

Recollections of God Painful To the Wicked

~Other Speakers M-R: Edward Payson:

I remembered God, and was troubled. —PSALM LXXVII. 3.

GOD is a being, whom it is impossible to contemplate with indifference. His character is so interesting, our dependence on him is so complete, and his favor is so indispensably necessary to our happiness, that a distinct recollection of him must always excite either pleasing or painful emotions. We must view him with dread and anxiety, or with confidence and joy. Agreeably we find, that the recollection of God always produced one or the other of these effects upon the mind of the Psalmist. It was usually productive of delight. My soul, says he, shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips; when I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches. But sometimes the remembrance of God produced on his mind very different effects. An instance of this we have in the psalm before us. My soul refused to be comforted; I remembered God and was troubled; I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed; I am so troubled, that I cannot speak.

The account, which the Psalmist here gives of his experience, naturally leads to some very interesting inquiries and remarks; remarks, which will probably come home to the bosoms and feelings of almost every person present. There is, I presume scarcely an individual of mature age in this assembly, who cannot say, with reference to some seasons of his life, I remembered God and was troubled. And there are, I trust, not a few present, who can say, my meditations on God in the night watches have been sweet. Now whence arises this difference? Why is the remembrance of God pleasant to some of us, and painful to others? Why is it sometimes pleasant, and at others painful, to the same individual? These are inquiries intimately connected with our happiness; for since it is impossible for any one to banish all recollection of God, and since the period is approaching, when he will be always present to our minds, it is highly necessary for our happiness, that we should be able, at all seasons, to remember him with pleasure.

I. In pursuing these inquiries, it may be necessary, in the first place, briefly to state what we mean by remembering God. We certainly mean something more than a transient recollection of the word, God, or of any other name, by which he is known. A person may hear or mention any of the names of God, many times in a day, without forming any distinct conceptions of his character, or of any part of it. He cannot, in this case, be said to remember God; for, properly speaking, it is only a word, which he remembers. But by remembering God, I mean, as the psalmist undoubtedly meant, recollecting those ideas, which the term God is used by the inspired writers to signify. When they use the word, they use it to denote an eternal, self-existent, infinitely wise, just, and good Being, who is the Creator and Upholder of all things, who is our Sovereign Lawgiver, and who worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will; who is always present with us, who searches our hearts, who approves or disapproves our conduct, who loves holiness and cannot look on sin but with abhorrence, who has power to make us eternally happy or miserable, and who will hereafter exert that power in bestowing endless happiness on some persons, and dooming others to endless woe, according to their respective characters. Whenever a person has these ideas of God in his mind, when he feels convinced for the time, that there is such a being, and that he is what the Scriptures represent him to be, then he remembers God in the sense of the text.

II. The way is now prepared to inquire, why the recollection of such a being should ever be painful; or in other words, why any of God's creatures should be troubled at the remembrance of him. It may easily be shown, that there is nothing in the divine character or government, which necessarily renders the remembrance of God productive of painful emotions. If there were, the remembrance of God would be painful to all his creatures, upon all occasions. But this is not the case. On the contrary, the remembrance of God is always delightful to holy angels, and to the spirits of just men made perfect. In fact, the constant presence of God constitutes their heaven. The recollection also of his existence, character, and government, is usually, though not always, highly pleasing to all good men. Nor is it strange that it should be so. It is always pleasing to an affectionate child, to reflect on the character, wealth, honor and influence of his father. The power, grandeur, and riches of their sovereign, are a source of heart-felt exultation and delight to all loyal subjects. They would consider their habitations as highly honored by his presence, and themselves as still more honored by an admission to his palace. For similar reasons, the affectionate children and loyal subjects of the King of kings cannot but exult and rejoice in contemplating the existence, the glories, the favor and the constant presence of their heavenly Father and King. It is and must be pleasing to them to reflect that they are the creatures, the subjects of such an infinitely great, wise, and powerful being. The thought that Jehovah exists and reigns God over all, blessed forever; that he brings good out of evil, causes the wrath of man to praise him, and makes all things work

together for the accomplishment of his wise and just designs, cannot but be exceedingly gratifying and consoling to persons of this description, while they contemplate the dreadful prevalence of natural and moral evil in this ruined world.

