

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit

AN INSTRUCTIVE TRUTH

A Sermon

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“Oh Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” — Jeremiah 10 : 23.

THIS declaration follows after Jeremiah’s lamentation over the Lord’s ancient people, who were about to be carried away captive into Babylon. The prophet speaks of a fact that was well known to him. It is always well, brethren, to know the truth, and to know it so certainly that you are able to remember it just when you most need it. There are some people, who are very much like that foolish captain of whom we have heard, who had a good anchor, but he left it at home when he went to sea, so it was no use to him. So, these people know what would comfort them, but they do not recollect it in the time of their distress. Jeremiah says, “O Lord, I know,” and he utilizes his knowledge as a source of comfort in his hour of need.

What Jeremiah knew was this, — that the affairs of this world are not under the control of men, however much they may imagine that they are. There is a supreme authority to theirs, and a power which rules, and overrules, and works according to its own beneficent will, whatever men may desire or determine to do. Nebuchadnezzar was about to carry the Jews away from the land which flowed with milk and honey to his own far distant country; but the prophet consoled himself with the reflection that, whatever Nebuchadnezzar meant to do, he was only the instrument in the hands of God for the accomplishment of the divine purpose. He proposed, but God disposed. The tyrant of Babylon thought that he was working out his own will, yet he was really carrying out the will of God in chastising the idolatrous and rebellious nation. This was Jeremiah's consolation, "I do not know what Nebuchadnezzar may do; but I do know that 'the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.' I know that, in God's eternal purposes, every step of Judah's way is mapped out, and he will make it all work for his own glory and the good of his chosen people in the end."

Child of God, will you, for a moment, reflect upon the overruling power of God even in the case of the most mighty and wicked of men? They sin grossly, and what they do is done of their own free will, and the responsibility for it lies at their own door. That we never can forget, for the free agency of man is a self-evident truth; but, at the same time, God is omnipotent, and he is still working out his wise designs, as he did of old, in the whirlwind of human wrath, in the tempest of human sin, and even in the dark mines of human ambition and tyranny, all the while displaying his sovereign will among men even as the potter forms the vessels on the wheel according to his own will.

This truth ought to be remembered by us, because it tends to take from us all fear of man. Why shouldst thou, O believer, be afraid of a man that shall die, or the son of man, who is but a worm! Thou art, as a child of God, under divine protection; so, who is he that shall harm thee while thou art a follower of that which is good? Remember that ancient promise, "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgement thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord." The most powerful enemy of the Church can do nothing without God's permission. He can put a bit into the mouth of leviathan, and do with him as he pleaseth. The almighty God is Master and Lord even over the men who imagine that all power is in their hands.

And while this truth should banish our fear of man, it should also ensure our submission to the will of God. Suppose that the Lord allows Nebuchadnezzar to devastate the land that he gave to his people by covenant; it is God who permits it, therefore think not thou so much of the instrument employed by him as of the hand in which that instrument is held. Art thou afflicted, poor soul, by some hard unkind spirit? Remember that God permits thee to be so tried, and be not angry with that which is only the second cause of thy trouble, but believe that the Lord permits this to happen to thee for thy good, and therefore submit thyself to him. A dog, when he is struck with a stick, usually bites the stick; if he had more sense, he would try to bite the man who holds the stick. So, your contention must not be against the instrument of your affliction. If there be any contention, it is really against God; and you would not, I trust, think of contending with your Maker. Rather, say, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good." Let your back be bared to the rod, and look up, into your Heavenly Father's face, and say, "Show me wherefore thou contendest with me."

This truth ought also to strengthen our faith. When fear goes, faith comes in. It is an easy matter to trust God when everything goes smoothly; but genuine faith trusts God in a storm. When the land of Judah was hedged about by God's providence, and no enemy ventured to set foot upon the sacred soil, it was easy for a prophet to praise the Lord; but it was quite another matter to trust God when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the villages, besieged the cities, and, by-and-by, took them, and gave them up to utter destruction, and carried away their inhabitants into captivity. To trust in God then, was not so easy; yet that was the time for the display of real faith. Faith in the storm is true faith; faith in a calm may be, or may not be, genuine faith. Summer-weather faith may be true, or may not be true; but wintry faith, that can bring forth fruit when the snows are deep, and the North wind blows, is the faith of God's elect. It proves that it has divine vitality in it, because it can master the circumstances which would have utterly crushed the faith which appertains only to flesh and blood. It is a severe trial, to a child of God, when he is mocked at home, — when someone, who ought to be kind to him, is quite the opposite, — when the ties of nature seem only to intensify the hatred that is felt against the heir of grace, — when Ishmael mocks Isaac, and grieves him continually. That is a severe trial, but it affords the opportunity for the tried one to recall this truth, that God has all things in his hand, and that this trial is only permitted, in his

