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God's Guarantee about Children: A Sermon

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Capex 2
GOD'S GUARANTEE ABOUT CHILDREN.

A Sermon

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By Rev. J. E. Rankin, D. D.

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**GOD'S GUARANTEE ABOUT CHILDREN.**

Proverbs xxii: 6.—"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

A child will come up, in some way. Its growth in some direction, is a certainty. Training does not insure growth; it only determines the direction of growth. Growth is a necessity of the child's being. Set out a grape-vine; it will grow whether you train it or not. It will grow up; it will grow down; it will grow North, South, East or West: according as you train it. Those little tendrils, by which it clings to the nearest object of support; to fence, or stake or stump; to the very weeds, which tower up around it; to the trellis, which you construct for it; those little tendrils are the most fearful things in its nature; show us that some direction or other it is bound to take, and to keep. It is just so with a child. It has just such tendrils to climb with. All that there is trustful, tender and impressionable in a child; all that there is which clings and climbs, promises the taking and the keeping of some direction, which is to be given to it by outward objects; by parents, teachers, precept, example.

It is not, then, the alternative: Either I must train up this child in my way, which is the Lord's way, or let him come up himself; let him wait until he comes to years of discretion. It is the rather: Either I must train
up this child in my way, which is the Lord's way; or somebody else will train him up in his way, which is not the Lord's way. He will find training, just as certainly as that vine does. He will find some teacher, toward which he will lean; some support, around which the tendrils of his nature will cling. If you do not determine what your children shall be; what books your children shall read; what associates they shall have; where they shall attend Church and Sunday School, and what they shall be taught there, somebody else will. You can as well settle that, at the outset.

We often think, as we are engaged in this work with our children: Could we only know how it would result; could we make a prophetic forecast of our children's future; it would help to support us, when discouraged. Impressionable as our children are, we sometimes seem to make no impression upon them. Affectionate as they are, they sometimes seem to trifle with our most serious words. And we often say to ourselves, "Could we have some guarantee from Heaven, that this will not be all in vain!"

The text is

GOD'S GUARANTEE AS TO THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN.

Let us think of it.

I. No guarantee can be given, except by one who has power to make that guarantee good.

A guarantee requires something more than a kind intention; a favorable opinion. There are a great many men, for whom you have the highest respect, whose name upon a note would not be worth any more that that of a child. They have no ability to make good the promise
of the note. There is only one Being in the Universe, who has the power to make good such a guarantee, as that of the text. It is the Being who sees the end from the beginning; it is the Being who knows how to adapt means to the accomplishment of an end; it is the Being whose methods of working in Nature, we call the laws of Nature. They are so uniform; they are so unfailing. "When he is old, he will not depart from it." Such training made Moses, made David, made Daniel, made Timothy.

It is often said that a man who plants a tree, is a benefactor to future generations. What does he do? He only takes God's guarantee, that what he starts in the earth a twig, will go on growing until his children's children shall sit beneath the shadow of it. He will lie sleeping in the dust. The roots of this tree, indeed, may come to be neighbors to his pillow. But, this thing he does; this attachment which he makes of himself to something, to which God has given a law of growth, will go on perpetuating itself, generation after generation. In every field and forest, God has said, "Train up a tree in the way it should go, and when it is old, it will not depart from it." And that wide-spread oak, a hundred years old, which overshadows the dwelling where this man once broke mortal bread, shows us how he took God's guarantee, and acted on it; and how what God guaranteed was fulfilled.

People with clear heads about other life, get very much mystified when they come to religious life. It does not seem to them to stand upon the same plane with the nurture of plants and trees. They believe in the uniformity of God's laws when they are cultivating roses and tomato-
vines. They set out a young oak with a kind of confidence that it will tower into the heavens, and bless everybody who sits in the shadow of it. But, when they come to the training of immortal beings, in whom God has so much more interest than in flowers and trees, they say in their hearts, "If the Lord will, this child shall grow up as I train him in his childhood." Why should there be any "if" about it? There is no doubt about what God's will is. If you take the moment, when your heart is the most tender toward your child; when you have the highest aspirations as to what he may be, and what you wish him to be; when you build for him those "castles in the air," which fathers and mothers know so well how to build; that, if you are a Christian, is nearer the will of your Heavenly Father respecting him, than anything else that you can form. God has the father-heart and the mother-heart in one. You know how it was with the mother of Samuel. She wanted for her son a place in the tabernacle, to serve there with the old man Eli. And long before the Lord spoke to him, she trained him for it. She took him to Shiloh, and left him in his childhood; coming, yearly, to bring a little coat, which she had made for him with her own hands. Who can doubt, but that wish of hers, that her own boy should minister to the old man Eli, was in entire harmony with the will of God that Samuel should become an eminent prophet; and contributed to it?

