

RIGHT STEPS

A SERMON

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“Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set us in the way of his steps.” Psalm
85:13

JESUS CHRIST'S righteousness reached heaven before he himself arrived there; and that testimony, “It is finished,” going direct to heaven, was the way by which he himself entered heaven. As the priest in olden time entered into the holy of holies by the blood of the sacrifice, so Jesus Christ has entered into heaven itself by his own blood, “having obtained eternal redemption for us.” And as Christ is set before God's face forever, so God sets this righteousness of Jesus Christ before him as the way in which he comes in mercy, in saving grace, and in lovingkindness unto the children of men. And it is also true that the sins of the lost reach the judgment throne of God before they themselves come there. Little did Cain think that his deadly and awful deed of slaying his brother would so quickly reach the throne of judgment; but it did, “The voice of your brother's blood cried unto me from the ground.” Thus, it is, then, that those who die in their sins, unacquainted with Christ, will find all are waiting for them in God's terrible and eternal book. So that it is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. On the other hand, if brought out of that enmity and unbelief to receive Jesus Christ, then such persons may read, as descriptive of their own present position, those scriptures wherein it is said, “approved in Christ;” “accepted in Christ;” “complete in Christ;” “when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall we also appear in glory with him,” all our sins being blotted out by his one sacrifice, he having thus put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

First, the essential steps of the Lord's dealings with us; and, secondly, the reasons why he sets us in the way of his steps.

The beginning of this psalm will instruct us, and show us what his steps are, and that he brings all his people into those same steps. First, it is said, “Lord, you have been favorable unto your land; you have brought back the captivity of Jacob.” This must refer to the Lord Jesus Christ. Our sin, in the first place, is our captivity; it has our souls, it has our bodies. We have one of the strongest proofs of the captivating power of sin in the mortality of the body: our very mortality is nothing

else but the reigning power of sin within us. So that, in this solemn sense, though this is only part of the truth, we are in captivity. It is clear beyond all dispute that the Lord Jesus Christ met our sin in the strength of it. You know what is written, that "the strength of sin is the law;" and another scripture says, "Where there is no law, there is no transgression." Now the Lord was pleased so to order it as to decide (and of course the decisions are eternal) that not one jot nor tittle of the law of supremacy should fail, and that not one jot nor tittle of the penalty should fail. He has determined that sin shall be cursed, that sin shall be damned, that sin shall be punished. It never did, and never will, and never can escape the almighty vengeance of God. Now the Lord Jesus Christ came under God's holy law, he became a debtor to do the whole law, and he lived a life of obedience to that law, perfect in every sense. There is not one quality in the law that did not realize perfection in Christ; there is not one demand of justice that was not met by the Savior. He therefore has by his wonderful life established eternally the law, so that while "by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." So, when we come to the penalty, the Savior was made sin, that is, the representative of sin; and he was made a curse, that is, the representative of the curse, by himself enduring the curse. So, that, having thus established eternal righteousness and endured all the penalty, sin has hereby lost its power, for "the strength of sin is the law." This is a subject that we dwell so much upon, because you will need it all the way through life; you will especially need it in death, and to all eternity. There are so many ways now that have been pointed out in which we are to live well and to die happy; but there is no way of living well but that way described by the apostle when he says, "The life that I now live is by the faith of the Son of God, that loved me, and gave himself for me." And there is no dying happy but in the faith; being enabled in that hour to see the Savior's righteousness, to see his atonement set over against our sins, and that we need nothing else, for he has turned every sin back, he has destroyed death, so that death is only a shadow; spoiled principalities and powers, turned captivity away, and there is not a single thing left to hold that soul fast that is thus brought to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This, then, is the first, and I had almost said the last, for the last is included in it, essential step to the salvation of the soul. The first thing in God's dealing towards us is that he gives his well-beloved Son; and the first thing in his manifestation of himself to us is to open our eyes to see our need of this, and thus to bring us into the same way, the way of his steps. So, that Jesus becomes our way; he becomes the way to God, he becomes the way in which we see all bondage is destroyed. And the Savior spoke not only in lovingkindness, not only in sympathy, not only in mercy, not only in compassion, but he also spoke with infinite, eternal, infallible truthfulness when he said, "If the Son make you free, you shall be free indeed." That is the way, then, that the Lord has turned back the captivity of his people; and they are to realize this by knowing, receiving, and enjoying it. So much, then, for the first essential step, namely, the manifestation to us of his dear Son; "not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Those that are taught (and all the people of God are) what their own hearts are, they are the persons that will prize the truths which are confirmed and established by this mediation of the Savior; these are the persons that will prize more and more those blessed testimonies, and the blessedness of that complete victory we have by Jesus Christ. The next step in a way of detail as given in this psalm is that of forgiveness. The steps now described in a way of detail naturally follow. "You have forgiven the iniquity of your people." That is one of the sweetest features of the gospel. And although that sin was punished, so that he forgives us justly, yet at the same time that forgiveness to us comes entirely in the shape of mercy; because we have nothing whatever that could entitle us to the least favor. It comes to us justly, but no thanks to us that he forgives justly, no thanks to us, in a word, that he forgives at all. Now who are the persons

