Correction of Children

from the
Book of Proverbs

by

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A COMMENTARY ON PROVERBS

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Proverbs 13:24. He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him, chasteneth him betimes.

Among the many modern theories of education, how often is God's system overlooked! Yet should not this be our pattern and standard? *The rod* of discipline is its main character; not harsh severity, but a wise, considerate, faithful exercise; always aiming at the subjugation of the will, and the humbling and purifying of the heart. Here how- ever God and man are at issue. Man often *spares the ro*d, because he loves the child. This at least he calls love. But is not our Father's love to his children inconceivably more yearning than that of an earthly parent? Yet does he not *spare the ro*d—"What son is he, whom the Father chasteneth not?" (Heb. xii. 7.) Is *the rod* the proof of his hatred? "Whom the Lord *lovet*h, he chasteneth." (Ib. verse 6. Deut. viii. 5. Rev. iii. 19.) Nay—he gives us his Divine judgment— *He that spareth the rod, hateth the chil*d. Does he not act at least as if *he hated hi*m; omitting a duty so necessary for his welfare; winking at the indulgence of vicious habits and a wayward will, so surely issuing in bitter sorrow?1 Is not this delivering him up to his worst enemy? Better that the child had been trained in tile house of strangers, than that he should thus be the unhappy victim of the cruelty of parental love.

The discipline of our children must therefore commence with self- discipline. Nature teaches to love them *much*. But we want a controlling principle, to teach us to love them *wisel*y. The indulgence of our children has its root *in self-indulgence.* We do not like putting ourselves to pain. The difficulties indeed can only be known by experience. And even in this school one parent cannot measure the trials of another. But all our children are children of Adam. "Foolishness is bound up in their hearts." (Chap. xxii. 15. Gen. viii. 21.) All choose from the first dawn of reason, the broad road of destruction. (Isa. Liii. 6.) And can we bear the thought, that they should walk in that road? We pray for their conversion. But prayer without teaching is mockery, and Scripture teaching implies *chastening*. Discipline therefore must be. All need the rod, some again and again. Yet it must be the father's rod, yearning over his *chastened* child. (Ps. ciii. 13), even while he dares "not spare him for his crying." (Chap. xix. 18.) The rod without affection is revolting tyranny.

But often do we hear mourning over failure. And is not this the grand reason? We do not *chastise betime*s. (Ib.), Satan begins with the infant in arms! (Ps. lviii. 3. Isa. xiviii. 8.) The cry of passion is his first stir of the native corruption. Do we begin as early? Every vice commences in the nursery. The great secret is, to establish authority in the dawn of life; to bend the tender twig, before the knotty oak is beyond our power. A child, early trained by parental discipline, will probably preserve the wholesome influence to the end of life. But fearful indeed is the difficulty, when the child has been the *early* master; to begin *chastenin*g, when the habit of disobedience has been formed and hardened; to have the first work to do, when the child is growing out of childhood, and when the unreserved confidence needs to be established. Rarely

indeed does this late experiment succeed: while the severity necessary to enforce it is not less dangerous than painful. "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth." (Lam. Iii. 27.)

Proverbs 19:18. Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying.

Christian parents! carefully study the word of God. See here our Father's wise and loving discipline with his children. "Like as a Father, he pitieth his children." "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you." Yet when his children need chastening though the flesh cries—*Spar*e; though every groan enters into his heart, he loves so well, that *his soul spares them not for their crying.* He uses the rod; yea, if need be, heavily. He will wither their brightest comforts, children, or property, if they turn them to idols; and this, "not for his pleasure, but for their profit." And what child has not blessed him, that he did not refrain his discipline, till it had done "its perfect work?"

Is not this then our pattern and our standard; setting out the sound principle of a Christian education? "Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath; lest they be discouraged." (Col. iii. 21.) But let not the rule—*chasten—spare no*t—be "a hard saying." Is not tenderness for the child a cover for the indulgence of weak and foolish affections? There is much more mercy in what seems to be harshness, than in false tenderness. (Chap. xxiii.13,14.) Let the child see, that we are resolved; that we are not to be diverted from our duty by the *cry* of weakness or passion. Far better that the child should *cry* under healthful correction, than that parents should afterwards *cry* under the bitter fruit to themselves and children, of neglected discipline. 'Eli could not have devised which way to have plagued himself and his house so much, as by his kindness to his children's sin. Parents need no other means to make themselves miserable than sparing the rod.' Yet much less of it would be needed, did they govern, as they ought to do, by the steady decision of a word, a frown, or a look.

