

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

~Other Speakers A-F: Timothy Dwight:

Job, as every person who reads his Bible knows, was an eminently righteous man. God Himself testifies that there was none like him in the earth, that he was perfect and upright, that he feared God and hated evil. Still he was afflicted beyond most other men. He lost his property and his children. He was distressed with a most painful and loathsome disease His wife treated him with the bitterest unkindness, and his friends put a finishing hand on his sufferings by insisting that they were all exhibitions of the anger of God against him on account of his peculiar guilt. Job vindicated his character against these charges with firmness and zeal. In the progress of the debate, both parties evidently passed the bounds of moderation. While his friends attributed to him crimes which he had not committed and guilt which he had not incurred, Job strenuously asserted, in terms too unqualified, an innocency and a purity to which his claims were certainly imperfect.

When the dispute was ended, Elihu, a young man who had been a witness of their zeal, censured them all for their heat, for the intemperance of their sentiments, the unreasonable imputations of the one part and the unwarranted self-justification of the other. At the same time he vindicated, in a becoming manner, the justice of the divine dispensations toward Job, exhibited in a strong light the greatness and perfection of Jehovah, and urged irresistibly the duty of implicit submission to His will.

When Elihu had closed the discourse, God manifested Himself to this assembly of disputants in a storm accompanied with thunder and lightning and answered Job out of the whirlwind by which they were borne along. In a series of sublime and wonderful observations, He displayed His own supreme excellence, the immeasurable greatness, the incomprehensible multitude, and the unfathomably mysterious nature of the works of creation and providence. With these observations, He interwove, also, strong and overwhelming proofs of the littleness, ignorance, and imbecility of man and showed unanswerably how impossible it was that such a being should judge with any propriety concerning the divine dispensations. By these discoveries of the true, great, and perfect character of God, Job, as we might well expect, was deeply humbled and led to genuine self abhorrence and sincere repentance.

DOCTRINE. The great evangelical truth which is contained in this passage and on which I mean to insist in the following discourse is this: Clear and just views of the character and presence of God naturally produce in the mind abasing and penitential thoughts concerning ourselves.

This doctrine I shall attempt to illustrate by the following observations:

God is our Creator, Preserver, and Benefactor. He formed us out of nothing, breathed into our nostrils the breath of life and caused us to become living souls. He made us wiser than the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven and enabled us, by the light of reason, to discern His character and His authority and, by our moral powers, to love and serve and glorify Him forever. The being which He gave He upholds by the word of His power and renders desirable by the exercise of His goodness. His mercies to us are new every morning and fresh every moment. Life and breath and all things which we enjoy are among the good gifts which come down from the Father of Lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning (James 1:17). All these considerations prove without doubt that in the highest possible sense we are the property of this great and glorious Being. Indeed, nothing is ours except what He has given us, and all the property which intelligent creatures possess or can possess is created solely by the gift of God.

From these considerations it is evident that God has an absolute right to dispose of us in whatever manner seems good in His sight; particularly, He has an unquestionable right to prescribe for us such laws and require of us such services as He pleases. Whatever He prescribes, we are bound by the highest possible obligation to obey; whatever He requires, we are, by the same obligation, bound to perform.

This unlimited right God is infinitely able to vindicate. His power is immeasurable. Disobedience to His commands He can punish without bounds and without end. He knows every avenue to the heart and can make every thought and every nerve a channel of suffering. To escape from His eye or His hand is alike impossible. Every element, every faculty, and even every enjoyment, He can convert into a minister of vengeance. He needs not the famine nor the pestilence, the storm nor the thunderbolt, the volcano nor the earthquake, the sword nor the scepter of tyranny to execute His wrath upon His rebellious creatures. He needs no lake of fire and brimstone to torment the workers of iniquity. He can arm an insect or commission an atom to be the minister of His anger. He can make the body its own tormenter. He can convert the mind itself into a world of perdition where the gloom of despair shall overcast all the faculties, the sigh of anguish heave, and the stream of sorrow flow forever.

In the possession of this mighty power He is still just. No intelligent creature will ever find a solid reason for complaining against God. His commandments concerning all things are absolutely right. I do not mean that they are right because they are His commandments; they are right in themselves. The things which they require are the very things which wisdom sufficiently informed and virtue sufficiently pure would choose to do in preference to all others. In themselves, therefore, they contain ample reasons why they should be done by us.

