

THE WAY OF THE LORD

Which Side are You On?



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Proverbs 10:29, "The way of the Lord is strength to the upright: but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity."

You will notice that the English translation has added two words to the original text. The words are "shall be" in the last clause. They are unnecessary, and in fact, they distract and hinder the correct translation of this verse and therefore the application. They destroy the completeness of the two halves of this one verse.

If you leave them out, you will see that "the way of the Lord" is spoken in both cases, and in both clauses you will get a far deeper and fuller and more accurate meaning of our text. Literally, "The way of the Lord is strength to the upright, but the destruction to the workers of iniquity."

The way of the Lord is the strength to one man and is ruin to the other. The moral nature of the man determines which it will be to him, either strength or destruction. This is a penetrating word that goes deep down.

Unknown thinkers, to whose keen insight into the facts of human life we are indebted for this book of Proverbs, have pondered for many an hour over the perplexed and complicated fates of men. They crystallized their reflections at last in this thought. They have in it struck upon a principle which explains a great many things, and teaches us a great many solemn lessons.

We will try to get a hold of what is meant here. And then look at the applications and the illustrations of the principle.

First, let us get clearly the meaning and the bearing of these words. "The way of the Lord" means, sometimes in the Old Testament and sometimes in the New Testament, Christianity, considered as the way in which God desires a man to walk.

So we read in the New Testament of "the way" as the designation of the profession and practice of Christianity, and "the way of the Lord" is often used in the Psalms for the path

which He traces for man by His sovereign will. But that, of course, is not the meaning here. Here it means not the road in which prescribes that we should walk, but the road that He Himself walks. Or in other words, the sum of the Divine action, the solemn footsteps of God through creation, providence and history.

"His goings forth are from everlasting." "His way is in the sea." "His way is in the sanctuary." Modern language has a whole set of phrases which mean the same thing as the Jew meant by, "The way of the Lord," only that is left out.

Now they talk today about "the current of events," and teach current events, and they say, "The general tendencies of things," and they say, "The laws of human affairs," and so on. But for my part, I prefer the old fashioned hebraism to many modern thinkers, the whole drift and tendency of human affairs affords no sign of a person directing these. They hear the clashing and grinding of opposing forces, the thunder as of falling avalanches, and the moaning as of a homeless wind, but they hear the sound of no footfalls echoing down the ages.

But Proverbs and this ancient teacher has keener eyes. And it would be well for us if we shared his faith and see in all the else distracting mysteries of life and history.

"The way of the Lord." But not only does this expression point to the operation of a personal Divine will in human affairs, but it conceives of that operation as one, a uniform and consistent whole. However complicated and sometimes apparently contradictory, the individual events were, there was unity in them, and they all converged on one result.

The writer here does not speak of "ways," but of "the way of the Lord," as a grand unity. It is all one continuous connected, consistent, mode of operation from beginning to end. The author of this Proverb believed something more about the way of the Lord. He believed that although it is higher

than our way, still a man can know something about it. That whatever may be enigmatical and sometimes almost heart breaking, in it, one thing is sure, that as we have been taught of late years in another dialect, it "makes for righteousness."

"Clouds and darkness are round about him," but the Old Testament writer never faltered in the convictions, which were the soul of all their heroism and the life blood of their Christianity. That in the heart of the clouds and darkness, "justice and judgment are the foundations of His throne."

"The way of the Lord" says this old thinker, is hard to understand, very complicated, full of all manner of perplexities, and difficulties. And yet, on the whole the clear drift and tendency of the whole thing is discernable, and it is this: it is all on the side of good. Everything that is good, and everything that does good, is an ally of His, and may be sure of the Divine favor and of the Divine blessing resting upon it.

Just because that is so clear, the other side is true. The same way, the same set of facts. The same continuous stream of tendency, which is all with and for every form of God, is all against every form of evil, or as one of the psalmists puts it, the same idea.

"The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry." The face of the Lord is against them that do evil." The same eye that beams love on the righteous, burns terribly to the evil doer. "The face of the Lord," means the side of the Divine nature which is turned to us, and if manifested by His self-revealing activity, so that the expression comes near in the meaning of "the way of the Lord." And the thought in both cases is the same, that by the eternal law of His being, His actions must all be for the good and against the evil.

They do not change, but man's character determines which aspect of them he sees and has to experience. His way has a bright side and a dark side. You may take which you like. You can lay hold of the thing by whichever handle you choose. On the one side it is con-

vex, on the other concave. You can approach it from either side as you please.

"The way of the Lord" must touch your way. You cannot alter that necessity. Your path must either run parallel in the same direction with His and then all His power will be an impulse to bear you onward. Or it must run in the opposite direction and then all His power will be for your ruin, and the collision with it will crush you as a ship is crushed like an egg shell when it strikes an iceberg. You can choose which of these shall befall you.

And there is still a more striking beauty about this saying, if we give the full literal meaning to the word "strength."

"The way of the Lord is strength to the upright." It is used in a somewhat archaic and peculiar significance as that of a stronghold. And at all events the Hebrew means a fortress, a place where men may live safe and secure. If we take that meaning, the passage gains greatly in force and in beauty.

