SERMONS,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF GLASBURY,

BRECKNOCKSHIRE,

AND

ST. JAMES’S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM,

SURREY.

**BY**

THE REV. CHARLES BRADLEY,

VICAR OF GLASBURY.

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SERMON V.

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THE PRAYER OF MOSES FOR A VIEW OF GOD.

Exodus xxxiii. 18.—“I beseech thee, show me thy glory.”

The blessedness of heaven consists chiefly in seeing God. The man therefore who is heavenly-minded, can enter at once into the meaning of this prayer. It expresses nothing more than a feeling with which he is well acquainted, one of the strongest and most cherished desires of his own heart. He too can say, he often has said at the footstool of his God, “I be­seech thee, show me thy glory.”

It is plain, brethren, that we have now a very lofty subject before us. Were Moses himself among us, he could not speak of it as he ought. An angel could not elevate our minds to any just conceptions of it. But a greater than Moses or any angel, is here. The Lord himself is in this place; and he can cause his glory so to shine, that even our feeble eyes may discern its brightness. We must however limit our view of it to one point—let us look on the divine glory as an object of desire to the spiritual mind.

We may consider, first, the circumstances which led to the petition in the text; secondly, the petition itself; and, thirdly, the reasons why every one of ourselves should take it as his frequent and earnest prayer.

I. The great lesson taught us by *the circumstances connected with this petition,* is the wonderful power of prayer.

By turning to the tenth verse of the preceding chapter, we discover the Most High expressing his righteous indignation against idolatrous Israel, and threatening to consume them. But Moses prays for the rebellious people. In the first instance, he endeavours to turn away the divine wrath from them, that it might not cut them off; and, as we are told in the fourteenth verse, he prevails. Still however, to mark his displeasure, the Lord refuses to go any farther with the guilty nation, and intimates, in the thirty-fourth verse, his intention of sending an angel with them in his stead. But no angel, no, nor all the angels in the courts of heaven, can fill up the place of a de­parted God. Moses knew this. Hence we find him, in the fif­teenth verse of this chapter, once more pleading for Israel. He beseeches the Lord to reveal himself again as the companion and guide of their way, and humbly tells him that they had rather stay or even die where they were, in a dreary wilderness, than go into the promised land without their God. “If thy pre­sence go not with me,” said the fervent prophet, “carry us not up hence.” “What is an angel to us? or what the possession of Canaan, with its boasted hills and fertile plains? These, without thee, will leave us poor; nay, they will make us wretched; they will serve only to remind us of the guilt we have incurred, and the pleasures we have lost.” And here again Moses prevailed. “My presence shall go with thee,” Jehovah answered, “and I will give thee rest.”

And now surely this intercessor will stop. No, brethren; the more prayer obtains, the more it asks; the more spiritual desires are gratified, the more they are enlarged. Moses turns from Israel to himself. With a mixture of filial boldness, and trembling reverence, and holy transport, he abruptly cries, “I beseech thee, show me thy glory.” And this bold petition too is granted. In a moment comes from the cloudy pillar this gracious answer, “I will make all my goodness pass before thee.”

See here then what prayer is and what prayer does, its nature and its power. It is a longing after God, which nothing short of the full enjoyment of God can satisfy. And as for its power, it can do all things. It knows no other bounds than the good of the sinner on the one hand, and the omnipotence of Jehovah on the other. “Open thy mouth wide,” the Lord says, “and I will fill it.” “Ye shall ask what ye will,” says Christ, “and it shall be done.” The pardon of all our sins, free, complete, and eternal; a victory over every lust; the presence of God with us all through this dark world; his glory passing before our eyes, and shining into our hearts; guidance, protection, strength; heavenly consolations while we live, and heaven itself when we die;—all are within the reach of prayer; within our reach; nay, held up, as it were, before our face, with this inscription shining on them all, “Ask, and ye shall have.” “Mercies purchased, prepared, waiting, for praying man.”

And which of these mercies is now the object of this prophet’s desire? One of the highest of them all—a clear and full dis­covery of Jehovah’s glory.

II. Consider *his petition.*

Its precise meaning is not easily discovered. Perhaps Moses himself could not have defined it. It might be that he wished to behold God with his bodily eyes, face to face. In this sense, he is told, in the twentieth verse, that his prayer is vain. The King of kings “dwelleth in the light which no man can approach unto.” He is one “whom no man hath seen or can see.” He accordingly declares to Moses, “Thou canst not see my face, for there shall no man see me, and live.” And yet, in the verse preceding, the great Searcher of hearts appears to have under­stood his praying servant in a different sense. He says, in answer to his request, “I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee.”