At the same time He is infinitely good. "Thou art good," says David, "and doest good" (Psalm 119:68); and "His tender mercies are over an His works" (Psalm 145:9). Even in this rebellious world He has not left Himself without abundant witness "in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). Our health, our food, our raiment, our friends, our hopes, the nameless and numberless enjoyments which succeed each other without intermission and flow in an unceasing stream through the period of life, and peculiarly, the means and proffers of life beyond the grave are all daily and divine proofs of the kindness of our great Benefactor. From Him who does these things to such beings as we are, what blessings would not descend were we better? Were we innocent, can we doubt that our thorns and briars would bloom with the beauty of paradise? Were we of angelic disposition, can we hesitate to believe that earth would be changed into heaven?

Of the goodness of God, His mercy is the consummation and glory. When we had ruined ourselves and had none to save or even to pity us, He sent His Son, His only beloved, to redeem us from our sins and to rescue us from perdition. He sent Him to endure the contradiction of sinners and to undergo the death of the cross. At the tidings of this wonderful work, heaven opened its gates to receive mankind, and thousands and millions of repenting sinners entered the path which leads to immortal life and found themselves welcomed into that happy world with a joy never exercised over just persons who need no repentance.

He is also our Ruler, our Judge, and our Redeemer. The universe which He has made is His own empire. All the things by which it is inhabited are His subjects. The dominion which He exercises over them is dictated by the glorious perfections which I have mentioned. To rebel against it is to oppose the excellence and authority of the Ruler and the interests of His immense and eternal kingdom. Those who rebel, He will therefore summon to judgment and demand from them an account of all the deeds done in the body. According to those deeds, they will be judged and rewarded.

From these considerations, he who realizes them will perceive in the clearest light that in every sin he is guilty of gross injustice to his Maker in refusing Him that which is His by the highest and most unquestionable right—an injustice at which he would start were it practiced upon his neighbor. Sin is an act of bold and impious rebellion against God's righteous government. Sin shows gross and dreadful ingratitude to God's goodness and mercy. Sin is an impious disregard of God's perfect and glorious character.

The guilt, inherent in all this wickedness, will be mightily enhanced by distinct perceptions of the purity of God. "Behold... the heavens are not clean in His sight" (Job 15:15); "and His angels He charged with folly" (Job 4:18). "How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water?" (Job 15:16). That every intelligent creature ought in some good measure to resemble his Maker in this attribute will not be questioned except by a mind peculiarly gross and guilty. It cannot be soberly doubted that both our thoughts and our lives ought to be clean. Accordingly, we are taught that good men aim assiduously at this character: "Every man that hath this hope in him," says Saint John, "purifieth himself, even as He is pure" (First John 3:3). But nothing can more strongly enhance the sense of our impurity than a comparison of our own character with that of God. We cannot but discern that the allperfect Mind, infinitely distant from every stain, must demand an absolute freedom from pollution in those who are to dwell with Him and obtain an interest in His everlasting love. What abasing views of himself must this consideration, strongly realized, awaken in the mind of every sinful being!

The same effect will be exceedingly increased by just apprehensions of the transcendent greatness of God. The importance which a sinner attributes to himself has no existence except in the jaundiced eye of pride. Yesterday, we were formed of the dust; tomorrow, we go down to the grave. From our birth to our death we are frail, dependent, helpless, little, ignorant, and polluted from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot. Still we are proud of ourselves and of our circumstances. How strange is this conduct! How weak! How sinful! How unhappy! There is no method in which this miserable spirit can be extinguished or even lessened so effectually as by bringing God before our eyes. To the view of solemn thought, what a Being He must be who called the universe out of darkness, who spoke and it was filled with inhabitants, who Himself fills immensity, who inhabits eternity, whose smile makes heaven, whose frown makes hell! Who can be profitable to such a Being? Who can be necessary? Were heaven to be emptied of its angels at once, His Word would replenish it again with others equally wise, great, and good. What then must we be? Nothing, less than nothing, and vanity!

As it is impossible that He should need us or our services, it is certain that He requires nothing of us for Himself and that all His commands are given for our good and not His. All the advantages derived from our obedience must be our own. He will not be benefited. We shall be better and, of course, happier.

