SERMONS

BY THE

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*RECTOR OF CLAPHAM.*

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SERMON XIII.

*ON THE EFFECT OF SEEING GOD AS HE IS.*

1 JOHN iii. 2*.*

*Beloved, now are we the sons of God: and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know, that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*

WHOEVER entertains a proper view of the nature of this life, the miseries to which it is sub­ject, and the corruptions with which it is defiled, will frequently be looking forward towards another state of existence with anxious curiosity and hum­ble hope, and will often meditate upon the partial discoveries and obscure intimations which the Scriptures afford concerning the nature of that state. Partial and obscure as they are, they serve, however, to convey some important lessons of instruction to us with respect to our duty in the present life. They reflect a light by which its true character and condition are more distinctly traced; and thus render our researches into the mysteries of the future world, while made under the guidance of Revelation, a source not of useless gratification to curiosity, but of real and practical improvement. It is in this view that the passage of Scripture contained in the text has been selected. It gives a glimpse of the eternal state, and presents a very striking idea, which it will be edifying to pursue and to develop.

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.” “Beloved, *now,*”in this fallen and sinful world, “*are we the sons of God.*”*—*God considers us as his sons, having adopted us into his family, sent his Son to become our Re­deemer, and his Spirit to sanctify us, and having also given to us many great and valuable privi­leges denoting our adoption. “And it doth not yet appear what we shall be.” The nature of the glory which we shall hereafter possess, in conse­quence of so high a title, is not yet clearly re­vealed; but this we know, that when Christ shall be manifested in his glory, and take us to himself, “*we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*”Itis this last clause, which contains the striking idea to which I have alluded. It seems to intimate, that the glory which we shall enjoy in the kingdom of Christ, will consist in a perfect resemblance to Christ; and it leads us to con­sider, as the means of our attaining that glory, the contemplation of our Saviour “as he is.” By this full and distinct view of the glory of our blessed Lord, we shall be transformed into the same image from glory to glory. It is also evidently implied in these words, that though in heaven we shall see God “as he is,” yet we have not that view of him in the present life. They present, therefore, to the mind four distinct points of consideration.

I. That in this world we do *not* see God *as he is.*

II. That in heaven we shall see him as he is.

III. That this view of the Divine Being will have a transforming efficacy to make us resemble him. And,

IV. That the glory and happiness of heaven will consist in our being thus conformed to the image of God.

I. In this life, then, *we do not see God as He is.—*Inpropriety, it cannot be said that in this world we see God at all. We see his works, but we do not see Him. We behold no embodied or personal Divinity. There are instances, how­ever, in which He has been even *thus* visible to human eyes. Though we know and are assured by the clearest demonstration of reason, that God is everywhere and at all times present with us, it will still be found, that no proofs of this kind, however strong, will produce on the mind of man, as at present constituted, the full effect of sen­sible appearances; and it is, perhaps, on this account, that although God has no visible form permanently appropriate to him, he has yet been pleased, on some particular occasions, in conde­scension to human infirmity, to make himself perceptible to the bodily senses of his creatures. Thus he revealed himself to Moses, first, as a flame of fire in the midst of a bush. Afterwards, he passed by him, and manifested to him a part of his glory, as he stood in the cleft of the rock. It was, indeed, only a partial and transient view; “for no man,” said God, “can see my face,” my full glory, “and live.” A similar manifestation was afterwards made to the Israelites on Mount Sinai; not indeed in any distinct shape; but “the mountain was seen as if to burn with fire, and there were thunderings and lightnings and earthquakes.” Thus, also, were visible tokens of the Divine Presence exhibited to the Prophet Elijah: “Behold, the Lord passed by; and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave.” The Shekinah in the temple displayed a permanent symbol of the Deity; a luminous glory first filling the whole temple at its dedication, so that the priests could not bear to remain in it, and afterwards continuing to occupy the space within the veil which concealed the Holy of Holies. To Isaiah God manifested himself in a vision; and he “saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly; and one cried unto another and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried; and the house was filled with smoke.” Without dwelling on the manner in which God was pleased to give an actual view or impression of himself to Daniel, to St, John, and to others, it is proved by the instances already adduced, that though God is properly invisible, and always equally diffused throughout all space, he may yet sometimes con­centrate the radiance of his power and glory, and give such visible indications of his immediate presence, that he may be said without impro­priety to be seen. But these are rare excep­tions from the ordinary course of events, and do not militate against the general truth of our first proposition, *that in this world we do not see God as he is.*