there called his people? “You have forgiven the iniquity of your people.” You see it is in the past tense, because Jesus Christ has put their sins away. The apostle Paul speaks thus, that “whosoever believes on him,” in this work, “shall receive remission of sins.” So, I hope you will not misunderstand me this morning if I say a word or two here to the little ones, that “whosoever believes on him shall receive remission.” If, then, you are so enlightened as to see that Jesus Christ is the way, that is, faith in him, and abiding simply in that faith in him, that that is the way in which the soul, if it ever be filled with peace, must be so filled by believing in what Christ has done; “The Lord fill you with all joy and ease in believing,” so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Ghost; What must you do? You still look to Jesus Christ; do not throw away the testimony of what he has done; and if you cannot call it yours, still you cannot say it is not yours; if you cannot cry, “Abba Father,” you cannot say that you are not born of God; and if you cannot say, “My beloved is mine, and I am his,” you cannot say it is not so. And, after all, the Lord will not be ruled by any of your despairing feelings. He himself is the author of that concern that you have at all for eternal things. Therefore, one of old, in the 27th Psalm, when he hears testimony of what the Lord was unto him, he brings before us a little of his past experience, and then gives us in our discouragements a word of advice. He says, “I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” As though he should say, There was a time when I had not yet seen it for myself; I could not say it was mine; but I had a kind of feeling that I should someday see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living; that I should someday know that he is good to me, that I am a part of that Israel of which it is written that “the Lord is good unto Israel, even unto such as are of a clean heart;” that is, that are simple and sincere in their profession, in contrast to craft, duplicity, and hypocrisy; for wherever there is the work of God, there is a purity of motive, there is a sincerity. And then when David thus brings before us his past experience, he gives us a word of advice. “Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart;” and then, as though he should say, We cannot attach too much importance to this, he repeats the advice, “Wait, I say, on the Lord.” So, then, happy the soul that is seeking forgiveness. The Lord knows what we are seeking, and you know that “with him is forgiveness,” because Christ is with him, “and plenteous redemption”, because Christ is with him; and that with him is the fountain of life, because Christ is with him. This, then, we will call step the second. First, the manifestation of his dear Son; secondly, the assurance that by him there is the forgiveness of sins. And of course, there never was, there never will be, and there never can be, in the nature of things, any real forgiveness where love is not. You may so forgive a person to whom you have no particular attachment as not to seek to retaliate or to revenge; but then there is no real reconciliation: there is no love. But here, in this forgiveness, is intense, eternal love, and therefore the object forgiven is infinitely and eternally dear to the forgiver. Here is love manifested in the Lord Jesus Christ, that he has proved that the object forgiven is dear to him as he is dear to himself. “No man yet ever hated his own flesh;” and the church of Christ is spoken of as his own flesh; and he does indeed nourish and cherish that church. Her sins have brought out his love, but never lessened it, never quenched it. So “Many waters could not quench love, neither could floods drown it.” So, I say the chief thing that makes this forgiveness so pleasant is that the object is so loved that God never means to part with him. “There is no separation from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.” And then the next step in detail is the oblivion of sin. “You have forgiven the iniquity of your people; you have covered all their sin.” Why, Satan himself would not be able to find where they are, because legally they have no existence. Perhaps you may think I am going too far when I tell you that the sins that you and I daily feel, the besetments, and sometimes our wicked hearts, at least, mine does send forth such thoughts against God and against the things dearest to my soul, that I

