

THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

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CHAPTER NINE

THE WISDOM AND HOLINESS OF GOD ILLUSTRATED IN SALVATION

And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen (Ezekiel 36:23).

The effect of the wind is visible, not the element itself. The clouds scud across the sky, the trees swing their arms wildly in the air, aerial waves chase each other in sport across the corn, and the boat, catching the gale in her flowing sheet, goes dancing over the billows. So— although in a sense infinitely higher—the Invisible is visible; and in his works we see God, who, seeing all, remains himself unseen. He is lost, not in darkness, but in light; He is a sun that blinds the eye which is turned on its burning disc. Angels themselves are unable to sustain his glory. They cover their faces with their wings, and use them, as a man his hand, to screen their eyes from the ineffable effulgence.

Suppose that we ascend the steps of creation, from matter in its crudest form to nature's highest and most beautiful arrangements; from the lichen that clothes a rock to the oak that stands rooted in its crevices; from the dull coal to the same mineral crystallized in a flashing diamond; from a dew-drop, lying in the cup of a flower, to the great ocean that lies in the hollow of its Mater's hand; from a spark that expires in the moment of its birth, to the sun which has risen and set with unabated splendor on the graves of a hundred generations; from the instinct of the moth, that flutters round a taper, to the intellect of an angel, who hovers before the throne; from a grain of sand to this vast globe; from this world to a creation in extent, perhaps, as much greater than our planet as it is greater than the grain of sand: As we climb upwards, step by step, our views of God's glory enlarge. They rise with our elevation, and expand with the widening prospect. At length we reach a pinnacle where the whole heavens and earth He spread out beneath our feet—and reach it to fall on our knees, and, catching the strain of adoring seraphim, to exclaim, "**Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory!**"

It is not given to man to discover all the works and ways of God. No; with our boasted discoveries and pride of science, perhaps these are as little known to us as the unbroken forest to the microscopic insect, whose life is a day, and whose world is a leaf—that little decaying leaf, the scene of its most distant journeys, its country, its cradle, its grave. With what modesty, then, should the highest intellect bow down and bear itself in presence of its Creator ! Let the patriarch, in language worthy of so high a theme, describe his majesty.

“He stretcheth out the north over the empty place, and hangeth the earth upon nothing. He holdeth back the face of his throne, and spreadeth his cloud upon it. He hath compassed the waters with bounds, until the day and night come to an end. The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at his reproof; he divideth the sea with his power, and by his understanding he smiteth through the proud; by his spirit he hath garnished the heavens; his hand hath formed the crooked serpent; lo, these are parts of his ways; but how little a portion is heard of him? but the thunder of his power who can understand?”

Unbeliever as he was, the great Laplace echoed these sentiments of Job, in this, one of his last and not least memorable utterances—“It is the little that we know; it is the great that remains unknown.” And in the confession of his ignorance, has not a Christian, and still greater philosopher, left us perhaps the finest illustration of his wisdom? Newton’s most brilliant discoveries reflect no brighter luster on Newton’s name than his well known comparison of himself to a little child—a child who had gathered some few pebbles on the shores of a vast and unexplored ocean.

Man, however— although comprehending but little of the ways of God—is privileged to contemplate, and is in himself honored to illustrate, the noblest of them all. He may be a beggar, but, if grace has made him a new creature, there is more of God seen beneath his rags than in the sun itself; nor does that brilliant sky studded thick with stars reveal the glorious fullness of Divinity that shines in the cross of Calvary and the face of Jesus. Bethlehem Ephratah was **“little among the cities of Judah,”** Our world also seems little among the suns and systems of creation—a dark, dim, insignificant spot; yet the eyes of the universe have been turned on our planet. It has all the importance spiritually, which physically was attributed to it, when men supposed it to be the pivot and center of creation.