wisdom and love, for some good purpose towards his own child. It is still true that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose;” and that “no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.” If your enemy triumphs over you for a time, you should say to him, “Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise.” May the Holy Spirit help you so to do! The way of the persecutor is, after all, not left absolutely to his own will, but there is another and a higher will that overrules all.

We will not, however, tarry longer over the consideration of the context so far as it applies to Nebuchadnezzar, and other adversaries of the people of God, but we will endeavour to learn the lesson that is taught us in the latter clause of the text: “It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” And, firstly, I will try to prove to you that *these words are true*; and, secondly, that *these words are instructive*.

I. First, then, **THESE WORDS ARE TRUE**: “It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.”

For, first, although man is an active individual, so that he can walk, he cannot direct his steps, *because there may be some obstacle in his way which he cannot surmount, and which will change the whole course of his life*. He may have determined, in his own mind, that he will do this or that, and that he will go here or there; but he cannot foresee every circumstance that may happen to him, and there may be circumstances that will entirely alter the direction of his life; there may be unexpected difficulties, or what many call accidents, which are really providences, which will prevent us from doing what we have resolved to do. Take the case of a young man, who is just beginning business life; though he is active and strong, is it in him to direct his steps? I know it was not in me to direct my own steps. I had certain plans concerning my life course, but they have not been fulfilled. No doubt, the highest desire I ever cherished has been granted to me; but my first plans and purposes were not realised. I am not, today, where I hoped to have been; there were difficulties in the way, which made it impossible for me to get there. I expect others have had a similar experience. A young man may try to choose his path in life, but we all know how seldom, if ever, he can get exactly what he wants. Perhaps he goes into a certain house of business, and he says, “I shall work my way up till I get to the top.” Yet, how frequently it happens that something occurs, which jerks him off

the line of rails which he had laid down for himself, and he has to go in quite a different direction. The path he had chosen was, apparently, a very proper one for him to choose; perhaps, he spent a good deal of earnest thought upon the matter, and, possibly, also a good deal of prayer; yet he finds, as many others have found, that "it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." It is possible that the young man prospers so that he is able to go into business on his own account; but the same lesson has to be learned under different circumstances. He could not foresee what was going to happen, so he had purchased certain goods, relying upon an expected rise in the market; but there was a sudden fall, instead of a rise, and he became a loser, not a gainer. Going into business is often like going to sea; one may be much tossed about, and possibly may be wrecked, before reaching the desired haven. Many a man has found that he cannot get what he most confidently reckons upon.

Another man fails in health. He might have prospered; but, just when the full vigor of his physical strength was needed, and the greatest clearness of his mental vision was required, he was laid aside. As he sickened, he also became depressed in spirit, as he realised that his path must be that of an invalid, and perhaps of a poor man; yet he thought his career would have been that of a strong man, who would soon have reached a competence. I am sure that I must be addressing many, who know very well, from their own experience, that it is not of the slightest use for a man to say, "I will do this," or "I will do that," because something or other may occur, which will altogether prevent you from doing that which seems simple enough now. The mariner reckons on reaching port at a certain day or hour, but the wind may shift, or many things may happen to delay him. The mariner, however, can reckon even better than you can, for he has his chart, and he can find his way; he knows where the shoals are, and the quicksands, and the rocks, and where the deep channels run; but you do not know anything about your future life; you are sailing over a sea that no ship's keel has ever ploughed before. God knows all about it; everything is present to his all-seeing eye, but it is not present to your eye. It is not possible for a man to direct his own way absolutely, for he has not the power to do it; let him strive and struggle as he may, he must often be made to feel this.

Perhaps some of you are just now in this condition. Your affairs have got into a tangle, and you do not at all know how to unravel it. You are like a man in a maze or a labyrinth. You wish to take the course

which is according to the will of God; but, whether you should turn to the right hand or to the left, you do not know.

