

# THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### MAN SUFFERING

**Wherefore I poured my fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols wherewith they had polluted it: And I scattered them among the heathen, and they were dispersed through the countries: according to their way and according to their doings I judged them** (Ezekiel 36:18-19).

It appears a very easy thing to say what a plant or animal is. It is not so. There are myriads of living creatures that occupy the debatable ground between the vegetable and animal kingdoms, and naturalists have not yet determined on which side of the border to assign them a place—whether to rank them among plants or animals.

What is man? You would think it an easy thing to answer that question; yet I am not sure that, even at this day, we have any correct definition which—distinguishing him on the one hand from the angelic race and on the other hand from the higher orders of inferior creatures—is at once brief and comprehensive. Now, if we have such difficulty in defining even ourselves, or those objects that, being patent to the senses, may be made the subject of searching and prolonged experiment, we need not wonder that, when we rise above his works to their Maker, from things finite to things infinite, it should be found much easier to ask than answer the question, “**What is God?**”

The telescope by which we converse with the stars, the microscope which unveil the secrets of nature, the crucible of the chemist, the knife of the anatomist, the reflective faculties of the philosopher, all the common instruments of science avail not here. On the threshold of that impenetrable mystery, from out the clouds and darkness that are round about God’s throne, a voice arrests our steps; and the question comes, “**Who can by searching find out God, who can find out the Almighty to perfection?**”

Divines, notwithstanding, have ventured on a definition of God; and, according to the Catechism of the Westminster Assembly, “God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” A very comprehensive definition, no doubt; yet did it never strike you as strange, that there is no mention of love here, and that that is a very remarkable omission?

An omission as remarkable as if a man who described the firmament were to leave out the sun, or, painting the human face, made it sightless, and gave no place on the canvas to those beaming eyes which give life and animation to the features.

Why did an assembly, for piety, learning, and talents, the greatest, perhaps, that ever met in England, or anywhere else, give us that catalogue of the divine attributes, and deny a place among them to love? We think the omission may be thus explained and illustrated.

Take a globe, and observing their natural order, lay on its surface the colors of the rainbow; gave it a rapid motion round its axis; and now you no longer see blue, red, yellow, and the others. As if by magic, the whirling sphere changes into purest white, presenting to our eyes and understanding a visible proof that the sunbeam is not a simple, but compound body, woven of various rays, and forming, when blended into one, what we call light.

Now, may it not be, that these divines make no mention of love (otherwise an unaccountable omission) just because they held that as all the colors together make light, so all the attributes acting together make love; and that though, because God is justice, is wisdom, is power, is holiness, is goodness, and is truth, God therefore of necessity, and in the express words of John, “**God is love.**”

This is the briefest and best definition of Divinity, and would have been John’s answer to the question, “**What is God?**”

It may be said, and is no doubt true, that objects take a color from the eyes that look at them; all things—sun, and sea, and mountains look yellow to the jaundiced eye; all things look gloomy to a gloomy mind; while a cheerful temper gilds the edges of life’s blackest cloud, and flings a path of light across a sea of danger; contentment sits down to a crust of bread and a cup of water, and gives God thanks; and the plainest person is beautiful in the eyes of fond affection.

Now it may be thought, to John’s loving eye, his heavenly Father seemed so loving and so lovely, that it was very natural for him to give the color of his own eyes to this divine object, and say, God is love. But it is to be remembered, that when he gave this shortest, sweetest definition of divinity, he was not painting objects only as they appeared to him; he was a pen in the hand of inspiration—like the keys of a musical instrument, he sounded to the movements of another’s will, and the touch of another’s finger; and that—one of the holy men of old, who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost—it was not he, but God himself, who thus described and defined himself, “**God is love**”; then that God is love, it may be asked, how does that harmonize with the text? How is it to be reconciled with words where God represents himself as pouring down his fury like a thundershower, and, scattering his people, in a storm of indignation, as light and worthless chaff blown away upon the wind. How, it may be asked, does this consist with God’s love and mercy?

Now, there is no greater mistake than to suppose that God, as a God of justice and a God of mercy, stands in antagonism to himself. It is not mercy, but injustice, which is irreconcilable with justice. It is cruelty, not justice, that stands opposed to mercy.

These attributes of the Godhead are not ‘**contrary the one to the other,**’ as are light and darkness, fire and water, truth and falsehood, right and wrong. No; like two streams which unite their waters to form a common river, justice and mercy are combined in the work of redemption.