But the great force of the rule is its timely application—*while there is hope.* For hopeless the case may be, if the remedy be delayed. The cure of the evil must be commenced in infancy. Not a moment is to be lost. "Betimes" (Chap. xiii. 24; xxii. 15)—is the season, when the good can be effected with the most ease, and the fewest strokes. The lesson of obedience should be learnt at the first dawn. One decided struggle and victory *in very early lif*e, may, under God, do much toward; settling the point at once and to the end. On the other hand, *sharp chastening* may fail later to accomplish, what a slight rebuke in thy; early course might have wrought.

But is there not too often a voluntary blindness, that does not choose to see what it is painful to correct? The false notion—'Children will be children'--leads us often to pass over real faults, and consider their tempers and waywardness as too trifling to require; prompt correction. And thus sin, winked at in its beginnings, harden in all the strength of deep-rooted corruptions. Whereas—who would neglect their most trifling bodily ailment, which might grow into serious results? If they cannot be argued with, they must be controlled. How often have we found in after-life the evil of fixed habits, which early correction might have subdued with far

less cost of suffering! (1 Kings, i. 6; ii. 24.) Oh! what grace and wisdom is needed to discipline our minds, judgment, and affections to that tone of self-government, which will enable us to train our children practically for the service of God, and for their own happiness!

Proverbs 22:15. Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.

What parent, what instructor of children, will not bear sad, but decisive, testimony to the *foolishness of the chil*d? 'A little innocent' --is the miscalled name of fondness and fancy. One only of Adam's race, and he--adored be his name! preserved by his holy conception (Luke, i. 35)--lays claim to it. *Foolishness* is the birthright of all besides. The early development of waywardness and passion,--even before the power of speech; before the child is capable of observing and imitating those around him--is a touching, but undeniable, evidence of the innate principle. Resistance therefore cannot begin too early. Education should commence even in the cradle. Observe--it is *foolishnes*s, not childishness. *That* might belong to an unfallen child. No moral guilt attaches to the recollection "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child." (1 Cor. xiii. 11.) A child is to be punished as Mr. Scott wisely observed--'not for being a *chil*d, but for being *a wicked chil*d.' Comparative ignorance, the imperfect and gradual opening of the faculties, constitute the nature, not the sinfulness of the child. The holy "child increased in wisdom." (Luke, ii. 52.) But*foolishness* is the mighty propensity to evil--imbibing wrong principles, forming bad habits, entering into an ungodly course. It means the very root and essence of sin in a fallen nature--the *folly* of being revolted from a God of love. It includes all the sins of which a child is capable-lying, deceit (Ps. lviii. 3), wilfulness, perverseness, want of submission to authority (Job, xi. 12)--a fearful aptness for evil, and revulsion against good. It is not the sheet of pure white paper; not the innocent, or even the tractable, creature, easily guided by proper means, that we have before us; but a little heart full of sin, containing all the seeds of future evil, multiplying to a fruitful harvest. We delight in our children's harmless play. We would make ourselves one with them in their sportiveness. But *this foolishnes*s--visible every hour before our eyes--never let it be a subject of sport, but of deep and constant sadness. Nor let childhood plead as an excuse for this *foolishnes*s. Children's sins may not be chargeable with the guilt of adult responsibility; yet God has awfully shewn, that they are sins against Himself. The judgment on the *"little childre*n" of Bethel is enough to make "both the ears of" thoughtless parents "to tingle." (2 Kings, ii. 23, 24)