From His hand we need all things. We are of yesterday and know nothing. If our mental darkness is illuminated, the light must come from heaven. Our strength is weakness and, of ourselves, we can do nothing. All our sufficiency is from God. His breath animated our lifeless forms. His power quickened our souls into thought and action. We breathe His air. We live upon His food. His army guides us. His hand sustains us. His mercy calls us to the possession of eternal life. We are nothing. We have nothing. We hope for nothing but what He is pleased to give. With these considerations in view, our importance and our pride sink into the dust. In this manner good men have, in all ages, learned and loved to abase themselves. Thus David, in the eighth Psalm, strongly affected with a sense of the greatness of God as displayed in the works of His hands, cries out with the deepest humility, "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?" (Psalm 8:3,4). Thus also Job exclaims in the text, "I have heard of Thee, by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

All these considerations will be mightily enhanced and their efficacy powerfully increased by the recollection of the omnipresence and omniscience of God. The consciousness that this great and awful Being is wherever we are, accompanies us wherever we go, and surrounds us in crowds and in solitude gives a solemnity to our existence and an importance to all our conduct which can be derived from nothing else. What an eye is that which is employed in searching the hearts and trying the reins of the children of men, which is always looking directly on our hearts, which as a flame of fire shines into the recesses of the soul and changes the darkness into day, which has watched all our sins from the beginning and has seen every impious, profane, ungrateful, and impure thought, word, and action. What a hand is that which has recorded all these things in the book out of which we shall be judged and will open to us the dark and melancholy pages at the final day. How must the presence of such an eye and such a hand make every sinner turn pale with conscious guilt and tremble at an approaching judgment if he be not blind and deaf and dead in trespasses and sins.

When we call to mind what an appearance we must make before Him who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity and cannot look upon sinners (Habakkuk 1:13), how can we fail to see ourselves in some measure as God sees us, to think concerning sin as He thinks, and to feel in our hearts that, as our guilt is of the deepest dye, our punishment must be dreadful.

Were all these considerations regularly present to the mind, were they daily and deeply realized, they must necessarily make a thinking man sober, a sober man serious, a serious man awakened, an awakened man penitent, and a penitent man watchful, prayerful, diligent, and vigorous in the performance of his duty. Particularly, if we have any just views of sin, it is scarcely possible that they should not become more just, more solemn, more intense, and more efficacious in persuading us to confess and to renounce our transgressions. The more just these views are, the more powerful must be their efficacy. In the mind of an enlightened Christian, especially, they cannot fail to produce the happiest consequences. Such a Christian will feel as Job felt and exclaim as he exclaimed, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

FIRST REMARK. From these observations we learn the reason why the great body of mankind have so imperfect a sense of their sin: they have no just, solemn, constant apprehensions of the character and presence of God.

They have very few and feeble apprehensions of the character of God. Let me address this consideration directly to you. When you, like most of your fellow creatures, think of God at all, is it not true that you think of Him only as a Being, who, although in various attributes superior to yourself, very much resembles you in other respects? Do you not feel that He has made you solely, or at least supremely, to promote your own enjoyment, or in plainer English, the gratification of your passions and appetites? Do you not feel that He has created, so He is bound to provide for you, and that chiefly as your own pleasure dictates, and that all the obligation lies on Him to bestow, while your whole concern is to receive and enjoy? Whenever you perceive or mistrust any defect or any fault in your conduct, is it not the habitual course of your thoughts to charge it upon Him and to clear yourself?

Do you realize that He has made you, that He preserves you, that you live solely on His bounty, that He is your Lord, that He is your judge, that He will be your rewarder beyond the grave? All these things you may, I

acknowledge, admit as a conclusion from premises which you cannot deny. The great question here intended is, do they come home to your heart with a solemn conviction of their reality? If you realized them, could you live as you have lived? Do you not, on the contrary, habitually feel that you are your own property, made for yourself and not for His service; that when He does not satisfy the demands of your passions and appetites, He is unjust; that when He interferes with your concerns, He is arbitrary; and that when He afflicts you, He is odious? And do not all these wretched conclusions flow from false, loose, and solitary apprehensions of His character?

Are you not equally destitute of any just apprehensions concerning His presence? When you lie down, do you remember that He only keeps your habitation from the flames or preserves you from death? When you awake, do you call to mind that if God had not awakened you, you would have slept the final sleep and your eyes would never have opened again upon the light of the living? When you eat, do you perceive whose hand spreads your table and fills your heart with food and gladness? When you profane His name, do you remember that He hears? When your imagination loosely roves after impure and gross objects, do you doubt that He sees? Have you ever dreamed that God entered at first the secret chambers of your soul and that He dwells there beholding with an awful survey all your forgetfulness of Him, your violations of His law, your abuses of His grace, your devotion to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life?

He has numbered your prayers. What do you think will be the total when that number is rehearsed at the final day? He has inhabited your closets. How many times has He seen you visit those sacred recesses to converse with Him? He has met you in His house; have you found Him there? Had you truly seen His presence could you have sent your thoughts on vain and sinful excursions to the ends of the earth? Could you have laughed and whispered and recklessly wasted away the golden hours of salvation? Could you have slept before the mercy seat and dozed away your accepted time at the foot of the cross?

