

CHAPTER 1

FOLLOWING HARD AFTER GOD

My soul follows hard after you;
your right hand upholds me.

—*Psalm 63:8*

Christian theology teaches the doctrine of *prevenient* grace, which briefly stated means this: that before a man can seek God, God must first have sought the man.

Before a sinful man can think a right thought of God, there must have been a work of enlightenment done within him; imperfect it may be, but a true work nonetheless, and the secret cause of all desiring and seeking and praying which may follow.

We pursue God because, and only because, he has first put an urge within us that spurs us to the pursuit. “No man can come to me,” said our Lord, “except the Father which has sent me draw him” (John 6:44), and it is by this very prevenient drawing that God takes from us every vestige of credit for the act of coming. The impulse to pursue God originates with God, but the outworking of that impulse is our following hard after him. And all the time

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we are pursuing him, we are already in his hand: “Your right hand upholds me” (Psalm 63:8).

In this divine “upholding” and human “following,” there is no contradiction. All is of God, for as von Hügel teaches, God is always previous. In practice, however (that is, where God’s previous working meets man’s present response), man must pursue God. On our part there must be positive reciprocation if this secret drawing of God is to eventuate in identifiable experience of the Divine. In the warm language of personal feeling, this is stated in the forty-second Psalm: “As the hart pants after the water brooks, so pants my soul after you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” (Psalm 42:1–2). This is deep calling unto deep, and the longing heart will understand it.

The doctrine of justification by faith—a Biblical truth, and a blessed relief from sterile legalism and unavailing self-effort—has in our time fallen into evil company and been interpreted by many in such manner as actually to bar men from the knowledge of God. The whole transaction of religious conversion has been made mechanical and spiritless. Faith may now be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the Adamic ego. Christ may be “received” without creating any special love for him in the soul of the receiver. The man is “saved,” but he is not hungry nor thirsty after God. In fact, he is specifically taught to be satisfied and encouraged to be content with little.

The modern scientist has lost God amid the wonders of his world; we Christians are in real danger of losing God amid the wonders of his Word. We have almost forgotten that God is a Person and, as such, can be cultivated as any person can. It is inherent in personality to be able to know other personalities, but full knowledge of one personality by another cannot be achieved in

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one encounter. It is only after long and loving mental intercourse that the full possibilities of both can be explored.

All social intercourse between human beings is a response of personality to personality, grading upward from the most casual brush between man and man to the fullest, most intimate communion of which the human soul is capable. Religion, so far as it is genuine, is in essence the response of created personalities to the Creating Personality, God. "This is life eternal: that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

God is a Person, and in the deep of his mighty nature he thinks, wills, enjoys, feels, loves, desires, and suffers as any other person may. In making himself known to us, he stays by the familiar pattern of personality. He communicates with us through the avenues of our minds, our wills, and our emotions. The continuous and unembarrassed interchange of love and thought between God and the soul of the redeemed man is the throbbing heart of New Testament religion.

This intercourse between God and the soul is known to us in conscious, personal awareness. It is personal: that is, it does not come through the body of believers, as such, but is known to the individual, and to the body through the individuals which compose it. And it is conscious: that is, it does not stay below the threshold of consciousness and work there unknown to the soul (as, for instance, infant baptism is thought by some to do), but comes within the field of awareness where the man can "know" it as he knows any other fact of experience.

You and I are in little (our sins excepted) what God is in large. Being made in his image, we have within us the capacity to know him. In our sins, we lack only the power. The moment the Spirit

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has quickened us to life in regeneration, our whole being senses its kinship to God and leaps up in joyous recognition. That is the heavenly birth without which we cannot see the Kingdom of God. It is, however, not an end but an inception, for now begins the glorious pursuit, the heart's happy exploration of the infinite riches of the Godhead. That is where we begin, I say, but where we stop no man has yet discovered, for there is in the awful and mysterious depths of the Triune God neither limit nor end.

Shoreless Ocean, who shall sound you?
Your own eternity is round you,
Majesty divine!

To have found God and still to pursue him is the soul's paradox of love, scorned indeed by the too-easily satisfied religionist, but justified in happy experience by the children of the burning heart. St. Bernard stated this holy paradox in a musical quatrain that will be instantly understood by every worshipping soul:

We taste you, O you Living Bread,
And long to feast upon you still;
We drink of you, the Fountainhead
And thirst our souls from you to fill.

Come near to the holy men and women of the past, and you will soon feel the heat of their desire after God. They mourned for him, they prayed and wrestled and sought for him day and night, in season and out, and when they had found him the finding was all the sweeter for the long seeking. Moses used the fact that he knew God as an argument for knowing him better. "Now,

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therefore, I pray you, if I have found grace in your sight, show me now your way, that I may know you, that I may find grace in your sight” (Exodus 33:13). And from there he rose to make the daring request, “I beseech you, show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18). God was frankly pleased by this display of ardor and the next day called Moses into the mount, and there in solemn procession made all his glory pass before him.

David’s life was a torrent of spiritual desire, and his psalms ring with the cry of the seeker and the glad shout of the finder. Paul confessed the mainspring of his life to be his burning desire after Christ. “That I may know him” (Philippians 3:10) was the goal of his heart, and to this he sacrificed everything. “Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them but refuse, that I may win Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

Hymnody is sweet with the longing after God—the God whom, while the singer seeks, he knows he has already found. “His track I see and I’ll pursue,” sang our fathers only a short generation ago, but that song is heard no more in the great congregation. How tragic that we in this dark day have had our seeking done for us by our teachers. Everything is made to center upon the initial act of “accepting” Christ (a term, incidentally, which is not found in the Bible), and we are not expected thereafter to crave any further revelation of God to our souls. We have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found him we need no more seek him. This is set before us as the last word in orthodoxy, and it is taken for granted that no Bible-taught Christian ever believed otherwise. Thus the whole testimony of the worshipping, seeking, singing Church on that subject is crisply set aside. The