

FOLLOWING HARD

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contents

David's Darkness	2
David's Desire	3
David's Determination	4
David's Delight	4

- David's Darkness
- David's Desire
- David's Determination
- David's Delight

"My soul followeth hard after Thee; Thy right hand upholdeth me" (Psalm 63:8).

The title of this Psalm ("A Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah" -- KJV) tells us that even in Canaan, though a fruitful country, there were wildernesses. But though David was in a desert, there was no desert in him; for he thirsted for the living God. The whole Psalm is one of the most beautiful in the Psalter. It has been said of it by Donne, that "as the whole book of Psalms is as ointment poured forth upon all sorts of sores -- a cerecloth that supple all bruises -- a balm that searches all wounds -- so there are some certain Psalms that are imperial, Psalms which command all affections -- universal Psalms that apply to all necessities... The spirit and soul of the whole book of Psalms is concentrated into this one."

Truly we do find described many of the exercises, the trials and the changes to which the living children of God are subject. David found that the path of his earthly pilgrimage was one of tribulation; but in the midst of all his darkness, difficulties and doubts, he found a secret something cheering his heart, and keeping him from despair. Though the dark shade of his manifold transgressions hung heavily upon his spirit, and the lowering cloud of perplexing providences wrung many a bitter cry from his heart, yet hope, sweet hope, sought in the gloom for one ray, however faint, of heavenly satisfaction in his God.

This Psalm is divided into two parts:
Those who seek after God (verses 1-8);
Those who seek the soul of God's Servant (verses 9-11).

The first eight verses are divided into 7 members (alternated). Four showing God's goodness and a consequent resolve, alternating with three, of which the writer himself is the subject. Our text is part of the last of these four -- Goodness and Resolve.

I. Thou art my God,
Early will I seek Thee;

II. Thy lovingkindness is better than life
My lips shall praise Thee.

III. God satisfying with marrow and fatness;
My mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips.

IV. God helping and upholding,
My soul rejoicing and following.

May this gracious God be our Teacher, and warm our cold hearts with His love, and cheer us with Heavenly light, while we consider the beauties of these verses.

We have four subjects, each of which we may describe by a word beginning with "D".
David's Darkness, Desire, Determination, and Delight.

David's Darkness

Oh! what a mine of experimental truth. How well it agrees with those Scriptures which describe the heartfelt trials of God's children! Often in their feelings they are at a distance, and question whether God has really anything to do with them or not. But the very cry, the very anxiety, is the strongest proof we can have that this felt distance would not trouble us except God Himself had come near to us in His Grace. It is a glorious fact that no trial, no tribulation, no temptation, however fierce, no way, no work, no warfare, however desperate, can make us feel that we have nothing to do with God. We often wonder how God can have anything to do with such unworthy sinners, but we also realize that we must have to do with God.

The heart charged with its bitterness heaves the heavenward sigh, and desires, and cries after the only object that can truly satisfy it. Now David's experience in verse 1 springs from this fact. He sought for God because no refreshment could be found. The land was barren, the clouds were dark. Hence his resolve -- "Early will I seek Thee." In Hebrew these five words are expressed by one word, shah-char, which means to break, cleave, break through. Hence the noun means the dawn, the breaking forth of light, and the verb gets an additional idea of breaking forth, hence to seek carefully or earnestly. In our text the two thoughts are united. Similar is the teaching (though not the same word) in Psalm 46:5 (marg.), "God shall help her, and that right early." What volumes do these words contain for Israel and Jerusalem in the future, and for all anxious waiting souls now!