Like the two cherubims whose wings met above the ark—like the two devout and holy men who drew the nails from Christ’s body, and bore it to the grave—like the two angels who received it in charge, and, seated, the one at the head, the other at the feet, kept silent watch over the precious treasure—justice and mercy are associated in the work of Christ; they are the supporters of the shield on which the cross is emblazoned; they sustain the arms of our heavenly Advocate; they form the two solid and eternal pillars of the Mediator’s throne. On Calvary mercy and truth meet together, righteousness and peace embrace each other.

These remarks may prepare our minds for entering with advantage on the solemn subject of God’s punitive justice; but, ere we open the prison, and look down into the pit, I would further bespeak your candid and affectionate consideration of the very affecting and awful subject, by remarking—

*I. That God is slow to punish.*

“**He executeth not judgment speedily against the workers of iniquity.**” He does punish; he shall punish; with reverence be it spoken, he must punish.

Yet no hand of clock goes so slow as God’s hand of vengeance. Of that, the world, this city, and this church, are witnesses; each and all, speaker and hearer, are living witnesses. It is too common to overlook this fact; and, overlooking the kindness, longsuffering and warnings which precede the punishment, we are too apt to give the punishment itself our exclusive attention. We see his kindness impressed on all his works. Even the lion growls before he leaps, and before the snake strikes she springs her rattle.

Look, for example, on the catastrophe of the Deluge. We may have our attention so engrossed by the dread and awful character of this judgment, as to overlook all that preceded it, and see nothing but these devouring waters.

The waters rise till rivers swell into lakes, and lakes into seas, and along fertile plains the sea stretches out her arms to seize their flying population. Still the waters rise; and now, mingled with beasts that terror has tamed, men climb to the mountain tops, the flood roaring at their heels.

- Still the waters rise; and now each summit stands above them like a separate and sea-girt isle.
- Still the waters rise; and, crowding closer on the narrow spaces of their lessening tops, men and beasts fight for standing room.
- Still the thunders roar and the waters rise, till the last survivor of the shrieking crowd is washed off, and the head of the highest Alp goes down beneath the wave.

And now the waters rise no more; God’s servant has done his work; he rests from his labors; and, all land drowned—all life destroyed—an awful silence reigning, and a shoreless ocean rolling.

Death for once has nothing to do, but ride in triumph on the top of some giant billow, which, meeting no coast, no continent, no Alp, no Andes, to break upon, sweeps round and round the world.

We stand aghast at this scene; and, as the corpses of gentle children and sweet infants are floating by, we exclaim, “**Has God forgotten to be gracious . . . is his mercy clean gone for ever?**” No; assuredly not. Where, then, is his mercy? Look here; look at this ark which, steered by an invisible hand, comes dimly through the gloom. That lonely ship on a shoreless sea carries mercy on board; and within walls that are pitched without and within, she holds the costliest freight that ever sailed the sea. The germs of the church are there—the patriarchs of the old world, and the fathers of the new. Suddenly, amid the awful gloom, as she drifts over that dead and silent sea, a grating noise is heard; she has grounded on the top of Ararat. The door is opened; and beneath the sign of the olive branch, they come forth from their baptismal burial, like life from the dead—like souls passing from nature into a state of grace—like the saints when they shall rise at the summons of the trumpet to behold a new heaven and a new earth, and to see the sign, which these “gray fathers” hailed, encircling the head that was crowned with thorns.

Nor is this all, our Heavenly Father’s character is dear to us; and I must remind you that ere mercy flew, like the dove, to that asylum, she had swept the world with her wings. Were there but eight, only eight saved? There were thousands, millions sought. Nor is it justice to God to forget how long a period of patience, and preaching and warning, and compassion, preceded that dreadful deluge. Long before the lightning flashed from angry heavens; long before thunders rolled along dissolving skies; long before the clouds rained down death; long before the floor and solid pavement of this earth, under the prodigious agencies at work, broke up, like the deck of a leaking ship, and the waters rushed from below to meet the waters from above, and sink a guilty world; long before the time when the ark floated away by tower and town, and those crowded hill-tops, where frantic groups had clustered, and amid prayers and curses, and shrieks and shouts, hung out their signals of distress—very long before this, God had been calling an impenitent world to repentance.

