

**Monergism**

# THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

EXPLAINED AND DEFENDED.  
BEING THE SUBSTANCE OF SEVERAL  
LECTURES ON THE ASSEMBLY'S  
LARGER CATECHISM

**THOMAS RIDGLEY**

The background of the book cover features a stylized, layered mountain range in shades of blue and grey, with dark silhouettes of trees in the foreground. The text is overlaid on this background.

**Monergism**

# THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

EXPLAINED AND DEFENDED.  
BEING THE SUBSTANCE OF SEVERAL  
LECTURES ON THE ASSEMBLY'S  
LARGER CATECHISM

**THOMAS RIDGLEY**

Copyright ©Monergism Books

# **The Divine Attributes**

**by Thomas Ridgley, D.D**

---

## **Table of Contents**

[The Attributes of God](#)

[General view of the Divine Attributes](#)

[The Spirituality of God](#)

[The Self-Existence of God](#)

[The Infinitude of God](#)

[The All-Sufficiency of God](#)

[The Eternity of God](#)

[The Immutability of God](#)

[The Incomprehensibility of God](#)

[The Omnipresence of God](#)

[The Omnipotence of God](#)

[The Omniscience of God](#)

[The Wisdom of God](#)

The Holiness of God

The Justice of God

The Benignity of God

The Goodness of God

The Mercy of God

The Grace of God

The Patience of God

The Faithfulness of God

NOTES.—The Communicable and the Incommunicable perfections of God

The Supremacy of God

The Unity of God

NOTES.—Proofs of the Unity of God from reason

Knowledge of the Unity of God among the heathen

The Simplicity of God

## **THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD**

QUESTION VII. What is God?

ANSWER. God is a Spirit, in and of himself, infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection, all sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, every where present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.

## **General View of the Divine Attributes**

BEFORE we proceed to consider the divine perfections, as stated in this answer, let it be premised, that it is impossible for any one to give a perfect description of God; since he is incomprehensible. No words can fully express, or set forth, his perfections. When the wisest men on earth speak of him, they soon betray their own weakness, or discover, as Elihu says, that they 'cannot order their speech by reason of darkness,' or that 'they are but of yesterday, and know,' comparatively, 'nothing.' When we speak of the infinite perfections of the divine nature, we are but like children, talking of matters above them, which their tender age can take in but little of. 'This knowledge is too wonderful for us; it is high, we cannot attain to it.' 'How little a portion is heard of him?'

But though God cannot be perfectly described, yet there is something of him which we may know, and ought to make the matter of our study and diligent inquiries. When his glory is set forth in scripture, we are not to look upon the expressions made use of, as words without any ideas affixed to them,—for it is one thing to have adequate ideas of an infinitely perfect being, and another thing to have no ideas at all of him; neither are our ideas of God, though imperfect, to be for this reason reckoned altogether false,—for it is one thing to think of him in an unbecoming way, not agreeable to his perfections, or to attribute the weakness and imperfection to him which do not belong to his nature, and another thing to think of him, with the highest and best conceptions we are able to entertain of his infinite perfections, while, at the same time, we have a due sense of our own weakness and the shallowness of our capacities. When we

thus order our thoughts concerning the great God, though we are far from comprehending his infinite perfections, yet our conceptions are not to be concluded erroneous, when directed by his word.

Let us consider then, how we may conceive aright of the divine perfections, that we may not think or speak of God that which is not right, though at best we know but little of his glory. And, 1. We must first take an estimate of finite perfections, which we have some ideas of, though not perfect ones in all respects,—such as power, wisdom, goodness, faithfulness, &c.; then we must conceive that these are eminently, though not formally, in God. Whatever perfection is in the creature, the same is in God, and infinitely more; or it is in God, but not in such a finite, limited, or imperfect way, as it is in the creature. 'He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye, shall not he see? He that teacheth man knowledge, shall not he know?' 2. When the same words are used to denote a perfection in God, and in the creature, such as wisdom, power, &c., we must not suppose that they import the same thing in their different application. When they are applied to the creature, they denote properties, which, though we call them perfections, are, at best, but finite, and have many imperfections attending them,—all which we must separate or abstract in our thoughts, when the same words are used to set forth any divine perfection. Thus knowledge is a perfection of the human nature; and the word knowledge is used to denote a divine perfection; yet we must consider that 'the Lord seeth not as man seeth.'<sup>p</sup> The same may be said of all his other perfections. He worketh not as man worketh. Whatever perfections are ascribed to the creature, are to be considered as agreeable to the subject in which they exist; and when the words denoting them are used to set forth any of the divine perfections, they are to be understood in a way becoming a God of infinite perfection.

This has given occasion to divines to distinguish the perfections of God, into those that are communicable, and those that are incommunicable. The communicable perfections of God are those some faint resemblance of which we find in intelligent creatures;

though at the same time, there is an infinite disproportion. When, for example, we speak of God as holy, wise, just, powerful, or faithful, we find something like these perfections in the creature; though we are not to suppose them, in all respects, the same as they are in God. In him, they are in his own, that is, an infinite way. In us, they are in our own, that is, a finite and limited way. The incommunicable perfections of God are those of which there is not the least shadow or similitude in creatures. They rather represent him as contrasted by them. Thus when we speak of him as infinite, incomprehensible, unchangeable, without beginning, independent, &c., we ascribe to him perfections which exhibit the vast distance that there is between God and the creature, or how infinitely he exceeds all other beings, and is the opposite of every thing that argues imperfection in them. [See note Z, end of section.]

From the general account we have given of the divine perfections, we may infer, 1. That there is nothing common between God and the creature; that is, there is nothing which belongs to the divine nature which can be attributed to the creature, and nothing proper to the creature is to be applied to God. There are, however, some rays of the divine glory, which may be beheld as shining forth or displayed in the creature, especially in the intelligent part of the creation, angels and men; who are for that reason, represented as made after the divine image. 2. Let us never think or speak of the perfections of God, but with the highest reverence, lest we take his name in vain, or debase him in our thoughts. 'Shall not his excellency make you afraid, and his dread fall upon you?' And whenever we compare God with the creatures, namely, angels and men, that bear somewhat of his image, let us abstract in our thoughts all their imperfections, whether natural or moral, from him, and consider the infinite disproportion that there is between him and them. We now come to consider the perfections of the divine nature, in the order in which they are laid down in this answer.

