

THE GOOD OLD WAY

BY

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Jeremiah vi. 16: Stand ye in the ways and see; and ask for the old paths, where is the good way; and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.

THIS advice was given to people who were in peril and perplexity. The kingdom of Judah was threatened with destruction, which could be averted only by wise and prompt action. But the trouble was to decide in which direction that action should be taken. The nation was divided into loud parties, and these parties into noisy wings. Every man had a theory of his own, or a variation of some other man's theory.

Some favoured an alliance with the East; some preferred the friendship of the West; others, a course of diplomatic dalliance; a few stood out for honest independence. Some said that what the country needed was an increase of wealth; some held that a splendid and luxurious court like that of Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar would bring prosperity; others maintained that the troubles of the land could be healed only by a return to "simpler manners, purer laws." Among the nobility and their followers all kinds of novelties in the worship of idols were in fashion and new gods were imported every season. The philosophers cultivated a discreet indifference to all religious questions. The prophets taught that the only salvation for the nation lay in the putting away of idolatry and the

revival of faith in the living and true God.

Judah was like a man standing at the cross-roads, on a stormy night, with all the guide-posts blown down. Meantime the Babylonian foe was closing in around Jerusalem, and it was necessary to do something, or die.

The liberty of choice was an embarrassment. The minds of men alternated between that rash haste which is ready to follow any leader who makes noise enough, and that sceptical spirit which doubts whether any line of action can be right because so many lines are open. Into this atmosphere of fever and fog came the word of the prophet. Let us consider what it means.

Stand ye in the ways and see: that means deliberation. When you are at a

junction it is no time to shut your eyes and run at full speed. Where there are so many ways, some of them are likely to be wrong. A turning-point is the place for prudence and forethought.

Ask for the old paths, what is the good way: that means guidance. No man is forced to face the problems of life alone. Other men have tried the different ways. Peace, prosperity, victory have been won by the nation in former times. Inquire of the past how these blessings were secured. Look for the path which has already led to safety and happiness. Let history teach you which among all these crossing ways is the best to follow.

And walk therein: that means action. When you have deliberated, when you have seen the guiding light upon the

way of security and peace, then go ahead. Prudence is worthless unless you put it into practice. When in doubt do nothing; but as long as you do nothing you will be in doubt. Never man or nation was saved by inaction. The only way out of danger is the way into work. Gird up your loins, trembling Judah, and push along your chosen path, steadily, bravely, strenuously, until you come to your promised rest.

Now I am sure this was good counsel that the prophet gave to his people in the days of perplexity. It would have been well for them if they had followed it. I am sure it is also good counsel for us, a word of God to steady us and stimulate us amid life's confusions. Let me make it a personal message to you.

Stand in the ways: Ask for the good

way : Walk therein : — Deliberation, Guidance, Action, — Will you take these words with you, and try to make them a vital influence in your life?

I. First, I ask you to stand in the ways and see. I do not mean to say that you have not already been doing this to a certain extent. The great world is crossed by human footsteps which make paths leading in all directions. Men travel through on different ways ; and I suppose some of you have noticed the fact, and thought a little about it

There is the way of sensuality. Those who walk in it take appetite as their guide. Their main object in life is to gratify their physical desires. Some of them are delicate, and some of them are coarse. That is a matter of temperament. But all of them are hungry.

That is a matter of principle. Whether they grub in the mire for their food like swine, or browse daintily upon the tree-tops like the giraffe, the question of life for those who follow this way is the same. "How much can we hold? How can we obtain the most pleasure for these five senses of ours before they wear out?" And the watchword of their journey is, "Let us eat and drink and be merry, for we do not expect to die to-morrow."

There is the way of avarice. Those who follow it make haste to be rich. The almighty dollar rolls before them along the road, and they chase it. Some of them plod patiently along the highway of toil. Others are always leaping fences and trying to find short cuts to wealth. But they are alike in this: whatever they do by way of avocation, the

real vocation of their life is to make money. If they fail, they are hard and bitter; if they succeed, they are hard and proud. But they all bow down to the golden calf, and their motto is, "Lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth."

