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SERMON XVII.

THE CONDESCENSION OF GOD.

PSALM CXIII. 5, 6.—“Who is like unto the Lord our God who dwelleth on high, who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven and in the earth?”

WE never think seriously of God without feeling, with the psalmist, that there “is none like unto him.” Among all the wonders we ever saw or heard of, he is the greatest.

But what is it that makes God so wonderful a Being? You think perhaps of the extent of his power, the eternity of his existence, or the mysterious nature of his person; but there is something in the Lord almighty still more wonderful than all these. It is, brethren, the greatness of his love, his amazing condescension. This drew from the fervent David the burst of admiration, which we find in this text. In a transport of wonder and praise, he challenges the universe to show any thing comparable to his great and condescending God.

I. We may consider the view which he gives us of *the divine majesty*.

But how can I convey or you receive any idea of this? We cannot describe it. The fault is not in language; it is in the weakness of our minds. We are finite beings, and any effort to comprehend infinite greatness is vain; just as vain as an attempt to measure the wide heavens with a span, or to take up the ocean in the hollow of one little hand.

Why then does the Holy Spirit bring before us a subject, of which we can form no just conception? Because even the poor conceptions of it, which we are capable of forming, are beneficial to us; because we must perish without some knowledge of God; because we may know enough of him to bring peace and life eternal to the soul.

No description of his greatness can be more simple than that given us here, but it would carry an angel farther than he could follow it. “The Lord our God dwelleth on high.”

The grandest objects of nature are mostly above us. The towering mountain, the sun, the moon, the stars, all carry our eyes upwards. We have accordingly learned to attach the ideas of magnificence and excellency to whatever is lofty. Hence, in condescension to our mode of thinking, the great God is frequently spoken of as “the high God,” “the Most High,” “the Highest.” Isaiah describes him as “sitting upon a throne high and lifted up,” and calls him “the high and lofty One who inhabiteth eternity.”

In the verse preceding the text, the inspired psalmist tells us something of the measure of his exaltation. “The Lord,” he says, “is high above all na-

tions, and his glory above the heavens.” He first bids us look on this lower world; and while we are admiring its convenience, its vastness, and its grandeur, he says, “The Lord dwells not there; the Lord is high above all nations.” He then lifts up our eyes to the worlds that roll in light; and as we see them shining far away in their magnificence, we are ready to say that in some one of these bright orbs is the dwelling place of God. But no. Again the prophet says, “The Lord is not there. His glory is above the heavens.” Stupendous as is their height, they come not nigh the footstool of Jehovah’s throne. Were we standing on the summit of them all, the distance between him and us would still be immeasurable; our minds must still be stretched, and our imaginations strained, to discover his abode.

View the matter in another light. Look at a little insect as it flutters in the air, or crawls on the ground. Think of its short life, and frail texture, and limited powers. Then think of one of the angels of God, of the noble faculties and long existence of the very brightest of those glorious beings. Endeavour to calculate the distance, the vast difference, between these two creatures. You feel at once that you cannot; that the distance is so great, that the mind is baffled as it strives to measure it. But what is the difference between an insect and an angel, when compared with the distance between an angel and the living God? It is a mere point, a nothing.

Take yet another view of the subject. We all know how easy it is to say whatever can be said in commendation one of another. A few poor words will exhaust the praise of the most excellent of the earth. It is not so in heaven. The songs that are resounding there, come from innumerable hosts of angels, and from “a great multitude” of the redeemed among men. They have been poured forth without a moment’s interruption for many ages; they will go on without ceasing for ever. The subject of them all is one and the same, the praise of the King of kings. Now imagine for a moment what such songs, in such a place, from such worshippers, must be! how fervent, how elevated, how divine! We are ready to think them worthy of their subject, suited to the glory of the great Lord of all. No, brethren; his glorious name, we are told, “is exalted,” raised on high, “above all blessing and praise.” The songs of heaven cannot set forth his majesty. Though lengthened out to eternity, they can never adequately display even one of his perfections.

We are brought then to this conclusion, “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised,” but “his greatness is unsearchable.” All the discoveries which have yet been made of it, are as nothing when compared with what is still concealed; they are rather “the hidings “of his glory, than the unveiling of its splendour. The psalmist’s description falls far short of the truth. God dwelleth so high, that we cannot ascend to him we “cannot find him out.”

But it is not in his greatness only, that the Lord is thus unrivalled.

II. We are called on to consider *his condescension*.

And here we have before us the link which connects the great Creator with his creatures. We cannot rise to him; he therefore stoops down to us. And he does this without impairing his own dignity. His condescension does not lessen the vast difference between us and our God. It leaves him on his lofty throne, and us in the dust before him. And yet it brings him near to every one of us; it places us as much within his sight, as though he were our equal or friend.