Had they no warning in Noah’s preaching? Was there nothing to alarm them in the very sight of the ark as story rose upon story; and nothing in the sound of those ceaseless hammers to waken all but the dead? It was not till Mercy’s arm grew weary ringing the warning bell, that, to use the words of my text, God “**poured out his fury**” on them. I appeal to the story of this awful judgment. True, for forty days it rained incessantly, and for one hundred and fifty days more “**the waters prevailed on the earth;**” but while the period of God’s justice is reckoned by days, the period of his longsuffering was drawn out into years; and there was a truce of one hundred and twenty years between the first stroke of the bell and the first crash of the thunder. Noah grew gray preaching repentance. The ark stood useless for years, a huge laughingstock for the scoffer’s wit; it stood till it was covered with the marks of age, and its builders with the contempt of the world; and many a sneer had these men to bear, as, pointing to the serene heavens above and an empty ark below, the question was put, “**Where is the promise of his coming?**”

Most patient God! Then, as now, thou wert slow to punish—“**waiting to be gracious.**”

As that catastrophe and many other judgments prove—he is slow to anger. God poured out his fury; but his indignation was the volcano that groans for days before it discharges the elements of destruction, and pours out its lavas on the vineyards at its feet. Where, when God's anger has burned hottest, was it ever known that judgment trod on the heels of sin?

A period always intervenes; room is given for remonstrance on God's part, and repentance upon ours. The stroke of judgment is indeed, like the stroke of lightning, irresistible, fatal; it kills—Skills in the twinkling of an eye. But the clouds from which it flashes are slow to gather, and thicken by degrees; and he must be deeply engaged with the pleasures, or engrossed in the business of the world, whom the flash and peal surprise. The gathering clouds, the deepening gloom, the still and sultry air, the awful silence, the big pattering raindrops—these reveal his danger to the traveler, and warn him from river, road, or hill, to the nearest refuge.

Heeded or unheeded, many are the warnings you get from God. He has **“no pleasure in the death of the wicked;”** he is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should turn to him and live; and no man ever yet went to hell, but trampling under foot ten thousand warnings—ten times ten thousand mercies.

Whatever injustice men may do themselves—however reckless they may cast away salvation and their souls, I demand justice for him whose ambassador I am—for these mysteries of salvation of which I am a steward. No doubt he says, **“I poured out my fury upon them;”** but when was this done? Not till divine patience was exhausted, and a succession of servants had been commissioned to warn, to preach, and plead with them.

Remember the words of a weeping Saviour, as he looked on the city from the top of Olivet—

**“O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!”**

Could language furnish terms more tender or pathetic than these? Or those, in which God pours forth his affection for this very people—**“When Israel was a child, then I loved him: I taught Ephraim also to go: taking them by their arms, I drew them with the cords of a man, and with bonds of love?”**

This language carries us into the tenderest scenes of domestic life; it reminds us of a mother, who, when telling us how one child had been blighted in the bud, and how another had strayed from the paths of virtue, and how all the sweet flowers of her home had withered away, bitterly looked back on departed joys, and cried, as she wrung her hands in a lonely cottage—“Ah! these were happy days, when they were children at my knee.”

Like a father who hangs over some unworthy son, and, while his heart is torn by contending emotions, hesitates what to do—whether once and for ever to dismiss him, or to give him another trial—it is most touching to see God bending over sinners, and this flood of melting pathos bursting from his heart—

**“How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? How shall I make thee as Admah, how shall I set thee as Zeboim? Mine heart is turned within me; my repentings are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger; I will not return to destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not man.”**

Let us do the same justice to our Father in heaven that we would render to an earthly parent. Would it be doing a father justice to look at him only when the rod is raised in his hand, and the child is on his knees, and although the trembling lip, and weeping eyes, and choked utterance of his boy, and a fond mother’s intercession also, all plead with him to spare, he refuses. In this, how stern he looks! But before you can know that father, or judge his heart aright, you ought to know how often ere this the offence had been forgiven; you should have heard with what tender affection he had warned his child; and above all, you should have stood at the back of his closet door, and listened when he pleaded with God in his behalf.

Justice to him requires, that you should have seen with what slow and lingering steps he went for the rod, the trembling of his hand, and how, as the tears fell from his eye, he raised it to heaven and sought strength to inflict a punishment which, were it to serve the purpose, he would a hundred times sooner bear than inflict.

When— nursing his rage for months, and coolly planning the atrocious murder — Absalom slew his brother, David was so shocked at this horrible crime, that, although he permitted him to return to Jerusalem, yet for two whole years he refused to see him. His son, his eldest son, his favorite son, he would hold no intercourse with Absalom, nor speak to him, nor look on him. Would it be justice to David to confine our attention to this?

Under that averted eye, and cold and stern aspect, what a heart! Goaded on by ambition, this guilty Son next aims a blow at his father’s life, and falls; then the fountains of the great deep are opened, and what a flood of feeling! What is it now to David, his crown is safe, his throne secure? Absalom is dead! **“Oh Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee. Oh Absalom, my son, my son!”** And, would we do our heavenly father justice, we must look on Calvary as well as on Eden, The Son of God indeed does not go up and down heaven weeping, wringing his hands, and, to the amazement of silent angels, crying, Would God that I had died for man!