## **The Spirituality of God**



God is a Spirit, that is, an immaterial substance, without body, or bodily parts. This he is said to be in John 4:24. But if it be inquired what we mean by a spirit, let it be premised, that we cannot fully understand what our own spirits or souls are, and that we know less of the nature of angels, a higher kind of spirits, and least of all the spirituality of the divine nature. In considering the nature and properties of spirits, however, our ideas begin at what is finite, and thence we are led to conceive of God as infinitely more perfect than any finite spirit.

Here we shall consider the word spirit, as applied more especially to angels, and the souls of men. A spirit is the most perfect and excellent being. The soul is more excellent than the body, or indeed than any thing that is purely material; and angels are the most perfect and glorious part of the creation, as they are spiritual beings, in some things excelling the souls of men. A spirit is in its own nature immortal: it has nothing in its frame and constitution that tends to corruption. In material things, which consist of various parts, that may be dissolved or separated, and may assume an altered form, there is what we call corruptibility. This, however, belongs not to spirits, which are liable to no change in their nature, except by the immediate hand of God, who can, if he pleases, reduce them again to nothing. A spirit is capable of understanding and willing, and of performing corresponding actions, which no other being can do. Thus, though the sun is a glorious and useful being, yet, because it is material, it is not capable of thought or any moral action, such as angels and the souls of men can perform.

Now these conceptions of the nature and properties of finite spirits, lead us to conceive of God as a Spirit. As spirits excel all other creatures, we must conclude that God is the most excellent and perfect of all beings, and also that he is 'incorruptible, immortal, and invisible,' as he is said to be in scripture. It follows that he has an understanding and will, and hence we may conceive of him as the creator and governor of all things. This he could not be, if he were not an intelligent and sovereign being, and particularly a Spirit.

Again, the difference between other spiritual substances and God, is, that all their excellency is only comparative, or consists in their being superior in their nature and properties to all material beings; while God, as a Spirit, is infinitely more excellent, not only than all material beings, but than all created spirits. Their perfections are derived from him, and therefore he is called, 'the Father of spirits,' and 'the God of the spirits of all flesh;' but his perfections are underived. Other spirits are, as we have observed, in their own nature, immortal, yet God can reduce them to nothing; but God is independently immortal, and therefore it is said of him, that 'he only hath immortality.' Finite spirits, indeed, have understanding and will, but these powers are contained within certain limits; whereas God is an infinite Spirit, and therefore it can be said of none but him, that 'his understanding is infinite.'

From God's being a Spirit, we may infer, 1. That he is the most suitable good to the nature of our souls, which are spirits. As the God and Father of spirits, he can communicate himself to them, and apply to them those things which tend to make them happy. 2. He is to be worshipped in a spiritual manner, that is, with our whole souls, and in a way becoming the spirituality of his nature. We are, therefore, to frame no similitude or resemblance of him in our thoughts, as though he were a corporeal or material being; neither are we to make any pictures of him. This God forbids Israel to do; and he tells them, that they had not the least pretence for doing it, in as much as they 'saw no similitude of him, when he spake to them in Horeb;' he tells them also that to make an image of him would be to 'corrupt themselves.'

## **The Self-Existence of God**

God is said to be 'in, and of, himself,' not as though he gave being to, or was the cause of himself; for that implies a contradiction. Divines, therefore, generally say, that God is 'in and of himself,' not positively, but negatively; that is, his being and perfections are underived, they

are not communicated to him, as all finite perfections are by him communicated to the creature. He is self-existent, or independent; and this is one of the highest glories of his nature, by which he is distinguished from creatures, who all live, move, and have their being, in and from him.

This attribute of independence belongs to all his perfections. Thus his wisdom, power, goodness, holiness, &c. are all independent.

1. He is independent as to his knowledge or wisdom. He doth not receive ideas from any object out of himself. All intelligent creatures do this, and, in that respect, are said to depend on the object; so that if there were not any such object, they could not have the knowledge or idea of it in their minds. The object known must exist, before we can apprehend what it is. But this must not be said respecting God's knowledge; for the things which he knows cannot be supposed of as antecedent to his knowing them. The independency of his knowledge is elegantly described in scripture: 'Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor, has taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and showed to him the way of understanding?'

2. He is independent in power. As he does not receive strength from any one, so he doth not act dependently on the will of the creature. 'Who hath enjoined him his way?' Again, as he did not receive the power of acting from any one, so none can hinder, turn aside, or control his power, or put a stop to his methods of acting.

3. He is independent as to his holiness, hating sin necessarily, and not merely depending on some reasons out of himself, which induce him to hate it; for it is essential to the divine nature to be infinitely opposite to all sin, and therefore to be independently holy.

4. He is independent as to his bounty and goodness, and so he communicates blessings not by constraint, but according to his

sovereign will. Thus he gave being to the world, and all things therein, which was the first instance, and a very great one, of bounty and goodness, not by constraint, but by his free will: 'For his pleasure they are and were created.' In like manner, in whatever instances he extends mercy to miserable creatures, he acts independently in displaying it. Nothing out of himself moves him or lays a constraint upon him; but he shows mercy because it is his pleasure so to do.

To evince the truth of this doctrine, that God is independent as to his being, and all his perfections, let it be considered, 1. That all things depend on his power, which brought them into, and preserves them in being. They exist by his will, as their creator and preserver, and consequently are not necessary but dependent beings. Now if all things depend on God, it is the greatest absurdity to say that God depends on any thing; for this would be to suppose the cause and the effect to be mutually dependent on, and derived from each other,—which implies a contradiction. 2. If God be infinitely above the highest creatures, he cannot depend on any of them, for dependence argues inferiority. Now that God is above all things is certain. This is represented in a very beautiful manner by the prophet, when he says, 'Behold the nations are as the drop of the bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance; all nations before him are as nothing, and they are counted to him less than nothing and vanity.' He cannot, then, be said to be inferior to them, and, by consequence, to depend on them. 3. If God depends on any creature, he does not exist necessarily,—and if so, he might not have been; for the same will, by which he is supposed to exist, might have determined that he should not have existed. And, according to the same method of reasoning, he might cease to be; for the same will that gave being to him might take it away at pleasure,—a thought which is altogether inconsistent with the idea of a God.