And this is true, not only of the person but of the attributes of God: even the most obvious perfections of the Deity, his power and wisdom, are not so conspicuously revealed in the present state of existence as to be immediately compre­hended in their full dimensions. This is partly owing to the imperfection of the human faculties. The dimness of man’s intellectual vision is such, that he cannot clearly or steadily discern the Divine Attributes. Thus though “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handy work,” it yet requires a mind gifted with more than natural powers to perceive the full glory of the Creator displayed in the moon and stars; in the magnitude of their size, in the velocity of their motions, in the harmony of their order. We see only the surface of nature’s wonders, and can often form but the most in­adequate notions of the interior and more admi­rable mechanism, which we are not permitted to explore. Not only, however, are our faculties inadequate to the full comprehension of the works of God, as exhibited in this world, but these are themselves of a lower order, and intended only for a temporary duration. Even the heavenly bodies, brightly as they display the glory of God, are made to continue only for a short period; for ere long these heavens themselves shall be consumed, and “the elements shall melt with fervent heat.”

But it is important in this view to remark, that the state in which we live is a state of sin and defilement; and, therefore, everything we behold is under a curse. The great Creator has yielded to merited degradation the world which he once pronounced to be very good. We behold inscribed on it everywhere the characters of imperfection; the display of justice as well as of mercy; the marks of anger as well as of goodness. Evil is suffered to blend itself with the works of Divine Benevolence, to tarnish their glory and obscure their excellence. The character, in which God appears to us, is one suited to our state as fallen sinners. Here he is a Judge, administering correction, and punishing the guilty. He has reserved for another world the full display of his benignity and love. Neither personally, there­fore, nor in his moral attributes, can we be said to “see God as he is.”

II. But, secondly, *in heaven we shall see him as he is.—*Thisimplies two things; first, That our own faculties will be sufficiently enlarged to take aproper view of his glory and perfections; and secondly, That these will be exhibited to us in a clear and comprehensive light.

1. There must be an enlargement of our minds—an expansion of our faculties—before we can fully understand the glory of God, even when it is displayed to our view. It is not sufficient that the object should be set before us, unless, on our parts, we possess the seeing eye and the under­standing heart. The ox and the horse behold the wonders of creation, but cannot recognize in them the hand of the Creator; and were we translated to heaven itself, with our present facul­ties and views, however we might stand asto­nished at the exterior splendour of that dazzling scene, we should perhaps be little able to appre­ciate its less obvious, but more sublime, glories. But ere that blessed period shall arrive, we shall receive faculties suitable to our new state of ex­istence, and to the enjoyment of that happiness by which we shall be there surrounded. The grossness of corporeal senses will no longer form the medium of perception. It will proba­bly be conveyed in a far clearer and more direct mode, somewhat corresponding to our idea of intuition; so that even the same object may then give impressions infinitely more luminous and comprehensive than we now derive from it. But to whatever elevation the several faculties of our minds may then be raised, it is in their freedom from pollution and imperfection that their most important improvement will consist. It is the corruption of our nature, which in this world prevents our more distinct apprehension of the glory of God. By sin, the understanding is darkened, the mind rendered frivolous and fool­ish, the attention diverted from grand and sublime objects to the most insignificant trifles, the relish for moral excellence, and the perception of the beauty of holiness, impaired. By sin, the affections are become base, earthly, sordid: a proneness is acquired to relish evil rather than good, to con­template what is gross and carnal rather than what is pure and spiritual. We have neither the power nor the inclination to turn our view from the objects of time and sense, and to fix it on the less intelligible, and to us less interesting, concerns of the eternal world. But in heaven the mind will be for ever freed from these dis­orders: it will be attracted at once by pure and spiritual subjects, and be led with steadfast atten­tion, and unwearied pleasure, to contemplate the perfection of what is holy, great, and excellent. Nor is it only by the elevation of our mental faculties that our knowledge of God will then be promoted, but by the removal also of those external impediments which at present retard the progress of that knowledge. In this world, our investigation of spiritual subjects is perpetually interrupted by the intervention of temporal con­cerns: but in heaven, no anxious cares about a subsistence will call back our thoughts; no dis­tressing association of painful remembrances will distract us; no temptations of Satan, the world, or the flesh, will harass our minds, or break the chain of our meditations. All without and within will correspond, and will unite to facilitate the acquisition of that Divine knowledge, which (as we have reason to think) will be at once our chief occupation and our highest enjoyment.