There is often a very low tone to our religious life, respecting our children just as respecting ourselves. We do aspire to have them escape the evils that are in the world; be virtuous, industrious and safe. But God's guarantee is just as good, if we seek great things for
GOD'S GUARANTEE ABOUT CHILDREN.

them. I do not know why, in these hundreds of families, there may not be children upon whom God will so descend by His grace, that they shall be eminent for usefulness; nursing fathers and nursing mothers in the Christian church; teachers, ministers, missionaries, great workers, great givers. For our children, why should we not covet the best gifts? Somebody's children must have these gifts. Does God give you and me any dispensation respecting our children, such that we may safely covet for them an easy place in His Kingdom? a future, where they will always be near their parents? even a life and death in their own native land? Was this aspiration of Samuel's mother an unnatural one? Was her conduct, in making so early a surrender of her little boy to the service of God, unmotherly? Who believes it?

II. There is a way, in which a child should go, and God guarantees that if he is trained up in that way, he will never leave it.

I do not think the training here, is mainly the imparting of knowledge. The imparting of knowledge respecting religious things is very important; and there is no religious training without it. But, we may make a fatal mistake right here. Here are the Ten Commandments, for example. They are the trellis, which we set up in God's name, on which to train the religious growth of our children. We teach them that God is the only Being to be worshipped; we teach them to set apart His day; to be reverent in the use of His name and His Word; we teach them to honor their parents; we teach them to be pure in their thoughts; to be truthful and honest and kind in their little dealings with each other. But, there is scarcely a day of nursery-life in any of our homes, in
which there is not an opportunity to enforce or illustrate some of these commandments. And here is the sphere of nurture; of training. Take, for example, the commandment: "Thou shalt not covet!" The drawing out of the child’s soul in obedience to this commandment, so that another child’s playthings and joys shall seem as sacred to him as his own; the making of the tendrils of his young nature clasp this trellis and climb it, is what is meant by training up the child.

There are people who have a great deal of success in dealing with plant-life. I always envy them. They are people of almost infinite patience. They are people who condescend to a multitude of little particulars. They are not like parents, who say to a little child: "I have told you once, and that is enough." Once is not enough. Once never was enough for you and me, when we were children. Our kind and forgiving Heavenly Father knows that it is not enough, now we are grown people. It has always taken line upon line and precept upon precept with every one of us. Precisely here, is where we fail. Teaching our children, is not training them. Telling them once, telling them a hundred times even, is not training them. We are often pointed to families of children whose future career falsifies the guarantee of the text. It is said, that here was a certain minister’s family, or a certain deacon’s family, all thoroughly taught the Bible and the Catechism, and yet, scarcely one of them turned out well. I say, again, teaching children is not training them; any more than putting down a trellis, and tying a vine to it with a string, is training it. Training implies the patient guiding of the growing stalk. God does not
guarantee the children of people who only teach their children, but do not train them.

Teaching is the function of the Sabbath School; but, not training. And we Christian parents, to whom God gives a guarantee if we train our children in the way they should go, comfort our hearts that our children are all right, if they are only taught that way. Teaching is imparting knowledge; training is the application of that knowledge; is the drawing out and confirming of the child's life, in accordance with it. Training involves condescension to child-life, and sympathy with it; the listening to thousands of little questions, and the patient attempt to answer them. There was a time, when education in school-houses was nothing but committing to memory. This was the old type of religious education. It was committing the Shorter Catechism. As though the knowledge of truth insured the application of it! The Catechism was put under the childhood cornerstone, as though that was to determine the whole superstructure.

There is something very touching in the manner, in which the mother of Thomas Carlyle followed her distinguished son, whom she at first hoped to hear preach the Gospel, with entreaties that he should not neglect his Bible. "Tell me if thou readest a chapter often, and Tom, if not, begin, begin." Letter after letter goes from that humble home, where the mother had practiced penmanship, that she might correspond with her favorite boy, whose future eminence her own heart predicted. For the heart of every mother is prophetic in its instincts. But, it was too late. The trouble was in that home-nurture. At least, I think so. It was rigidly Biblical and Calvinis-
tic, as a system of instruction. So far as outward morality, so far as a kind of proud and sturdy independence was concerned, it was faultless. It was a God-fearing household; that of Carlyle's father. The son honored it; revered it; but, somehow, it failed with him. Did it fail because it was so much a matter of teaching, and so little a matter of training?