A more amazing spectacle is here. He turns his back on heaven; he leaves the bosom and happy fellowship of his Father, he bares his own breast to the sword of justice, and in the depths of a love never to be fathomed, he dies on that accursed tree, **“the just for the unjust that we might be saved!”**

Through this vestibule of love, mercy, and longsuffering, we have thought it well to introduce you into the scenes of God’s punitive justice. It is on iron, softened by the glowing fire, that impressions are made and left; and expecting good only when what is terrible is associated with what is tender, we have thought it well that you should see at the very outset how slow God is to smite, how swift to save. Swift fly the wings of mercy. Slow goes the hand of justice; like the shadow on the sun-dial, ever moving, yet creeping slowly on, with a motion all but imperceptible. Still let sinners stand in awe.

The hand of justice has not stopped; although imperceptibly, it steadily advances; by and by, having reached the tenth, eleventh, twelfth hour, the bell strikes. Then, unless you now flee to Christ, the blow which was so slow to fall, shall descend on the head of impenitence with accumulated force. Let it never be forgotten, that although God's patience is lasting, it is not everlasting.

Observe—

## II. *How he punished his ancient people.*

This is furnished to our hand in many portions of Scripture. For example, “Now, because ye have done all these works, saith the Lord, and I spake unto you, rising up early and speaking, but ye heard not; and I called you, but ye answered not; therefore will I do unto this house which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh.

**“And I will cast you out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, even the whole seed of Abraham. Therefore, pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me; for I will not hear thee. The carcasses of this people shall be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth; and none shall fray them away. Then will I cause to cease from the cities of Judah, and from the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride; for the land shall be desolate . . . And death shall be chosen rather than life by all the residue of them that remain of this evil family, which remain in all the places whither I have driven them, saith the Lord of Hosts . . . I will surely consume them, saith the Lord; there shall be no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall fade; and the things that I have given them shall pass away from them . . . The Lord our God hath put us to silence, and given us water of gall to drink, because we have sinned against the Lord. We looked for peace, but no good came; and for a time of health, and behold trouble! The snorting of his horses was heard from Dan; the whole land trembled at the sound of the neighing of his strong ones: for they are come, and have devoured the land, and all that is in it, the city, and those that dwell therein . . . The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why, then, is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?”**

These were the children of Abraham, beloved for the father's sake—the sole depositories of divine truth — God's chosen people, through whose line and lineage his Son was to appear. How solemn, then, and how appropriate the question— **“If such things were done in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?”**

Look at Judah sitting amid the ruins of Jerusalem, her temple without a worshiper, and her streets choked with the dead: look at that bound, weeping, bleeding remnant of the nation toiling, on its way to Babylon: look at these broken, peeled, riven boughs; and may I not warn you with the Apostle—**“If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he spare not thee.”**

We have seen an ancient mirror from the sepulchers of Egypt, in which, some three thousand years ago, the swathed and mummied form beside whose dust it lay looked upon her face, to nurse her vanity, or mourn her deformity.

In the verses quoted we have a mirror well nigh as old, in which the prophet showed God's ancient people their likeness and their sins; and when I take it from the dead man's hand, to hold it up before you, do not some of you recognize, in the features which it presents, those of your own state and character? Are they not to be seen in such words as these, for instance—"**I spake unto you, rising up early, but ye heard not; I called you, but ye answered not:**" or these—"**The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.**"

Are none of us the degenerate plants of a noble vine? Are there none of us who, although trained to respect the Sabbath, have forgotten the lesson of our childhood? none with a picture of their early days yet fresh in memory, that exhibits a venerable father bending over the Bible, and, with his family around him, leading the domestic devotions, who have themselves no altar in their homes;—who have a house, but no household God? Have none of us defrauded our children, not of ancestral lands, but of what is infinitely more valuable, an ancestral piety? On the walls of many a house from which piety has been expelled may we not read the words— "**They did worse than their fathers?**"

If we speak thus, it is for your good. We would not arm ourselves with these harsh thunders of the law, except, in the words of Paul, "**to persuade you by the terrors of the Lord.**" We have no faith in terror disassociated from tenderness. Trusting more to the process of drawing than driving men to Jesus, we pray you to observe that he who is the good is also a most tender Shepherd.