2. But further, as our capacity of knowing God will in heaven be enlarged, so his works will there more clearly manifest his glorious attri­butes. That state of imperfection, which here, in some degree, veils, and even disguises, their proper character, will then be removed. The Divine wisdom, holiness, and benevolence will be displayed on every side in all their glory and brightness. They will demand instant admi­ration, and gratitude, and love. They will no more need comment, or explanation, or proof, than the existence of light, when the sun shines in meridian splendour. And as, in the future state, the works of God will thus more fully magnify him, so his presence will then be pe­culiarly manifested by such a display of visible glory, as is not at present granted to the eye of man. The city of God has “no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God doth lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.” “And there shall be no night there: and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light.” A more expressive and glorious idea cannot be presented. Here we are illuminated by the light of the sun; but the Lord God himself will be the Sun of that place, and his rays will fill every part with glory, as he originally did the temple, when the priests could not stand before its daz­zling lustre. We shall, therefore, see and feel, that “in him we shall live, and move, and have our being.” We shall rejoice in his presence, and in his light we shall see light. But this con­spicuous revelation of the presence and glory of God will particularly be displayed in *Jesus Christ.* In him the perfection and glory of the invisible God are embodied and rendered visible to man. He is his beloved Son, “the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person:” and so full and perfect is his identity with the Father, that, according to his own representation, he that hath seen the Son hath seen the Father also. The Son was the visible display of the Father’s glory even in this world. He came among us “the true light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world.” And “the Word was made flesh:” and “we beheld,” says the Apostle, “his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” It is to him that the Apostle particularly alludes in the text: “When *he* shall appear.” This term is not used of the Father, but is employed to express the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, with ten thousand of his saints and angels, to take his people to dwell with him for ever, and to execute vengeance on those that know not God. Hence the Apostle, in his view of heaven, after saying that “the glory of God doth lighten it,” adds, “and the Lamb is the light thereof.” And when Isaiah beheld the Lord of hosts sitting upon his throne of glory, we are assured by the Apostle that this was the Lord Jesus Christ, who is King of kings and Lord of lords; and when John beheld the hosts of heaven falling down before the Throne and worshipping. “Behold,” saith he, “I heard the voice of many angels round about the Throne, and the beasts, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice; Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.” This then will be the illustrious proof of the immediate presence of God: these will be the glorious means by which we shall see him as he is. “No man hath seen God at any time. The only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”