Man’s world is the place in the great universe from which God and his attributes may be best beheld and studied. It corresponds to that one spot in a noble temple— lying right beneath the lofty dome—where the spectator, commanding all the grandest features of the edifice, is instructed to look around him, if he would see the monument of its architect. For where can we see God as we behold him on the cross and in the gospel? I scale bartizan or tower to embrace at one view the map of a mighty city. I climb the sides of some lofty hill to survey the land that lies in beauty at its feet. And had I the universe to range over, where should I go to obtain the fullest exhibition of the Godhead? Would I soar on angel-wings to the heights of heaven to look on its happiness, and listen to angel’s hymns? “Would I cleave the darkness, and—sailing round the edge of the fiery gulf—listen to the wail, and weep over the misery of the lost?

No; turning away alike from these sunny heights and doleful regions, I would remain in this world of ours; and, traveling to Palestine, would stand beneath the dome of heaven with my feet on Calvary—on that consecrated spot, where the cross of salvation rose, and the blood of a Redeemer fell. Here I find the center of a spiritual universe. Here the hosts of heaven descended to acquaint themselves with God in Christ; here, in a completed arch, if I may so speak, locked fast by the key, all the properties of Divinity meet; here, concentrated as in a burning focus, its varied attributes blend and shine.

We had begun to show how these attributes were exhibited in the work of redemption; and having illustrated this in the power of God, we now remark that—

I. The wisdom of God is glorified in redemption.

The British Museum possesses in the Portland Vase one of the finest remains of ancient art; and it may be remembered how— some years ago—the world of taste was shocked to hear that this precious relic had been shattered by a maniac's hand. Without disparaging classic taste or this exquisite example of it, I venture to say, that there is not a poor worm which we tread upon, nor a sere leaf, that, like a ruined but reckless man, dances merrily in its fallen state to the autumn winds, but has superior claims upon our study and admiration.

The child who plucks a lily or rose to pieces, or crushes the fragile form of a fluttering insect, destroys a work which the highest art could not invent, nor man's best skilled hand construct.

And there was not a leaf quivered on the trees which stood under the domes of the crystal palace, but eclipsed the brightest glories of loom or chisel; it had no rival among the triumphs of invention, which a world went there to see. Yes; in his humblest works, God infinitely surpasses the highest efforts of created skill. "**Wisdom is justified of her children;**" nor shall our God be left without a witness so long as thunders peal and lightnings flash, and breakers beat upon the shore; so long as a flower blooms in the field, a fin cleaves the deep, or a wing cuts the air; so long as glowing suns blaze above, or dying glow-worms shine below. That man gave the Atheist a crushing answer, who told him that the very feather with which he penned the words, "**There is no God,**" refuted the audacious lie.

In redemption this wisdom is preeminent. That work associates such amazing wisdom with love, and power, and mercy, that the Saviour of man is called "**the wisdom of God.**" The Apostle selects the definite article, and pronounces Christ to be the power of God and the wisdom of God." Can any doubt the propriety of the language, who reflects but for a moment on what a hard task wisdom was set—what a difficult problem she was called to solve—when man was to be saved? She had to forge a key that should unlock the grave; she had to build a lifeboat that should live in a sea of fire; she had to construct a ladder long enough and strong enough to scale the skies; she was called on to invent a plan whereby justice might be fully satisfied, and yet the guilty saved. The highest intelligences had been at fault here, they might well have asked, who is sufficient for these things? "**He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor.**"

In such an emergency—for such a task—wisdom sufficient dwelt only with the Godhead—in him in whom "**are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**" "**How shall man be just with God,**" is a mystery insolvable to all but Him in whom the most extraordinary and apparently conflicting elements have met—who has a double nature in a single person—who has a divine Father and human mother, who is the only begotten of God and firstborn of a virgin womb—who, being in one sense dust, in another sense Divinity, has a nature to satisfy and a nature to suffer.