tremble at them; and yet these very sins have now no legal existence, for they have no right to live, and having no right to live, they must by and by die. "The sins of Israel and of Judah shall be sought for, but they shall not be found." "I will pardon those whom I reserve." "You have covered all their sin." So that God the Father is represented as casting them behind his back, as an old divine somewhere says, behind the back of eternity, cast, as it were, behind the back of the eternal God, to denote that he has lost sight of it. "He will not behold iniquity in Jacob, nor see perverseness in Israel;" the consequence must be, that there cannot be any fatal divination against Jacob, nor any final enchantment against Israel; they must prevail; they must by the blood of the Lamb ultimately and entirely overcome. So, then, "blessed is the man whose sin is covered." As we have so often said, that circumstance seems to force itself upon one's mind; we have often said there is not in the dealing of the father with the prodigal son the slightest reference to his faults; no. The elder brother remembered the faults of the younger brother; but our Elder Brother will not remember the faults of his brethren. "I, even I, am he that blots out your transgressions, and will not remember your sins." May the Lord enable us so to receive these testimonies as to make us more and more delight in his service and in his ways. Even in an earthly sense you cannot work so well for a master to whom you carry a kind of consciousness that he always has something against you; his presence, therefore, is always unpleasant. But when the master and the servant are like Boaz and his servants, when he came into the field he said, "The Lord be with you;" and they said, "And the Lord bless you" each knew his place, and they could go on together well. And so, it is if we have a right apprehension of Jesus Christ; he is meek and lowly in heart, and while he does kindly reprove his disciples, yet he knows how to preach a long sermon without the slightest reference to any one of their faults. "You have covered all their sin." Here is Satan's universal and entire defeat, seeing he has covered all their sins; and "who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" Is not this a step-in lovingkindness, is not this a step of mercy, is not this a step of grace, is not this an infinitely and an eternally advantageous step, thus, to receive Christ Jesus as to receive the forgiveness of sins? So that you little ones that understand this testimony but cannot yet rejoice in the realization of this oblivion, of this freedom, of this forgiveness, still hold fast the testimony, and pray as one of old did, "Remember your word, in which you have caused your servant to hope." Now that is a very humble part of Christian experience. He does not say, "Remember the word, in which you have caused your servant to rejoice;" he does not say, "remember your word, which made your servant very happy;" he does not say, "Remember your word, that set your servant free, and made him as full of assurance as he could wish;" no, but "in which you has caused your servant to hope." I have a humble hope, and cannot give up the hope. So, cling to him, and the Lord help you to say with Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." Here, then, is the captivity turned away; here is the forgiveness; here is the oblivion. Then comes the abolition at anger as well: "You have taken away all your wrath; you have turned yourself from the fierceness of your anger." That soul is well taught, and has learnt some deep lessons, that can adopt upon this subject in any measure the first part of the 12th chapter of Isaiah: "In that day you shall say, O Lord, I will praise you; though you were angry with me." Ah, my hearers, one and all, do you know what it is to feel a sense of his wrath, and to feel that as a sinner his threatening belong to you, to feel that the curse of the law does belong to you as a sinner? And have you ever been so solemnized that your days have sometimes been very unhappy, and your nights somewhat disturbed and unhappy too? Perhaps you have not been able to go so far as David did when he said, "Your wrath lies hard upon me, and the arrows of the Almighty drink up my spirits;" and such expressions as these. "You were angry with me." Ah, it is a great blessing to have a little experience of this, because it does enable us so highly to appreciate the mercy of God

