 94:7).

In such foul and tempting situations what is the righteous man to do? He must look to God, says the psalmist. He must realize who God is, what He is, and what He is about in permitting the man of faith and righteous purpose to be pressured and jostled and assaulted by all of this evil.

I

For one thing, it is in difficult and hazardous times that God seasons the righteous. Thus we hear in verse 12 the exclamation: "Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord."

To live dangerously is not our doom; it is our discipline. There is risk in it, to be sure; there is also reward in the finer character that results when the hazard has been accepted and overcome.

"My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him: For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth." (Heb. 12:5, 6). "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." (Heb. 12:11).

Yes, through trouble and temptation God is seasoning us.

II

In difficult times God not only seasons us in the direction of maturity, He shows us the truth of His Word and Will, "And teachest him out of thy law."

In the Psalms "the law of the Lord" is frequently used as a phrase to describe the revelation that God makes to the children of men either through nature or through the Scriptures. The phrase, moreover, has synonyms in such expressions as the "statutes," the "com-

mandments," the "judgments," of the Lord. "The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple," we read in Psalm 19, "the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes."

Not long ago it was my very sacred privilege to watch at close range as a saintly soul walked down the valley of pain and faced the threat of death. She wanted God's healing. She wanted it to come in a particular way. When it did not come in that way, there was no rebellion, but there was just enough of disappointment and bewilderment to create some inner tension. Her relaxation in God was not complete. In that crucial situation God spoke to her through II Samuel 3:18, where we have the words of Eli to young Samuel: "It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth Him good."

It was the shaft of light needed. All tension melted. All bewilderment gave way to yielding trust. And all that has happened since—the agony, the surgery, the recovery—has been a stepping in the light. Somehow or another God shows us His way.

When life is difficult and dangerous, God shields the righteous as their defender and vindicator.

Listen to this: "The Lord will not cast off His people; neither will He forsake His inheritance" (Psalm 94:14). And this: "Who will rise up for me against the evildoers? or who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity? Unless the Lord had been my help, my soul had almost dwelt in silence" (Psalm 94:16, 17).

III

And now we come to the principal business of our discussion. Our text assures us that when the going is difficult and treacherous, God steadies us. "When I said, My foot slippeth, Thy mercy, O Lord, held me up."

Consider, for instance, how life sometimes presents us with situations in which our thinking tends to lose its footing.

Look at the wrong ideas some people have regarding the learning process. They have been told that the mind is largely "set" by the time we finish our adolescence. They have been told that the ability to learn is pretty much done for after forty-five or fifty. So, arriving at middle age, they resign themselves to the hardening of the intellectual arteries. They lose the zest of wonder. They drop the spirit of inquiry. They fear to tackle any new tasks. They have reached one of life's slippery places, and they need God to steady them. They need a new mental grip, a new intellectual drive.

God is saying to some of you older readers: "Read! Think! Inquire! Venture on some new mental quests! Do not grow stale in that intellect I gave you. Never lose the spirit of wonder, the impulse of curiosity!"

We may lose our mental foothold also by developing a pattern of self-centered thinking. In Italy last summer our train ran through twenty-five miles of tunnel along the rocky coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Much of it was continuous tunnel. Part of it was where the rock was solid on one side and a series of portal-like openings on the other side. I noticed that when our train was in the tunnel, it seemed we were rushing along at terrific speed. When we got free of the tunnel and our eyes could

see out to distant points, the speed appeared to be much less.

I think many of us are living like that. We dash hither and yon at break-neck speed. We appear to be busy as beavers. But alas, on examination, it turns out that much of what we are doing is for ourselves and for none besides. We are living tunnel-lives. Self-interest confines us. Life would be both quieter and finer if we had broader outlooks and healthy Christian interests in other people.

You do not need a psychiatrist for your unmanageable emotions; you need to let the love of Christ possess your thoughts and then, because impression needs expression, you need to get up and take the love of Christ in the form of a gift-book or a bouquet of flowers or an understanding prayer to someone across the city who can be helped by you. In that way another interesting bit of psalmody will be fulfilled in your experience: "Thou hast enlarged my steps under me, that my feet did not slip" (Psalm 18:36).

Consider another area of life in which we need the steadying of God lest we lose our footing. It is in the sphere of our moral sensibilities.

How often have we heard it said: "Let conscience be your guide." Sounds fine, does it not? But let us be on our guard. Suppose conscience itself has begun to slip! How safe a guide, how trustworthy a guardian, is conscience then?

I dropped a nearly new watch some years ago. It would not keep time. The watchman said that, among other things, I had damaged the balance staff. Some of us do not seem to know what time it is in the domain of right and wrong or, what is even more important, in the zone of what is really Christian and what is not. The reason? We have not checked our balance wheel of conscience lately to see if it lines up with the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ.

Here is a young woman—the case is an actual one—who had grown up in the church. She had a conscience that had been trained to react in terms of what Christian living is supposed to be. She reached her slippery place when an offer was made to her to join a troop of singers who neither worshipped nor obeyed Jesus Christ. God's steadying hand was held out to her when her friends advised her against going on the road with these performers.

She did what any of us can do. She declined the help of God, brushed aside the counsel of friends, and signed her contract. Two years later, in a railway station, she met her pastor. In the frank conversation that followed it came out that she had taken on most of the ways of her companions in the troop. On the self-defensive, she was a bit defiant at first, insisting boldly, "I am just as good as I have ever been."

But before long she dropped the mask of pretense. She admitted she had developed habits that were humiliating to her. She said, "I guess that is why I stay up late and drink more than I should. I am afraid," she added, "I am afraid to go to bed with my conscience!"

That young woman is typical of a lot of us. Our moral sensibilities have grown weak and wobbly. God tried to steady us, to keep us on our feet, but we refused His help. Then came collapse. And now there is nothing for it but to confess our fall and let Him, in His pardoning mercy, give us back our footing.

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