And mark how this promise was fulfilled. Moses is ordered to ascend Mount Sinai. There the Lord meets him, but still hidden from his sight by the same veil which had before con­cealed him. “He descended in the cloud, and stood with him there.” And what followed? Was the cloud rent asunder, and the Lord of the universe disclosed in all the majesty of his greatness? No. The prophet may strain his expecting eyes, he may strive to pierce the covering of the Holy One; but the cloud passes by him, dark and impenetrable. He sees nothing; but as it rolls along, he hears a voice proclaiming from the midst of it “the name of the Lord.” And how did this procla­mation run? In this august and yet gracious style, “The Lord; the Lord God, merciful and gracious; long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy for thousands; forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty.”

We are warranted then in coming to this conclusion—the chief, if not the only object of the prophet’s prayer, was a clearer manifestation of the divine perfections, a greater knowledge of God, a closer and more enlarged view of those attributes which constitute his glory.

1. Hence we are taught by this petition, that *there is more glory in the perfections of God, than his most favoured servants ever saw.*

Why was not Moses satisfied? He had seen the power of the Almighty in the wonders he had wrought in Egypt. He had trembled at his majesty amid the blackness, and darkness, and terrific grandeur, of mount Sinai. For forty days and forty nights, he had been surrounded by his brightness, while he re­ceived the law from his mouth. His patience had been displayed in bearing with the murmurings and idolatry of Israel. The smitten rock and descending manna proclaimed his goodness. What more could a child of the dust require? What more could he bear?

If we turn to ourselves, why need we offer up this prayer? Who can look around, and not discover his Creator’s glory? Would we see his power? a thousand shining worlds declare its greatness;—his goodness? the earth is full of it;—his wis­dom? it is visible in every blade of grass, in every movement and vessel of our frame;—his justice? every opened grave pro­claims it; we feel it in the griefs and troubles of every hour;—his patience? we have tried it, and know it to be almost boundless.

And then if we turn from the vast creation and from provi­dence, to the revelation made of God in the gospel of his Son—what can an angel want more? There, “in the face of Jesus Christ,” shines his glory in its full radiance. There “treasures of wisdom and knowledge” display themselves. There justice, as it leads the Holy One of Israel to the cross, fills us with awe. There mercy and love melt us. There grace shines in its free­ness; providing a Saviour for rebels;—in its sovereignty; pass­ing by the angels that sinned, and making lost man its object;—in its unsearchable riches; bringing the Fellow of Jehovah from his throne, clothing him in mortal flesh, surrounding him with earthly pollutions, and pouring into his soul more than earthly griefs, casting him on the ground at Gethsemane, con­demning him at Golgotha, crucifying him in gloom and terrors at Calvary, laying him mangled in the grave. O what an exhibition of every divine perfection is here! Who can look on the cross of the Lord Jesus, and still say to Jehovah, “Show me thy glory?” Every one, brethren, who looks on it in faith. The very sight of the glory which is manifested there, will make his heart burn to behold it nearer.

There is in the fulness of the Godhead, such an infinite depth and height of glory, that no manifestation can display it all, and no created being, however exalted, can comprehend it all. Take the highest creature in the universe; place him in the im­mediate presence of God, before his throne; and give him all the powers which earth and heaven can supply; and let him bend these mighty powers for years and ages to this one effort, to know God—and what has he learned of him? About as much as a mariner knows of an ocean which he can neither measure nor fathom. The prayer with which he began the work, is as often on his lips as ever. And let another succes­sion of ages roll away, it is the same. He is heard crying with still greater frequency and ardour, “Show me thy glory.” And what does he say to every one who asks him of the knowledge he has acquired? The same that Zophar said to the bewildered Job; “Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.”

2. This truth also is implied in the text, that *none but God can give us even that partial discovery of his glory, which we are capable of receiving.*

Here nature, with all her splendid works, is powerless. Enquiry and study can do nothing. Nay, the gospel itself, though sent down as a light from heaven, removes not our darkness. These things may teach us something of God as an object of speculation or science, may give us as much knowledge of him as a map of Eden would give us of paradise; but what is the sum of it all? It is no more to be compared with that sight of God, for which the Christian prays, than studying by a taper the nature of the sun, is to be compared with the light and warmth which gladden us at noon-day.

This Moses knew. With this truth every servant of God is acquainted. Ask him where he obtained his lofty conceptions of the divine greatness, he will trace them, not to the sermons he has heard, or the books he has read, or the many hours of meditation which he has past: these have been the means or channels by which knowledge has been communicated to his mind, and he is thankful for them; but as for the source of it, he points us to God himself. He tells us that it is a wisdom which has come from above. He declares with humble thank­fulness, that without the special teaching of the Holy Ghost, all the means of grace which he has enjoyed would have left him as ignorant as they found him; that even in the full blaze of Jehovah’s glory, he should have gone down to the grave with his mind benighted, knowing no more to any useful purpose of the Being who formed him, than the brutes which perish.