But if there be nothing in the character or government of God, which renders the remembrance of him necessarily painful to his Creatures; and especially if the recollection of him be in itself suited to console, delight and animate them, then it follows, that if any are troubled by the remembrance of God, the cause must exist solely in themselves. My friends, it does so. Nor is it difficult to discover and point out the cause. In one word, it is sin. Nothing but sin can ever render the remembrance of God painful to any of his creatures. None but such as are conscious of sin indulged and guilt contracted, can have reason to say, I remembered God and was troubled. This is evident from facts. The once holy, but now fallen angels, rejoiced in God till they sinned. Our first parents in paradise contemplated his character and government with unmixed delight, till they transgressed his commands. Good men find a similar pleasure in meditating upon these subjects, when they can view themselves as justified from the guilt of sin by the blood of Christ, and when they are conscious of no allowed deviation from the divine law. If our hearts condemn us not, says the apostle, then have we confidence towards God; and the man, who has confidence towards God, cannot be troubled at the remembrance of him. But on the other hand, if our hearts or consciences condemn us, it is impossible to remember him without being troubled. It will then be painful to remember that he is our Creator and Benefactor; for the remembrance will be attended with a consciousness of base ingratitude. It will be painful to think of him as Lawgiver; for such thoughts will remind us, that we have broken his law. It will be painful to think of his holiness; for if he is holy, he must hate our sins, and be angry with us, as Sinners—of his justice and truth; for these perfections make it necessary that he should fulfil his threatenings and punish us for our sins. It will be painful to think of his omniscience; for this perfection makes him acquainted with our most secret offences, and renders it impossible to conceal them from his view: —of his omnipresence; for the constant presence of an invisible witness must be disagreeable to those, who wish to indulge their sinful propensities. It will be painful to think of his power; for it enables him to restrain or destroy, as he pleases: —of his sovereignty; for sinners always hate to see themselves in the hands of a sovereign God: —of his eternity and immutability; for from his possessing these perfections it follows, that he will never alter the threatenings which he has denounced against sinners, and that he will always live to execute them. It will be painful to think of him as Judge; for we shall feel, that as sinners, we have no reason to expect a favorable sentence from his lips. It will even be painful to think of the perfect goodness and excellence of his character; for his goodness leaves us without excuse in rebelling against him, and makes our sins appear exceedingly sinful. Thus it is evident, that the consciousness of sin committed and guilt contracted must render the government, and all the perfections of God, objects of terror and anxiety to the sinner; and of course, the recollection of them must to him be painful.

Nor is this all. Every sinner loves sin. He places his whole delight in it. The only happiness, with which he is acquainted, consists in gratifying either the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eye, or the pride of life. But all these things are contrary to the will of God. He forbids the sinner to pursue them; he forbids him to indulge or gratify his sinful propensities; he commands him to mortify and destroy them, to deny himself, to take up his cross, follow Christ, and live a religious life, in which sinners can find no pleasure. He not only requires all this, but threatens all, who do not comply, with everlasting punishment. Whenever, therefore, the sinner thinks of God, he thinks of a being, who crosses all his, darling inclinations, thwarts all his schemes of happiness, and treads down self, that idol which he loves to worship, and to which he wishes every thing to give way. The sinner, therefore, cannot but look upon God, when he views him in his true character, as his greatest and most irreconcilable enemy. Agreeably, he is represented by the inspired writers as saying in his heart, No God; that is, would there were no God, or that I could escape from or resist his power. But this, reason and revelation assure him, is impossible. They tell him, that he can neither deceive God, nor fly from him, nor resist him; that he is completely in his power, and that God will dispose of him just as he pleases. This being the case, it is evident, that whenever he remembers God in the sense of the text, he cannot but be troubled.

It is further evident, that the more clearly they perceive God's character and their own; the more light is thrown into their consciences, the more mercies, privileges, and opportunities they have enjoyed and abused,—so much the more they will be troubled by a remembrance of God. Whenever they contemplate him, they will be thrown into a state of intestine war, of war with themselves. Conscience will rise up in their breasts, and take God's part, and reproach them for disobeying his commands, and abusing his favors. Their understandings will side with conscience, and render its reproaches doubly terrible. On the other hand, all their sinful feelings and propensities will array themselves in opposition to reason and conscience, and attempt to defend and justify themselves. Hence inward Struggles and conflicts will arise; the sinner's mind will become like the troubled sea, which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt; and he can have no rest, until he either becomes Cordially reconciled to God, or succeeds in banishing all serious thoughts of him from his breast. As well then may an imprisoned rebel think of his sovereign, or a condemned criminal of his judge, with

pleasure, as an Impenitent sinner remember his offended God, without being troubled.