From God's being independent, or 'in and of himself,' we infer that the creature cannot lay any obligation on him, or do any thing that may tend to make him more happy than he is in himself. The apostle gives a challenge to this effect: 'Who hath first given to him, and it

shall be recompensed unto him again?' And Eliphaz says to Job, 'Can a man be profitable to God, as he that is wise may be profitable unto himself? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty that thou art righteous? or is it gain to him that thou makest thy ways perfect?'e Again, if independency be a divine perfection, let it not, in any instance, or by any consequence, be attributed to the creature. Let us conclude, that all our springs are in him, and that all we enjoy and hope for is from him, who is the author and finisher of our faith, and the fountain of all our blessedness.

## **The Infinitude of God**

God is infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection. To be infinite, is to be without all bounds or limits, either actual or possible. Now that God is so, is evident from his being independent and uncreated, and because his will fixes the bounds of all the excellencies, perfections, and powers of the creature. If he doth not exist by the will of another, he is infinite in being, and consequently in all perfection. Hence, it is said, 'His understanding is infinite.' His infinitude appears also in his omniscience. His will likewise determines what shall come to pass, with an infinite sovereignty, which cannot be controlled or rendered ineffectual. His power, moreover, is infinite; and therefore all things are equally possible and easy to it, nor can it be resisted by any contrary force or power. And he is infinite in blessedness, as being, from all eternity, self-sufficient, or not standing in need of any thing to make him more happy than he was in himself. The Psalmist is supposed, by many, to speak in the person of Christ, when he says, 'My goodness extendeth not to thee;'g that is, "How much soever thy relative glory may be illustrated by what I have engaged to perform in the covenant of redemption, yet this can make no addition to thine essential glory." And if so, certainly nothing can be done by us which may in the least contribute to it.

## The All-Sufficiency of God

God is all-sufficient; or he hath enough in himself to satisfy the most enlarged desires of his creatures, and to make them completely blessed. As his self-sufficiency is that whereby he has enough in himself to constitute him completely blessed, as a God of infinite perfection; so his all-sufficiency is that whereby he is able to communicate as much blessedness to his creatures, as he is pleased to make them capable of receiving. In consequence of his all-sufficiency, he is able not only to 'supply all their wants, but to do exceedingly above all that they ask or think.' This he can do in an immediate way. Or if he thinks fit to make use of creatures as instruments to fulfil his pleasure, and communicate what he designs to impart to us, he is never at a loss; for as they are the work of his hands, so he has a right to use them at his will,—and on this account they are all said to be 'his servants.'

This doctrine of God's all-sufficiency should be improved by us to induce us to seek happiness in him alone. Creatures are no more than the stream, while he is the fountain. We may, in a mediate way, receive some small drops from them; but he is the ocean of all blessedness.

Let us take heed that we do not depreciate, or, in effect, deny this perfection. This we may be said to do in various instances. 1. We do it when we are discontented with our present condition, and desire more than God has allotted to us. This seems to have been the sin of the fallen angels, who left their first habitation through pride, seeking more than God designed they should have; and it was the sin by which our first parents fell, desiring a greater degree of knowledge than what they thought themselves possessed of, and fancying that by eating the forbidden fruit they should be 'as gods, knowing good and evil.' 2. We practically deny the all-sufficiency of God, when we seek blessings, of what kind soever they are, in an indirect way; as though God had not been able to bestow them upon us in his own

way, or in the use of lawful means. This Rebekah and Jacob did, when they contrived a lie to obtain the blessing of Isaac;<sup>l</sup> for they acted as if there had not been an all-sufficiency in providence to bring what they desired, without their having recourse to methods which were sinful. 3. When we use unlawful means to escape imminent dangers. This David did when he feigned himself mad,—supposing, without ground, that he should have been slain by Achish king of Gath, and that there was no way to escape but by the artifice he adopted. Abraham and Isaac also were guilty of this,<sup>n</sup> when they denied their wives, as an expedient to save their lives,—as though God had not been able to save them in a better and more honourable way. 4. When we distrust his providence, though we have had large experience of its appearing for us in various instances. This David did, when he said in his heart, 'I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul;' and the Israelites, when they said, 'Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?'<sup>p</sup> though he had provided for them in an extraordinary way ever since they had been there. Yea, Moses himself was faulty in the same way, when he said, 'Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me;' and Asa, when he tempted Benhadad to break his league with Baasha, who made war against him,—as though God had not been able to deliver him without this indirect practice, and as though he had not in an eminent manner appeared for him, in giving him a signal victory over Zerah the Ethiopian, when he came against him with an army of a million of men;<sup>r</sup> and likewise Joshua, when Israel had suffered a small defeat, occasioned by Achan's sin, and fled before the men of Ai, though there were but thirty-six of them slain; for on that occasion he was ready to wish that God had not brought them over Jordan, and anticipated nothing but ruin and destruction from the Amorites, forgetting God's former deliverances, and distrusting his faithfulness and his care of his people, and, as it were, calling in question his all-sufficiency, as though he were not able to accomplish the promises he had made to them. 5. When we doubt of the truth, or the certain accomplishment, of his promises; and so are ready to say, 'Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Doth his truth fail for ever?' This

we are apt to do, when there are great difficulties in the way of the accomplishment of them. Thus Sarah, when it was told her that she should have a child in her old age, laughed through unbelief;† and God intimates, that her conduct was an affront to his all-sufficiency, for he says, 'Is any thing too hard for the Lord? Gideon, in the same way, though he was told that God was with him, and though he had an express command to go in his might, with a promise that he should deliver Israel from the Midianites, yet says, 'O Lord, wherewith shall I save them? for my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.'x He was told again by God, 'I will be with thee, and smite the Midianites;' yet, afterwards, he desires that he would give him a sign in the wet and dry fleece. What was this but questioning his all-sufficiency? 6. When under pretence of our unfitness for them, we decline great services, though called to them by God. Thus when the prophet Jeremiah was called to deliver the Lord's message to the rebellions house of Israel, he desired to be excused, and said, 'Behold I cannot speak, for I am a child;' whereas the main discouragement was the difficulty of the work, and the hazards he would probably run. But God encourages him to it, by putting him in mind of his all-sufficiency, when he tells him, that 'he would be with him, and deliver him.'z

