

WHEN YOU ONLY HAVE TIME FOR ONE VERSE - Part five

Sunday, July 9th, 2023 - 5:30 p.m.

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SUSTAINING THE HEART'S VISION OF GOD

Psalm 16:8 - "I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."

If there is anything that can properly be called a "**secret**" to Christian living (and we live in a day when religious spin-doctors present almost anything as the miracle cure for all of life's ills) this verse may actually contain it.

This verse really can be life-changing.

The Psalmist describes a **practice** and a **result** of that practice. The **practice** is "**setting the Lord always before me.**" The **result** is "**...I shall not be shaken.**" And the whole point in this simple logic is we can't have this blessing of **steadfastness and strength** apart from the discipline of **setting the Lord continually before us.**

That's the message of this verse in a nutshell. And we're instantly prompted by the Holy Spirit, who first **birthed** spiritual life in our hearts, to give more diligence to **sustaining** the vision of God as we move on down the road from our first experience of saving grace at conversion.

Think on these points:

1) **THE KEY CHALLENGE OF ALL SPIRITUAL LIFE IS TO KEEP THE LORD IN HIS PROPER PLACE WHILE THE SURROUNDING TRENDS AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF LIFE CONSTANTLY FLOW AND CHANGE**

Psalm 16:8a - “I have set the LORD *always* before me...”

This is not something the **LORD** did. It is something the *psalmist* did. He constantly **set** the Lord before his own heart and mind. Of course, the Lord was **with** the Psalmist all the time. In another place the psalmist admits that there is, in fact, no place on earth, or under the earth, where he could actually **not** be with God. In a sense there is no **escaping** God.

But that’s not what David is talking about in today’s verse. Today’s verse is not so much about having the omnipresent God **with** him as setting this God **before** him - “***I have set the Lord always before me...***”

Sometimes we can get the impression from certain tracts, like the **Four Spiritual Laws**, that this is a simple, one time decision. You know the little picture that shows **self** on the throne of the heart, and then, on the next frame, shows Christ on that throne, with self kneeling at His feet.

And that's absolutely true as far as it goes. But the impression is sometimes given that this enthroning of Christ in the heart is a one time decision that actually takes place totally ***right at the moment of conversion***. But conversion is only where this process of divine enthronement ***starts***. It is not where it ***finishes***.

David tells us a great deal when he, the man after God's own heart, says he must ***always*** set the Lord before him. He wasn't a man of God by ***accident***. I take that to mean David was constantly re-learning - almost ***forcing*** himself - to ***never regard anything as detached from this divine relationship with God***. He meant that, just like a compass must ***continually*** be oriented toward true north before any of its other readings can be trusted, so David's heart must never lead his thoughts, feet, or hands in any other direction until God is established as the controlling reference point.

And this doesn't happen ***automatically***. David says he must ***"set"*** the Lord in this proper, dominant place. And then David says he must do this ***repeatedly: "I have set the Lord always before me..."***

Perhaps we can say it in another way. The Christian life truly ***does*** begin with a specific decision about Jesus Christ. You can't begin the Christian life at all without the whole-hearted decision to ***make Jesus Lord of your whole life***. This is what makes conversion the new birth.

But while the Christian life ***begins*** with this one-time decision, this is not a decision that is ever ***left behind***. In other words, yes, making Jesus Lord of your life is the ***beginning*** of the Christian life, but this is not a beginning that you ***leave behind*** as you move on to other things.

When I first learned to ride a bike I actually began on a tricycle. Then, I left the tricycle behind and moved on to other things. Now I drive a car. The tricycle was a beginning that was ***just*** a beginning. Then I left it behind.

But that's not a good illustration of how we move ahead in the Christian life. Because you never move on from the beginning of your Christian life in that sense. Here's what I think David had in mind when he said he ***"always set the Lord before him."*** In the same way that you first ***begin*** learning your ABC's, and then ***continue to use*** those same letters, whether you read "See Spot run," or, "Fourscore and seven years ago..." or "The Lord is my shepherd," you ***continue using those same letters every day of your life***. You never leave them behind. They are a ***beginning that stays with you - reused in deeper and richer applications everywhere you go.***

That's what David does with His commitment to the Lord. He is constantly ***setting it in motion***, over and over again - ***continually*** - ***"always."***

2) **THERE IS NO CHRISTIAN LIFE WITHOUT THIS**

Do you continually set the Lord before you? Or maybe a better question would be, “***How do you know you continually set the Lord before you?***” The Psalmist gives some practical tests in this Psalm:

- a) ***Does the Lord bring you more joy than anything else?***
Psalm 16:2 - “I say to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.’”

I don’t take this verse to mean we Christians only enjoy prayer meetings and Bible studies. And I don’t take it to mean there is nothing else - no other activity - that we find pleasurable or worthwhile.

I ***do*** take this verse to mean that my relationship with the Lord is the life center that nourishes and gives meaning to everything else I do. So I should try, for example, in every other pleasure, to trace good gifts back to the hand of the Lord. I ***bring Him into*** all other pleasures. I try to guard against ***the idolatrous enjoyment of anything else*** by making sure all other pleasures are under the boundaries of His blessing and approval. This is a part of what it means to “***set the Lord always before me.***”

Also, I **do** take this verse to mean I consider anything else I do, however good and enjoyable, to be **expendable** compared to my relationship with the Lord. And make no mistake about this - God will lovingly **test** me in this. He will find countless, varied ways to remove perfectly legitimate things from my life to see if I **complain** about their removal. And He will do this to reveal to me places where my joy in other things as been bordering on **idolatry**.

