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GOD THE GUIDE OF HIS BLIND PEOPLE.

BY

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“I will bring the blind by a way they know not.”—ISAIAH xlii. 16.

TRUE wisdom will confirm the decision of Scripture, not only as to spiritual things, but as to all things, when it says, “If any man thinketh that he knoweth anything;” *i. e.*, if he regard himself as perfect in knowledge, “he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.” It is only the ignorant man who can feel that he knows everything. And the more truly well-informed an individual becomes, the more ready is he to confess, not only that he does not, but also that he cannot know much. Even as to external objects, things which fall under the cognizance of the senses, it cannot be said that we perfectly know them. The veriest child may ask questions about a straw or a clod of earth, which the wisest philosopher would be unable to answer. The question, what is matter? or gravitation? or light? or heat? or time? or space? cannot be answered. We know many things about their appearances and laws, but what they are, no man can tell. In every blade of grass, and breath

of air, in the formation of our own bodies, in the nature of the animal life which we possess, in all things around us and within us, there are mysteries—things yet unlearned by man. If we look forth upon the universe of God, the little circle of light by which we are surrounded, is perceived to be itself surrounded by an illimitable circumference of darkness. The most powerful optic-glass helps not so much to perfect our knowledge, as to reveal to us the vastness of our ignorance. Hence, Sir Isaac Newton, who astonished the civilized world by his discoveries, and whose name stands among the brightest and most imperishable upon the annals of all human science, declared, when far in the decline of life, that “he seemed to himself to have been like a child, picking here and there a pebble on the shore, while the vast ocean of truth yet lay undiscovered before him.”

If we pass from material to spiritual objects, we are yet more emphatically ignorant and blind. Leave out of view the teachings of God’s word, and what do we know of the spiritual world? Can we tell what orders of intelligences dwell there? or what may be the mode of their existence? or what their moral character? or what connection they may have with us, and what influence over us? We must resort not to the poet, but to the inspired writer to ascertain the fact that

Millions of spiritual beings walk the earth
Unseen, both when we sleep, and when we wake.

We are surrounded by principalities, and powers,

and ministering spirits, who are ever active, for weal or woe, in influencing our conduct, in guiding our steps, in aiding to fix our everlasting destinies. Man does not probably so much influence man; the friends and relatives and business associates, by whom you are each surrounded from day to day, do not probably exercise so much influence over your present conduct and everlasting destiny as unseen intelligences, good and bad, are doing. Yet what do we know of them, save what the Bible tells us? Nothing—absolutely nothing. We walk amidst these spiritual beings as men walk amidst their fellow-men, when in total darkness or in blindness. We see them not—we know them not.

If we look to our own path or progress in life, (and it is this fact more especially which is assumed in our text,) we find ourselves not at all better informed concerning that which lies before us. We walk forward in the path of life, as men walk who grope their way in a strange road, step by step, in total blindness. We have no faculty of the mind by which we can penetrate the future, as memory can penetrate the past. There is a thick curtain hung across our course, so thick that the most penetrating gaze can never pierce it, nor the most sagacious contrivance ever rend it; a curtain which recedes before us as we advance, but only step by step, yet revealing to us at each advance, things most unexpected, often most undesired, frequently most startling in their nature. All human wisdom has never yet devised a way to ascertain what a single day or hour may bring forth. Men have

earnestly longed to know the future, and have tried to know it, but without success. The extent to which astrology and fortune-telling and similar impositions have been patronised in every age, shows how eagerly men would know, if they could, what lies before them. But auguries, and omens, and oracles, and every kindred device, however ingeniously contrived, and with whatever skill practised, have failed to draw aside the veil which hides futurity from sight.

With what truthfulness therefore do the words of our text—with what truthfulness does the word of God everywhere, represent men—especially in their natural state—as blind; as persons who cannot see before them the path in which they walk, but who are also walking in a new and strange path; a path with which no information to be acquired from others can render them familiar.