The all-sufficiency of God affords matter of support and encouragement to believers, under the greatest straits and difficulties they are exposed to in this world. We have many instances in scripture of believers having had recourse to it in such circumstances. Thus, when David was in the greatest strait that ever he met with—when upon the Amalekites spoiling Ziklag, and carrying away the women captives, the people talked of stoning him, and all things seemed to make against him, 'he encouraged himself in the Lord his God.' Mordecai, in the same way, was confident that 'the enlargement and deliverance' of the Jews should be accomplished by some other means, if not by Esther's intercession for them, when she was afraid to go in to the king;‡ and, considering the present posture of their affairs, he could never have this confidence without a due regard to God's all-sufficiency. Moreover, it



was this divine perfection which encouraged Abraham to obey the difficult command to offer up his son; as the apostle observes, he did this as knowing 'that God was able to raise him from the dead.' And when believers are under the greatest distress from the assaults of their spiritual enemies, they have a warrant from God, as the apostle had, to encourage themselves that they shall come off victorious, because 'his grace is sufficient for them.'d

## **The Eternity of God**

God is eternal. He was without beginning, and shall be without end. His duration is unchangeable, or without succession, the same from everlasting to everlasting. Hence the Psalmist says, 'Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world; even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.'

1. God is from everlasting. This appears, from his being a necessary, self-existent Being, or from his existing in and of himself; for whatever is not produced is from eternity. That he did not derive his being from any one, is evident from his having given being to all things, which is implied in their being creatures. Nothing gave being to him; and consequently he was from eternity.

Again, if he is an infinitely perfect being, as has been observed before, then his duration is infinitely perfect; and consequently it is boundless, that is to say, eternal. It is an imperfection, in all created beings, that they began to exist; and hence they are said, in a comparative sense, to be but of yesterday. We must, therefore, when we conceive of God, separate this imperfection from him, and so conclude that he was from all eternity.

Farther, if he created all things in the beginning, then he was before the beginning of time, that is, from eternity. It is said, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.' Time is a successive duration, taking its rise from a certain point, or moment,

which we call the beginning. Now that duration, which was before this, must be from eternity; unless we suppose that there was time before time began, or that there was a successive duration before successive duration began,—which is a contradiction. Hence, if God, as their Creator, fixed a beginning to all things, and particularly to time, which is the measure of the duration of all created beings, then it is evident that he was before time, and consequently from eternity.

That God is from everlasting appears also from scripture; as when it is said, 'The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms;' and when we read of his 'eternal power and Godhead;'<sup>h</sup> and elsewhere, 'Art not thou from everlasting, O Lord my God? Thy throne is established of old; thou art from everlasting.'<sup>k</sup> His attributes and perfections also are said to have been from everlasting: 'The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.'

That God is from everlasting, may be proved, further, from many scripture-consequences. Thus, there was an election of persons to holiness and happiness, 'before the foundation of the world.' Christ, in particular, 'was fore-ordained' to be our mediator 'before the foundation of the world;' and was 'set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.'<sup>p</sup> It follows, that there was a sovereign fore-ordaining will; and therefore God, whose will it was, existed before the foundation of the world, that is, from everlasting. Moreover, there were grants of grace given in Christ, or put into his hand, from all eternity. Thus we read of 'eternal life, which God promised before the world began;' and of our being 'saved, according to his purpose and grace, given us in Christ Jesus, before the world began.'<sup>r</sup> From this it follows, that there was an eternal giver, and consequently that God was from everlasting.

2. God shall be to everlasting. Accordingly it is said, 'The Lord shall endure for ever;' 'he liveth for ever and ever;'<sup>t</sup> 'his years shall have no end;' and 'the Lord shall reign for ever;'<sup>x</sup> therefore he must endure to everlasting. Again, it is said, 'the Lord keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him, to a thousand generations;' and 'he will ever

be mindful of his covenant,'z that is, will fulfil what he has promised therein. Now, if his truth shall not fail for ever, then he who will accomplish what he has spoken, must endure to everlasting.

But that he shall endure for ever may be farther evinced from the perfections of his nature. His necessary existence not only argues, as has been before observed, that he could not begin to be, but equally proves that he cannot cease to be, or that he shall be to everlasting.—Again, He is void of all composition, and therefore must be to everlasting. None but compounded beings, namely, such as have parts, are subject to dissolution; which arises from the contrariety of the parts, and their tendency to destroy one another,—a contrariety and tendency which occasion their dissolution. But God having no parts, as he is the most simple uncompounded being, there can be nothing in him that tends to dissolution; so that he can never have an end from any necessity of nature. [See note 2 A, page 124.]—Further, He must be to eternity, because there is no one superior to him, at whose will he exists, who can deprive him of his being and glory.—Lastly, He cannot will his own destruction, or non-existence; for to do so would be contrary to the universal nature of things. No being can desire to be less perfect than it is; much less can any one will or desire his own annihilation. No one, especially, who is possessed of blessedness, can will the loss of it, for to do so is incongruous with the nature of it as a desirable good. God, therefore, cannot will the loss of his own blessedness; and since his blessedness is inseparably connected with his being, he cannot cease to be, from an act of his own will. Now, if he cannot cease to be, from any necessity of nature, or from the will of another, or from an act of his own will, he must be to eternity.

The eternity of God, as to both the past and the future, may still further be proved from his other perfections; since one of the divine perfections infers the other.—First, it may be proved from his immutability. He is unchangeable in his being; he is, in consequence, unchangeable also in all his perfections; and therefore, he must be always the same from everlasting to everlasting, and not proceed

from a state of non-existence to that of being, which he would have done, had he not been from everlasting, nor decline from a state of being to that of non-existence, which he would be supposed to do, were he not to everlasting. Either of these is the greatest change that can be supposed, and therefore inconsistent with the divine immutability.—Again, He is the first cause, and the ultimate end of all things. He must, therefore, be from eternity, and remain the fountain of all blessedness to eternity.—Further, He could not be almighty, or infinite in power, if he were not eternal. That being which did not always exist, once could not act, that is, when it did not exist; and he that may cease to be, may, for the same reason, be disabled from acting. Both of these consequences are inconsistent with almighty power.—Lastly, If he were not eternal, he could not, by way of eminence, be called, as he is, 'the living God,' or said 'to have life in himself;'<sup>b</sup> for both these expressions imply his necessary existence, and that argues his eternity.