There is the way of social ambition. Those who walk in it have their eyes fixed on various prizes, such as titles of honour, public office, large acquaintance with prosperous people, the reputation of leading the fashion. But the real satisfaction that they get out of it all is simply the feeling of notoriety, the sense of belonging to a circle to which ordinary people are not admitted and to whose doings the world, just for this reason, pays envious attention. This way is less like a road than like a ladder. Most of the people who are on it are "climbers."

There are other ways, less clearly marked, more difficult to trace,—the way of moral indifference, the way of intellectual pride, the way of hypocrisy, the way of indecision. This last is not a single road; it is a net-work of sheep-tracks, crossing and recrossing the great highways, leading in every direction, and ending nowhere. The men who wander in these aimless paths go up and down through the world, changing their purposes, following one another blindly, forever travelling but never arriving at the goal of their journey.

Through all this tangle there runs another way,—the path of faith and duty. Those who walk in it believe that life has a meaning, the fulfilment of God's will, and a goal, the attainment of perfect harmony with Him. They try to

make the best of themselves in soul and body by training and discipline. They endeavour to put their talents to the noblest use in the service of their fellow-men, and to unfold their faculties to the highest joy and power in the life of the Spirit. They seek an education to fit them for work, and they do their work well because it is a part of their education. They respect their consciences, and cherish their ideals. They put forth an honest effort to be good and to do good and to make the world better. They often stumble. They sometimes fall. But, take their life from end to end, it is a faithful attempt to walk in "the way of righteousness, which is the way of peace."

Such are some of the ways that lead through the world. And they are all

open to us. We can travel by the road that pleases us. Heredity gives us our outfit. Environment supplies our company. But when we come to the cross-roads, the question is, "Boy, which way will you ride?"

Deliberation is necessary, unless we wish to play a fool's part. No amount of energy will take the place of thought. A strenuous life, with its eyes shut, is a kind of wild insanity. A drifting life, with its eyes open, is a kind of mild idiocy.

The real question is, "How will you live? After what rule and pattern? Along what way? Toward what end?"

Will you let chance answer that question for you? Will you let yourself be led blindfold by the first guide that offers, or run stupidly after the crowd without

asking whither they are going? You would not act so in regard to the shortest earthly journey. You would not rush into the railway station and jump aboard of the first train you saw, without looking at the signboards. Surely if there is anything in regard to which we need to exercise deliberation, it is the choice of the way that we are to take through the world. You have thought a good deal about what business, what profession, you are to follow. Think more deeply, I beg you, about how you are to follow it and what you are to follow it for. *Stand in the ways, and see.*

II. Second, I earnestly advise you to *ask for the old paths, where is the good way.*

I do not regard this as a mere counsel

of conservatism, an unqualified commendation of antiquity. True, it implies that the good way will not be a new discovery, a track that you and I strike out for ourselves. Among the paths of conduct, that which is entirely original is likely to be false, and that which is true is likely to have some footprints on it. When a man comes to us with a scheme of life which he has made all by himself, we may safely say to him, as the old composer said to the young musician who brought him a symphony of the future, "It is both new and beautiful; but that which is new is not beautiful, and that which is beautiful is not new."

But this is by no means the same as saying that everything ancient is therefore beautiful and true, or that all the

old ways are good. The very point of the text is that we must discriminate among antiquities,—a thing as necessary in old chairs and old books as in old ways.

Evil is almost, if not quite, as ancient as good. Folly and wisdom, among men at least, are twins, and we cannot distinguish between them by the gray hairs. Adam's way was old enough; and so was the way of Cain, and of Noah's vile son, and of Lot's lewd daughters, and of Balaam, and of Jezebel, and of Manasseh. Judas Iscariot was as old as St. John. Ananias and Sapphira were of the same age with St. Peter and St. Paul.

What we are to ask for is not simply the old way, but that one among the old ways which has been tested and tried and proved to be the good way. The

Spirit of Wisdom tells us that we are not to work this way out by logarithms, or evolve it from our own inner consciousness, but to learn what it is by looking at the lives of other men and marking the lessons which they teach us. Experience has been compared to the stern-light of a ship which shines only on the road that has been traversed. But the stern-light of a ship that sails before you is a head-light to you.