The Sabbath is the day of God; the sanctuary is the house of God; both were instituted to bring you directly into His presence. Has this ever been their effect? Have you not even felt that God was afar off in an unknown and distant country called heaven where He was wholly occupied with His own concerns and had neither leisure nor inclination to attend to you? Upon how many Sabbaths can you look back with comfort or even with hope? Is there one, the transactions of which you would be willing to have rehearsed at the day of judgment or made the grounds of your future reward?

If you daily and hourly say, "Thou God seest me," and feel what you say, would it be possible for you to be so quiet, so hardened, so stupid in your sins? Could you go on so quietly toward the miseries of perdition? Could you so gaily, so sportively see the distance between you and heaven become greater and greater every day? Would you not tremble at the thought of provoking afresh the anger of this great and terrible Being? Would not your instinctive language at the sight of every temptation, at the approach of every sin, be "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9).

Remember that in all this conduct you are inexcusable. To realize the presence of God is absolutely in your power. It demands no supernatural assistance, any more than to think or to feel, to

study or to labor.

SECOND REMARK. Let me urge upon sinners the great duty of bringing home to their hearts the character and presence of God. If you are ever to have a just sense of your sins, you must derive it from this source. All our obligations to obey God arise from His character as a Being of supreme perfection, from the fact that we are indebted to Him for our existence and for all its blessings and hopes, and from the perfect nature of His law and its absolute tendency to glorify Him and to produce the complete happiness of his immense and eternal kingdom. Of such importance is this tendency as to justify the declaration on His part that "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18). In proportion to these things the guilt of sin is great and terrible.

But this truth cannot be felt unless you bring home to your hearts the character and presence of your Creator. Were this duty done you could no longer be at ease in Zion, no longer secure and light-minded in your iniquity and gay on the brink of destruction. It is because God is not at all in your thoughts that you do not flee from the wrath to come and lay hold on eternal life.

When the Israelites, at the foot of Mount Sinai, beheld the presence of God in clear view, all the people that were in the camp trembled and earnestly besought Him that he would speak to them no more except by the mouth of Moses. But a few days afterwards they made themselves a molten calf and worshipped it and sacrificed

thereunto and said, "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). The reason for this otherwise inexplicable conduct was nothing else but that they had forgotten God their Saviour who had done such great things for them in Egypt. All other sinners are, in these respects, exact copies of the Israelites. Whenever they bring the divine character and presence to their hearts, they begin to see their sins in some measure as they are; they learn their true character; they open their eyes upon their guilt; and they tremble at their danger. But when, as is the usual fact, God is not at all in their thoughts, they become bold, strong, and impious, regardless of sin and hell, of holiness and salvation, of God and their own souls. The language of their hearts, if not of their lips, is "Tomorrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant" (Isaiah 56:12). Who is the Almighty that we should serve Him? Or, what profit shall we have if we pray unto Him? All the difference between the most hopeful thoughts and emotions in the mind of a convinced sinner and the most hopeless circumstances of a stupid impenitent may be explained by the existence and want of a solemn, proper, and affecting sense of the character and presence of God. What a mad man is he, then, who forces this awful but immensely profitable subject out of his mind and who is satisfied to go to perdition if only he may have a smooth and quiet passage!

THIRD REMARK. Let me urge this great duty, also, upon Christians. You, my brethren, are no less bound to advance in holiness than sinners are to become holy, for both these duties are enjoined by the same authority. At the same time there is a law in your members warring continually against the law in your minds and bringing you under captivity to the law of sin which is in your members (Romans 7:23). You, like all other Christians, are perpetually prone to forget God, your duty, and your salvation. All these, let me exhort you to remember, are forgotten together. The world takes their place. Sin resumes its power. Temptations crowd upon the soul; transgression succeeds; our duty is feebly done or left undone; and the door is opened for repentance and sorrow.

Purity of life is maintained and improvement in holiness acquired only by a constant and lively sense of the presence of God. He is the Sovereign who demands this character of us. No other being is lord of the conscience; no other being can direct the faith or enjoin the duty of intelligent creatures.