Now, this view of our situation may seem dark and gloomy. But admitting it to be so, is it *less true*, because dark and gloomy? We admit that it is to him who is forgetful of his God and unreconciled to Him, an awe-inspiring glimpse of his present situation. And we would that every forgetter of God in this assembly might feel it to be so. How know you, O man, O woman, whose pursuits, and plans, and pleasures all have reference to this life, and who art either carelessly or confidently trusting to unaided human wisdom—how know you that you may not be wandering even now in the by-paths of error and delusion to the ruin of your soul? How know you that some awful precipice

may not be near at hand across the very path in which you tread? How know you that your foot may not be pressing even now the brink, so that a single step may plunge you into the bottomless pit? You cannot know it. You are not sure that this very day may not bring forth your everlasting ruin.

But the word of God does not more explicitly reveal to us our ignorance and blindness, than it offers to us a great and infallible guide. "*I* will bring the blind by a way that they know not," says Jehovah himself. It is a promise, made, as the previous context shows, with a reference to the Saviour's coming and His work. It is a promise made to the children of God, in their natural state, as blind and ignorant as others, and exposed to the same dangers. *They* should be led in a way that they knew not. Their course should be one that was not of their own choosing. And it was to be a course at every stage and turn unexpected and surprising.

Let our minds be now directed then to the inquiry, whether or no this promise is verified in the experience of God's people. Can we perceive in the way by which they are led along, anything so new and unexpected—so without or even so contrary to their own plans and anticipations that we may believe there is a superhuman wisdom planning for them, and a hand of infinite power leading them along?

I. In answer to this question we first reply, that

such a guidance may be traced in the dealings of God with His children *by His providence*.

A recent historian of the Reformation has placed in the forefront of his immortal work this sentence respecting it. "This history takes as its guiding-star the simple and pregnant truth that *God is in history*."* And that single sentence contains a world of important truth. Other historians have sought to make their books valuable and valued by means of accurate and learned statements; by picturesqueness and beauty of description; by deep and philosophical reflections, but almost without exception they have forgotten this cardinal truth, that the hand of God has wrought in all the affairs of men. They have described the rise and fall of nations; the changes, progress, and convulsions of the nations of the earth; but amidst the establishment and overthrow of thrones, the intrigues of politicians and the clang of arms, they have forgotten the chief, even the first cause of all—God, "working all things according to the counsel of His own will." And no little share of our forgetfulness of God may be attributed to that silent lie of all our histories, which has kept out of view the important fact, that "God is not far from every one of us."

The recorded history of the Jewish nation affords a beautiful illustration of the truth, that God is active in all human affairs. Had that history been for the first time written out by an uninspired hand, it had no doubt differed little from other histories. We should have had a minute, and perhaps, as to

* D'Aubigne's Hist. of the Reformation, preface.

outward things, an accurate account of the Jewish origin in Abraham, and thence down to the Redeemer's time, with all the long series of outward changes, while the presence and power of God had been almost unseen and unthought of, and the various wonderful turns in their affairs been, as far as possible, ascribed to, and explained by, merely natural causes. But God became Himself the author of that history. The Holy Ghost enabled holy men to perceive and to record *the truth*. And hence, in every event of Jewish history, we see the hand of God, not only in its miraculous, but in its most ordinary occurrences. The veil was drawn aside, and the cause of this thing and of that thing was seen in the Divine Mind, as well as in nature and in man. And had God inspired another prophet to write the history of any other nation, yea, had God inspired a prophet to write your individual history, my hearer, or my own, I doubt not we should be startled and astonished to see how busy the hand of God had been in its every stage and turn. I know we should be made to feel as we have never felt, that if there is less of miracle, there is no less of Providence around us now, than was around the Jews in the days of their theocracy.

