

## "KEEPING OUR FOOTING"

TEXT: "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, and my steps had well nigh slipped." Psalm 73:2

This person is sharing with us some of the experiences he has encountered along the pathway of life. He has come, at last, to where he walks with a certain sureness of step. He feels the road firm and solid beneath his feet because he has learned the secret and the source of strength. But it has not always been this way. Looking back over the years, he sees one stretch of road that was very difficult. In fact, he almost tripped and fell down. But he escaped, and managed somehow to steady himself and regain his confidence. And now he looks back with mixed emotions - with terror and with a feeling of gratitude.

"But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, and my steps and well nigh slipped."

And so, we have here the spiritual biography of a person who struggled and triumphed many centuries ago. And yet, the story is amazingly modern and up to date. Some of you, in your own minds, may be thinking sadly:

"I know exactly what the psalmist is talking about. His experience differs from mine in only this - he managed to keep his footing, and I lost mine altogether. I fell down. I gave up. I quit trying. I became afraid of high places."

But then there are others for whom these words represent a very present experience. Some of you may not have lost your footing, but you're walking in slippery places. You feel that at any moment you may collapse. You've come to God's house this morning not with any great confidence. You're not at all sure that you'll find anything here to steady you and to enable you to stand firmly on your feet. But at any rate, you're here, hoping that there may be some word of strength.....some hand stretched out to help you. You're in great need, and you don't know just where to turn. May God grant your fainting faith a rich reward, and may you leave here with a firm sense of the undergirding of the Everlasting Arms!

"But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, and my steps had well nigh slipped....."

### WHAT CAUSED HIM TO STUMBLE?

What caused this man to stumble? What was it that nearly tripped him?

It's evident that the man was confused and bewildered by the events that were taking place in this God-ordered universe. He found it very difficult to understand how a good and holy God could govern the world in the way that it appeared to be governed. He had always been taught to believe that the good prospered, and that the wicked failed. This

belief was common among all pious Jews. Even the disciples of Jesus were in agreement with this idea. The good prosper, and the wicked fail. On one occasion, Jesus and his disciples were walking through the crowded streets of Jerusalem, and the disciples pointed to a blind man and said, "Who sinned - this man or his parents - that he should be blind?" In other words, they could not conceive of any form of suffering or sorrow that was not born directly of God. They believed without exception that the good are always prosperous and happy, while the wicked failed and were wretched.

And so it is that there are some who cling to this idea in some degree even in our own day. It's a comfortable faith, and one that dies hard. There are still those who believe that God rewards us in the here and now with material gifts and blessings for being good. And when we don't receive our rewards, then we become bitter and disappointed, and our faith grows weak.

When this man referred to in this psalm began to test his faith by the hard facts of experience, he found himself slipping. When he opened his eyes to what was taking place in the world around him, he found it difficult to comprehend. Perhaps there was a neighbor who lived nearby who despised the worship of the Temple, and lived in utter disregard of God. Perhaps this neighbor had once declared that he was not in business for his health, but for the money. And there was no denying the fact that he was getting ahead. Why everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. He and his family enjoyed good health, and from all appearances they were finding life exceedingly enjoyable.

But how about himself. He was diligent in his religious duties. He sought to please God. He tithed. He was trying so hard to be a good man. He always went to the Temple. And where was it all getting him? No where at all. In spite of it all, he was poor and unhappy. Everything he touched seemed to turn to dust and ashes. He was bothered with poor health. And many times he became angry and disturbed by the noise of joyful revelry that came from the house of his godless, but prosperous neighbor. You can imagine the thoughts that passed through his mind:

"It's not fair. What's the good of it all?  
Why go to church. Why bother about God?  
Why be good. Goodness doesn't pay! Why  
not have a real fling....take the cash that's  
in that box, and have some real fun....."

Let's face it. We've all had such thought. We've all doubted the value of goodness. We've all questioned the value of bothering with the things of God. Sickness.....financial losses.....death.... We've played it straight, and lost! Others have played it crooked, and won! We've had opportunities for questionable business adventures, but for conscientious reasons, we've turned them down. Others have entered the enterprise, and now live in handsome homes and drive around in new cars. And like the psalmist, we wonder whether it really does pay to be honest, true to God, and our high standards. We even go so far as to question whether there is a God who cares about our little petty affairs.

"My feet are almost gone.....my steps are on  
the point of slipping."