"The way of the Lord" is like a castle for the shelter of the shelterless good man, and behind those strong bulwarks he dwells impregnable and safe. Just as a fortress is a security to the garrison, and a frowning menace to the besiegers or enemies, so the "Name of the Lord is a strong tower," and the "way of the Lord" is a fortress. If you choose to take shelter within it, its massive walls are your security and your joy. If you do not, they frown down grimly upon you, a menace and a terror.

How differently some 800 years ago Normans and Saxons looked at square towers that were built all over England to bridle the inhabitants. To the one, they were the sign of security of their dominion. To the other they were the sign of their slavery and submission, torture and prison houses they might become. Frowning portents they necessarily were. "The way of the Lord" is a castle fortress to the man that does good. And to the man that does evil, it is a threatening prison, which may become a hell of torture. It is "ruin to the workers of iniquity." So you can settle for yourselves which one of these two are yours.

Secondly, the application and/or illustration of these principles that are here. First we must be reminded of the order of the universe is such that righteousness is life and sin is death. This universe and the fortunes of men are complicated and strange. It is hard to trace any laws, except purely physical ones, at work. Still on the whole, **things do work so that goodness is blessedness and badness is ruin.** That is, of course, not always true in regard to outward things, but even about them it is more often and obviously true than we sometimes recognize.

Hence all nations have their proverbs, embodying the generalized experience of centuries, and asserting that, on the whole, "honesty is the best policy" and that it is always a blunder to do wrong.

What modern phraseology calls, "the laws of nature," the Bible calls, "the way of the Lord." And the manner in which these help a man who conforms to them, and hurts or kills him if he does not, is an illustration on a lower level of the principle of our text.

This tremendous congeries of powers in the midst of which we live does not care whether, we go with it or against it. Only if we do the one we shall prosper, and if we do the other, we shall very likely be made an end of.

Try to stop a train and it will run over you and murder you. Get into it and it will carry you smoothly along. Our lives are surrounded with powers which will carry our messages and be our slaves if we know how to command nature by obeying it, or will impassively strike us dead if we do not.

Again in our physical life, as a rule, virtue makes strength. Sin brings punishment. "Riotous living" makes diseased bodies. Sins in the flesh are avenged in the flesh. And there is no need for a miracle to bring it about that he who sows to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption. God entrusts the punishment of the breach of His laws of temperance and morality in the body to the natural operation of such breach. The inevitable connection between sins against the body and disease in the body is an instance of "the way of the Lord."

The same set of principles and facts are strength to one man and destruction to another. Hundreds of young people in Houston, some of whom no doubt are killing themselves, or at least are ruining their health, are flying in the face of plain laws of purity and self-control. They think they must have their fling, obey their instincts, and so on. Well, if they must, then another MUST will insist upon coming into play. They must reap as they have sown, and drink at they have brewed. The grim saying of this book about profligate men will be fulfilled in many of them.

"His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth, which shall die down with him in the grave." Be not deceived. God is not mocked and His way avenges bodily transgressions by bodily sufferings.

And in the higher regions, on the whole, goodness makes blessedness and evil brings ruin. All the powers of God's universe, and all the tenderesses of God's heart are on the side of the man that does right. The stars in their course fight against the man that fights against Him. And on the other side, in yielding thyself to the will of and following the dictates of His Word, "Thou shalt make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at peace with thee."

All things serve the soul that serves God. And all things war against him who wars against his Maker. "The way of the Lord" cannot but help and further all who love and serve Him. For them all things must work together for good.

By the very laws of His own being which necessarily shape all His actions, the whole stream of tendency without us makes for righteousness. In the one course of life we go with the stream of Divine activity, which pours from the throne of God. In the other, we are like men trying to row a boat up Niagara. All the rush of the mighty torrent will batter us back. Our work will be doomed for destruction, and ourselves to shame. For ever and ever to be good is to be well.

An eternal Truth lies in the facts that the same word, good, means pleasant and right, that sin and sorrow are both called evil. All

sin is self-inflicted sorrow. And every rogue is a roundabout foul.

So ask yourself the question: Is my life in harmony with or opposed to, these omnipotent laws which rule the whole field of life?

Still further, this same fact of the two-fold aspect and operation of the one way of the Lord will be made yet more evident in the future. It becomes us to speak very reverently and reticently about the matter, but I can conceive it possible that the one manifestation of God in the future life may be in substance the same, and yet that it may produce opposite effects upon oppositely disposed souls.

According to the old mystical illustration, the same heat that melts wax hardens clay. And the same apocalypse of the Divine nature in another world may to one man be life and joy and to another may be terror and despair.

Now we don't talk about that much, but it is worthwhile to take it to heart when indulging in easy anticipations that, of course, God is merciful and blesses and saves everyone after He dies. Maybe. Maybe cannot. And maybe if a man has got himself into such a condition as it is possible for a man to get into, maybe, like light upon a diseased eye, the purest beam may be the most exquisite pain, and the natural instinct may be to "call upon the rocks and the hills to fall upon them," and to cover them up in a more genial darkness from that face, to see which should be life and blessedness.