In the dark and dreary nights of trial which we are called to pass through, we wait and watch for the day's return. "My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning" (Psalm 130:6). As surely as God's children experience the darkness of the Wilderness, so surely will God help, defend, and comfort them with the morning of His appearing. Yes! God's deliverances are "early". Look at Exodus 14:24-27. The children of Israel are in straits. They know not what to do. The enemy is in hot pursuit, but "in the morning-watch the Lord looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of the fire and the cloud, and troubled the host of the Egyptians." The Lord looks destruction on His enemies; but He looks mercy and deliverance to His own. Israel's enemies are dismayed and destroyed, while the Redeemed of the Lord break forth with songs of deliverance, and joy, and gladness.

So with Hezekiah, when Sennacherib, King of Assyria, sent his blasphemous letter.

Hezekiah made no stir, marshalled no forces, but went up to the house of the Lord. What was the result? "When they arose early in the morning they were all dead corpses" (Isaiah 37:36). Ah! it is blessed (and it will ere long be blessed for Israel), after a long night of darkness and sorrow, to behold the rising of the Sun of Righteousness, with healing in His wings" (Malachi 4:2).

And why did David long to see God's power? (verse 2). Because his own fancied strength was gone! The collect for the second Sunday in Lent exactly expresses David's mind. "Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul, through Jesus Christ our Lord." David knew that his own strength was perfect in weakness. He, like Paul, gloried in his infirmity, that the power of Christ might rest upon him.

And why did David long to see God's glory? Because God had stained all his pride, marred all his beauty, divested him of all boasting and self-glorying. Because the lovingkindness of God was better to him than life, David would praise Him with joyful lips. These were David's experiences, expressed, not only here, but in Psalm 119:25, where he says, "My soul cleaveth unto the dust, quicken Thou me according to Thy word." With so firm a foundation as Jehovah's word, he could look up and say, "Thou, which hast showed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth" (Psalm 71:20). David's faith was for the night as well as for the day, for the storm as well as for the calm. That is a faith which is worth having, a faith to live in, and a faith to die in.

David's Desire

"Thee" -- "after Thee"; nothing else could satisfy David's heart but David's God. He had a heart for God, and Oh! wondrous mercy, he had God for his heart, though he did not realize it as he would. This is the essence of true faith; it is all in a Person. This is the essence of the Gospel. The Gospel of God is concerning His Son -- "A Saviour, Christ the Lord." "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me." This, I repeat, is the work of grace. All short of this is only religion, and you see it at every step. What is man (unregenerate man in search of? Pleasure, Fame, Reputation, Power, Riches, a name in the world. Man will have anything, everything, without God. So also with the religious man! He will have his creed, his sect, his belief, his responsibility, his zeal and his earnestness, but if he have not Christ he will be lost though he have all the appliances and all the forms and ceremonies of religion. What are these things to nay heart, without a knowledge of God in Christ as my God? Nothing but deception and delusion.

So with the true Christian. The temptation is ever to add something to Christ, as if He were not enough, or to substitute something for Christ as if He were not necessary, instead of being All in all. We are told to seek "the blessing." But blessings without Christ are so many burdens which our poor, proud nature cannot carry. No! If Christ is our one object, then we have the Blesser with us, with all His Blessings with Him, making them to abound in us for our good and for His glory. We are told to rest upon the many "exceeding great and precious promises"; but promises without the Faithful Promiser to make them good in our experience, are but so

many words -- meaningless words to make our hearts ache with an unsatisfied longing. "That I may know Him" was the prayer of the Apostle. "That I may know Him" will be the desire and prayer of every Spirit-taught child of God. Yes, Spirit-taught; for look at the first verse of the Psalm, "My soul thirsteth for Thee." Now compare this with Psalm 65:9, "Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it"; but see the rendering in the margin, "After thou hadst made it to desire rain." This brings us to...