We need not go far for proofs of the divine condescension; we ourselves are living monuments of it. We owe to it our very being, all we have and are. And what is the work which now employs us, but an affecting evidence of its greatness? He who is exalted above the praise of angels, is suffering a miserable worm to sully his glory by feeble efforts to display it, is looking with delight on some of you who are endeavouring to comprehend it, is bearing with others who do not deem it worthy of a single thought. Let us admire his patience, while we look at the psalmist's description of his condescension.

1. "He humbleth himself," he says, "to behold the things that are *in heaven*."

By "the things that are in heaven," we are to understand the inhabitants of heaven, the glorified saints and angels, with all that belongs to or surrounds them. And "beholding" them signifies, not merely observing them as their Lawgiver and Judge, but taking an interest in them and their concerns. Exalted as he is, the Lord is not so wrapt up in his majesty, in his own glory and happiness, as to overlook them. No; he makes them the objects of his care, his love, and his delight. And in this he manifests his condescension. "He humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven."

But how is this? Is not heaven a holy place, and are not the spirits also holy, who dwell in it? They are; but then they are creatures, and, as creatures, they fall infinitely short of the perfection of the living God. In comparison with ours, their knowledge is excellent; but it is as nothing when compared with his infinite wisdom. Hence he is said to "charge his angels with folly." And pure as is their dwelling place in comparison with the earth, he says that it is not "clean in his sight." Look at man, and all in heaven is knowledge and holiness; look at God, and all is mingled with ignorance, pollution, and meanness.

Dwell on this thought, brethren. Think what a world heaven is—how unspeakably glorious! Read the glowing, the elevating descriptions given us of it in the word of God. And after you have thought and read, hear the inspired writers tell you, that it has not entered, and cannot enter, into your heart to conceive aright of this wondrous place. Then, while your minds are

filled with the subject, and the glories of the new Jerusalem seem to be almost present to your view, turn to this text, and read here—what? that this is a place worthy of the God who formed it? suited to be the habitation of his greatness? No; that he humbles himself if he deigns to cast an eye on it.

2. But the condescension of God comes down yet lower: “He humbleth himself to behold the things that are in *the earth*” even this vile earth; the very things which we ourselves cannot look on without many a mournful and many a sickening thought.

And here again by the word “behold,” we must understand something more than a mere glance. It implies a concern, an interference, in our affairs; a constant and deep interest in all that passes around us and within us; a care so extensive that it reaches to the meanest of our race, and so close that it numbers the hairs of our heads.

Look at the divine condescension as it is seen in *the preservation* of the inhabitants of the earth. Think of the goodness that upholds us.

We have experienced this so constantly and so long, that many of us regard it only as a matter of course; as a mercy of so ordinary a kind, that it need not excite either our surprise or thankfulness. But did we know the power which is required merely to keep in existence such frames as ours, frames so “fearfully and wonderfully made,” we should all be filled with astonishment to find ourselves still alive.

Think also of the goodness that provides for us. When we consider that every moment since we were born, the providence of God has been at work for our support and welfare; that he has ordered all our affairs, from the highest down to the very lowest; that not a thought, not a movement, of our hearts has escaped his notice;—when we recollect how he has come to our aid in the hour of need, and guided us in the hour of difficulty; how he has comforted us in our affliction, and laid us low when in danger of being lifted up in our prosperity; how he has brought darkness out of light for us, and good out of evil, and peace out of bitterness;—when we remember all the way wherein the Lord our God has thus led us, we must stand amazed at his infinite condescension. We must break out, with the wondering psalmist, and say, “Lord, what is man, that thou art” so “mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou” so “visitest him?”

And to place this goodness in a yet stronger light, consider for a moment what we are whom the Lord thus beholds. We are not dwelling in heaven, but here in a fallen world, and we, like the world, are mean and fallen. We are formed of the dust, and after a few years of weakness, vanity, and suffering, we turn to dust again, are buried in darkness and forgotten. And not only this, we are polluted as well as mean; the prey of vile affections and debasing lusts; so full of evil, that we can hardly bear with ourselves or with one another. As for God, the greater part of us forget him;

some of us blaspheme him to his face, and pour equal contempt on his mercy and his wrath. And what is the service which the best of us render him? So defiled, that were an angel to offer him such service, he would be sent quick into hell. Yet we are the very beings whom the Lord upholds and provides for; this is the very earth in which he even dwells.

But even this condescension falls short of the humility which he has manifested in *the redemption of his church*.