as manifested in Jesus Christ in this, that he has delivered us from the wrath to come. Now everyone knows that it is one of the most painful experiences of life when your friends are angry with you, persons that you know in their hearts have been and are sincere friends to you, it is one of the most painful experiences to feel that they are angry with you, and especially if there be any degree of consciousness that their anger is just. This is one of the most painful experiences of life, and if anything, merely human would drive a man to desperation, perhaps it would be such anger as this. I say it is a most painful thing; and the Savior therefore speaks very largely of love one to the other, and of forgiving one another even until seventy times seven. He did not therefore wish us to be subjected to more painful experiences than were needful. One of old said, "Had it been my enemy I could have borne it." We expect frowns from them, we expect anger from them, we expect persecution from them, we expect slander and various evils from them. So, then, I say, it is one of the most painful experiences we can undergo. And yet, painful as that is, it is not so painful as a sense of divine wrath. But sometimes they both come together. "My mother's children were angry with me; I am black, because the sun has looked upon me." They come together sometimes. It is then a sight and sense of divine wrath that is the most distressing and the most painful of all, because it cuts at the root of our only hope. For, friends, if we have no hope in God, if we have no hope in Christ, if we have no hope in the gospel, we may look to the east, the west, the north, and the south, where shall we find an anchorage ground for the soul? where shall we find the least expectation of escaping eternal ruin? So, then, the Lord does lead his people and suffer them to be led in many painful paths, that he may hereby humble them, and bring them into his own Spirit, into his own steps. "He shall set us in the light of his steps." "You have taken away all your wrath; you have turned yourself from the fierceness of your anger." And the people of God, seeing this, pray to be turned; "Turn us, O God of our salvation." We were afraid of you; we have run away from you; We have seen your anger; but now the scene is changed. "You were angry with me; but now you comfort me and are become my salvation. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid; for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation." These are some, then, of the essential steps, brought thus into oneness with God by what Jesus Christ his done, and here we are met with the forgiveness of iniquity, here we are met with the eternal oblivion of all our sins; here we are met with freedom from wrath:

"Nothing but sin I you can give,
Nothing but love shall I receive."

I must now come, secondly to *the reasons why the Lord sets us in the way of his steps*. The first reason or purpose is that we may be supported when we fall into tribulations, adversities, and trials. If some of you are so placed at present that you may not exactly feel in your minds the force of this reason, you will before you die, because trouble is the lot of us all, affliction is the lot of us all, and the Lord brings us into his steps that we may be with him, and be supported. Let me note three or four very beautiful scriptures upon this. 37th Psalm, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord" and a believer in Jesus Christ with the faith that works by love is a good man, and brought into the steps I have described, brought there by the Lord; "and he delights in his way," because Christ is his way. "Though he fall" into affliction, into trouble, into adversity, like Job or others, "he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with his hand." He falls, like Job, or like others, many others I could name, into affliction, yes, the Bible has almost innumerable instances of the people of God falling into afflictions and trials; yet not one of them was utterly cast down, for the Lord upheld them with his hand. So, then, he takes his people, as it were, in this