And yet, blinded as our understandings are by sin, and heedless as we are of the hand of God while it works, we can often clearly see the traces of that hand when its work is done. However tame and commonplace his course of life, I venture to assert, that there is not one among my audience

who can sit down in still retirement, and take a careful and candid retrospect through adult years back to the scenes of childhood's early days, who will not feel the calm conviction steal in upon his soul, that there has been an unseen hand leading him in paths that he knew not. The assertion of the poet finds a response, not only in our experience, but also in the very depths of our dependent nature, when he says,

There's a divinity which shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

This same sentiment was uttered only in other words by a more infallible poet and philosopher when he said long before, "The heart of a man deviseth his way, but the Lord directeth his steps." Did you ever try the experiment of taking such a calm and careful retrospect? If not, no wonder if the doctrine of a special Providence has taken little hold upon your mind and heart. Try, I beseech you, the profitable experiment, and see if you be not convinced. Tear yourself away from the busy world which now crowds upon your thoughts, and from the relations which now bind you to the present, and flee back to the sunny days of childhood. Surround yourself again with the smiles of those whom you then loved, and on whom you then leaned for happiness. Call back the gladsome, buoyant spirit which then dwelt within your bosom. Bid memory again paint upon the canvas of your soul the sunlit landscape of the future. Bid her re-colour the faded and almost forgotten visions

of future enjoyment. Bid her delineate afresh the erased and neglected plans for future usefulness, success, and happiness. And then, when you have done well and carefully all this, go forward and re-tread the path of life, carrying with you those recovered plans and pictures of the future, and at each step compare the anticipation or resolve with the reality. And how do they agree? Ah how? You meant to do so and so. Did you do it? You meant to be so and so. Did you fulfil your design? Did you even always alter your designs voluntarily as you went forward? Although ignorant of your history, I answer for you—you did not. You found unforeseen circumstances arising all along the way to alter your determinations and to change your course. Now some seeming accident occurred, perhaps the veriest offspring of a moment, to mar your plan. Here some unexpected reverse of fortune overtook you, which with all your wisdom and exertions you could not avert. There some bereavement snatched away a relative or friend, whose departure dashed many a fond hope, and threw many a well-laid scheme into confusion. And how many parts of life, unpainted in your youthful picture, have you not encountered! Passions have been stirred up which you never meant should have a place within your bosom. Trials and troubles and temptations have occurred, the nature and perhaps the very existence of which you knew not of when you started on your journey. Friends whom you deemed true as truth itself, have forgotten you, perchance have become your enemies.

Sickness has laid you upon beds of languishing, and brought you to the brink of eternity, or perhaps has more permanently benumbed your susceptibilities for enjoyment. And so by a thousand unforeseen incidents, you have been led by a way that you knew not, and reached to-day a position, both as to inward character and outward relations to the world, which it was no part of your original plan to reach. Is it not so? And now as you contrast your present self with your former picture of your then future self, does not either this or that, as the case may be, seem to be a caricature and mockery of the other? And now why is this? Why have you been unable to walk in that path which you marked out for yourself? Why in spite of your utmost exertions to go in it, have your feet been turned aside? How happens it that you have been often diverted when you were unwittingly just entering some labyrinth of trouble, or about to step blindly off some precipice of guilt and ruin? How is it that you have been so often protected from yourself, and thwarted for your good? Ah! it is because you have had an unseen guide. And although you perhaps felt not his gentle grasp which was laid upon you, and acknowledged not his goodness, he has not left you to walk alone a single step, or to chose your own path when He saw it would not be for your advantage. He has brought you in your blindness by a way that you knew not. And just as really as he led his ancient Israel, day by day, by a pillar of fire and of cloud, just so really is he now leading by his own presence,

every one of his own dear children towards the heavenly Canaan. And although he may lead them through the depths of the sea, or the rugged desert, by blessings and by chastisements, He will by his providence be with them still, until they reach the journey's end, for his promise is "I will *never* leave thee nor forsake thee."

II. But we are far from having yet reached the full meaning of this text, which we must regard, from its close connection with the previous prophecy concerning Christ, as having reference yet more to the leadings of God's *Spirit* than of his providence. I proceed, then, to remark yet more emphatically, that God leads his children by a way they know not *in the dealings of his grace*. He, by his grace, lays hold upon them at a time when they do not expect him, and in a way in which they look not for him; and from that moment, until they reach their heavenly destination, their progress in the paths of righteousness is, at every step, new, strange, and surprising to themselves. Let us briefly see if it be not so.