And this conviction is the fruit of his present experience. There are still times when surrounded by the works of God, with the word of God in his hands and perhaps sounding in his ears, he feels himself shut out from God. He knows that he is near him, but he is near him in a cloud, shrouded in darkness. In spite of all his efforts, he cannot see him. He is no more affected by his glory, than as though the heavens had ceased to declare, and the gospel to proclaim it. And yet wait for an hour. The Holy Spirit shines into that man’s heart; and without adding a single idea, one atom, to his knowledge, he humbles, and elevates, and almost overwhelms him with a sense of the divine glory.

The testimony of St. Paul on this point is exceedingly strong. “The natural man,” he says, “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” In another place, he sends us back to the creation of the world. He bids us look on the earth “without form and void,” and with not one ray of light to break its darkness. Here, he tells us, is a pic­ture of the mind of man; not of man, in a savage, heathen state only, but of man in every state, under all possible circumstances, till enlightened from above. He then reminds us of the voice which said, “Let there be light;” and in the brightness which that voice called forth, he finds an emblem of the wonderful change which the mighty power of God had effected in his own soul by a discovery of his glory. “God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” And St. Peter takes up his language. He speaks of “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood;” and whence have they come? “God,” he says, “hath called them out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

We may now discover the meaning of the prophet’s supplica­tion. It is an acknowledgment of the unsearchable glory of Jehovah. It is a confession of the feebleness and blindness of his own mind. It is an earnest request to God, not so much for any new revelation of his character, as for eyes to see and a heart to feel the manifestation which he has already made of himself in his works and word. It is a prayer for an inward, and spiritual, and abiding sense of his perfections, such as may give to them a reality and power which earthly objects may not remove, nor the corruptions of his own heart deaden.

3. But this is not all. There is included also in this petition, *a desire that God would reveal to the soul its own special interest in his perfections.*

We perceive at a glance that this desire must accompany the other. We cannot look with the eye of faith on the great God, without at the same time remembering that he is a God “with whom we have to do,” and anxiously enquiring into the nature of that relation which exists between him and us. Is this glo­rious Being my friend or my enemy? Are these stupendous powers exerted for my happiness or my woe? These are questions that will arise in the heart, as soon as a ray from the Holy One shines on it, and they must be answered before the heart can rest. Left to ourselves, we never can obtain any other than one heart-sinking reply to them. There is so much in God, even in his mercy, to awe us, and so much in our own desperately wicked hearts to discourage us, that though his great salvation is laid at our feet, we shrink from putting our unworthy hand on so great a blessing. The goodness we adore may be ours, but then it may not be ours; and the least un­certainty in an affair of such fearful moment, is almost more than we can bear. “Show me thy glory,” means therefore nothing less than this—“O let me see that the riches of thy goodness can reach to me; that thy power will befriend, and not destroy me; that thy faithfulness is pledged to save, not to condemn thy servant; that my crimson sins are washed away by thy mercy; that this guilty soul has found a pardon; that this vile heart is thine!”

And when this prayer is heard; when the Holy Spirit shows us God, not as “a consuming fire,” but as “rich in mercy unto all that call upon him;” when he throws open before us the book of life, and shows us our own poor names written there; when we are enabled to look upon the mighty Lord of the heavens and the earth as our reconciled Father through him who “hath made peace by the blood of his cross;” when we can say to him in his majesty, “My Lord and my God!” and hear him saying to us, “Thou art mine;”—O what a sight of the divine glory have we then! O what a wonderful blessedness is ours! This is called “the secret of the Lord, which is with them that fear him;” “the lifting up of the light of his countenance upon them.” This is indeed the unveiling of his face, the shining forth of his glory.

Such was the prayer of Moses.

III. Let us consider *the reasons why we should make it our own.*

1. We ought thus to pray, because *such a manifestation of the divine glory is humbling.* And this is the object at which we should be ever aiming, to lie down in the dust; to be de­livered from that proud, and self-sufficient, and independent spirit which reigns unchecked in hell, and to feel something of that subdued and lowly frame of mind, which lays angels pros­trate before the throne in heaven.

But how difficult a work is this! None more difficult or more disheartening. It is easy to use modest and even strongly abasing language concerning ourselves; to call ourselves, within these walls, “miserable sinners,” and, among our Christian friends, “worms of the dust, viler than the vilest but really to “walk humbly with our God;” in very deed to force our high thoughts and lofty imaginations down; to empty the soul of all that has been its pride in company and its confidence alone; to strip it bare, a poor, defiled, guilty, dark, helpless thing;—O this is a work so exceedingly hard, so passing all human strength, that the heart almost breaks in its struggles to accomplish it. But a sight of the divine glory effects it. We behold God, and the dust is our station.