But it may, perhaps, he objected, that many impenitent sinners appear to remember God, not only without pain, but even with pleasing emotions. I answer, it is not the true God, whom they remember, but an imaginary god, a god of their own creation. Sinners soon find that it is impossible to think of such a God, as the scriptures describe, without anxiety and alarm. Their carnal minds are full of enmity against such a being. They, therefore, proceed to form a god of their own, one who will not interrupt, oppose, or alarm them in their sinful pursuits; and such a god they can contemplate without pain, and even with pleasure. Hence we are told, that they think God to be altogether such a one as themselves, and say in their hearts respecting sin, God will not requite it.

It will, perhaps, be further objected, that there are some things in the character and government of God, which are adapted to allay the apprehensions of sinners, and prevent them from being troubled at the remembrance of him; his forbearance, long-suffering, and mercy, for instance, and especially the display which he has made, of his love in the Gospel of Christ. I answer, it is readily allowed, that these things are suited to encourage and comfort those, who, in the exercise of repentance and faith in Christ, become reconciled to God, and embrace the offers of mercy. Indeed, were it not for these things, not one of our apostate race could ever contemplate God with any other feelings, than those of terror, remorse, and despair; for we have all sinned, and exposed ourselves to everlasting condemnation. But while the mercy and grace of God, as displayed in the Gospel, are well adapted to comfort the penitent believer, they can evidently afford no rational ground of consolation to impenitent sinners, nor enable them to contemplate him without being troubled. Promises of pardon to the penitent, the believer, the reconciled, are nothing to the impenitent, the unbeliever, the unreconciled rebel, whose heart is still at enmity against God. To such persons the divine character and government still remain no less terrible, than if Christ had not died, and mercy were not offered. Nay. they are, in some respects, more so; for the Gospel has threatenings, as well as the Law, and it denounces on those, who neglect it, a much sorer punishment, than does the Law itself. Those, therefore, who neglect the Gospel, and refuse to repent and be reconciled to God, cannot remember him without being troubled. The same may be said of hypocritical professors, at least, of those, who know or suspect themselves to be such; for to them the thoughts of an all-seeing, heart-searching Judge, who cannot be deceived, and who will bring every secret thing into judgment, cannot but be exceedingly painful. The presence of a penetrating master is ever disagreeable to an unfaithful servant.

APPLICATION. 1. This subject, my friends, affords a rule, by which we may try ourselves, and which will assist us much in discovering our real characters; for the moral character of every intelligent creature, corresponds with his habitual views and feelings respecting God. If we never remember him in the sense of the text, or if we think of him infrequently and with indifference, it is an infallible proof; that our characters are wholly sinful, and our situation most dangerous; for we are expressly told, that all who forget God, shall be turned into hell. If we do not habitually contemplate God's true character and government with heartfelt satisfaction; if we do not rejoice, that the Lord reigns, and that he is just such a being as the scriptures represent him, and that we and all other creatures are in His hands,—it is certain, that we are not reconciled to him, that we still remain under the power of that carnal mind, which is enmity against God. If, though we can usually contemplate these objects with delight, we sometimes find the thoughts of them painful, it is a proof, that at such times, we are in a state of backsliding, from which we ought immediately to return. But whenever we can remember the true character of God, and the truths connected with it, without being troubled, when we can think of appearing in his presence at the judgment day with a humble, solemn joy; and especially, when we feel that to be with him, to see and praise him, forever and ever, is the very heaven which we desire, then we may be sure, that we are his real children, and that we are in a state of actual preparation for death.

2. From this subject we may learn how wretched is the situation of impenitent sinners; of those, who cannot remember God, without being troubled. That such persons cannot enjoy real happiness even in this life, is too evident to require proof; for the world cannot afford it, and they dare not look up for it to heaven, the only source whence it can be derived. Nay more, that great and glorious being, who alone can communicate happiness, is to them an object of dread, and a cause of anxious apprehension. The waters of life, which convey refreshment and felicity to all holy beings, are to them waters of bitterness; and what ought to be their happiness, constitutes their misery. Hence, what ever calamities and afflictions may overwhelm them, however deeply they may be distressed, and however greatly they may need consolation, they cannot look for it to the God of all consolation; for the remembrance of him would only increase their troubles. Indeed, the remembrance of him is usually most painful to sinners, when they are most severely afflicted; because they justly consider their afflictions as proofs of his displeasure. And if the situation of such persons is wretched in life, how much more so must it be at death, and in eternity! You will, I presume, allow, that if there be any such thing as consolation, it must be drawn from the contemplation of God, and of a future state; for it is most certain, that neither this world nor its inhabitants can afford it. But from the contemplation of these objects the