sense by the hand. Hence, again in the 145th Psalm there is another beautiful description of the Lord upholding his people in great trials. It there says, "The Lord upholds all that fall." How many of the people of God have fallen by the sword, by spoil, and by captivity! and yet how the Lord upheld them in the faith! What tortures the martyrs underwent! and yet they were upheld. See in the 11th of the Hebrews, forgive me for referring to that chapter so very frequently, what the Old Testament saints underwent, and yet the Lord so upheld them that they endured it. "He upholds all that fall and raises up all those that be bowed down." Cannot some of you bear testimony to that descriptive scripture in the Proverbs, "Heaviness in the heart of man makes it stoop"? You feel spiritually like the woman literally that Satan had bound, and she could in no wise lift up herself. When there is this heaviness in the heart, it does indeed make it stoop. "But a good word makes it glad." So, he brings us into this way that he may keep us, and not suffer us to be tried above that we are able to bear. And then in that 145th Psalm, not only does he uphold those that are in affliction and trial, and raise up them that are bowed down, but see his kindness to them: "The eyes of all" of all these in tribulation, all these cast-down ones, "the eyes of all wait upon you" "my eyes were unto you" "I will look again to your holy temple" "and you give them their meat in due season." "You open your hand, and satisfy the desire of every living thing," every living soul. He does open his hand bountifully. When he shuts it, who can open it? I do not say this to discourage prayer, because everything encourages prayer; and when he opens it to our souls, who can shut it? "You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing." This is one of the noble purposes for which he brings us into his steps, that he may support us under trouble, and fulfil his blessed word, "As your days, so shall your strength be." One more scripture out of a great many that might be named, the 10th verse of the 41st of Isaiah is just descriptive of this same thing, "Fear you not, for I am with you;" and if I am with you, it does not matter who is against you; "be not dismayed," implying that such do fear, they are dismayed, or elsewhere would be the room for the healing words, "Be not dismayed, for I am your God"? and I will not be unto you like the gods of the heathen, nothing: "I will strengthen you, you, I will help you; you, I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness." May I say it, that if the Lord had not prepared a right by which to help us, we have no right to any such favor. But "I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness." And is it not this that upholds us, upholds our hope and our confidence? So, then, who in his senses would not be brought into these heavenly steps, into these heavenly ways, that we may, whenever in trouble, feel that there is a God who is our refuge and very present help in trouble?

Then the second reason why he brings us into these steps, I must notice, is, that he might foreshow us what we should do under difficult and trying circumstances. It is said that "Noah walked with God." Now, Noah, I will foreshow you the calamity that is coming. Noah had a pre-revelation of it, according to the necessity. Noah had a great deal to do between the time it was foreshown to him and the time the trouble should come; and therefore, he needed a corresponding time. The Lord foreshowed him, and he escaped the flood. Now Lot did not need much time; but Lot, as every child of God does, walked with God, and God foreshowed him the trouble that was to come. And the dear Savior in the 17th of Luke, when treating upon this, says, "The same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all." Here is the preciousness of faith. And I must pass by a great many things, such as the Lord foreshowing Moses; and yet there was one part there which the Lord did not foreshow him till just before the time. When they came to the seaside, what a despairing position that was. There was but one way open, and that was a curved sort of road, which would lead them right back into the brick-fields