3. God's eternal duration is without succession, as well as without beginning and end. That it is so, appears from his being unchangeable. All successive duration infers change. Thus, the duration of creatures, which is successive, is not the same one moment as it will be the next; every moment adds something to it. But this cannot be said of God's duration. Besides, successive duration implies a being what we were not in all respects before, and a ceasing to be what we were; and so it is a kind of continual passing from not being to being,—which is inconsistent with God's perfections, and, in particular, with his unchangeable duration. The Psalmist, speaking of God's eternal duration, describes it by its immutability: 'Thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end;' and the apostle, speaking concerning it, says, 'He is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.'<sup>d</sup> Moreover, successive duration is applicable to time. The duration of all creatures is measured, and therefore cannot be termed infinite. It is measured by its successive parts: thus a day, a year, an age, a million of ages, are measured by the number of moments of which they consist. But God's duration is

unmeasured, that is, infinite; it is, therefore, without succession, or without those parts of which time consists.

4. Eternity is an attribute peculiar to God; and hence we call it an incommunicable perfection. There are, indeed, other things that shall endure to everlasting,—as angels, and the souls of men,—also those heavenly bodies that shall remain after the creature is delivered from the bondage of corruption, to which it is now subject,—and likewise the heavenly places, designed for the seat of the blessed; but the everlasting duration of these things infinitely differs from the eternity of God. As all finite things began to be, and their duration is successive, so their everlasting existence depends entirely on the power and will of God, and therefore cannot be called necessary or independent, as his eternal existence is.

It may, perhaps, seem inconsistent with the account that has been given of his eternity, that the various parts of time, as days, years, &c. and the various changes of time, as past, present, and to come, are sometimes attributed to God. Such expressions, it is true, are often used in scripture. Thus he is called, 'the Ancient of days;' and his eternity is expressed, by 'his years having no end;'<sup>f</sup> and it is said, 'He was, is, and is to come.' But, for the understanding of such expressions, we must consider that in using them God is pleased to speak according to our weak capacity, who cannot comprehend the manner of his infinite duration. We cannot conceive of any duration but that which is successive; therefore God speaks to us, as he does in many other instances, in condescension to our capacities. But yet we may observe, that though he thus condescends to speak concerning himself, there is often something added which distinguishes his duration from that of creatures; as when it is said, 'Behold, God is great, and we know him not; neither can the number of his years be searched out.'<sup>h</sup> Hence, though we read of the years of his duration, yet they are such as are unsearchable, or incomprehensible, infinitely differing from years as applied to created beings. Thus it is said, 'A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday, when it is past.' 'One day is with the Lord as a thousand

years, and a thousand years as one day.'k And, by the same method of reasoning, it may be said one moment is with the Lord as a thousand millions of ages, or a thousand millions of ages as one moment. Such is his duration; and therefore it is not properly successive, like that of creatures. Again, when any thing past, present, or to come, is attributed to God, it signifies either that he is so as to his works, which are finite, and measured by successive duration; or that he whose duration is not measured by succession, notwithstanding, exists unchangeably, through all the various ages of time. As he is omnipresent with all the parts of matter, yet has no parts himself; so he exists in all the successive ages of time, but without that succession which is peculiar to time and creatures.

Several things may be inferred, of a practical nature, from the eternity of God. Since his duration is eternal, that is, without succession, so that there is no such thing as past or to come with him,—since ten thousand millions of ages are but like a moment to him,—it follows that those sins which we committed long ago, and which perhaps are forgotten by us, are present to his view. He knows what we have done against him ever since we had a being in this world, as much as though we were at present committing them.—Again, if God was from eternity, how contemptible is all created glory when compared with his! Look but a few ages backward, and it was nothing. This consideration should humble the pride of the creature, who is but of yesterday, and whose duration is nothing, and less than nothing, when compared with God's.—Further, the eternity of God, as being to everlasting, affords matter of terror to his enemies, and of comfort to his people, and, as such, should be improved for the preventing of sin. It affords matter of terror to his enemies. For he ever lives to see his threatenings executed, and to pour forth the vials of his fury on them. Accordingly, the prophet speaking of God as 'the everlasting King,' says, that 'at his wrath the earth shall tremble, and the nations shall not be able to abide his indignation.' The eternity of God argues the eternity of the punishment of sin; since this great Judge, who is a consuming fire to impenitent sinners, will live for ever to see his threatenings executed upon them; and as he is eternal

in his being, he must be so in his power, holiness, justice, and all his other perfections, which are terrible to his enemies. Hence the Psalmist says, 'Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath;' and the apostle says, 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' But the doctrine of God's eternity affords, on the other hand, matter of comfort to believers. It is a refuge to them from the fluctuating and uncertain enjoyments which are connected with the creature; and it is an encouragement under the loss of friends and relations, and under all the other losses and disappointments which they meet with, as to their outward state in this world. These are, at best, but short-lived comforts; but God is 'the eternal portion' and happiness of his people. And from his eternity, they may certainly conclude, that the happiness of the heavenly state will be eternal; for it consists in the enjoyment of him, who is so,—a thought which is very delightful to all who are enabled by faith to cherish it.

## **The Immutability of God**

God is immutable. 'With him is no variableness neither shadow of turning.' His immutability is sometimes set forth in a metaphorical way; in which respect he is compared to a 'rock.' As this remains immoveable, when the whole ocean that surrounds it is continually in a fluctuating state; so, though all creatures are subject to change, God alone is unchangeable in his being, and in all his perfections.

I. We shall consider how immutability is a perfection, and how it is a perfection peculiar to God.

It must be allowed that immutability cannot be said to be an excellency or perfection, unless it be applied to, or spoken of, what is good. An immutable state of sin or of misery, as found in fallen angels or wicked men, is far from being an excellency. But unchangeable holiness and happiness, as found in holy angels, or saints in heaven, is a perfection conferred upon them. And when we

speak of God's immutability, we suppose him infinitely blessed,—which is included in the notion of a God; and so we farther say, that he is unchangeable in all those perfections in which it consists.

Immutability belongs, in the most proper sense, to God alone; so that 'as he only' is said 'to have immortality,' that is, such as is underived and independent,—he alone is unchangeable. Other things are rendered immutable by an act of his will and power; but immutability is an essential perfection of the divine nature. Creatures are dependently immutable; God is independently so.