Just see how Carlyle regarded his father: "We had all to complain," he says, "that we dared not freely love our father. His heart seemed as if walled in. My mother has owned to me that she could never understand him, and that her affection and admiration for him were obstructed. He had an air of deepest gravity, and even sternness." An American biography, the biography of the American divine, who did so much in his day to emphasize the importance of Christian Nurture, furnishes another picture of a father. This is from the hand of a daughter: "Of my father's paternal tenderness, shown daily in little ways and sometimes in rare moments, finding exquisite expression, this is not the place to speak openly. It may be guessed what warmth he radiated, if we recall that luminous revelation of himself, when he said, 'It is the strongest want of my being, love!' Nor can we reveal the gentle, fatherly counsels, and the attractive, personal religious talks, all the more prized because of their rarity. In such conversations it was always the winning, never the compelling side of religious experience, which he presented to us."

Here was one father, as stately and rigid and cold as Ailsa Crag itself, and another, as gentle and approachable as some green slope of the Connecticut, clothed with flocks, and graceful with elms. It is easy enough to see
that in Ecclefechan, all the aspects of religion would be of the inflexible and forbidding kind; while in Hartford, they would seem wholly harmonious with the gentle authority and grace of home-life; that in Ecclefechan, there would be a kind of gulf fixed between childhood and the Kingdom of God, while in Hartford, the children would be in this Kingdom, before they asked where they were.

There would have been no difference between James Carlyle and Horace Bushnell as to the meaning of the words in the text, "the way he should go." They both believed that children should be brought up religiously. But the difference was as to what constituted this religious bringing up. In the old Scotch method, great attention was paid to teaching the Bible and teaching the Catechism; to grounding the children in the fundamental doctrines; matters which we too much neglect. In the home in Hartford, larger dependence was placed on nurture; on guiding the little feet into the way of life; on having the image of Christ impressed on the soul, in infancy and childhood; matters which are of the first importance.

I have already called your attention to a distinction between teaching and training. Teaching has to do with knowledge; training has to do with practice. The child has to be trained in the way he should go: that is, his child-life, in the way it expands, in the forms which it takes on is to be guided and directed by you in the paths of piety; is to unfold under your eye, your influence, your touch. Take an illustration of this kind: Your little lad is trying to lay out a flower-bed in the back-yard. You see that he has not drawn the border lines straight. He knows what straight is; but he does not know how to compass a straight line. You can take the spade, and
guided by your eye, you can make a straight line. But this is not what he wants. He wants you to show him how he can make a straight line. You drive down two stakes, and stretch a cord between them, and tell him to follow that cord. Will he ever forget that lesson? The same little fellow does not go straight to school, or to Sunday School. It is not because he does not know the way. He needs a little inward training, as to the bearing of his negligence upon his own future. Show him how to make a straight line here.

III. God’s guarantee is not, that if we teach a child the way he should go, and fail to train him up in that way, his future is secure. This has been the too-frequent interpretation of this passage. It is much like the expectation of the man who cultivates vines, that if he do not succeed with the vine while it is young and tender, it will take to the trellis of its own accord, when it has become stiff and woody.

The dedication of a child to God in baptism, as a kind of preventive charm against evil; as an effort to put God under bonds to take care of it, and ultimately save it, whatever our failures: this is the attitude of many people in the Christian Church. God does not say: “Dedicate a child to me; take him to my house, and have his name uttered in presence of the great congregation; and have my servant administer the seal of the ordinance to him; and I will take care of him; I will see that your expectations are fulfilled, and that, some day, he himself will come and give himself away to the Lord, and be just what you want him to be!” He does not even say, “Educate your child for me; teach him the truths of the Bible; teach him his native sinfulness and need of a
Saviour; teach him what Jesus taught; and I will see that in after days this effort shall have its recognition and reward.” Now, I believe in dedicating children to God; I believe in educating them for God. But, this is not the meaning of this text. It is not intended to comfort us when, having failed to train them up in the way which they should go; having never got them into this way, we see them wandering away from God; I say, it is not intended to comfort us with the thought, that what we have failed to secure in their infancy and childhood, is some how, in some magical way, to be accomplished in their maturer years. Whatever may be said of other passages of the Bible, as bearing upon these points, this is not the one, which teaches any such doctrine.