When God by his Spirit comes to apply unto the soul the redemption that is in Christ, he first of all produces in the soul *a persuasion and perception of its own guilt and wretchedness*; and this conviction God causes to lay hold upon the soul, usually *at a time* as unlikely, as he does in ways wonderfully various. Behold the woman of Samaria! She goes forth from her household as usual, to fill her vessel with water at the well of Jacob; she finds a tired stranger sitting on the well, and

perceives him to be of the hated nation of the Jews; she enters into a brief conversation with him, and soon stands conscience-stricken and self-condemned before the acknowledged Messiah. Behold the assembly which stood before the Apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost! There are men out of every nation under heaven, who have come up to Jerusalem, not to find salvation, but for purposes of trade and ceremonial worship. There, too, stand the men of Judea, who have just now taken and with wicked hands have crucified and slain the Lord of glory, their hearts and hands yet reeking with the Redeemer's blood. They have just reached the climax of human guilt. Yet, strange to tell, there they stand, convinced of sin, and crying—"Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Behold the thief upon the cross! Regardless alike of the claims of God and of humanity, his crimes have brought him near to death. Even amidst the agonies of crucifixion, the two thieves at first both railed on Jesus; but soon the one is heard rebuking his companion, saying, "Dost thou not fear God?" while he turns his supplicating cry to Jesus, "Lord, remember me." Behold the blaspheming, persecuting Saul! With an exceeding madness in his heart against the saints of God, breathing forth threatenings and slaughter,—with the commission of the high priest for their destruction on his person, a light shines around him, a voice from heaven smites upon his ear, and the bloody persecutor humbly, tremblingly inquires, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Behold the jailer at Phi-

lippi! He retires to his rest as unconcerned about his soul as usual, but at midnight he is heard crying in alarm, "What must I do to be saved?" John Newton became convinced of sin while in a slave-ship, and engaged in a course of gross and shocking licentiousness. A late and celebrated clergyman of England was pierced by his first convictions of sin by hearing from the minister who occupied the pulpit the simple words, "Let us pray." Two students in one of our colleges, while a revival was in progress, some years ago, mutually agreed to attend an inquiring meeting, that they might amuse themselves by practising deception upon the officiating clergyman. When the meeting was called to prayer, they kneeled among the rest, and, while upon their knees, they were both smitten by the power of the Spirit. Thus, "fools who came to scoff, remained to pray;" and so unexpectedly found salvation in the cross of Christ.

And it is ever so. God is characteristically a God who is found of them that sought Him not. Often does he meet the criminal in his dungeon cell, and reclaim him to himself. Often does he meet the licentious man in the midst of his licentiousness: sometimes the dying sinner, as he did the thief upon the cross, when all hope seems preposterous. Not seldom does he bring the sinner to repentance when he has just reached a point, where he is more than ever surrounded by manifold and strong temptations: when he had perhaps long disregarded affectionate parental prayers and admonitions, the warnings of a preached Gospel, the striv-

ings of the Holy Spirit: when he had begun to indulge in new species of iniquity: when he was peculiarly exposed to evil influences or companions: when in short his case seemed more than ever hopeless. When Satan had shielded his bosom most carefully with some choice and adamant breastplate from the armory of hell, then did the king make sharp his arrows to pierce it through and through, and reach the heart beyond. Thus, generally, (may I not say always?) does God magnify the power of his grace.

As to the *nature* no less than the occasion of *these convictions*, God works in unexpected ways. Men often think that conviction of sin is little more than to know that one is a sinner. Hence they often expect that when a suitable time, a convenient season, shall have come, it will be sufficient just to read and meditate upon this fact, that they are sinners. And he, who once entertained this thought, but has since become a child of God, has probably been taken by surprise when the Spirit opened the eyes of his understanding. He was astonished to find how stony, how unyielding, how unfeeling a heart he carried in his bosom. He was astonished to find, how averse he was from God, and how depraved he is in all his nature. He is amazed to see how things before regarded as innocent, have become vile; how the favorite sins which he hugged to his bosom have become serpents and scorpions which he cannot get rid of: how the carnal nature which he before delighted to gratify, (so far at least as outward appearances and the

good opinion of those around him would allow) is now transformed into a putrid carcase—a body of death—from which he longs and strives to be set free.