Now, this wisdom of God in redemption is brought out in no aspect more strikingly than in the harmony which it has established among what appeared conflicting attributes. Here is nothing like the prophet's graphic picture of a city, where chariots jostle each other on the streets; nor like what happens even on the spacious ocean, when in the gloom of night bark dashes into bark, and foundering crews find in their ship a coffin, and in the deep sea their grave. Harmony, indeed, sits enthroned amid the order of the silent heavens. Flaming sun, and wandering comet, and rolling planets, move in their orbits without accident or collision; yet in the harmony established among the attributes of God, redemption illustrates a higher wisdom.

There is one fact, which brings this out very palpably. With the deepest interests at stake—in circumstances eminently fitted to sharpen his ingenuity—man never approached, nor so much as guessed at, the only method of salvation, We can show how near preceding philosophers have been to the later discoveries of science.

For many centuries before their practical application, China was acquainted with the properties both of gunpowder and the magnet; and have not we seen one astronomer get upon the track of a star, and start a thought, by which another—who pursued it to its ultimate conclusions—has been conducted to the brilliant discovery?

Every one acquainted with the history of science knows that some of the greatest inventions of the nineteenth century were all but anticipated at former and even remote periods; another step—but another step—and the world had possessed them ages before—and, centuries ago, man would have steered his way across the sea by the compass needle—yoked the spirits of fire and water to his triumphant wheels—and sent messages across oceans and continents on the wings of lightning.

The mystery of godliness, however—God manifest in the flesh—a Daysman such as the patriarch desired—with the right hand of Divinity to lay on God, and the left hand of humanity to lay on man, and thus the “fellow” and friend of both, to reconcile them—in short, a man to suffer and a God to satisfy, this was a thought which it never entered the mind of man to conceive.

We find nothing corresponding to this in the creeds and religions of a heathen world. There is neither glimpse nor glimmering of it in these. Every way but the right one was thought of. Here, the sinner seeks by his own works to work out redemption; here, by costly sacrifices, he attempts to appease offended justice; here, in children—whom he offers on the altar, or passes through the fire to Moloch—he gives the “**fruit of his body for the sin of his soul;**” here again—doing less violence to nature—guilty of a crime less contrary to reason and revolting to humanity, he courts death beneath the wheels of Juggernaut, and sheds the blood of his body to expiate the guilt of his soul.

These were the sands on which man built his house. These were the straws drowning men caught at. There never entered into other mind than God's a plan, or shadow of a plan, by which sweet Mercy might be espoused to stern Justice, and God—in the luster of untarnished holiness, and the majesty of a vindicated law—might appear, as he appears in Jesus, the “**just and yet the justifier of the ungodly.**”

II. *The holiness of God is glorified in redemption.*

The eyes are moved by the heart, as the hands of a time-piece are turned by the internal machinery. We turn them to what the heart loves, and from what the heart loathes. The most emphatic expression of dislike is a silent one—the closed eyes and averted head.

Such an attitude as I can fancy Zedekiah's to have been, when they brought out his sons to slay them in their father's presence. And "**to wound him that God had smitten,**" to add a crushing weight to his captivity and chains, to imprint a spectacle on his memory, that should haunt him like a horrid specter, when sight was quenched and hope for ever gone, his barbarous enemies put the sons to death before they put out the father's eyes. When you have in fancy imagined yourself in that father's place, imagining how, when you had implored them to begin with you, and save you this horrid sight, and they had refused the favor of these burning irons, how you would have closed your eyes, and turned shuddering away, you will be able in some measure to appreciate the abhorrence with which a holy God regards iniquity. Hear the prophet—"**Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity.**"

Nothing might appear more strongly to express the holiness of God than this language, "**Thou canst not look on iniquity;**" and yet his hatred of sin is, beyond doubt, much more fully expressed by the very way in which he saves the sinner; more fully expressed in redemption, than if, executing relentless vengeance, with an eye that knew no pity, and with a hand that would not spare, he had made an utter end of sinners—such an end that, to borrow the language of the prophet, "**there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped.**"

What man, what father, has not felt so on reading the story of the Roman judge? Had that stern patriot condemned common criminals enough to make the scaffolds of justice and the gutters of Rome run red with blood, that wholesale slaughter had been a weak expression of his abhorrence of crime, compared with the death of this solitary youth. When the culprit—his own child, the infant he had carried in his arms, his once sweet and beautiful boy, the child of his tenderest affections, who had wound himself round a father's heart—rose and received the immolating sentence at a father's lips, oh! that iron man offered the costliest sacrifice man ever made at the shrine of justice, and earned for a Roman virtue a proverbial fame.