And here's the important point: I **do** take this verse to mean I would put more effort and energy into **maintaining** my relationship with the Lord than I would put into anything else I do. And, with that idea mentioned, let me move on to some specifics with these questions:

- b) ***Do you build all of your personal relationships with the intent of honoring the Lord in them? Psalm 16:3-4 - "As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. [4] The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips."***

O, I know there's an important role in reaching those without Christ. But that's not David's subject here. He's considering the **life relationships** that shape destiny and character.

It's noteworthy to see the way the Psalmist evaluated every person on earth. You can see what was uppermost in his mind. Talk to people and you will quickly see what's important to them in their friends and relationships. We like to be with people who are fun. Or who make us laugh. Or who listen to us and build our self-esteem.

The Psalmist measured everyone else by his or her commitment to the Lord. There were people who loved the Lord as he loved the Lord, and he **delighted** in them because they shared his own greatest joy.

There were others who had no interest in God and were heading in a totally different direction. The Psalmist - lead by the Spirit of God - says he didn't even want to know their names.

There is much to learn here. It **costs** to keep a hold on the living God. How to you keep Him "**always before you?**" David says it has a great deal to do with how you form personal relationships.

I'll tell you if you truly delight in the Lord. If the Lord is your heart's highest love and delight you will be drawn to people who **share** that delight. If you are drawn to people who have no interest in spiritual things, then, like it or not, regardless of what you **say** about God, you are revealing the indifference in your own soul towards Him. The Psalmist wanted nothing to do with those who didn't walk in the ways of the Lord. That's how he demonstrated he was "**setting the Lord always before him.**"

- c) ***Do you listen to the Lord when He speaks to your heart?***
Psalm 16:7 - "I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me."

It is very easy to cool in your faith to the point where you live your life on **two different levels**. It's easy to have a part of your life that is spiritually well maintained only because it is **outward** and **observable**. Then, as time goes by, we learn we can compromise in some **inward** areas of life without anyone else really knowing about it or holding us accountable.

Resisting that downward drift is exactly what David is describing. He outlines an experience we can all identify with. God speaks to his heart. He's not talking about a church service, or even his personal study of the revealed will of God in the Old Testament Law. The process he's describing here is much more natural and personal and intimate.

When he's alone and quiet, God deals with his *thoughts*. God uses David's *conscience*. God talks to David about how David's life is going. God goes over the day with David.

And here's how David "*sets the Lord always before him*" - David *listens* to the Lord at those private times. God corrects small deviations in David's life *before* they turn into major blunders.

And we know, for the most part, that David made this kind of listening to God a prominent part of his daily life: **Psalm 19:12-13** - **"Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. [13] Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression."**

Listening to the voice of the Lord in your thoughts is the acid test of setting the Lord continually before you. Anyone who can read can study the Bible. But deep, genuine, life transforming faith doesn't come by **reading**. It comes by **hearing**.

The test of your nearness to the Lord is simply this: What do you do when you think, "**You know, I really think I ought to do such and such....**" Do you **do** it? Do you do it **instantly**? Do you **argue** with God? This is the how you and I **always** set the Lord **before** us.

- d) ***After all these years of following the Lord, does He still steer your hands and feet? Psalm 16:8b - "...because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."***

Most people are right-handed. It is the hand of most people's strength and activity. The Psalmist says this is where he keeps God. I'm not sure we wouldn't be better off if we didn't always use the inward organ of the **heart** as the dwelling place of God, and began, instead, to talk about him sitting at our **right hand**.

This **demystifies** faith. It puts it right out there where everyone can see it. You shake hands. You clap hands. You make a fist or write out checks. You pat someone on the back with your hand. You write letters. You give your offering. You point your finger at people. You open your Bible or rob a friend. The right hand is a good place to keep God indeed. Your right hand will reveal your faith far more efficiently than your heart.

I had an interesting conversation with a young adult from the church just before I went on holidays. One Sunday after the service she came up to me and spoke of her need to realign her life with God. She talked about some of the careless habits she had allowed to take hold of her life.

Later on she came by my office. She was starting to second guess her initial return to Christ. She said she realized she wasn't living any differently than the rest of her Christian friends.

I asked her the difference between the way her Christian friends lived life and the way her non-Christian friends lived life. She said there was virtually no difference outside of the church service. They all went to the same bars and clubs, listened to the same music, watched the same movies and shared the same interests.

She was quite surprised when I told her she didn't really **have** Christian friends and non-Christian friends. She only had non-Christian friends - some of whom went to church on Sunday morning and some of whom didn't.

You see, going to church doesn't make you a Christian. It's what you do with your **hands** - where you go with your feet - what you love in your **heart**. This is what shows whether or not you **set the Lord before you continually**.

All of this, of course, is what Jesus meant when He told His disciples (apparently **followers** of Jesus need to hear this) that the emphasis needed to be, not just on **turning to Christ**, but **abiding** in Him. There is no **detaching** of any segment of life from His presence, not even for a moment.

We are constantly **recalled** to this devotion. We constantly have to **re-commit** to this choosing to **"set the Lord continually before us."** This alone is what will make an unshakable life.

Revelation 2:4-5 - “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. [5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”

These are words of Jesus to the **church**. This is a church that failed to set the Lord before herself **continually**. The members probably did honor the Lord **occasionally**, but not **continually**. And there’s only one remedy to that problem. They must **return to their first love**. They must re-establish something they failed to **continue** in. The essence of repentance is **re-establishing the proper place of the Lord in your life**. You must **set** Him constantly **before** you.

Here’s the promise attached to this call: **Psalms 16:11 - “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”**

Show me someone who isn’t finding delight in the Christian life and I’ll show you someone who isn’t putting God in His proper place in some area of daily living. Honor Him and He’ll make known to you the path of life!