You do not need to try everything for yourself in order to understand what it means. The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that he gave his heart to know madness and folly; and that it was all vanity and vexation of spirit. It will be a wise economy for us to accept his lesson without paying his tuition-fee over again.

It is perfectly safe for a man to take

it as a fact that fire burns, without putting his hand into the flame. He does not need to try perilous experiments with his own soul in order to make sure that lust defiles, that avarice hardens, that frivolity empties, that selfishness cankers the heart. He may understand the end of the way of sensuality by looking at any old pleasure-seeker,

“Gray, and gap-toothed, and lean as death,”

mumbling the dainties that he can no longer enjoy, and glowering with bleared eyes at the indulgences which now mock him even while they tempt him. The goal of the path of covetousness may be discerned in the face of any old money-worshipper ; keeping guard over his piles of wealth, like a surly watch-dog ; or, if perchance he has failed, haunting the

places where fortune has deceived him, like an unquiet ghost.

Inquire and learn; consider and discern. There need be no doubt about the direction of life's various ways.

Which are the nations that have been most peaceful and noble and truly prosperous? Those that have followed pride and luxury and idolatry? Or those that have cherished sobriety and justice, and acknowledged the Divine law of righteousness?

Which are the families that have been most serene and pure and truly fortunate? Those in which there has been no discipline, no restraint, no common faith, no mutual love? Or those in which sincere religion has swayed life to its stern and gracious laws, those in which parents and children have walked together to the

House of God, and knelt together at His altar, and rejoiced together in His service ?

I tell you, my brother-men, it has become too much the fashion in these latter days to sneer and jeer at the old-fashioned ways of the old-fashioned American household. Something too much of iron there may have been in the Puritan's temper ; something too little of sunlight may have come in through the narrow windows of his house. But that house had foundations, and the virile virtues lived in it. There were plenty of red corpuscles in his blood, and his heart beat in time with the eternal laws of right, even though its pulsations sometimes seemed a little slow and heavy. It would be well for us if we could get back into the old way, which proved itself

to be the good way, and maintain, as our fathers did, the sanctity of the family, the sacredness of the marriage-vow, the solemnity of the mutual duties binding parents and children together. From the households that followed this way have come men that could rule themselves as well as their fellows, women that could be trusted as well as loved. Read the history of such families, and you will understand the truth of the poet's words : —

“Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,—

These three alone lead life to sovereign power.”

Look around you in the world and see what way it is that has brought your fellow-men to peace and quietness of

heart, to security and honour of life. Is it the way of unbridled self-indulgence, of unscrupulous greed, of aimless indolence? Or is it the way of self-denial, of cheerful industry, of fair dealing, of faithful service? If true honour lies in the respect and grateful love of one's fellow-men, if true success lies in a contented heart and a peaceful conscience, then the men who have reached the highest goal of life are those who have followed most closely the way to which Jesus Christ points us and in which He goes before us.

III. *Walk therein and ye shall find rest for your souls.* Right action brings rest.

Rest! Rest! How that word rings like a sweet bell through the turmoil of our age. We are rushing to and fro,

destroying rest in our search for it. We drive our automobiles from one place to another, at furious speed, not knowing what we shall do when we get there. We make haste to acquire new possessions, not knowing how we shall use them when they are ours. We are in a fever of new discoveries and theories, not knowing how to apply them when they are made. We feed ourselves upon novel speculations until our heads swim with the vertigo of universal knowledge which changes into the paresis of universal doubt.

But in the hours of silence, the Spirit of Wisdom whispers a secret to our hearts. *Rest depends upon conduct. The result of your life depends upon your choosing the good way and walking in it.*

And to you I say, my brother-men, choose Christ, for He is the Way. All the strength and sweetness of the best possible human life are embodied in Him. All the truth that is needed to inspire and guide man to noble action and fine character is revealed in Him. He is the one Master altogether worthy to be served and followed. Take His yoke upon you and learn of Him, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.