I admit the force of faith in God’s covenant, with reference to the return of a wayward child, even when his parents have passed to the skies. I believe in the influence of the truth, implanted in the memory, when not received into the heart. But, you will agree with me that, ordinarily, religious instruction which doesn’t result in religious training, soon becomes irksome and distasteful. The child reacts from it. It is just as it is in the day-school. Cramming the memory with dry rules, or dry facts, causes a reaction from the study so prosecuted. The practical illustration of these rules, or the scientific classification of these facts, on the other hand, is delightful. True religious life in a home, will be just as engaging to other children, as it was to Dr. Bushnell’s children. Carlyle’s biographer relates a very impressive event in the last days of his grandfather. There had been some family quarrel, and he and his brother, though living close neighbors, had not spoken for years. They were
both over eighty years old. One of them, Carlyle’s grandfather, being on his death-bed, the heart of the other one relented. He was a grim, broad, fierce-faced man, who had followed the sea; this great-uncle of Carlyle. And being too unwieldy to walk, he was brought to Ecclefechan in a cart, and carried in a chair up the steep stairs, to the room of his dying brother. There he remained some twenty minutes, and came down, with a face which the memory of the little Carlyle never forgot. Doubtless this was religion. It was a kind of heroic thing to do. It was the act of a man who expected soon to appear before the Judge of all the earth, and who remembered the words of the daily prayer, taught him in childhood: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” But, it was not such a tender and childlike manifestation of religion, as was calculated to win the heart of a child. Here was relenting; but, where were the long, wasted years of unrelenting?

Do you know that I think that God sets a much higher value upon the conversion of a child, than the conversion of an adult? The joints of an adult are stiff. It is not so easy for him to walk in the way of God’s commandments; even when that way has been taught him. Why is it that in kinds of business, say banking, for example, clerks are wanted who are young? Employers want that period, when the mind is still flexible; when habits can be easily formed. Just so, I believe, that God wants children brought to Him early, and trained up for Him in youth, because they are much more valuable to Him. And when He says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it,” I believe He refers to the greater serviceableness of
those who are converted in childhood; to the highest economy in church-work.

Take men or women, who are converted after all their tastes and standards have been for years worldly. True, they renounce them. They seek new channels for the currents of their life. But, every now and then, some great inundation will come, and will break through the new barriers, and strike across the beautiful valleys of their present aspirations and purposes, and leave the work of months or years in desolation. Converted adults, it seems to me, require more nursing and forbearance than converted children. The grace which they seek from God, seems largely expended upon themselves. To them, the church is more a hospital, than a field of service. As a rule, very little is expected of them but to manage to get along without a breach of their covenant. I know there are noble exceptions. But, believing thoroughly as I do in revival-work, as the only work calculated to reach many adults; and glorying in the fruits of such work, I want still to make this emphatic, that even when God talks about loyalty to him in adult-life, He attaches it to the injunction, "Train up a child the way he should go." Maturity and consistency of Christian character in manhood and womanhood, God attaches to the childhood trained up the way it should go.

Salvation by repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, so far as I can see, addresses itself just as really to child-life as to adult-life. Nay, it is more on a level with child-life, than adult-life. When a lad of thirteen comes to his Pastor, with the wish to talk and pray with him, about what he ought to do to be saved; and when a man sixty years old comes upon the same errand, you
may think the last understands himself better than the first. It does not follow from the difference in their ages. The Kingdom of God is right over opposite the day-school and the play-ground, as really as the evening-time of mature years. And it may depend upon your faith and my faith, whether the lad shall come now, when there is some use in him; when youth's glow and youth's baptism make his life beautiful; when there may be a half-century of work in him for the Lord Jesus Christ; or, come a little child, in his old age; at the eleventh hour.

There is many a parent, and many a teacher, and many a pastor, who has occupied the attitude of the disciples when the mothers brought their little ones to the Lord, that He might bless them; meeting them with rebuke and discouragement; while He always says, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

IV. When we are looking at the Lord's guarantee as to the training of our children, we must mark the difference between the meaning of training up children in the way they should go, and training them up the way they should go. The expressions sound very much alike. But, the meaning of one is material and artificial; and the meaning of the other is spiritual. A child trained up in the way he should go, is one held in restraint; kept within bounds; limited here, and limited there; in a word, under authority; not taught self-government.

The best government, is the least government. I mean, of course, the best government which answers the ends of government; which is a terror to those that do evil, and a praise to those who do well. The training of
a vine implies its freedom to grow according to the law of life within it. Every tendril that gets hold of the trellis, tends to fix the place of the next tendril. Fix in your child's mind reverence for the Bible, and when he finds there: "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy;' or "Honor thy father and thy mother," he is ready to transfer the reverence already awakened to these precepts. He grows up from that trellis, where you have fixed him, to another, which is beyond it.