The most perfect creatures, such as angels and glorified saints, are capable of new additions to their blessedness. New objects may be presented as occasions of praise, which tend perpetually to increase their happiness. The angels know more than they did before Christ's incarnation; for they are said to know 'by the church,' that is, by the dealings of God with his church, 'the manifold wisdom of God,' and to 'desire to look into' the account the gospel gives of the 'sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow;' and they shall have farther additions to their blessedness, when all the elect are joined to their assembly in the great day. Hence the happiness of the best creatures is communicated in various degrees. God's perfections and blessedness, on the contrary, can have no additions made to them. He, therefore, is immutable in a sense in which no creature is.

II. We shall now prove that God is immutable in his being, and in all his perfections.

1. He is immutable in his being. Immutability in this belongs to him as God, and consequently to him alone. All other beings once were not; there has been in them, if I may so express it, a change from a state of non-existence to that of being; and the same power that brought them into being, could reduce them again to nothing. To be dependent, is to be subject to change at the will of another, and belongs to all finite things. Hence it is said, 'As a vesture thou shalt



change them, and they shall be changed;' while God, being opposed to them as independent, is said to be 'the same.'

God did not change from a state of non-existence to being; in as much as he was from everlasting, and therefore necessarily existent. He consequently cannot change from a state of being to that of non-existence, or cease to be. And because his perfections, in the same sense as his being is, are essential to him, and underived, there can be no change in them.

Again, he cannot change from a state of greater to a state of less perfection, or be subject to the least diminution of his divine perfections. To suppose this possible, is to suppose that he may cease to be infinitely perfect,—that is, that he may cease to be God. Nor can he change from a state of less perfection to a state of greater; for that is to suppose him not to be infinitely perfect before this change, or that there are degrees of infinite perfection. Nor can he pass from that state in which he is, to another of equal perfection; for, as such a change implies an equal proportion of loss and gain, so it would argue a plurality of infinite beings; or as he who was God before this change, was distinct from what he arrives to after it, the change would be contrary to the unity of the divine essence.

Moreover, if there were any change in God, it must arise either from himself, or from some other. But it cannot be from himself; for he exists necessarily, and not as the result of his own will, and therefore cannot will any alteration or change in himself. To suppose that he could, is contrary also to the nature of infinite blessedness, which cannot desire the least diminution, as it cannot apprehend any necessity for it. And then he cannot be changed by any other; for he that changes any other, must be greater than him whom he changes. Nor can he be subject to the will of another, who is superior to him; for there is none equal, much less superior, to God. There is, therefore, no being that can add to, or take from, his perfections.

2. God is immutable in his knowledge. 'He seeth not as man seeth.' His knowledge is independent of the objects known; so that whatever changes there are in them, there is none in him. Things known are considered, either as past, present, or to come, and are not known by us in the same way; for concerning things past, it must be said, that we once knew them, and concerning things to come, that we shall know them hereafter. But God, with one view, comprehends all things past and future, as though they were present.

If God's knowledge were not unchangeable, he might be said to have different thoughts or apprehensions of things, at one time, from what he has at another; and this would argue a defect of wisdom. A change of sentiments implies ignorance, or weakness of understanding; for to make advances in knowledge, supposes a degree of ignorance, and to decline therein, is to be reduced to a state of ignorance. Now it is certain, that both these are inconsistent with the infinite perfection of the divine mind, and cannot be attributed to him who is called, 'The only wise God.'

Moreover, a possibility of God's knowledge being changed, would infer a change of his will; since having changed his sentiments, he must be supposed to alter his resolutions and purposes. But his will is unchangeable; and, therefore, his understanding or knowledge is so. This leads us to prove,

3. That God is unchangeable in his will. It is said of him, 'He is in one mind, and who can turn him?' This is agreeable to his infinite perfection. He does not purpose to do a thing at one time, and determine not to do it at another. The revelation of his will, it is true, may be changed; and that may be rendered a duty at one time, which was not at another. Thus the ordinances of the ceremonial law were in force from Moses' time to Christ's; but after that they were abolished, and ceased to be ordinances. There may thus be a change in the things willed, or in the external revelation of God's will, and in our duty founded thereon, when there is, at the same time, no change in his purpose; for he determines all changes in the external

dispensation of his providence and grace, without the least shadow of change in his own will.

This may farther appear, if we consider that if the will of God were not unchangeable, he could not be the object of trust. For how could we depend on his promises, were it possible for him to change his purpose? Neither would his threatenings be so much regarded, if there were any ground to expect, from the mutability of his nature, that he would not execute them. All religion would in consequence be banished out of the world.

Again, Any changeableness in the will of God, would render the condition of the best men, in some respects, very uncomfortable. They might be one day the object of his love, and the next of his hatred; and those blessings which accompany salvation might be bestowed at one time, and taken away at another. But such things are directly contrary to scripture; which asserts, that 'the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.'

Farther, None of those things which occasion a change in the purposes of men, can have any place in God; and there is, therefore, nothing in him that, in the least degree, can lead him to change his will, or determination, with respect to events. Men change their purposes, from a natural fickleness and inconstancy,—there being mutability in their very nature; but God, being unchangeable in his nature, must be so in his purpose or will. Men often change their purposes, in making but not fulfilling their promises; or, as we say, in being worse than their word, from the viciousness and depravity of their nature; but God is infinitely holy, and therefore, in this respect, cannot change. Men change their purposes, for want of power to bring about what they designed,—a want of power, which has hindered many well-concerted projects from taking effect in some, and many threatenings from being executed in others; but God's will cannot be frustrated for want of power to do what he designed, in as much as he is almighty. Men often change their purposes for want of foresight—something unexpected occurs, which argues a defect of

wisdom, and renders it expedient for them to alter their purpose; but with God, who is infinitely wise, nothing unforeseen can intervene to induce him to change his purpose. Men, in fine, are sometimes obliged to change their purposes by the influence, threatenings, or other methods, used by some superior; but there is none equal, much less superior, to God, and consequently none who can lay any obligation on him to change his purpose.

## **The Incomprehensibility of God**

God is incomprehensible. This implies that his perfections cannot be fully known by any creature. Thus it is said, 'Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?'