But that is nothing to the spectacle which redemption offers. Over what are these angels hovering? On what do they bend a gaze so fixed, so intent, so full of awe and wonder? Sons of the morning! they had sung in their joy over a new-born world. Attendants at the birth of earth! they now hail with intense wonder, and praise in loftier strains, the birth in a stable, the appearance of a babe in Bethlehem. They had seen suns blazing into light; they had seen worlds start into being, and watched them as, receiving their first impulse from the Creator's hand, they rolled away into the far realm of space; but never had they followed world or sun with such interest as they follow the weary steps of this Traveler from his humble cradle to the cross of Calvary. What draws all their eyes to that sacred spot? what keeps them gazing on it with looks of such solemn interest? The Son of God dies beneath his Father's hand. Innocence bleeds for guilt; divine innocence for human guilt; a spectacle at which, in the mysterious language of the Apocalypse, "**There was silence in heaven.**"

On the night Daniel passed in the lion's den the Persian would hear no music—nor flute, nor harp, nor psaltery, nor dulcimer, woke the echoes of his palace; the daughters of music were all brought low. God's Son is dying on the tree. I can fancy that during these dread hours there was no music in heaven—there was an awful pause; silent every harp, hushed the voice of song; and when all is over, and the cry, "**It is finished,**" has been heard, and the last quiver has passed from Jesus' lips, I can fancy how these angels broke the awful silence, and, turning round to the throne, with new, deeper, holier reverence, exclaimed, "**Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.**"

This holiness, so glorified in redemption, appears still more plainly, when we consider how the eyes of Love both multiply and magnify beauties; and, overlooking all defects, reconcile us even to deformity. How beautifully, tenderly, touchingly, affection clings to an idiot child! and with what ingenuity does Love palliate in our children faults which are tolerable and tolerated in no one else. She flings a broad mantle over the shame of child and parent, brother, sister, and friend.

See how Eli—a too indulgent parent—tolerates crimes in his sons, which it is only doing this holy man justice to believe, he would have died rather than have himself committed. Now, in our judgment, the holiness of God shines very conspicuously in this, that, even when sin was associated with his beloved Son, it appeared nonetheless vile in his eyes; perhaps viler, fouler, still more loathsome—just as the churchyard mould, flung by the sexton from a grave upon winter's fresh fallen snow, looks the blacker for the contrast. Love would have spared the pains of a beloved Son, but it is met and mastered by God's hatred of sin. He looks on our sins as laid on Christ, and still he hates them with a perfect hatred, turning on him, that bare them on his own body on the tree, an unmitigated vengeance. To reach sin—to kill sin—he passes the sword through the bosom of his well-beloved Son; and if he did not spare even his own Son when he took our sins upon him, oh! what holiness in God! Whom will he spare?

What will he spare? What a startling alarum is rung from Calvary in the ears of a drowsy world! With your eye on the cross, within sight of its agonies, within sound of its groans, I ask the question, and I wait for an answer, If he did not spare his own Son, how shall he spare the impenitent and unbelieving? "**If they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?**"

III. *The justice of God is glorified in redemption.*

The prophet is perplexed. He strains his eye to penetrate a mystery. He says to God, "**Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil;**" but then, as one unable to reconcile the character of God with the dealings of his providence, he asks, "**Wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?**"

Now, although—as that question implies—clouds and darkness are round about the Lord's throne, whatever shadow present events may appear to cast upon his justice, and to whatever trials, as in the wrongs of a Joseph or David, faith may be put, in believing that there is a just God upon earth, his justice is as conspicuous in redemption as the cross which illustrated it.