He is always present to see whether we obey or refuse to obey this solemn requisition. What He sees He records, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

By what solemn obligations then, by what amazing interests, are you bound to realize His presence and to remember that His all searching eye is open day and night with an awful survey upon your hearts and upon your lives? A clear apprehension of this truth cannot fail deeply to affect your minds, to take strong hold on your hearts, to prevent or drive away temptation, to rouse you from sloth and sleep, and to awaken you to the dangers of this seducing world. When God is before your eyes, can you fail to remember the riches of His grace, the wonders of redeeming, forgiving, and sanctifying love, the solemnity of the covenant in which you have consecrated yourselves to His service, and your mighty, as well as enduring, obligations to purify yourselves even as He is pure? When God is before your eyes, can you fail to remember how delightful it is to please Him; how odious to dishonor Him; how mischievous, how painful, to wound religion and pierce the hearts of your fellow Christians? In the presence of this awful Being how can your sins fail to appear in their black and awful colors? How can you fail to detest, renounce, and, in a good degree, forsake them? A constant dread of sinning will, therefore, seize upon your hearts and become a governing principle of your moral conduct.

To forget, or to be insensible of the presence of God, is to lose sight of your best good, to weaken your sense of duty, and to expose yourself to every temptation. Had David remembered this glorious and awful Being, had he called to mind the just and sublime thoughts which he uttered in the 139th Psalm when he commenced the career of his iniquity with Bathsheba, what a long train of dreadful crimes, what a long course of bitter repentance, what a melancholy series of excruciating distresses would have been prevented. Had Peter remembered the inspection of the all-seeing eye he would not have denied his Lord, the pages of the Gospel would not have been stained with his fall, and his own seed would have been saved from the anguish of many sorrows. The nature of these is the nature of all good men. In themselves weak, frail, and backsliding, they have no safety but in God. But where shall we find a promise that the divine protector will extend His guardianship to any man at seasons in which He is forgotten? Were it possible for the inhabitants of heaven to cease from a consciousness of the presence of God, there is reason to fear that they would cease from their unspotted virtue.

To prompt and to aid mankind to the performance of the duty enjoined in this discourse is one of the great benefits intended by the worship instituted in the Gospel. The sanctuary derives its importance, its solemnity, its sacred character, not from the splendor with which it may be built nor from the rites with which it may be

consecrated, but from its divine inhabitant. On the doorposts and on the altar of every temple, every Christian should read the name of the city seen in vision by Ezekiel, "The LORD is there" (Ezekiel 48:35). "Surely," said Jacob, "the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16,17). Hither we come to see His face and seek His favor, to confess our sins and supplicate His mercy. Here He meets us to pity, to forgive, to bless, and to save. All our transactions here are with God and irresistibly bring this glorious Being immediately before our eyes. Every good man, every man in whom piety is alive, will feel, therefore, as a pious Israelite felt when he stood before the cloud in the temple, from the bosom of which the awful voice of Jehovah answered the prayers of His people and uttered the oracles of life.

From the house of God these solemn apprehensions are carried with us to our own habitations. They revive; they are invigorated in the morning and evening sacrifice; but they are especially quickened in the closet. From this sacred retreat the world is shut out. No earthly eye looks on. No earthly object intrudes. Here we bow before our Maker and converse with Him face to face. Our souls are naked before Him. Our lives pass in review; our sins are set in the light of His countenance as are our penitence, our faith, our love, our comforts, and our hopes. God, thus intimately seen in this private temple, is seen through the day till we revisit the same solemn retreats and again converse with our Maker. Thus a sense of the divine presence becomes the habitual and controlling state of our minds.

Thus aided, thus cultivated, the good man learns to find God in all places and in all things. This great Being becomes present to him in every enjoyment which he shares, in every affliction which he suffers, in every hope which he indulges, and in every advancement which he makes in the Christian life. To the eye of such a man, Jehovah is present and lives and acts in all the works of His hands. His smile is the beauty of the spring, His breath its fragrance. His hand pours out the riches of the summer and the bounty of the autumn. The thunder is His voice; lightnings are His arrows. He makes the clouds His chariots; He rides upon the whirlwind. The earth is His footstool; the heavens are His throne. In the sun, the brightest material image of His exaltation, immutability, and glory, He gives light and life and comfort to the unnumbered millions of animated creatures and holds out to the eye of the mind a magnificent symbol of heaven's everlasting day. Thus, everywhere He lives, controls, and smiles in all the works of His hand.

In His Word He is seen in still more divine forms. There His goodness and mercy beam with a mild and soft, but immeasurable glory in the face of the Redeemer. There His voice is heard in the awful threatenings of His law and the delightful promises of His Gospel. There He shines, a moral sun, into the soul and awakens in it the life which shall never die. Animated, comforted, invigorated with hope and joy, the Christian draws nearer and nearer to God and beholds Him in clearer and brighter view, until his soul, entering the regions of eternal rest, opens its eyes upon the glories of heaven and is admitted to behold His face in righteousness forever and ever.