

"ADVICE AND CONSOLATION"¹

from

*Plain Sermons
On Subjects
Practical and Prophetic*

by Alexander McCaul

*"In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths."
Proverbs 3:6*

Beloved brethren, we have just concluded another annual period of God's long-suffering mercy and kindness, and now stand at the beginning of a new year. We may, and ought, to rejoice for ourselves and others that the day of grace is not past; but we must, and ought, to tremble that our probation is not ended. We may, and ought, to thank God that he hath suffered us so long; but we must fear lest he will bear with us no longer. We may, and ought, to congratulate ourselves and each other that the doors of mercy are not closed; but our joy must be sobered by the reflection that the paths of danger are still open.

In a word, a new year may animate hope, but in a considerate mind it cannot fail to awaken fear. A new year tells us that our pilgrimage is not done, nor the difficulties and dangers of the road ended. A new year brings new trials, new temptations, new sorrows; but it does not necessarily bring new wisdom, new strength, new consolation. A new year may serve, like a milestone, to record how much of our journey is past; but it also reminds us that some length of way, and that the most difficult and dangerous, remains to be accomplished. A new year, then, tells us that we have need of advice to direct, and of promised help to support us. The text supplies our necessities: "*In all thy ways acknowledge Him*"—Here is advice—"and he will direct (or make straight) thy paths." Here is the promised help. The text contains a word of advice and a word of comfort, to which two points I now solicit your attention. And may the Lord in his mercy incline our hearts to follow the advice, that so long as our earthly pilgrimage lasts we may enjoy the comfort. Amen.

I. The advice given in the text is simple and intelligible, especially when taken in connection with the words which precede: "*Trust in the Lord with all thine heart,*" says Solomon, "*and lean not to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him.*" Remember your dependence upon God. Forget not that your own wisdom is not adequate to devise, nor your own strength sufficient to execute, that which is best. Trust not therefore in yourselves. Remember that God is the supreme contriver and the all-wise disposer of events. Acknowledge Him then as such, by praying for his blessing and trusting in his mercy. This is advice which you all understand, and the reasonableness of which you admit.

But my object this day is to persuade you to follow it, to have it always in your mind, to feel continually the necessity of it, to bring it into the daily practice of life. Time does not permit me to point out its manifold application in the varied business of life. I propose therefore to apply it to that which is most necessary—your Christian course. We are now to begin a new period of

¹ Preached to the English Congregation at Warsaw on New Year's Day 1830.

time, a new preparation for eternity. The coming year is to make us more meet for heaven, or riper for hell. It is to yield us a blessing, or to draw down upon us a curse; and the alternative depends upon ourselves. Heaven and hell! blessing and cursing! Oh what awful words. What fearful things to deal with! And man, weak and sinful man, how insufficient to the task. How, my brethren, can we contemplate the greatness of the work, or our own helplessness, without trembling, without turning to the Lord and acknowledging Him in all our ways? Our work this year is to avoid error, to mortify sin, to resist temptation, to glorify our Lord by a holy life. But to avoid error, wisdom is necessary; and we are ignorant. To mortify sin, strength is needful; and we are weak. To resist temptation, unbending resolution is required; and we are frail. To glorify our Lord by a holy life, steady consistency is indispensable; and we are unstable in all our ways, as reeds shaken with the wind.

Were error only possible in matters of speculation, it would be comparatively harmless. But most men err practically, and none more so than those who profess to be religious. One practical error alone is fatal to thousands. Men mistake religious knowledge for religion, clear doctrinal views for piety, angry wrath for holy zeal, and natural restlessness for Christian activity. In one single point, their speculations about doctrine, they are perhaps right. And because they have some reason to think themselves right in this one point, they conclude that they must be right in all. They are therefore satisfied with themselves and their state. Self-satisfaction begets pride. Pride banishes meekness, humility, and charity, and makes room for every evil disposition until he who thinks himself a follower of Christ becomes a personification of the malignity of the devil, and a meet candidate for the company of evil spirits. And the end of all his religious profession, unless it please God to open his eyes, is damnation.

Such are the consequences of error. But we have in the coming year not only to avoid error, we must mortify the flesh. Our old nature has not passed away with the old year. The seeds of "adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulation, wrath, strife, sedition, heresies, envyings, murder, drunkenness, and such like," still remain in our nature; and if not mortified will bring forth a plenteous harvest of shame, sorrow, and misery. Any one of all these horrid diseases is sufficient to bring on eternal death, but our nature is predisposed to all. Any one of all these deadly enemies is able to ruin us, but we must contend with them all.

Brethren, we are either very insensible or very unbelieving. Were our mortal bodies oppressed with as many and as deadly diseases as those that afflict our immortal nature, did fever, plague, palsy, and consumption but attack us at once, we should tremble for the consequences. Yea, did but one of them, the plague, seize upon us and we behold our fellow men dying around us under its fatal grasp, we should despair of finishing the year which we now begin. And yet the body, wasted by malady or preyed upon at once by manifold disease, is only a faithful picture of our once pure nature defiled and corrupted by sin. Neither does complicated disease more certainly terminate in natural death than the manifold forms of sin end in eternal perdition.