Sinners, indeed, are pardoned, but then, their sins are punished; the guilty are acquitted, but then, their guilt is condemned; the sinner lives, but then, the surety dies; the debtor is discharged, not, however, till the debt is paid. Dying, **“the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God,”** Jesus satisfies for us; and, as we have seen a discharged account pierced by a nail, and hung to gather cobwebs on the dusty wall, he who paid our debt, nor left us one farthing to pay, has taken the handwriting that was against us and nailed it to his cross.

And now, I say, that justice is not only satisfied, but more than satisfied. She is better pleased to have her debtors free in heaven, than locked up in hell.

It must be so. Is it better for the creditor to hold the money in his purse than the man that owed it in a prison? What man of common humanity or common sense does not esteem himself happier to have the debt paid, than the miserable debtor rotting in jail?

Observe, I pray you, that in regard to the lost, and her claims upon them, justice, in a sense, is never satisfied. The pains of hell do not, cannot exhaust the penalty. Dreadful sentence! Banishment for life, for life eternal, from the blissful presence of God.

Mysterious debt! A debt ever paying, yet never paid. No wonder, in one sense, that Jesus died to save. The calamity is so incalculably tremendous, that the occasion was worthy of the interposition of God, and the salvation is most worthy of our grateful and instant acceptance.

Embrace it; for no length of suffering discharges this debt—a truth established by the fact that the debtor is never discharged. Justice is never satisfied; and it be plain therefore, to say nothing of his mercy, that God’s justice is more illustriously glorified, and more fully satisfied through the satisfaction rendered by our substitute, than it could have been by our everlasting sufferings.

Nor is that all. It is a mean and vulgar error to suppose that the only office of justice is to punish. She has higher and more pleasing functions. Sternly, indeed, she stands by the gallows tree; and, when she has drawn the bolt, and launched her victim into eternity, she leaves the scene, sorrowing it may be, yet satisfied. It is a melancholy satisfaction. From that revolting spectacle, turn to this hall of assembled nobles. Amid the brilliant, flashing, gorgeous, magnificence of the scene, all eyes are fixed on one man.

He comes red with the blood of a hundred battles, and crowned with the trophies of a hundred victories; he comes at the summons of a sovereign whose crown he has saved; he comes to receive the thanks of a country, grateful for his defence of its shores. Justice presides in that assembly. She was satisfied on the scaffold, here she is more than satisfied; pleasure and triumph light up her eye, as, with lavish hand, she dispenses titles and rewards, and on a head, so often covered by the God of battles, she places a laurel crown.

In fact, it is her noblest function to reward merit, to crown the brows of virtue or of valor, and send suspected innocence back to the world amid the plaudits, and flushed with the triumph of an honorable acquittal.

Justice did a stern but righteous act, when she hung up Haman in the face of the sun.

And, before the eyes of the city— a warning to all tyrants, and a terror to all sycophants; yet it was a loftier and a happier exercise of her functions to call the Jew from obscurity, to marshal him along the crowded streets with a crest-fallen enemy walking at his stirrup, and royal heralds going before to blow his fame, and ever and anon to cry, **“Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor.”**

Even so, shall the justice of God be glorified when heads, now lying in the grave, are crowned with honor. Believer! lift up thy drooping head. Thou shalt lift it up in glory from the dust, **“He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.”**

In consideration of a Redeemer’s righteousness, God shall crown thee; in the righteousness that is on thee, reward the work of his Son; and in the righteousness that is in thee, approve the work of his Spirit. The august assembly of the skies shall be a spectacle of glorified justice. In the Head with its members all exalted, the Captain and every soldier crowned, Jesus shall receive the full payment of His wages, and justice shall reward a Saviour in the saved.

“He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.”

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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