It's well to know that the psalmist came through his experiences safely and found firm footing, and we can do so if we're only willing.

HOW DID HE KEEP FROM FALLING?

How did he keep from falling? What was it that steadied him?

He didn't find new strength by throwing away his religious faith. He didn't find it by getting away from God even though the temptation to do so may have been very strong. What then did he do. The answer is found in the psalm. It may sound very simple and childish, but we read that he went to church.

"It seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God....."

I know the church of his day was far from being perfect. And so it is in our day. Sometimes the church service can be very disappointing. Sometimes the preacher contributes very little, and the congregation yawns. The sheep look up and are not fed. In fact, they're often fed up as they look. This reminds me of a letter I received some time ago from a person who attended services in this church. The person went on to say in the letter:

"I go once in a while Sundays but because of poor lighting to the extent that I can't see what's on your program, and instead of you being in a spot light and when you have your sermon, light lessened in church, a loud speaker to send your talk to the back of the church, I could not hear you many times when you lowered your voice. I left the church. It was very close and stuffy, and being painted so dark it is depressing....."

We always welcome constructive criticism. I know as most of you know that our churches are far from being perfect. And yet, it is my very deep conviction that if a person turns to God's house with a hungry heart, that God will break through a stupid sermon and get past the personality of a very common place preacher, to the soul that really longs to know him. Good lighting, loud speaker systems, and fresh paint are not essential to a valid and meaningful worship experience. And so we try to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

The psalmist came into possession of certain gripping convictions that steadied him and enabled him to walk in the after days with firmness and assurance. He found these in the sanctuary of God.

WHAT WERE THESE CONVICTIONS  
THAT HE GLIMPSED IN THE HOUSE  
OF GOD?

And so we ask ourselves: what were these convictions that he glimpsed in the house of God?

What did he take hold of with a clearer vision that enabled him to walk with steadiness through the later years of life? He discovered several things.

FIRST: He discovered that he had greatly exaggerated the well-being and the prosperity of his godless neighbor. When he looked with clearer and calmer eyes, he saw that his neighbor was not as well off as he had imagined him to be. Distance always lends enchantment. His neighbor had his troubles too. Although prosperous in things, it was in things only in which he was prosperous. He was poor in spirit. He was not joyful and care-free, but was constantly buffeted from within by terrors and fellyings of insecurity. His prosperity was a hollow sham. He was far from being truly wealthy.

SECOND: He discovered that the prosperity of the wicked and the godless is not lasting. The wealth that is our today will belong to someone else tomorrow. The names that fill the headlines today will be forgotten tomorrow. The things we work so hard for and struggle so long to achieve easily slip from our fingers. In spite of all outward appearances, the world is built upon righteousness and the values of fame and fortune are superficial and fleeting.

THIRD: He came ~~to discover in God's house and to realize his own wealth as he came into possession of certain bracing convictions about God.~~ to a realization of his own wealth while in God's.. He grew sure of God's abiding presence. God was not far off and un-concerned with the heart aches, sorrows, and sufferings of his children. He was a God near at hand. As Tennyson reminds us:

"Closer is He than breathing,  
And nearer than hands and feet."

God was near - in the shadows, as well as the sunshine. God was near - when his eyes filled with tears, and when his eyes sparkled with joy! God was not only present, but he was present to help!

The other day I saw a woman with her little child walking along 86th Street. The little fellow, for a few steps, walked alone, but then he came to a crossing. He reached up and his mother took his hand and he went forward without fear. "And so it has been in my case," says the psalmist. "When the way grew rough, rocky and treacherous, and I thought I would fall down, I reached up and when I did, I did not clutch just thin air. Someone seized my hand, and steadied me, and gave me guidance."

In the power of this faith the psalmist kept his footing. In the power of this faith, he walked forward without fear. And such a faith will steady us in even the most desolate hours of life. The question is this: Do we really possess such a faith? Do we know deep down in our hearts that there is someone who is near to grip our hands? Are we sure that though friends - health - and all else may fail us, there is still someone to turn to - something to cling to. This is the conviction of the man who wrote this psalm centuries ago. And today it is still the conviction of all those who are most deeply schooled in the things of the spirit.

Lord - give me faith to live from day to day...

With tranquil heart to do my simple part, and with my hand in

Faith to trust, if not to know.

With quiet mind in all things thee to find, and child like go ...

Faith - to leave it all to thee. The future is Thy gift. I would not lift the veil thy love and hung twixt it and me.