Now, you have begun to realise what was always true, but what you did not perceive before, that is, that “it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” You cannot direct your own way; you are quite perplexed as to which of two courses you should take. If this one be taken, it involves one form of trouble; and if the other course be chosen, that involves another kind of difficulty. What are you to do? Well, you know that the wisest thing for you to do is to take the matter to the Lord, and ask him to direct you. That is what you ought to do in every case; that ought to be the constant habit of your soul, — to look for the fiery-cloudy pillar which alone can guide you safely over the trackless wastes of life.

In the second place, man ought not to direct his way according to his own will, because *his will is naturally evil*. Ungodly men think that they can direct their own way. Ah, sirs! if you do that, you will direct your way down to the deeps of destruction. He who is his own guide is guided by a fool. He that trusteth to his own understanding proves that he has no understanding. If you will be your own director, you will be directed to the place where you will have bitter cause to rue it for ever and ever. If a man, starting out in life, says, “I shall follow my own will. I will say to my passions, ‘You shall be indulged;’ and to my desires, ‘Eat, drink, and be merry;’ and to my soul, ‘Trouble not thyself with solemn and serious things; leave eternity till it comes, and make thou the best thou canst of time:’ I will direct my own way as pleasure shall guide me, or as self-interest shall guide me,” — if you, sir, talk like that, I pray you to remember that “it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps;” and it ought not to be, for man is quite incompetent to perform such a task as that, because he has a natural bias towards that which is evil, — an inclination towards that which will be injurious to him, and to others also, and which will make him miss the chief end of his being, which is, to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

I should like, before proceeding further with my subject, to urge everyone, who has hitherto depended upon himself, to pause, and lift up his heart to heaven, and say, “Gracious Spirit, thou shalt be my Guide, from this time, and for ever.” For, young man, young woman, you will surely run upon the rocks, ere long, if you take the tiller of your life’s vessel into your own hands. With such a heart as yours, you cannot

expect to go right without the grace of God. The doctrine of the depravity of the human race, is not merely an article in the creed; it is a matter of everyday experience. There is in you, by nature, a tendency to put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter, — to put darkness for light, and light for darkness; and though you may think that you have a preference for good, — and it is possible that you have a preference for some forms of good, — yet there are critical points where self seeks to rule, where the weakness of your natural disposition will be discovered, sooner or later, and where the evil that lurks within your flesh will prove to be your ruin. I charge you, sons and daughters of Adam, to remember that, since your father, Adam, even in his state of innocence, could not direct his own way aright, but lost paradise for us all, there is no hope that, in your fallen state, you can find your way back to paradise. Nay, but you will keep on wandering further, and further, and further from the way of peace and holiness, for “it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.”

Let me give another meaning to the text, and still seek to prove it at the same time. It is not, and it ought not to be in man that walketh to direct his steps, because, not only is he naturally inclined to evil, but *even when grace has renewed his nature, his judgement is so fallible that it is a great mistake for him to attempt to direct his own way.* Dear brother or sister in Christ, the stony heart of unbelief has been removed from you, and you have had a new heart and a right spirit put within you; and, now, the living and incorruptible seed that is in you makes you seek after that which is good and right; but if you, even now, shall trust to your own judgement, you will find yourself brought into a thousand sorrows. Ah, my brother, you are an experienced Christian man, and others look up to you, and ask direction from you; but if you are really experienced, you will often say to them, “God helping me, I can direct you; but, as for myself, I feel that I have need of a director quite as much as the youngest babe in the family of God.” Does, not every man, who is truly wise, feel himself to be increasingly a fool apart from divine guidance, and is it not a token of growth in wisdom and grace, when a man’s self-confidence continues to grow less and less? Distrust yourself, dear friend, for you accurately gauge your own judgement when you do that. It is about little matters that wise men generally make their grosser mistakes. In what he considers a difficult matter, the wise Christian man always has resort to God in prayer; but when he gets what he regards as a very simple, thing, which is perfectly clear, and which he thinks he can himself decide; then his folly is speedily discovered. He is like the, Israelites were with the Gibeonites;