I want, if possible, to distinguish here between walking in a way, as one might do, artificially, and growing up into that way; adopting it as the law of one's growth and development. For this is what the text means. You have seen a peach tree spread out upon the walls of a conservatory like a fan. That was done contrary to the law of its natural growth, and, in one sense, made it a deformity. God intended it to balance itself and support itself by the way in which it grew. Now, religion does not take a child's nature and spread it against a brick wall, and nail it up there; taking away all its beauty, and all its sweet proportions. This sort of treatment is the very one against which his nature reacts. And God makes no promise to it in the text. His guarantee relates to that kind of guidance, under which the naturally-developing life of the child is given a tendency toward God and toward Heaven.

"Train up a child in the way which he should go." The going, the child has to perform; just as the tree has to do the growing. His going is growth, like the growth of the tree. And the text guarantees, that training, which results in a child's growing up into Christian life, never will be reacted from in adult life. This is a period in
which a great many people, who once thought themselves Christians, are falling away, not merely from the practice of Christianity, but from the belief of it. Now, if you, who are so anxious that your children should have the safeguards of religion; should be held true to the system of truth which Jesus taught; should be not only child-Christians, but adult-Christians; and when everybody else talks as though they stood on sinking sand, should be like one with his feet planted on the Rock of Ages; if you want God's guarantee for it, do not look for it in the result of your prayers and your faith, that it will eventually be all right with your children; that they will be converted in some future revival; but look for it in the diligent and tender training of them the way they should go.

The guarantee of God is not that when they are old they will come into the way they should go; but, that they shall not depart from that way, in which you have trained them up. When the great Scotch preacher, Guthrie, was lying in the border-lands, which are between this world and the next, why did he want sung to him the songs of the children; bairns' songs, as he expressed it? Why did John Quincy Adams never retire to rest without first repeating the nursery-prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep?" Had these men found nothing beyond those first impressions made on them in their childhood? Had this man, whose eloquence had swayed such multitudes, and had helped such multitudes to a knowledge of the way of life in the pulpit; nothing better for his soul, than the songs of little children? Had this great statesman of Quincy no other prayer for his lips in old age,
than the prayer his mother taught him? Ah! the great poet was right:

"Heaven lies about us in our infancy."

If in childhood we get into the way of life, adult years will take care of themselves.

I suppose, in one sense, children will always be upon the hearts of their parents. The parental instinct to defend and protect the child, makes it necessary. But the solicitude about the direction of the child; and the ultimate result of the child's life; this solicitude, I believe, this, and kindred passages of the Bible were intended to relieve. The years of especial care and anxiety are very few. From birth to the teens, the thing is virtually settled. When the children of the great novelist, Charles Dickens, left home to shift for themselves, he gave them a personal letter, with a copy of the New Testament, commending to them the Christian religion. No doubt, the fact of going away from home makes the impressions connected with that event very solemn; that what a mother says, as she puts the boy's Bible into the trunk; or what the father says, as he warmly presses the dear fellow's hand, and gives him a last kiss; no doubt, these are to be long remembered. But, do you know, that deeper than these fervors and memories of the moment, are those impressions which have been made little by little, as drops of water wear a hole into the stone; as the pebbles of the seashore are smoothed, as no chisel of the stone-cutter can smoothe them?

Do not depend upon it, though it may come; do not depend upon the sudden revolution, which may be wrought in your child after he is gone; when he meets for him-
self the buffet of life's ways; when he undertakes to walk alone with himself in the far-away wilds; in the crowded city. Now, you have him in his boyhood. Now, your father-love and your mother-love inspire you to mark him for the Lord. Grave deep into his spirit, the fundamental things; the things which unbelief cannot disturb. Teach him there is a God; teach him to open his fresh young nature to the influences of God's Spirit, as the bud opens to the rays of the sun. Teach him that the thing which God hates, is evil; sin, in whatever form. Array him loyally on the right side. Teach him, that the manifestation of Himself, which God has made, in Jesus of Nazareth, is something which must be to him, without the possibility of change! The handwriting of your love, which you make in your weakness, will grow with his growth, just as the initials carved in a sapling enlarge with the growth of the tree; till nothing can remove them, which does not destroy that tree itself. And, one thing always remember, that in all life, in all growth of childhood, there will be fluctuations. You are not training up beings without individuality; without a will. Because to-day you do not see the same results from your training of your child, which followed yesterday, it does not prove anything against the training. A child is like a fruit-tree in the spring-time. This day, he is all covered over with blossoms, and to-morrow, the ground is sprinkled with them; and you are discouraged. But, the time of the fruit is not yet. The blossoms no more predict the fruit, than the period when the fruit is setting. You hold steadfast to your work. "Train up the child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it." It is God's guarantee, that you shall not "labor in vain, nor spend your strength for naught."