III. It was proposed, in the third place, to show, that this view of the Divine Being will have a transforming efficacy to make us resemble him. “We know we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” It is scarcely necessary to observe, that there is an allusion here to the case of Moses, who, when he was favoured only with a glance of the Deity, received so much him­self of the glory which he beheld, that the Israelites could not look upon him; or rather, perhaps, we may say, that this occurrence was intended as an apt type and illustration of the manner in which we shall hereafter receive glory ourselves from the contemplation of the blessed God. It is a general law throughout the creation, that everything great and good is derived from God. All wisdom, power, and goodness are but the reflection of the same qualities in him. And therefore it is very conceivable, that in heaven, where the communi­cation between the Creator and his creatures is more direct and express than it can be here, the Divine glory may also be attended with a trans­forming efficacy of a more signal and immediate kind. Of the properties of the Deity, there are some indeed which seem absolutely incommu­nicable to man, such as his eternal existence; but there are others, of which we shall doubtless be in some degree susceptible. What portion he may please to impart of his wisdom and power we can but very imperfectly conjecture; but that we shall derive from the view of him as he is, a con­siderable resemblance in all moral excellences, there can be no question. The analogy of the present state of existence demonstrates, that in all example, whether good or evil, there is an assimilating efficacy; and there can be no doubt, if we extend the analogy still further, if we were condemned to dwell in the regions of outer dark­ness with Satan and the infernal spirits, exposed to the view of perpetual malignity and deceit, we too should become malignant and deceitful. Assailed with rage and execration, our passions too would be kindled; and where we were hated, we should soon learn to hate in our turn.—But not to pursue further this awful contrast, let us suppose ourselves placed in those blessed regions, where the mercy and love of God shall surround us on every side with inexhaustible profusion. In those regions of eternal tranquillity, should not our souls possess an unruffled calm? Seeing nothing on every side but happiness, could we fail to be happy? Or could we behold the triumph of eternal love, without loving also in return? Where all were endeavouring to increase our hap­piness, would not our hearts surely burn with a gene­ral glow of gratitude? Where all were wise, should we not learn wisdom? Where the beauty of holi­ness was everywhere diffused, could we be other­wise than holy? Thus there will necessarily be a general tendency in heaven towards a continual increase of peace, happiness, love, wisdom, and holiness. Christ will communicate to all his servants, and they to each other, every good. Out of his fulness shall we receive even grace for grace imparted to us. And, in reference to this assi­milating influence, we are told, that even our bodies shall be made to resemble the glorified body of Christ. “We look for the Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself,” or to assimi­late all things to himself. Thus “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

IV. Itremains, in the last place, to observe, that the glory and happiness of heaven consist in being thus conformed to the Divine image.—This needs very little explanation. There is, in fact, but one kind of glory or of happiness. And in God this glory and happiness are found in an infinite degree. Just in proportion, therefore, as we attain to these excellencies, we must of necessity resemble him. The resemblance to him is the exact measure of that attainment. Let us then correct our views of heaven. Let us no longer consider it as a place of happiness of what kind we know not, or conceive of it so meanly as to compare it to the most perfect pattern of temporal enjoyment; rather let us view it as the abode of happiness, because there our resem­blance to the Divine Nature will be perfected. “It doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” Thus to contemplate heaven, is to have the nearest view of it which perhaps it is possible on earth to obtain.

By way of improvement on this interesting subject, let it be observed, that it teaches us the *necessity* of becoming pure and holy in this life, in order to obtain an entrance into the kingdom of glory above. “He that hath this hope in him, purifieth himself even as he is pure.” It is im­possible that God can admit into his kingdom the impure and unsanctified. It is indeed the very object of the Gospel, to prepare us for heaven by purifying us in this state of probation. That dispensation is intended to display the impossibi­lity of our becoming happy without being holy; to show us the nature of God, and thus to convince us that “without holiness no man shall see the Lord.”

But the subject also illustrates the *means* of becoming holy; for holiness is communicated in this world precisely in the same way as it is above. By contemplating God “as he is,” that is, according to the true description of his character given in the Gospel, we become like him. Thus the Apostle teaches us;—“We beholding as in a glass,” or mirror, “the glory of the Lord” (that is, his glory reflected in the face of Jesus Christ), “are changed into the same image from glory to glory.” The Gospel is expressly intended to be a true and comprehensive exhibition of God, and not merely such as we view in nature; for there, though we see his power and wisdom, we do not fully learn his holiness, mercy, and love. When, therefore, we study the Bible; when we meditate most deeply on the nature and character of God as there unfolded; when we pray to God for the influence of his grace and Spirit (in which act of devotion we place ourselves, as it were, in his presence, and contemplate his glory); then we take the means the most efficacious to assist our endeavours to resemble him. Then we prepare ourselves in the best manner in our power on earth, to be transformed into his image; for, in fact, the same method will be pursued above. When we die, we shall not so much change the means of resembling God as find their efficacy increased. God grant, therefore, that as we cherish this hope, we may thus “purify ourselves, even as he is pure;” that when he shall come again, with power and great glory, we may be made like unto him in his eternal kingdom, where with the Father and Holy Spirit he reigns evermore!