Look at Isaiah. The glory of the Lord fills his temple. He sees it, and the next moment he complains of his uncleanness and his woe. Look at Job. “Mine eye seeth thee,” he says to his God; “wherefore I abhor myself.” And look at Moses on this very occasion. The Lord revealed himself to him, and then Moses “made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped.” And what followed? An immediate remem­brance of guilt. This is his very next prayer, “Pardon our iniquity and our sin.”

2. But humility is not the only fruit of such a manifestation; *a view of God is universally sanctifying.* It transforms the whole soul; “renews it again after the image of him that created it;” it makes it like the God it contemplates.

Is this lofty language? It is not loftier than the Holy Spirit has taught a creature of dust and ashes to use. “We all,” says St. Paul, “beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

The face of Moses shone when he came down from the mount; the reflected rays of the divine majesty lingered on it; the people saw that he had been with God. It is ever thus. No man leaves the presence of Christ, without carrying with him that which will distinguish him from other men; a mind less preyed on by worldly cares; affections elevated above worldly vanities; a holy abhorrence of all that is polluting and base; a soaring of the thoughts and desires to heaven; a humble pro­fessing and sustaining of this character—a pilgrim and a stranger on the earth, a native of heaven in a foreign land. The world around him will “take knowledge of him that he has been with Jesus;” for “the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon him.”

3. Hence we may observe farther, that *a spiritual view of the divine glory is establishing.*

Your natural life, brethren, is every moment endangered. Its continuance is a standing miracle; at least, it is a standing proof of Jehovah’s omnipotence. Your spiritual life is still more exposed. It is a light burning amidst waves, a spark on an ocean.

The mere professor of Christianity knows nothing of these dangers which beset the soul; but if you are in the way to heaven, you know and you feel them; there are times when they make you tremble. Now how are they to be overcome? Their origin will point out their remedy. Trace to its source every error that harasses and pollutes the Christian church, every corruption that puffs up the young and blinds the old—you discover folly where you looked for wisdom; you stand astonished at the ignorance of God in which even the partially enlightened mind can rest, at the low conceptions of Jehovah’s glory at which a worm of the earth dares to stop. One right thought of God would silence half the controversies which distract the world, and make men who now dispute, bend down and pray.

Your safety then lies in the spirit which breathed the prayer before us. Naturally all your ideas of God are narrow and mean. He has, in some degree, enlarged and raised them. Be thank­ful; but as you value your souls, rest not in any of your present discoveries or attainments. Press forward. Aim, like Moses, at high things. Like Paul, count “all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus your Lord.” Breathe after a nearer and closer communion with God. Deem nothing beyond a sinner’s reach, when a sinner pleads in the name of his righteous Lord. There is no humility in turning away from the blessings which God has commanded you to seek; there is no presumption in thirsting for the mercies which he has promised to give. A little religion, a cold, comfortless piety, may be a treasure; but it is one which is easily lost, which it is hardly possible to hold. To think of passing with it to heaven through such a world as this, is to take a lamp which is only half lighted, and expect it to guide you through the tumult of a storm. “The joy of the Lord”—that is “your strength.” “The peace of God”—it is that which “shall keep your hearts.”

4. There is one reason more, why we should take this prayer as our own; it is a prayer *which is absolutely necessary.*

Shall I say that there is no salvation for the soul without the blessing which it supplicates? without a discovery of the glory of God, of which multitudes, even in this Christian land, know nothing, and which God only can give? The Bible would con­firm the saying, but the fearful and dejected might misapply it. This is a plainer declaration, and one which is as true, as that all who live shall die—no man shall see the face of God in heaven, who does not desire to see his glory here on earth. Bring before us a sinner drawing near to heaven, and there is a man whose wishes, in his happiest moments, might all be summed up in this one short petition, “Show me thy glory.” There is nothing strange in this language, nothing peculiar to Moses. The scripture is full of it. What are the psalms which are read in your hearing every sabbath-day? Is not this the substance of many of them, “Show me thy glory?” This is the enrap­tured cry of the church above; it has ever been one of the most earnest prayers of the church below. Is it your prayer? What do you know of this longing after God?

You have perhaps for many years gone up to the house of God; you have joined there in many thousand prayers, attended many sacraments, heard many sermons. Now what has been the one great leading desire of your soul in all these things? Has it been to acquaint yourselves with God? Can you say with David, “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple?” Can you go on with him, and express no more than the feelings of your own heart as you say, “O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee. My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee, in a dry and thirsty land where no water is; to see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary?” Then this is the voice which even now reaches the ear of Jehovah, and you are the men of whom it speaks, and the eternal Jesus is the Being from whom it comes, “Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory.”