dying sinner can derive no consolation. On the contrary, he must, if he thinks of them at all, think of them only with anxiety and dread. If he thinks of God, he can think of him only as a being, whom he has neglected and offended, whose mercies he has abused, and who can view his conduct with no feelings but those of indignation and abhorrence. Every remembrance of him must be accompanied with a recollection of duties neglected, and sins committed, and with fearful apprehensions of his just and eternal displeasure. Which way soever the expiring sinner turns his eye, he can, therefore, discover nothing, which does not add to his wretchedness and despair. If he looks forward, he sees nothing but the dark and gloomy valley of death, through which no friend will accompany him; the burning throne of judgment, to which he is hastening, and eternity, shrouded in blackness and darkness, spreading in boundless extent beyond it. If he looks back, he sees numberless sins following him as accusers to the judgment seat, and threatening there to find him out. If he looks upward, he sees nothing but the frowning eye of a just and angry God, the glories of which search his inmost soul, and wither all his hopes. If he looks downwards, it is to that bottomless abyss, which he cannot but fear awaits him. He "turns, and turns, and finds no ray of hope."

My friends, if such be the death of those, who forget God, what must be their eternity? No sooner do they leave the body than that holy, just, eternal being, whose every remembrance troubled them, bursts, at once, in all his burning glories, upon their aching sight! And if merely to remember him were painful, what must the sight of him be? Think of a wretch deprived of his eyelids, and condemned to gaze unremittingly at a scorching sun, till the balls of sight were withered and dried up, —and you will have some faint conception of the feelings of a sinful creature doomed to gaze, through eternity, at the, to him, heart-withering perfections of that God, who is a consuming fire to all the workers of iniquity.

My sinful hearers, you, to whom the remembrance of God is painful, will you not hear and be convinced? I do not so much ask you to believe the scriptures, as to believe the testimony of your own experience. You cannot but be sensible, that the light of divine truth is painful to you; that the thoughts of God, of death, and judgment, trouble you. Nor can you deny, that you are mortal, that you must soon exchange this world for another. Now if the remembrance of God be painful to you while in health, must it not be far more painful to you, when sickness and death come upon you. If the mere recollection of God troubles you, must not the sight of him be incomparably more productive of distress? Why, then, will you put away thoughts, which must return, at a dying hour, to overwhelm you? which must be your eternal companions! Why will you put off that preparation for death, which alone can prevent the recollection, and the sight of God from being productive of anguish? and will convert what is now painful into a source of the purest, of everlasting felicity? Why will you continue in the wretched state of those, who are rendered unhappy by the remembrance of their Creator, of a being, in whose world they live, of whom every thing tends to remind them; a being, who is not far from every one of them, and in whose presence they must dwell forever? How wretched would be the situation of the inhabitants of the ocean, if the element, which surrounds them, and out of which they cannot exist, should become to them a source of misery! And how much more wretched, then, must be the situation of those, who are made miserable by the remembrance or by the sight of him, in whom they live, and move, and from whom they can never fly! Why then, will you not be persuaded to renounce those sins, which are the only cause, that renders the recollection of God painful, and to embrace those terms of reconciliation, which will render the thoughts, and the presence of God consoling in life, delightful in death, and productive of ineffable happiness through eternity? This leads us to remark,

3. How great are our obligations to God for the gospel of Christ, the gospel of reconciliation! Were it not for this, the remembrance, and still more the presence of God would have occasioned nothing but pure unmingled wretchedness to any human being. Were it not for this, no child of Adam could ever have contemplated God in any other light, than that of an inflexibly holy, just, and offended Judge, all whose perfections demanded his destruction. Were it not for this, there could have been nothing before us, but a certain, fearful looking for of judgment, and fiery indignation. It is only when viewed through that Mediator, whom the gospel reveals, that God can be contemplated by sinful creatures, without dismay and despair. But in and through him God is reconciled. In and through him peace is offered to rebellious men; through him we may all have access by one Spirit unto the Father. O, then, be thankful for the gospel of reconciliation, and show your gratitude, by eagerly embracing the terms of peace, which it proposes. Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

4. Is sin alone the cause, which renders the remembrance of God painful? Then let all, who have embraced the terms of reconciliation offered by the gospel, all who desire to remember God without being troubled, beware, above all things, beware of sin. It is sin, my Christian friends, which is the cause of all your sorrows. It is sin alone which spreads a frown over the smiling face of God; sin which hides from you the light of his countenance, which prevents you from always contemplating him with pure, unmingled delight and confidence. Swear, then, an eternal war with sin not only swear, but maintain it. Oppose sin resolutely, crucify it, mortify it

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in every way, and under all the forms, in which it appears, and it shall not have dominion over you. You shall not have the spirit of bondage again to fear; but the spirit of adoption, whereby ye will cry, Abba, Father.