Think of the means by which this redemption was purchased. That the great and eternal God, the very God who “dwelleth on high,” should descend so low as to become man; that, emptying himself of his majesty, he should take upon him our meanness; that he to whom all honour, and glory, and happiness belong, should submit himself to contempt, reproach, and misery; that the holy One of Israel, into whose presence iniquity never came, should dwell among transgressors, be vexed with their pollutions, and numbered with them; that the Author and Giver of life should himself suffer death, be seen hanging in a sinner’s likeness on a cross, bleeding, groaning, and dying there; and after all his work was accomplished, that, instead of casting off the form in which he had suffered, he should raise it out of the grave, take it with him into heaven, and sit down in it on his everlasting throne;—this is condescension indeed, the utmost depth of abasement, the infinite humility of an infinite God.

Remember too the condescension displayed in the application of this dearly purchased redemption. Behold the great King of heaven stooping from his height, and deigning to offer terms of peace to a rebel in arms against him. Hear him persuading and beseeching him to accept these terms; reasoning with the sinful worms of the earth with as much earnestness as though his own blessedness were bound up in their salvation. See him bearing to be despised and rejected; following the worthless object of his care into every scene of vanity, and striving with him there; alarming his conscience, rousing his fears, warring with his lusts, exciting his desires; never leaving nor forsaking him till he has laid him a suppliant penitent at his feet, and then rejoicing over him as though he had recovered a long lost son. Brethren, is not this amazing condescension? Is it not enough to force every tongue to exclaim, “Who is like unto the Lord our God?”

Consider also the end at which all this wonderful goodness aims. And what is this? The following verses of the psalm will tell us. “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill, that he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people.” These words appear to be taken out of the song of Hannah, in the second chapter of the first book of Samuel. In their primary application, they relate probably to the elevation of such men as Saul and David from the lowest ranks of life to the throne of Israel. But the connection in which they stand, requires

us to look for a higher meaning in them. They show us men like ourselves raised from the lowest depths of sin and misery, not to an earthly throne, but to all the honour and blessedness of heaven. "He beholdeth the things that are in the earth;" and this is the great end he has in view in all the preserving and redeeming mercy he has shown them, to take the poorest he can find among them out of the dust of death, and set them among his own kings and priests in a world of life; to lift up the needy, the contrite, and broken-hearted, out of this wretched earth, this dunghill of vileness, and to cause them to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of God; to make them the sharers of his own glory and partakers in his own joy.

And here we must stop. We can no more fathom the depth of the divine condescension, than we can measure the height of the divine greatness. Indeed, without a full knowledge of the one, our views of the other must be partial. It is the infinite grandeur of God, that magnifies his condescension. It does more than adorn and augment it, it makes it infinite. In both cases our finite understandings fail us. Like men standing on the shore of a wide ocean, we can see a vastness that surprises and fills the mind, but there is beyond our sight a boundless, immeasurable expanse, which no eye can reach. Instead therefore of aiming at a knowledge of God which is "too excellent for us," let us rather seek to make a practical use of that which we are permitted to attain. Admiration is not all which the contemplation of his condescension requires. It is condescension towards ourselves; we are the very beings who are most nearly concerned in it.

III. Let us then consider *the influence which it ought to have upon our own minds*. We are repeatedly called on in this psalm to praise God for it; but how is this praise to be shown?

1. In *godly fear*.

It may appear strange to some of you, that fear should be the first effect expected to spring from a consideration of mercy; but turn to the scripture. "The children of Israel," says Hosea, "shall fear the Lord and his goodness." "They shall fear and tremble," says God by his prophet Jeremiah, "for all the goodness and for all the prosperity that I procure unto it." And then comes David "out of the depths," singing of mercy and plenteous redemption, and at the same time declaring before his God, "There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared."

The mere professor of religion cannot comprehend this; it is one of those mysteries which must ever perplex him; but the Christian understands it. His experience has made it plain. Ask him when his reverence of God is the deepest, and his awe the most profound; he tells us, not when he is confining his thoughts to his majesty, but when he is enabled to regard him in

Christ Jesus as his own condescending, gracious, and pardoning God. The fact is, the greatness of the Lord is seen the most in his goodness. He never unveils so much of his glory, as when showing mercy to the sinful, raising up the poor, and redeeming the lost. None but a God of infinite greatness could display such infinite grace.

2. With this godly fear, *self-abasement* will be connected.

It is impossible to look on God in the glory of his condescension, without being thrilled with a sense of our vileness. And the higher we rise in our apprehensions of the divine goodness, the lower we must inevitably fall in our own esteem. Would you, brethren, continue to think yourselves wise, and righteous, and great? Then turn away your eyes from “the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity,” and keep them fixed on worms of the dust. Would you see yourselves as you really are? Acquaint yourselves with God. Would you, with Isaiah, feel yourselves unclean? Then strive, with Isaiah, to see “the King, the Lord of hosts.” Would you, with Job, abhor yourselves? Then, with Job, be not content with “the hearing of the ear,” but behold with the eye of faith a holy God. Would you, with angels, prostrate yourselves before the throne? Then, with angels, look into those things wherein “he who sitteth on the throne,” has caused his glory to shine.