The same remark also applies to *the means* which God employs to arrest his children in their thoughtless way. They perhaps expected to go up the slope of Calvary by some path of their own choosing, but how has God disappointed them? They were intending perhaps when a convenient time had come, to seek salvation leisurely and gently, as a mere matter of self-interest. But, lo! the Spirit of God came down upon them like a rushing mighty wind, in which the soul, like some tall forest tree, was swayed and bowed before the blast as if its destruction were at hand. While God was effecting the transformation of the old creature into the new, all its powers seemed convulsed by the greatness of the change. Or, more probably the sinner then impenitent, was looking for some mighty exertion of God's power; waiting for, and desirous of some powerful revival in the community, or some indubitable, heart-breaking sense of guilt laid upon himself. He felt that until God almost struck him to the earth by the thunderings and lightnings of the law, he could not be in God's path towards heaven. And how did God disappoint him also. The power of the Spirit descended upon him like the gentle shower, or the evening dew. Some striking providence; some simple truth repeated in his hearing for the thousandth time; some whispered admonition of a Christian friend;

some long-known text of holy scripture; awakes attention, decides for action, bows down the soul gently, yet with true convictions, before God. God has led the sinner to conviction by a way that he knew not.

The same is eminently true of *the apprehension and acceptance of Jesus Christ: the act of faith*. It is wonderful how defective, how distorted, how every way wrong, are men's views of Jesus Christ previous to the experience of faith. They may have learned the whole orthodoxy of the subject. Yet there are some things here which the natural man cannot discern. There seems to be a veil—a dark and terrible veil—drawn before the eyes of men, which shuts out the sight of Christ as “the way, the truth, and the life.” This strange, this universal blindness of men to Christ, and to his relation to our salvation, meets us at every turn in the endeavour to lead souls to Heaven, and their inability to comprehend the grand and spirit-stirring message of salvation when set before them in the clearest terms, can only be explained by recurring to the Apostolic declaration—“In whom the god of this world hath blinded the eyes of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.” When God saves a sinner, this dark and terrible veil is torn from his eyes by the power of the Holy Ghost, and to the soul's recovered vision is presented “Christ, the image of God,” in all his divine fullness, in all the completeness of his offices, in all the freeness of his offers. He becomes

its wisdom, its righteousness, its sanctification, its redemption. The soul now bows down before him, leans upon him, clings to him, takes him as its all in all. He who was just now "without form or comeliness," has become "the one altogether lovely." And now as the soul looks back upon its by-gone times of ignorance, it is filled with astonishment and humiliation because it never *thus* saw Christ before,—so free, so simple, so beautiful, so perfect does his salvation now appear. The believing soul feels and is ready to confess that in revealing to it such a sight; in giving to it such a trust, God has been leading it in ways which it knew not.

The divine methods for leading the believer to growth in grace are not less unexpected. When the new-born child of God looks forth upon the path of holiness, into which his feet are, by grace, just turned, it seems to him to lie, throughout its whole extent, across green pastures and beside still waters, and, with the most sanguine and pleasing anticipations, he presses on. He sees not the difficulties of the way, and is, therefore, almost ready to chide others for their tardy pace, while he forms high resolutions for himself. He will never lag, let others do what they may. But he has not gone far before he finds that even here he cannot walk in the way of his own choosing. Perhaps he has begun with too much self-confidence, or too much pride, and it is best he should be humbled. Hence, he has not gone far before his feet are found in a more rugged and more toilsome path. Temptations

are around him, and sometimes he falls beneath their power. Unexpected hindrances arise on this side and on that, until he finds, at length, that his own strength is perfect weakness. Perhaps he is in prosperity, and he is found yielding to self-applause, to self-indulgence, or to avarice. Perhaps he is in adversity, and he yields to despondency, to repinings, to distrust God. Beloved objects of affection are spared, and he idolizes them. They are torn away, and he murmurs at his Father's act. Without are fightings and within are fears. Yet he trusts in God. He presses onward. He prays day by day for growth in grace. Who that lives a life of faith cannot appreciate the language of that touching hymn?—