again. On the left hand was a fortress, on the right hand a mountain, before them was the sea, and behind them was Pharaoh's host. They thought Moses was one of the greatest deceivers that could be. You all know what their rebellion was, and you know what a gospel Moses preached. "Stand still." Stand still! What! with Pharaoh and all his host pursuing us! Here are six hundred chariots, and I do not know how many armed men; and we are nothing else but an undisciplined multitude. Stand still! Yes! "Stand still." But then that is not all his sermon. "Stand still and see the salvation of God. For the Egyptians whom you have seen today you shall see no more forever." Five minutes did not elapse before the rod, with divine authority, was stretched over the sea, and the waters parted hither and thither; the Israelites, under the protection of the cloud, light to the one, darkness to the other, were saved. This, then, is another of the purposes for which he brings us into his steps, that he may foreshow us, under any circumstances where it is needful, the way out of trouble. Then, again, the Lord does sometimes, where he intends deliverance, stir up his people that they might seek the means by which to get out of the trouble. He does not let them sleep through it, because if they did, they would not see it. Now, Daniel, you and your companions are to be put to death. Nebuchadnezzar says so, and you know that whom he will he slays, and whom he will he keeps alive; whom he will he sets up, and whom he will he puts down. Well, that stirred up Daniel and his companions; and dare to say that Daniel and his companions said one to the other, How glad we are that we did not join in the luxurious living of those who did eat the king's meat, that we have lived upon water and pulse! for if we had been ensnared with their rich food and wine we should not have been in the state we are now in; now we are sober, now we can be thoughtful what we shall do. Our lives are in jeopardy; we can do nothing politically, we can do nothing in a military sense, nothing in a magisterial sense; but we can do something in the believing sense. We will have a prayer meeting. And they prayed to God. Oh, what a wonderful answer! There is not a more wonderful answer in all the Bible given to prayer than was there given to Daniel and his companions. How did he astonish the great kingdom Babylon when he unfolded the deep secrets of the future, the swallowing up of all the kingdoms of this world, and in contrast to that the eternal duration of the kingdom of Christ, his everlasting reign, and the endless happiness of his people! Well might the heathen king exclaim, "Of a truth it is that your God is a God of gods, and Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing you could reveal this secret." So, the three worthies. There was not much time given to them. The Holy Spirit said to them, you must go into the furnace; do not give up the truth. If they will not give up the king's decree, you be as firm to God's truth as the devil is to his cruelty. And so, they were "We will not serve your gods, nor bow down to your image." You see how the Lord was with them, and the fire could not hurt them. See Daniel in the lions' den; see Mordecai; time would fail me to show how the Lord does in ten thousand ways stir up his children, give them the spirit of prayer, make them look to him to deliver them from their troubles; thus they shall escape ten thousand evils that they must have been entangled fatally by but for the reigning grace, power, and interposition of the blessed God.

"The way of his steps." After all, the great foreshowing, that surpasses all the rest, is God so foreshowing us the certainty of the wrath to come as to constrain us to fly for refuge, to lay hold upon the hope set before us; still the circumstantial are of great value, and we cannot give them up. We do bless our God that he notices the lily and the sparrow, the fowls of the air, "the very hairs of your head are all numbered."

The third reason why he brings us into the way of his steps is, I suppose, the last I must name, though I had many, many more; he brings us into the way of his steps that we may be like him.

The Lord keeps his people with himself that they may be like him. They are led to see that God the Father rests in his immutable oath, and they become like him in that. They become immovably decided for his immutable counsel; they become like iron pillars, defended cities, and brazen walls. Move them away from God the Father's sworn covenant if you can; I speak now of those that are rooted, grounded, and established. This is what the Savior means, I should think, when he says, "Be you therefore perfect" in decision; he cannot mean in the abstract sense, as God is. "Be you therefore perfect" in decision, "even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." He is perfectly decided; his love is settled, his choice is settled, his promise is settled, and the eternal inheritance which he has settled can never be unsettled. "Forever, O Lord, your word is settled in heaven." God loves to see his children like him. And then also they become like Jesus Christ; with him they become like him, not only in his decision, but in meekness, in humility, in earnestness, and in mercifulness. Was there ever such a merciful person in the world as Jesus Christ? No. The people of old once said to him concerning the centurion, "He is worthy for whom you should do this, for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue." But did you ever know Jesus Christ question the character that came to him, whether worthy or unworthy! He looked at the necessity, lost sight of the worthiness or unworthiness; he went direct to the necessity. Like the good Samaritan, the question was not how the man came there; there he is, and he goes direct to the necessity. This is the way the Savior dealt. Is it any wonder that he so won the hearts of men and women? Is it any wonder that they so loved him? Is not Toplady right when he says,

"I no more at Mary wonder dropping tears upon the grave:"

nor anyone else who knows anything of the liberality, mercifulness, compassion, kindness, sympathy, and intense love of the Lord Jesus Christ. "They took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus." And I am sure the more a minister's mind is baptized into the sufferings of Christ, the more scripturally will he speak of the counsels of the Father, the work of the Spirit, the prospects of the saints; and the more effectually will he find his way into the souls of the people, and the more useful will he be in thus bringing sinners to Christ, for the same gospel feeds the living that quickens the dead. Then, again, they are to be like him inasmuch as they are not of this world, even as he is not of this world.