they said, in effect, if not in words, “We do not need to pray about this matter. We must not make treaties with the Canaanites, but these men are not Canaanites, that is quite clear. We heard them say that they had come from a far country, and when we looked at their shoes we knew that they spoke the truth. They told us that they were quite new when they put them on, yet now they are old and clouted; they must have come a great many miles, you may depend upon it. And their bread — did you notice that? It has the blue mould all over it; we should not like to eat a mouthful of it, yet they told us that it was quite new when they started. There is no doubt that they are distinguished foreigners, who have come from a far country, so let us strike hands with them, and make a covenant with them.” And so they did, for the case seemed so clear to them that they asked no counsel of God; and therein Israel made a great mistake. So, brothers and sisters, whenever any case appears to be very clear to you, be sure then to say, “Let us pray about it. “You know the old proverb, “When it is fine weather, carry an umbrella. When it is wet, you can do as you like.” So, when any case seems to be quite clear, pray over it. When it is more difficult, I dare not say that you may do as you like about praying then, unless I say it in the spirit of the proverb, which would imply that you would be sure to pray then. When you feel certain that you cannot go wrong, you certainly will go wrong unless you ask counsel of God about the matter. That was a good plan of the old Scotchman, who, when anything was in dispute, used to say, “Reach down yon Bible;” and when that was brought down, and the Scripture read, and prayer offered, the good man felt that he could see his way, and could go with firm step along the path to which the Lord had directed him. “It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps,” for his judgement is fallible.

I think there is another meaning to be given to the text, for the gracious man feels that he must not direct his own steps, *because he cannot take even a step in the right way apart from divine help*. How can he talk about directing his own steps when he is absolutely dependent upon the grace of God for every step he takes? O brothers and sisters, if the Lord were to help us, by his grace, until we got up to the doorstep of heaven, we should never be able to get in unless he gave us the grace to take the last step! You cannot direct your own steps, for you are a cripple, and cannot take even one step except as strength is given you from on high. You are like a ship upon the sea; you can make no progress except as the breath of the Divine Spirit fills the sails of your barque. How can you direct your own way when you have no

power to go in it, and are dependent upon God for everything? I pray you to confess your dependence, and not to talk of directing your own steps.

I must give you just one thought more under this head. *He that walketh need not think of directing his own steps, for there is One who will direct them for him.* What if sin inclines us to take the wrong path, and if a feeble judgement makes us err through inadvertence? There is no need for us to choose our own lot; but we may bow before the Lord, and say, “Thou shalt choose our inheritance for us.” The choice is difficult for you, my brother; then do not choose your own way, but leave it to him who seeth the end from the beginning, and who is sure to make a wise choice. The burden of life is heavy, my sister, then do not try to carry it, but “cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee.” “Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.” Let it not be your choice, but let it be God’s choice. That was a wise answer of a good old Christian woman, when she was asked whether she would choose to live or die. She said that she had no choice in the matter, but that she left it with the Lord. “But,” said one, “suppose the Lord put it to your choice, which would you select?” “Neither,” she replied; “I would ask him not to let me choose, but to choose for me so that it should be as he willed, not as I willed.” Oh, if we could but once abandon our own choosings, and say to the Lord, “Not as I will, but as thou wilt,” how much more happy we might be! We should not be troubled by the thought that we could not direct our own steps, but we should be glad of it, because our very weakness would entitle us to cry unto the Lord, “Now that I cannot direct my own way, what I know not teach thou me.”

II. Time fails me, and therefore I will close my discourse by briefly mentioning the practical lessons of the text in order to prove to you that **THESE WORDS ARE INSTRUCTIVE**. It seems to me that they are instructive if we use them thus.

First, *avoid all positive resolutions about what you mean to do*, remembering that “it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” Do not forget what the apostle James says about this matter, “Go to now, ye that say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a rear, and buy and sell, and get gain, whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow’.” If you do make any plans, always make them in pencil, and have your india-rubber handy, so that you can rub them

out quickly. Much mischief comes of making them in ink, and regarding them as permanent, and saying, "This is what I am sure I shall do." Cast iron breaks easily, so do not have any cast iron regulations for your life. Do not say, "That is my plan, and I shall keep to it whatever happens." Be ready to alter your plan as God's providence indicates that alteration would be right. I have known people who have been very much given to change; I cannot commend them, for I remember that Solomon said, "As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is a man that wandereth from his place." So, do not be in a hurry to wander. On the other hand, I have known some persons, who have resolved that they will never move at all. Do not make such a resolution as that, but recollect that, although "a rolling stone gathers no moss," it is equally true that "a sitting hen gets no barley;" and believe that there may come a time when it will be right for you to move. Do not make up your mind either that you will move, or that you will not move, but wait for guidance from God as to what he would have you do.