But whence the origin of this *foolishnes*s? "Look unto the rock whence we are hewn." Look unto "Adam" our father, and unto "Eve that bare us." (Isa. li. 1, 2.) As is the root, so ate the branches. As is the fountain, so are the waters. Our nature was poisoned at the spring. Our sinful parent, having lost God's image, could only "beget a son after his image" (Gen. v. 3)--a sinner begetting a sinner. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John, iii. 6), and could be nothing else. Now "who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" (Job, xiv. 4; xxv. 4.) The creature therefore is produced into being with a radical enmity to God;--"by nature" therefore "a child of wrath." (Eph. ii. 3.) The entail is held from "our first father," and can never be cut off. There is no division of this sad inheritance. Each of his children has the whole. His Maker

testifies, that he is "a transgressor from the womb, that his heart is evil from his youth." In shame he acknowledges the testimony--"Behold! I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Ps. li. 5.) If the joy of a child's birth blot out the remembrance of its pain and sorrow (John, xvi. 21), yet must not this joy be chastened in the humbling recollection of what the child brings into the world--*foolishnes*s? That self-will, that proud independence, that shakes the very foundations of society, is the birth-sin of our fallen nature. Nor does it lie only on the surface, like some childish habits, easily corrected. *It is bound in the child's heart,* 'held firmly there by chains invincible to human power. It is incorporated into his very nature. And so various are its forms, so subtle its workings, that the wisest parent is often at a loss how to detect and treat the evil.

The prescribed remedy, however, is clear. It is vain to bid the *foolishness* depart. And little inclination is there in the child himself to *drive it far awa*y. *The rod of correction* is distinctly named, and repeatedly inculcated, as God's own means for this important end. And surely the thought of having been an instrument of producing nature envenomed against a God of love must constrain the parent to use the means thus divinely appointed for destroying the deadly poison.

Only let the child see, that, as with our heavenly Father, love is the ruling principle; that we follow the example of the wisest and best of parents, that we use his rod for *driving* men *from foolishnes*s; that, like him, we "chasten, not for our pleasure, but for our child's profit" (Heb. xii. 10); not from caprice or passion, but from tenderness to his soul. Use the Lord's means, and we can then, what *otherwise* we cannot do, wait in faith for the promised blessing. Many a stirring movement of the flesh will be restrained. Man's will will be put down, and God's will gain the supremacy. Shame of sin will issue in abhorrence; and in this sorrow and humiliation the path of wisdom will be chosen, loved, and followed. (Chap. Xxix. 15.)

We have indeed no right to demand to see God's reasons for his ordinance. Yet we may be permitted, in part at least, to trace its workings. Habits are of immense value, as wrought into the character by the Holy Spirit. But there must be a beginning, and the use of means to fix the principle. If a child be punished for falsehood; to avoid future punishment, he abstains, and speaks the truth. As he advances, he finds the blessing and comfort of the right path. He learns gradually to speak truth from a higher motive. Insensibly his conscience acquires tenderness respecting it; and it becomes a principle in his character. Thus the *rod of correction* performs its work with permanent benefit.

Proverbs 23:13. Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. 14. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.

Christian parents do not always recognize the scriptural standard of discipline. "Foolishness is bound in the heart" of the parent, no less than "of the child." "The wild ass's colt" (Job, xi. 12) must always need its measure of *correctio*n. The rule therefore is, notwithstanding all the pleas of pity and fondness--*withhold it no*t. Do the work wisely, firmly, lovingly. Persevere

notwithstanding apparently unsuccessful results. Connect it with prayer, faith, and careful in instruction.

We admit that it is revolting to give pain, and call forth the tears of those we so tenderly love. But while hearts are what hearts are, it is not to be supposed that we can train without discipline. If it be asked--will not gentle means be more effectual? Had this been God's judgment, as a God of mercy, he would not have provided a different regimen. Eli tried them, and the sad issue is written for our instruction.6 'Must I then be cruel to my child?' Nay--God charges thee with cruelty, if thou *withheld correction from hi*m. He "goes on his own foolishness." Except he be restrained, he will die, in his sin. God has ordained the rod to purge his sins, and so deliver his soul *from hel*l. What 'parent then, that trembles for the child's eternal destiny, can *withhold correctio*n? Is it not cruel love, that turns away from painful duty? To suffer sin upon a child, no less than upon a brother, is tantamount to "hating him in our heart." Is it not better that the flesh should smart, than that *the soul should di*e? Is it no sin to omit a means of grace, as divinely appointed, as the word and the sacraments? Is there no danger of fomenting the native wickedness, and thus becoming accessory to the child's eternal destruction? What if he should reproach thee throughout eternity, for the neglect of that timely *correctio*n, which might *have delivered his soul from hell?* Or even if he be "scarcely saved," may he not charge upon thee much of his increasing difficulty in the ways of God?