Among the hills of our native land I have met a shepherd far from the folds, driving home a lost sheep—one which had "**gone astray**" —as a creature panting for breath, amazed, alarmed, foot sore; and when the rocks around rang loud to the baying of the dogs, I have seen them, whenever it offered to turn from the path, with open mouth dashing fiercely at its sides, and thus hounding it home. How differently Jesus brings home his lost ones! The lost sheep sought and found, he lifts it, tenderly lays it on his shoulder, and, retracing his steps, returns with joy, and invites his neighbors to rejoice along with him.

The "**green pastures**" where he feeds his flock, the rocks under whose grateful shadows they repose in noontide of the day, the flowery and fragrant banks of the streams where they drink, are disturbed by no sounds of violence nor voice of terror.

Yea; Jesus rules his flock by love, not by fear; and amid the holy calm of sweet Sabbath mornings, gentle of countenance, he may be seen at their head, conducting them forth to pastures sparkling with the dews of heaven, some sweet lamb in his arms, its mother at his side, and all his flock behind him; his rod their guard, and his voice their guide. Catching grace from his lips, and tenderness from his looks, I would speak to you as becomes the servant of such a gentle, lowly, loving Master. Yet, shall I conceal God's verity, and ruin men's souls to spare their feelings? Shall I sacrifice truth at the shrine of a false politeness?

To hide what Jesus revealed were not to be more tender, but less faithful than He. If the taste of these days were so degenerate as to frown down the honest preacher who should pronounce that awful word “Hell,” and leave him to vacant pews, it were better, far better, that he should be as **“one crying in the wilderness,”** and getting no response but the echo of empty walls, than that he should fail in proclaiming **“the whole counsel of God.”** Apart from your interests, and looking only at my own, how could I otherwise hold up these hands, and say, **“They are clean from the blood of all men?”**

How otherwise could the preacher turn from his unhappy head the Bible’s closing curse—**“If any man shall take away from the words of this book, God shall take away his part out of the book of life.”** Regard to myself, to you— regard to a gracious God, to a blessed Saviour— regard to all that is precious, solemn, sacred, eternal—these now compel me, although with trembling hands, to lift the veil.

If any are living without God, and hope, and Christ, and prayer, I implore them to look here: turn to this dreadful pit. How it gleams with fire! How it resounds with woeful groans! Now, when we stand together on its margin, or rather shrink back with horror, look there, and say, **“Who can lie down in everlasting burnings?”**

It is alleged by travelers, that the ostrich, when pursued by its hunters, will thrust its head into a bush, and, without further attempt either at flight or resistance, quietly submit to the stroke of death. Men say that, having thus succeeded in shutting the pursuers out of its own sight, the bird is stupid enough to fancy that it has shut itself out of theirs, and that the danger, which it has concealed from its eyes, has ceased to exist. We doubt that. God makes no mistakes; and, guided as the lower animals are in all their instincts by infinite Wisdom, I fancy that a more correct knowledge of that creature would show, that whatever stupidity there may be in the matter, lies not in the poor bird, but in man’s rash conclusion regarding it. Man trusts to hopes which fail him: the spider never; she commits her weight to no thread which she has spun, till she has pulled on it with her arms, and proved its strength.

Misfortune overtakes man unprovided and unprepared for it: not winter the busy bee. Amid the blaze of gospel light, man misses his road to heaven: without any light whatever, in the darkest night, the swallows cleave their way through the pathless air, returning to the window-nook where they were nestled; and through the depths of ocean the fish steer their course back to the river where they were spawned.

If we would find folly, Solomon tells us where to seek it:—**“Folly,”** says the wise man, **“is bound up in the heart of a child;”** and what is folded up there, like leaves in their bud, blows out in the deeds and habits of men. This poor bird, which has thrust its head into the bush, and stands quietly to receive the shot, has been hunted to death. For hours the cry of its pursuers has rung in its startled ear; for hours their feet have been on its weary track; it has exhausted strength, and breath, and craft, and cunning, to escape; and even yet, give it time to breathe— give it another chance—and it is away with the wind; and with wings outspread, on rapid feet it spurns the burning sand. It is because escape is hopeless and death is certain that it has buried its head in that bush, and shut its eyes to a fate which it cannot avert.

To man—rational and responsible man—belongs the folly of closing his eyes to a fate which he may avert, and thrusting his head into the bush while escape is possible; and, because he can put death, and judgment, and eternity out of mind, living as if there were neither a bed of death nor bar of judgment.

Be wise: be men. Look your danger in the face. Anticipate the day when you shall behold a God in judgment and a world in flames; and now flee to Jesus from the wrath to come. To come! In a sense wrath has already come. The fire has caught, it has seized your garments; you are in flames. Oh! away then, and cast yourselves into that fountain which has power to quench these fires, and cleanse you from all your sins.

**~ end of chapter 4 ~**

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