The next thing is, *never be too sanguine in your expectations*. I suppose we must have expectations; that old-fashioned benediction, "Blessed are they that expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed," is very difficult to gain. Expect that, if God has promised you anything, he will be true to his word; but, beyond that, do not expect anything beneath the moon; for, if you do, you will be sure to be disappointed sooner or later. It is of the man whose heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord, that it is said, "He shall not be afraid of evil tidings"; but if his heart had been fixed merely on the attainment of certain worldly ends, he would have been overwhelmed when the evil tidings came. As to anything in this world, let this be the rule by which you are governed, "Having food and raiment, be therewith content," and never cherish too sanguine expectations.

Next, *avoid all security as to the present*. If you have anything that you prize very highly, hold it very loosely, for you may easily lose it. Read the word "mortal" plainly imprinted on the brows of all your children. Look into the dear eyes that are to you like wells in the desert, and remember that they may be closed in less than an hour, and the light of life be gone from them. Your beloved one and you yourself are alike mortal, and either of you may soon be taken from the other. Have you property? Remember that wealth has wings, and that it dies away, like a bird upon swift pinions. Have you health? Then think what a marvellous mercy it is that —

***“A harp of thousand strings
Should keep in tune so long;” —***

and remember that, very soon, those strings may be all jarring, and some of them may be broken. Hold everything earthly with a, loose, hand; but grasp eternal things with a death-like grip. Grasp Christ in the power of the Spirit; grasp God, who is your everlasting portion, and your unfailing joy. As for other things, hold them as though you held them not, even as Paul says, “it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none;... and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.” Of everything below, it is wise for us to say, “This is not my abiding portion.” it is very necessary to say this, and to realise that, it is true, for everything here is covered with bird-lime, and the birds of paradise get stuck to it unless they are very watchful. Mind what you are doing, you prosperous people, you who have nice homes, you who are investing your money in the funds; mind that you do not get bird-limed. There is nothing permanently for you here, after all. Your home is in heaven; your home is not here; and if you find your treasure here, your heart will be here also; but it must not be so. You must keep all earthly treasures out of your heart, and let Christ be your treasure, and let him have your heart.

The next observation I would make is this, — *Bow before the divine will in everything.* “It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.” Why should it be? O Lord, thou art Master, thou art King; then why should we wish to have our own way? Is it right that the servant should take the master’s place? There are some of you who are in trouble, and probably your chief trouble arises from the fact that you will not absolutely submit to the Lord’s will. I pray that the Holy Spirit may enable you to do so, for trouble loses all its sting when the troubled one yields to God. If you had directed your own way, and this trouble had come upon you because of the choice that you had made, you might have cause to be distressed; but as the Lord has so directed and arranged your affairs, why should you be cast down? My dear friend, you know — or, at any rate, you ought to know — that you cannot be supreme; you must be content to be second. You must say to the Lord, “Thy will, not mine, be done.” You will have to say it sooner or later; and if you are a child of God, you ought to have said it long ago, so say it at once. I heard one who, I thought, was a Christian, say, “I cannot think that God was right in taking away my dear mother from me.” I replied, “My

sister, you must not talk like that.” Perhaps someone else says, “I did feel that it was hard when my dear child was taken from me.” Yes, my dear friend, you may have felt that it was hard, but you ought to have felt that it was right. God must be free to do as he pleases, and he always does what is right; therefore, you must submit to his will, whatever he pleases to do.

My last observation is, — *Pray about everything*. Remember what Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.” Pray about everything; I make no exception to this. Pray about waking in the morning, and pray about falling asleep at night. Pray about any great event in your life, but pray equally about what you call the minor events. Pray as Jacob did when he crossed the brook Jabbok; but do not forget to pray when there is no angry Esau near, and no special danger to fear. The simplest thing, that is not prayed over, may have more evil in it than what appears to be the direst evil when once it has been brought to God in prayer. I pray that all of you, who love the Lord, may commit yourselves afresh to Christ this very hour. I wish to do so myself, saying, “My Master, here am I; take me, and do as thou wilt with me. Use me for thy glory in any way that thou pleasest. Deprive me of every comfort, if so I shall the more be able to honour thee. Let my choicest treasures be surrendered if thy sovereign will shall so ordain.” Let every child of God make a complete surrender here and now, and ask for grace to stand to it. Your greatest sorrow will come when you begin to be untrue to your full surrender to the Lord; so may you never prove untrue to it!