Yet let it not be used at all times. Let remonstrance be first tried. Our heavenly Father never stirs the rod with his children, if his gentle voice of instruction prevail. Continual finding fault; applying *correction* to every slip of childish trifling or troublesome thoughtlessness, would soon bring a callous deadness to all sense of shame. Let it be reserved, at least in its more serious forms, for wilfulness. It is medicine, not food; the remedy for the occasional diseases of the constitution, not the daily regimen for life and nourishment. And to convert medicine into daily food, gradually destroys its remedial qualities.

Some parents, indeed, use nothing but *correctio*n. They indulge their own passions at the expense of their less guilty children. Unlike our Heavenly Father, they afflict and grieve their children *willingl*y;" to vent their own anger, not to subdue their children's sins. Self recollection is of great moment. 'Am I about to correct for my child's good?' An intemperate use of this Scriptural ordinance brings discredit upon its efficacy, and sows the seed of much bitter fruit. Children become hardened under an iron rod. Sternness and severity of manner close up their hearts. It is most dangerous to make them afraid of us. A spirit of bondage and concealment is engendered, often leading to a lie; sowing the seed of hypocrisy--nay, sometimes of disgust, and even of Hatred, towards their unreasonable parents. 'If parents,'--said a wise and godly father--'would not correct their children except in a praying frame, when they can "lift up their hands without wrath," it would neither provoke God nor them.'

Other parents freely threaten the *ro*d, yet *withhold* it. It was only meant to frighten. It soon becomes all empty and powerless sound. This again contravenes our Great Exemplar. His threatenings are not vain words. If his children will not turn, they will find them faithful and true to their cost. This threatening play is solemn trifling with truth; teaching children by example, what they had learnt from the womb (Ps. lviii. 3), to "speak lies." Let our words be

considerate, but certain. Let our children know, that they must not trifle either with them or with us. The firmness of truthful discipline alone can convey a wholesome influence. Any defect here is a serious injury. We must learn however not to expect too much from our children; nor to be unduly depressed by their naughtiness. Yet we must not wink at their sinful follies. We must love them not less, but better. And because we love them, we must *not withhold when needed correction from them.* More painful is the work to ourselves, than to them. Most humbling is it. For since the corrupt root produces the poisoned sap in the bud, what else is it but the *correction* of our own sin? Yet though "no chastening for the present be joyous, but rather grievous" (Heb. xii. 11); when given in prayer, in wisdom, and in faith, the saving blessing will be vouchsafed. 'Lord, do thou be pleased to strike in with every stroke, that the rod of correction may be a rod of instruction.' 'It is a rare soul '--said good Bishop Hall--'that can be kept in constant order without smarting remedies. I confess, mine cannot. How wild had I run, if the rod had not been over me! Every man can say, he thanks God for his ease. For me, I bless God for my trouble.

Proverbs 29:15. The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.

Discipline is the order of God's government. Parents are his dispensers of it to their children. The child must be broken in to "bear the yoke in his youth." (Lam. iii. 27.) Let *reproof* be first tried; and if it succeed, let *the rod* be spared. (Chap. xvii. 10.) If not, let it do its work. Eli gave the *reproo*f, "but spared *the ro*d."7 *The rod* is evidently to be taken literally, not metaphorically; corporal, not spiritual chastisement.

Some give *the rod* without *reproo*f, without any effort to produce sensibility of conscience. From this tyranny or caprice nothing can be expected. The combined influence not only "drives foolishness far away," but, as a positive blessing, *gives wisdo*m. (Chap. xxii. 15.) God's own children grow wiser under correction. They see their folly, and in genuine shame turn from it, blessing him for his rod of faithfulness and love,1 and teaching us the folly of rejecting medicines because they are bitter.