It would be a sort of melancholy comfort to us were sin shut up and enchained in our own bosom, unable to break forth from its prison. But it is free. It has a thousand outlets and a thousand voices [to] call it forth into action. We have not only the principle of sin within, but innumerable temptations to sin from without. Whithersoever we go, wherever we rest, temptation in some shape or other awaits us. If we go forth to seek a supply for the necessities of nature, we are not safe. Abraham was tempted to deceit when he went down into Egypt to escape the famine. If we retire to the loneliness of our chamber we are not secure, for in such retirement David was led

into the sin of adultery. Even the solitude of the wilderness can afford no protection, for there Satan tempted our Lord. Every sense of the body and every situation of life has its peculiar temptations. But to avoid error, to overcome sin, to resist temptation is far from comprising the whole of our duty. We have also to glorify God by a holy life. *"Glorify therefore God in your body, and in your spirits, which are his."* We have not only to abstain from evil, but to do good; and so to do it that God may be thereby honoured. *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."* Such, my beloved brethren, is the work that is set before us for this coming year. How vast! How overwhelming is it, when considered in itself. But how does the difficulty of accomplishing it increase when we consider our own helplessness!

I will not now set forth our ignorance which has to contend with error, nor the weakness which must strive against sin, nor the frailty that must resist temptation, nor the instability which must attain to steady consistency. I will simply refer you to the experience of the past year. Let it tell you what you are and testify of your ability to accomplish the mighty work. Have you concluded the year in triumph? Does a review of your struggle with error, sin, and temptation afford a pleasing recollection of your wisdom and strength? Does a consciousness of having spent the last year to the glory of God fill your heart with joy and peace? Or does experience testify that wherever mistake was possible, you were led into error; that wherever you trusted to your own strength, you were overcome by sin and fell at the approach of temptation; and that sloth, and ease, and personal indulgence prevailed over zeal for the glory of God?

And is not the experience of the last year the experience of all that preceded it? And does not the history of the whole life declare that we are in ourselves utterly unable to abstain from evil or to do good, to benefit ourselves or to glorify God? With what prospect of success then can we enter on the probation of a new year, or what degree of confidence can we repose in ourselves for the future when we have reason only for shame in the contemplation of the past?

II. Hope the most ardent must begin to sink, if the word of God did not teach us that there is one whose strength is made perfect in weakness. Despair would inevitably seize upon us at the prospect of further trial and difficulty still to come, were it not that the voice of God cries to us to despair only in ourselves, but to trust in the Lord. True [it is] that the way of life is difficult, and the wanderer weary and weak. But the text says, *"Acknowledge him in all thy ways, and he will direct or make smooth thy paths."* Here is the word of comfort, for it promises help; and the Promiser is God. The promise is exactly suited to our necessities. We are ignorant and require guidance, we are weak and desire the removal of difficulties. In the text both are promised, for the word translated "direct" does not only signify to guide, but also to make straight or smooth. God will direct your paths; but he will also make them straight and smooth.

Put on then, beloved brethren, fresh courage. Your way is through the wilderness, but God is your guide. He who sent his angel before Eleazar, He who was Jacob's Shepherd all his life long, He who conducted Israel for forty years through a trackless desert, He who led Joseph like a flock and who has already brought many sons to glory, He will direct your paths. He will keep you from all error. He will lead you into all truth. When perplexity arises with regard to doctrine, when doubt occurs with regard to your own state and character, when uncertainty distracts with regard to conduct, stand still and look to your Guide. Call upon your God. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and he will direct your paths. And when weary nature is ready to sink under the ruggedness of the road, and when hope droops because of new obstacles, and when courage fails because of unexpected difficulties, turn to Him who can exalt the valleys and

make the mountains low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.

The promise in itself may well encourage us, but still more the character of the Promiser. It is the All-wise, the All-mighty, the All-faithful God; our God, and the God of our fathers. He who has borne us from the belly, and carried us from the womb, and now says, *"Even to your old age I am he: and even to hoary hairs will I carry you. I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry and deliver you."* O my brethren, how gracious, how seasonable, how comforting is this promise! How delighted should we be if some aged Christian man, some kind relation, a tender parent in whose experience we could trust, on whose wisdom we could rely, in whose fidelity we could confide, would undertake to be our guide through life; to warn us of danger, to guard us against error, to admonish us of sin, to support us in temptation, to console us under trial. How light would our hearts feel. How cheerfully should we begin this year, and hope to pass through its dangers and overcome its difficulties. But here is one whose wisdom is the great fountain whence saints since the beginning of the world have drunk; whose love has been the great source whence all paternal love and all the charities of life have flowed; whose fidelity is the great center whence all the feeble beams of human faith and loyalty have emanated. And he promises to be our guide through life and to direct all our paths. He promises to employ that wisdom by which he established the world; that discretion whereby he stretched out the heavens, for our guidance; that love which made and redeemed us, for our comfort; that fidelity which is immutable, for our support.

It is true that the promise is attached to a condition; but the condition is such as to encourage the most desponding [man]. It imposes no hardship and extorts no sacrifice. It requires no exertion to which the strength of man is unequal. It demands no exhibition of holiness which the sinfulness of man cannot supply. It simply says, *"Acknowledge him in all thy ways."* Remember Him. Confess Him. Pray to Him. [This is] a condition that can be fulfilled by us all, and fulfilled best when our need of help is greatest, and remembered best when comfort is most necessary. When the way is smooth and the path of life prosperous, we may forget Him. But when strength and courage fail, trouble will force the promise upon our memory and incline our hearts to make use of it. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct thy paths.

Go then, my brethren. Commence your pilgrimage anew. Remember the difficulties and the dangers, and let the remembrance drive you to follow the word of advice; but let the troubles, when they come, remind you of the word of comfort. Remember that though the seasons change and years pass away, the word of promise abides; and God, who gave it, does not change. Yea, when life itself wanes and death draws near, our comfort still remains; for *"this God is our God for ever; he will be our guide, even unto death."*