People speak of future rewards and punishments as if they were given and inflicted by simple and Divine volition, and did not stand in any necessary connection with holiness on the one hand and with sin on the other. I do not deny that some portion of both blessings and sorrow may be of such a character, but there is a very important and wide region in which our actions here must automatically bring consequences hereafter of joy or sorrow, without any special retributive action of God's.

We only have to keep in view one or two things about the future which we know to be true, and we shall see this. Suppose a man's memory with his memory of his past life was

perfect and his conscience stimulated to greater sensitiveness and clearer judgment, and all opportunities ended of gratifying tastes and appetites, whose food is in this world. While yet the soul has become dependent on them for ease and comfort, what more is needed to make a hell? The supposition is but a statement of fact. We seem to forget much, but when the waters are drained off, all the lost things will be found at the bottom.

Conscience gets dulled and sophisticated here. But the icy cold of death will wake it up. And the new position will give new insight into the true character of our actions. You see how often a man, at the end of life, has his eyes cleared to see his faults. But how much more will that be the case hereafter? When the rush of passion is past, and you are far enough from your life to view it as a whole, holding it at arm's length, you will see better what it looks like.

There is nothing improbable in supposing that inclinations and tastes which have often nourished for a lifetime may survive the possibility of indulging them in another life, as they often do in this. And what can be worse than such a thirst for one drop of water which never can be tasted again? These things are certain, and no more is needed to make sin produce, by necessary consequences, misery, and ruin, while similarly, goodness brings joy, peace and blessing.

But again, the self-revelation of God has this same double aspect. "The way of the Lord" may mean His process by which He reveals His character. Every truth concerning Him may be either a joy or a terror to men. All of His attributes are builded into a strong tower into which the righteous runs and is safe. Or else they are builded into a prison and torture house.

So the thought of God may either be a happy and strengthening one, or an unwelcomed one. "I remembered and was troubled" says the psalmist. What an awful confession, that the thought of God disturbed him. The thought of to some is a very unwelcomed as the thought of a detective to a band of thieves. Is not that dreadful?

Music is a torture to some ears. And there are people who have so alienated their hearts and wills from God that the Name which should be their dearest faith, is not only their ghastliest doubt, but their greatest pain.

The thought of God and all that wonderful complex of mighty attributes and beauties which make His Name should be our delight, the key to all treasures, the end of all sorrows, our light in the darkness, our life in death, our all in all. It is either that to us or it is something that we would like to forget. Which is it to you?

Especially the Gospel has this double aspect. Our text speaks of the distinction between the righteous and the evil doers. But how to pass from the one class to the other, it does not tell us. The Gospel is the answer to that question. It tells us that though we are all workers of iniquity, and must therefore die. If such a text as this were the last word to be spoken on the matter, share in the ruin, which smites the opponent of the Divine will.

But we may pass from that class, and by simple faith in Christ, who dies on the cross for all workers of iniquity, may become of those righteous, on whose side God works in all His way. And who have all His attributes drawn up like an embattled army in their defense and have His mighty Name for their refuge, as the very crown of the ways of God, the work of Christ and the record of it in the Gospel have most eminently this double aspect. God meant nothing but the salvation of the whole world when He sent us this Gospel. His way therein was pure, unmingled, universal love. We can make that great message untroubled blessing by simply accepting it. Nothing more is needed but to take God at His Word and to close with His sincere and earnest invitation.

Then Christ's work becomes the fortress in which we are guarded from sin and guilt, from the arrows of conscience, and the fiery darts of temptation. But if not accepted, then it is not passive. It is not nothing. If rejected, it does more harm to a man than anything else can. Just because if accepted, it would have done him more good.

The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The pillar which symbolized the presence of God, sent down influences on either side. To the trembling crowd of the Israelites on the one hand, to the pursuing ranks of the Egyptians on the other, the pillar was one. Opposite effects streamed from it, and it was "a cloud of darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these."

Everything depends on which side of the pillar you choose to see. The ark of God, which brought dismay and death among false gods and their worshippers, brought blessing into the humble house of Obed Edom, the man of Gath, with whom it rested for three months before it was set in its place in the city of David.

That which is meant to be the savour of life unto life must either be that, or the savour of death unto death. Jesus Christ is something to each and everyone of us. For you who have heard His Name even since you were children, your relation to Him settles your condition and your prospects, and molds your character. Either He is for you the tried Cornerstone, the sure Foundation on which whosoever builds will not be confounded. Or He is the Stone of stumbling, which whosoever stumbles will be broken, and which will crush to powder whosoever it falls upon.

"This child is set for the rise," or for the fall of all who bear His Name. He leaves no man at the level at which He found him. But either lifts him up nearer to God and purity and joy, or sinks him into an ever descending pit of darkening separation from all these.

What is He to you? Something He must be: your strength or your ruin.

If you commit your soul to Him in humble faith, He will be your peace, your life and your Heaven. If you turn from Him and His offered GRACE, He will be your pain, your death and your torture. What makes Heaven and what maketh hell? Which do you choose Him to be?

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