But look at the child *left to himsel*f--without restraint. A more perfect picture of misery and ruin cannot be conceived. His evil tempers are thought to be 1he accident of childhood. 'They will pass away, as his reason improves. Time only can mend them.' But in fact time of itself mends nothing. It only strengthens and matures the growth of the native principle. This, being a decided bias to evil, must tend to deadly injury. The mother cannot conjecture the future stature, health, talents, or prospects of her new-born infant. But of one thing she may be absolutely certain--a corrupt and wayward will. The poison however does not appear at first. No special anxiety is excited. The child is not nurtured in wickedness, or under the influence of bad example. He is only *left to himself. Left!* The restive horse, with his rein loosened, full of his own spirit, plunges headlong down the precipice. The child, without government, rushes on under the impetuous impulse of his own will; and what but Almighty sovereign grace can save him from destruction? Many a hardened it villain on the gallows was once perhaps the pleasing, susceptible child; only *left to himsel*f, to his own appetite, pride, and self-willed-

obstinacy. The sound discipline of heavenly guidance is our father's best blessing. His most fearful curse, is to be given up to our own ways, "to walk in our own counsels." (Ps. lxxxi. 12.) A *child thus left* is at the furthest point from salvation, in the very jaws of the devouring lion. Turn we now from the ruined child to the disgraced, broken-hearted parent. *The mother* only is mentioned, as the chief superintendent of the early discipline; perhaps also as the most susceptible of the grievous error. For if the father's stronger character induces him to "provoke his children to wrath" (Col. iii. 21); to rule rather by command than by persuasion; does not *the mother's* softer mould tend to the opposite evil? And so far as she yields to mistaken indulgence, she bears the greater share of the punishment. It is not, that she is brought to troub1e, or even to poverty; but to that, which is the most keenly-felt of all distress--*to sham*e. Nowhere is God's retributive justice more strongly marked. The *mother's* sin is visited in the proportioned punishment. What greater neglect of obligation, than *a child left to himself!* What greater affliction, than the *shame to which he bring, her.* Parental influence is lost. The reverence of authority is forgotten, as a by-gone name. (Chap. xix. 26.) The child rules; instead of being as a corrected child, in subjection. (Heb. xii. 9.) The parent fears, instead of the child; and thus virtually owns her own degradation. Instead of "the wise son, that maketh a glad father;" it is "the foolish son, that is the heaviness of *his mothe*r."1 The sunshine of bright prospects is clouded. The cup of joy is filled with wormwood. The father's mouth is dumb with the confusion of grief. The dearest object of *the mother's* tenderness, instead of being the staff and comfort of her age, *bringeth her to sham*e. Truly *childre*n, thus *left to themselves,* will mingle the bitterest cup that man can ever have to drink, and stir up the saddest tears, that ever eyes can have to weep. This is not a trial, which, like many others, she might cover in her own bosom. Alas! *the shame* is too public to be concealed. What must have been the open dishonour upon Eli's name, when "the sins of his children made men abhor the offering of the Lord!" When the treason of David's sons *brought him to shame* in the sight of all Israel; surely his own conscience, must have brought his own perverted fondness to mind, as the cause of their ruin; both *left to themselve*s—one palliated in the most aggravated sin;2 the other having been not even corrected by a word. (1 Kings, i. 5-9.) And if *the shame* before men be so bitter, what will be the overwhelming confusion at the great consummation, when the evil propensities, cherished with such cruel fondness in the parental bosom, shall produce their harvest "in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow!" (Isa. Xvii. 11.)

Oh! as our children's happiness or misery, both for time and eternity, is linked with our own responsibilities; shall not we "watch and pray," and resist "the weakness of the flesh," in self-denying firmness? 'Take this for certain'--says Bishop Hopkins--'that as many deserved stripes as you spare from your children, you do but lay upon your own back. And those whom you refuse to chastise, God will make severer scourges to chastise you.'* At whatever cost, establish your authority. Let there be but one will in the house. And let it be felt, that this will is to be the law. The child will readily discover, whether the parent is disposed to yield, or resolved to rule. But however trifling the requirement, let obedience be, in small as great matters, the indispensable point. The awe of parental authority is perfectly consistent with the utmost freedom of childlike confidence. Nay--it is the very foundation of it (for the child can hardly appreciate the kindness of a parent, whom he thinks afraid to strike), while it operates as a valuable safeguard against a thousand follies of uncontrolled waywardness. But ever let us put the awful alternative vividly before us. Either the child's will, or the parent's heart, must be broken:

"Without a wise and firm controul, the parent is miserable; the child is ruined.