*I hop'd that in some favour'd hour,
At once he'd grant me my request,
And by his love's constraining pow'r
Subdue my sins and give me rest.*

*Instead of this, he made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart ;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.*

*Yea, more ; with his own hand he seem'd
Intent to aggravate my woe ;
Cross'd all the fair designs I schem'd,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.*

*“Lord, why is this?” I trembling cried,
“Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?”
“’Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,
“I answer pray’r for grace and faith.”*

And is such the experience of the young convert who started but yesterday upon the road heavenward, full of ardent hopes and high resolves? Yes. God has put the gold in the furnace. He is tearing loose the roots of the tree, that he may finally transplant it to a better soil. He is guiding his child by a more rugged road, because his eye sees dangers in the path of uninterrupted progress and enjoyment, even in spiritual things. And he will continue, even to the end of life, thus to bring the blind by a way they knew not.

Still further; even *on the believer's death-bed* is often and gloriously illustrated the teaching of our text. See there a believer who has been all his lifetime in bondage, through fear of death. Every sign of its approach has filled him with alarm, and the knowledge that he himself must sometime pass through that dread change has filled his soul with trembling. And now his time has come. The silver cord will soon be loosed, and the golden bowl be broken. Flesh and heart already begin to fail him. But, lo! to his surprise, his soul is calm. The destroyer has lost all his terrors. The everlasting arms are underneath him, and he joyfully exclaims, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me!"

There is another believer whose countenance was always sad. It was not so much that he feared the King of Terrors, but he doubted his interest in Christ. He feared to appropriate unto himself the

precious promises and consolations of the gospel lest he should be a self-deceiver. He feared to utter a clear testimony on the side of Christ, lest he should be uttering heartless words. Now he, too, must enter that dark valley. And how can he, who always feared while in life and health, be otherwise than in despair in this his day of awful trial? But look! how serene and cheerful is his aspect! The dark clouds are now all cleared away. The Sun of Righteousness is pouring its effulgence full upon him. And, as he disappears from mortal sight, his last shout, clear and joyful, rings in our ears: "I know that my Redeemer liveth! O, death! where is thy sting? O, grave! where is thy victory?" God leads his people, in the hour of death, by a way that they knew not.

I will only add, that as the path by which God leads his people is in its beginning, and in all its progress, so is it in its *termination*—one which they know not. Our heavenly destiny is veiled from mortal sight. "It doth not yet appear what we shall be." The believer's has all along been a surprising course; but here, my brethren, will be the great surprise of all, when he bursts away from his habiliments of flesh, and the remaining bonds of sin, and finds himself in the abodes of glory. What new, what strange, what ecstatic sensations will then rush in upon him! What yet untasted sources of enjoyment will then be open to him! What vast discoveries of wisdom, and of power, and of grace, as yet unguessed at, will he make! What seraphic raptures, what holy companionships, what a blessed

eternity will be his! Refine the joys of earth as you may—exert your imaginations to the utmost—you have not yet conceived adequately of the joys and glories of that heavenly home towards which God by his grace is daily leading each and every one of his dear children. And when the first tumult of that great surprise shall have subsided, it will be one occupation of that eternity of bliss, to look back along the way by which the Lord your God has led you, and to trace his goodness, his wisdom, and his power in its every step. And then and there, as you review his dealings with you, in the pure light of heaven, you will see cause to praise him for ever and for ever more, that he gave you not the choice of your own path, but led you, in your blindness, by a path which else you had never known.

Accept, then, I beseech you, Christian brethren, the joy and strength these words are suited and intended to afford you. Believe that your Heavenly Father is continually at your side, and choosing all your paths. Commit your way into his keeping. Trust to his wisdom in all you perplexities and straits. Lean on his powerful arm in all your weakness; rely upon his firm promise that he never will forsake you. Be submissive and reconciled to his will in all things. Cast your eyes forward from his present dealings to their glorious issues; and be ever careful to testify your gratitude by your obedience and by your praise.