When we consider God as incomprehensible, we not only mean that man, in this imperfect state, cannot fully comprehend his glory,—for we can comprehend but very little, comparatively, of finite things, and much less of that which is infinite; but we mean, that the best of creatures, in the most perfect state, cannot fully conceive of or describe his glory. The reason is, that they are finite, while his perfections are infinite; and there is no proportion between an infinite God and a finite mind. As easily might the water of the ocean be contained in the hollow of the hand, or the dust of the earth weighed in a balance, as the best of creatures could have a perfect and adequate idea of the divine perfections.

On this subject we generally distinguish between apprehending and comprehending. The former denotes our having some imperfect or inadequate ideas of what surpasses our understanding; the latter, our knowing every thing that is contained in it, or our having an adequate idea of it. Now we apprehend something of the divine perfections, in proportion to the limits of our capacities, and our present state; but we are not, and never shall be, able to comprehend the divine glory,—God being incomprehensible to every one but himself.—Again, we farther distinguish between our having a full

conviction that God hath those infinite perfections, which no creature can comprehend, and our being able fully to describe them. Thus we firmly believe that God exists throughout all the changes of time, and yet that his duration is not measured thereby; or that he fills all places, and yet is not co-extended with matter. We apprehend, as having undeniable demonstration of it, that he does so; though we cannot comprehend how he does it.

## **The Omnipresence of God**

God is omnipresent. This is elegantly set forth by the Psalmist, 'Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there; if I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.' The omnipresence of God doth not consist merely, as some suppose, in his knowing what is done in heaven and earth. This is only a metaphorical sense of omnipresence; as when Elisha tells Gehazi, 'Went not my heart with thee, when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee?' or as the apostle says to the church at Corinth, that 'though he was absent in body, yet he was present with them in spirit;' or as we say, that our souls are with our friends in distant places, as often as we think of them. Nor doth this perfection consist in God's being omnipresent by his authority, as a king is said, by a figurative way of speaking, to be present in all parts of his dominions, where persons are deputed to act under him, or by his authority. We must take omnipresence in a proper sense; and understand by it that God fills all places with his presence, and is not confined to or excluded from any place. He is thus omnipresent, not by parts, as the world or the universe is said to be omnipresent; for such an omnipresence is agreeable only to things corporeal, and compounded of parts, and is by no means attributable to deity. [See note 2 B, page 124.]

This is a doctrine which it is impossible for us to comprehend; yet we are bound to believe it, because the contrary to it is inconsistent with infinite perfection. It is sometimes called his essential presence, to distinguish it from his influential presence. By the latter, he is said to be where he acts in the methods of his providence; and it is either common or special. By his common influential presence, he upholds and governs all things; and by his special he exerts his power in a way of grace. As his omnipresence, or immensity, is necessary, and not the result of his will, so his influential presence is arbitrary, and an instance of infinite condescension. In respect to it he is said to be, or not to be, in particular places,—to come to, or depart from, his people; sometimes, to dwell in heaven, as he displays his glory there agreeably to the heavenly state; at other times, to dwell with his church on earth, when he communicates to them those blessings which they stand in need of.

## **The Omnipotence of God**

God is almighty. If he is infinite in all his other perfections, he must be so in power. Thus, if he be omniscient, he knows what is possible or expedient to be done; and if he be an infinite sovereign, he wills whatever shall come to pass. Now his knowledge would be insignificant, and his will inefficacious, were he not infinite in power, or almighty. Again, his omnipotence might be argued from his justice, either in rewarding or in punishing; for if he were not infinite in power, he could do neither of these, at least so far as to render him the object of that desire, or fear, which is agreeable to the nature of these perfections. Neither without omnipotence, could infinite faithfulness accomplish all the promises which he hath made, so as to excite that trust and dependence, which is a part of religious worship; nor could he say, without limitation, as he does, 'I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.'

But since power is visible in and demonstrated by its effects, and infinite power by those effects which cannot be produced by a creature, we may observe the almighty power of God in all his works, both of nature and of grace. His 'eternal power is understood,' as the apostle says, 'by the things that are made,'—not that there was an eternal production of things, but that the exerting of creative power in time proves it to be infinite and truly divine; for no creature can produce the smallest particle of matter out of nothing, much less furnish the various species of creatures with those endowments in which they excel one another, and set forth their Creator's glory. And the glory of his power is no less visible in the works of providence, whereby he upholds all things, disposes of them according to his pleasure, and brings about events which only he who has an almighty arm can effect. These things might have been enlarged on, as evident proofs of this divine perfection. But since the works of creation and providence will be particularly considered in their proper place,<sup>i</sup> we shall proceed to consider the power of God, as appearing in his works of grace.

1. The power of God appears in some things subservient to our redemption; as in the formation of the human nature of Christ, which is ascribed to 'the power of the highest,'—and in preserving it from being crushed, overcome, and trampled on, by the united powers of hell and earth. 'The arm of God,' it is said, 'strengthened him,' so that 'the enemy should not exact upon him, nor the son of wickedness afflict him.'<sup>l</sup> It was the power of God that bore him up under all the terrible views he had of sufferings and death,—sufferings which had many ingredients in them that rendered them, beyond expression, formidable, and would have sunk a mere creature, unassisted by divine power, into destruction. It was by the divine power, which he calls 'the finger of God,' that he cast out devils, and wrought many other miracles, to confirm his mission. Accordingly, when he 'rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the child,' it is said, 'they were all amazed at the mighty power of God.'<sup>n</sup> It was by the divine power also which, as thus displayed, is called 'the exceeding greatness of the power of God,'—that 'he was raised from

the dead;' and accordingly he was 'declared to be the Son of God, with power,' by this extraordinary event.<sup>p</sup> Moreover, the power of God will be glorified, in the highest degree, in his second coming, when, as he says, he will appear 'in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.'

2. The power of God eminently appears in the propagation of the gospel. That a doctrine so contrary to the corrupt inclinations of mankind, and which had so little to recommend it but what was divine, should be spread throughout the greatest part of the known world, by a small number of men, who, in order to this end, were spirited to act above themselves, and furnished with extraordinary qualifications, such as the gift of tongues and a power to work miracles, is a convincing proof that the power by which all this was done is infinite. It was by this power that they were inspired with wisdom, by which they not only silenced and confounded their malicious enemies, but persuaded others to believe what they were sent to impart to them. It was by this that they were inflamed with zeal, in proportion to the greatness of the occasion, and fortified with courage to despise the threats, and patiently to bear the persecuting rage, of those who pursued them unto bonds and death. It was by this that they were enabled to finish their course with joy, and seal the doctrines they delivered with their blood. And the power of God was the more remarkably displayed, that they were not men of the greatest natural sagacity or resolution; and they always confessed, that whatever there was extraordinary in the course of their ministry, was from the hand of God.