David's Determination

"My soul followeth hard after Thee." The original word is dah-vak, which means literally to stick to, cleave to (as with glue). "My bones cleave to my skin" (Psalm 102:5). "My soul cleaveth to the dust" (Psalm 119:25). "I have stuck unto Thy testimonies" (Psalm 119:31). "The tongue of the sucking child cleaveth unto the roof of his mouth for thirst" (Lamentations 4:4). But here it is with the preposition "after," and therefore "followeth hard after," suitably supplies the ellipsis and exactly expresses the meaning. Boaz says, "Abide here fast by my maidens" (Ruth 2:8). The word dai-vak occurs in Proverbs 18:24, "There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother." David means, therefore, that he followed after the Lord, not at a distance, but having overtaken Him, he abode fast by Him.

There is everything to make the child of God do this: a world at enmity with Him; the devil at constant war with Him; a deceitful heart that cannot believe in Him; a cowardly self that will not acknowledge Him. Truly my soul followeth hard after Him; we long to breathe our desires to Him; but the flesh is weak, and language is lame, and ability is wanting. We would live a life of praise to the God of all our mercies, but we cannot do the thing that we would. We desire that love should burn more fervently, but the flames break not forth as we would have them. It is a following hard after God; it is our determination. It is our "toiling in rowing," but Jesus Christ is on the mount of intercession, and soon He will come and bless His toiling ones with His own presence, with the full enjoyment of the peace and quietness which He now deals to them only in measure. Lastly, we come to...

David's Delight

"Thy right hand upholdeth me." This is closely connected with the other experience, for why do we cleave to the Lord? Because the Lord cleaves to us, and holds us. We have the same word in Genesis 2:24. "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife." The comment of the Holy Spirit on this is in Ephesians 5:32. "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church." It is not, then, we who cleave to Christ, but it is Christ who cleaves to us. "Thy right hand upholdeth me." This is the secret of David's determination to cleave unto the Lord. Were it not for the unseen hand of Jehovah, there would be no following hard.

Now it is all explained. David's desire is now understood. The world does not understand

these blessed spiritual realities. The world represents the poor seeker who would follow after and find God, as a weak woman struggling in the water, and trying to get hold of a cold lifeless rock, and in danger of being washed away by the very next wave. The Holy Spirit of God here represents her as a poor, weak vessel indeed, but held fast in the loving embrace of the living God Himself! Oh what a distance between man's imagination and God's revelation! This is David's delight here. Not Satan's subtlety, nor Saul's cruelty, nor his own infirmities, nor all of them together are of sufficient force to cut asunder this anion with Christ! The cleaving of David's spirit was the work of the Friend that sticketh closer than a brother, it was the cleaving of the Heavenly One Himself. A union of the Lord's making is altogether incapable of the devil's breaking.

But there's more in this "right hand of the Lord." It is a beautiful figure. "The right hand of the Lord is exalted... doeth valiantly" (Psalm 118:16). This is the Lord who, having saved His people from their sins, now lives ever lives to make intercession for them, and at God's right hand is pledged to deliver them from all trial, tribulation, and temptation. David knew this. Hence his prayer, "That Thy beloved may be delivered, save with Thy right hand, and hear me" (Psalm 60:5). As salvation was accomplished by the Lord Jesus, so it is applied by the Holy Spirit; and what a mercy it is to know that all our wants, all our joys, are in the right hand of our risen and exalted Saviour! Blessed with the knowledge of this, the redeemed of the Lord can say, "O sing unto the Lord a new song, for He hath done marvellous things. His right hand and His holy arm hath gotten Him the victory" (Psalm 98:1).

He who triumphed over all our foes will protect and defend us from them until our life's end. But he will teach us to bless and praise Him for His grace, His goodness, and His gentleness, as did the sweet singers of Israel: "Thou hast also given me the shield of Thy salvation, and Thy right hand hath holden me up, and Thy gentleness hath made me great" (Psalm 18:35). Well may we, poor doubting, fearing, trembling ones, whose daily cry is, "Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe" (Psalm 119:117), apply and feed on this precious promise for our spiritual comfort and refreshment. "Fear thou not, for I am with thee, be not dismayed, for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee, yea, I will help thee, yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness" (Isaiah 41:10).