3. And from this self-abasement flows a *holy sorrow*.

Is the God whose laws I am so often breaking, thus wonderful in his condescension? How base then has been my conduct towards him! I have sinned against infinite goodness. I have offended against infinite love. And how little have I thought of this love and goodness! How transient have been my views, and how low my conceptions, of it! I have admired the works of God; I have looked with delight on some of his creatures; and yet to his own unspeakable glories I am often blind. “Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man.”

4. *Trust* is another effect produced by a sight of the divine condescension.

Why do we find it so hard to repose in God? Because we have low thoughts of him. We measure him by ourselves; at least, we judge of his goodness by our own ideas of what is becoming his character. The consequence is, when fear comes, we yield to it. But look at this text. It describes the goodness of God to be as great as his majesty; as much exceeding all our conceptions of it, as the glory that fills heaven and earth, passes our understanding. It is not such mercy as we expect, or desire, or need; it is such mercy as corresponds with the grandeur of Jehovah, such mercy as even towers above his grandeur, and becomes the chief glory of his wonderful name.

Great faith then ought to be exercised towards such a God. It is a lessening of his honour to allow either sins, or troubles, or wants, to sink us into despair. He can stoop lower than we can fall. He can raise the meanest and poorest higher than the most heavenly-minded can conceive. He can succour where human kindness would abandon, comfort where the tenderest earthly friend would forsake, pardon where the most merciful of his creatures would condemn. Our firmest confidence, our most enlarged expectations, can never equal his love.

We might still go on. The attribute we have been contemplating calls on us to love, to imitate, to glorify, our God. But there is an enquiry connected with this subject, too momentous to admit of being passed over. It is this—Who among ourselves are warranted to rejoice in the divine condescension? Who are the happy men for whose sake the great God of heaven “humbleth himself to behold the things that are on the earth?” And how can we answer this question? In no other way than by looking into our hearts and lives; in no other way than by enquiring whether we bear on us those marks, by which the Lord has distinguished the objects of his regard. And these are no high or splendid attainments; nothing that it requires either learning, or rank, or even a worldly religion, to acquire. Thus saith the Lord, “The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house that ye build unto me, and where is the place of my rest? To this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.”

Is this character yours, brethren? Are you made so sensible of your spiritual poverty as to be convinced that in you “dwelleth no good thing?” Is your heart broken, contrite, tender? Does the word of God pierce your very soul, causing you to fear even when it fails to encourage you to hope? Then you are the very men whom he that “dwelleth on high,” beholds. “His eyes run to and fro throughout the earth” in search of such as you. He has already found you out. Amidst the infinite variety of his works, you are as much noticed by him, as though you were the only creatures that his hands have formed. Nay, he enters into your smitten and fearful soul; he dwells and rests there; and he loves his mean abode. As he chose it for his habitation, he said of it, as he said of Zion of old, “This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell, for I have desired it.” O what an elevating thought is this! If there is in the wide universe a single being great and happy, it is the man who can look up to heaven and say, “I am poor and needy, yet the Lord thinketh upon me.” “I am the temple of the living God.”

But this blessedness forces the mind to think of the misery of those who are not thus regarded by God. There are multitudes in this wretched condition. And we need not descend into hell to find them, nor go to the dark

places of the earth in the search. There are many such in this parish, within these walls. All amongst you are of this number, who are well satisfied with yourselves; all who are strangers to spiritual sorrow; all who have sat sabbath after sabbath, year after year, unmoved by the gospel of Christ. This text, brethren, speaks no comfort to you. It is like the symbol of Jehovah's presence at the Red Sea—to his people, a pillar of light to brighten every thing around; to his enemies, a cloud and darkness to trouble and disquiet. It tells you indeed that the Lord beholds you, for "his eyes behold and his eyelids try" all "the children of men but he looks on you without delight, with indignation and wrath.

And can you be easy in such a situation? easy without one glance of love from a Being who is always beholding you, and that Being the Author of all happiness? Do not even wish to be easy. Yield rather to the disquieting convictions which are now rising within you. Call upon the Spirit of God to make them the means of beating down your vain self-confidence; implore him to humble, abase, and empty you. And then act as though you felt yourselves to be poor and needy. Go to the great Saviour of sinners, that your need may be supplied. You know by the testimony of others "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." O may you know it by your own blessed experience, and be enriched and "filled by it with all the fulness of God!"