Proverbs 29:17. Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul.

Once more the wise man returns to the subject of discipline. These repeated inculcations 5 strongly shew its importance. The command is positive--*Correct thy so*n. How can an upright judgment evade or explain away a plain, literal rule? This, book of Proverbs is not out of date. Like every other part of the Sacred Volume, it is the Book for every age; "given by inspiration of God; profitable for doctrine, and written for our learning."6 To try therefore more self-pleasing rules, is to set up our will in opposition to God's; reason or feeling in the stead of faith. It is making ourselves "wise above that which is written."

The measure and mode of *correction* indeed must depend upon the age, sex, temper of the child, the character, the aggravation, or the mitigated circumstances, of the fault. But let it be, like our gracious Father's discipline, never more than can be borne.7 Make due allowance for any marks of ingenuous confession. Yet with a wise application of the principle, there must be no exception to the rule. Different tempers, like different soils, require corresponding difference of treatment. But discipline there must be; not relaxed in fondness, not pushed on in harshness; but authority tempered with love. If a gentle hand cannot controul, a stronger hand must be applied.

We may take rest without correction; but such rest will bring trouble in the end. The true *rest* is that, which our *child will giv*e; and that he may *give* it, the rule is--*Correc*t.1 We may be assured, that God would not have so insisted upon it, if a blessing was not with it. If Eli was rejected, it was because in this matter he "honoured his sons above God." Those then "that honour him" above their sons "he will honour." Pain is the present exercise both to parent and child,3 but the *after* blessing is secured. (Heb. xii. 11.) Ground well tilled, trees carefully pruned, bring forth more fruit." Observe how the objection of parental weakness is anticipated. 'If I put my son to pain, will he not hate me?' No--when "left to himself," he was a deep and anxious trouble. Now *he shall give thee res*t. Before--he "brought thee to shame." (Verse 15.) Now *he shall give delight to thy sou*l." The momentary feelings of the child under *correction* will give way to the conviction of the parent's wisdom and regard for his profit. (Heb. Xii. 9.)

Yet the rule against discouragement would not have been repeated, had there not been some parental evil to be corrected. "Provocation" revolts, transfers confidence to most unworthy associates, and brings into ruinous temptations. Children claim a considerate treatment. They must not be driven by brute force. Authority must be tempered with love. The grounds of extraordinary commands should be explained to them. What is good should be liberally commended. The best construction should be put upon defective efforts. The distinction should be carefully drawn between weakness and wilfulness, between heedlessness and obstinacy. Home should be gladdened with the invigorating joy of spring, and replete with

every wholesome indulgence. Every attempt should be made to gain confidence, so that the child, instead of a cold trembling reserve, should run into our arms. But in this glowing atmosphere, forget not God's rule. The completeness of discipline is the father's firmness combined with the mother's tenderness; each infusing into the other the quality of each. A wise parent will put his seal to the testimony, that this well-disciplined education is the surest means of securing the children's affection, gratitude, and reverence.

In fine--on this important subject so often enforced--we are not taught to believe without promises, or to obey without precepts. The Book of Proverbs exhibits cause and effect--the certain consequence of a given course of action, whether good or evil. It sets out promise and obligation--promise fulfilled in the way of obligation. The promised blessing to godly parental discipline is written in beams of living light. If the grace of the promise be lost, it is only by unbelief in the promise, or by a presumptuous confidence in it (separating the end from the means) such as brings shame in the issue. It is not that God is untrue, but that we are unfaithful. God has given the promise. Man either slights, rejects or abuses it. He attempts to put aside the Scripture by an appeal to experience, instead of proving the faithfulness of God by "the obedience of faith." The commands--the directions--the promises—the blessing--all are the Lord's. Put his word to the test. The simplicity and perseverance of faith will be richly honoured in his own best time and way.

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