3. The power of God appears in the success of the gospel; the report of which would never have been believed, had not 'the arm of the Lord been revealed.' An eminent instance of this occurs in the greatness of the multitude which were converted to Christianity in one age. The profession which these made was contrary to their secular interests, and exposed them to the same persecution, though in a less degree, which the apostles themselves met with; yet they willingly parted with their worldly substance, when the necessity of



affairs required it, and were content to have all things common, that the work might proceed with more success. It was the power of God that touched their hearts; and its internal influence contributed more to the work of grace, than all the rhetoric of man could have done. It was this that carried them through all the opposition of cruel mockings, bonds, and imprisonment, and, at the same time, compensated all their losses and sufferings, by those extraordinary joys and supports which they had, both in life and death. Moreover, the daily success of the gospel, in all the instances of converting grace, is an evident effect and proof of the divine power. This will farther appear when, under a following head, we consider effectual calling, as the work of God's almighty power and grace.p

It will be objected, that there are some things which God cannot do; and that, therefore, he is not almighty. It is true, there are some things that God cannot do; but the reason is, either that to do them would be contrary to his divine perfections, or that they are not the objects of power. It is not an imperfection in him that he cannot do them, but rather a branch of his glory.—First, there are some things which he cannot do, not because he has not power to do them, had he pleased, but only because he has willed or determined not to do them. If we should say that he cannot make more worlds, we do not mean that he wants infinite power, but we merely suppose that he has determined not to make them. He cannot save the reprobate, or fallen angels, not because he wants power, but because he has willed not to save them. In this, the power of God is distinguished from that of the creature. We never say that a person cannot do a thing, merely because he will not, but because he wants power, if he would. But this is by no means to be said, in any instance of God. We must distinguish therefore between his absolute and his ordinate power. By the former he could do many things, which by the latter he will not; and consequently to say he cannot do those things which he has determined not to do, does not in the least impugn the attribute of almighty power. [See Note 2 C, page 124.]—Again, God cannot do that which is contrary to the nature of things, when there is, in the things themselves, an impossibility that they should be done. Thus

he cannot make a creature to be independent; for independence is contrary to the idea of a creature. Nor can he make a creature equal to himself; for then it would not be a creature. It is also impossible that he should make a creature to be, and not to be, at the same time, or render that not done, which is done; for that is contrary to the nature and truth of things. We may add, that he cannot make a creature the object of religious worship, or, by his power, advance him to such a dignity as shall warrant any one's ascribing divine perfections to him.—Farther, He cannot deny himself. 'It is impossible for God to lie;' and it is equally impossible for him to act contrary to any of his perfections. For this reason, he cannot do any thing which argues weakness,—for instance, he cannot repent, or change his mind, or eternal purpose. Nor can he do any thing which would argue him not to be a holy God.—Now that God can do none of these things, is no defect in him, but rather a glory; since they are not the objects of power, but would argue weakness and imperfection in him, should he do them.

We shall now consider what practical improvement we ought to make of this divine attribute.

The almighty power of God affords great support and relief to believers, when they are assaulted, and afraid of being overcome, by their spiritual enemies. Hence when they 'wrestle,' as the apostle says, 'not only against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, and against spiritual wickedness in high places;' and when they consider what numbers have been overcome and ruined by them, and are discouraged very much, under a sense of their own weakness, or of their inability to maintain their ground against them; let them consider that God is able to bruise Satan under their feet, and to make them more than conquerors, and to cause all grace to abound in them, and to work in them that which is pleasing in his sight.

The consideration of God's almighty power, also gives us the greatest ground to conclude, that whatever difficulties seem to lie in the way

of the accomplishment of his promises, relating to our future blessedness, shall be removed or surmounted. Things, which seem impossible, if we look no farther than second causes, or the little appearance there is, at present, of their being brought about, are not only of possible but of very easy accomplishment by the power of God. With respect to those who are sinking into despair, under a sense of the guilt or power of sin, and who are ready to conclude that their burden is too great to be removed by any finite power, let them consider that to God all things are possible. He can, by his powerful word, raise the most dejected spirits, and turn the shadow of death into a bright morning of peace and joy. Moreover, if we consider the declining state of religion in the world, the apostacy of some professors, the degeneracy of others, and what reason the best of them have to say, that it is not with them as in times past; or if we consider what little hope there is, from the present view of things, that the work of God will be revived in his church; yea, if the state of it were, in all appearance, as hopeless as it was when God, in a vision, represented it to the prophet Ezekiel, showing him the valley full of dry bones, and asking him, 'Can these bones live?' or if the question be put, Can the despised, declining, sinking, and dying interest of Christ be revived? or how can those prophecies which relate to the church's future happiness and glory ever have their accomplishment in this world, when all things seem to make against it? every difficulty will be removed, and our hope encouraged, when we contemplate the power of God, to which nothing is difficult, much less insuperable.

A consideration of the power of God will remove likewise all the difficulties that lie in our way, with respect to the resurrection of the dead. This is a doctrine which seems contrary to the course of nature; and, if we look no farther than the power of the creature, we shall be inclined to say, How can this be? But when we consider the almighty power of God, all objections which can be brought against it will be sufficiently removed. Accordingly, when our Saviour proves this doctrine, he exposes the absurd notions which some entertained

respecting it, by saying, 'Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God.'

Let us have a due regard to this attribute, and take encouragement from it, when we are engaging in holy duties, and are sensible of our inability to perform them in a right manner. When we have too much reason to complain of an unbecoming frame of spirit, of the hardness and impenitency of our hearts, the obstinacy and perverseness of our wills, the earthliness and carnality of our affections, and when all the endeavours we can use to bring ourselves into a better frame have not their desired success; let us encourage ourselves with this consideration, that God can make us 'willing in the day of his power,' and 'do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.'

But let us take heed that we do not abuse, or practically deny, or cast contempt on, this divine perfection, by presuming that we can obtain spiritual blessings, without dependence on God for them, or by expecting divine influences, while we continue in the neglect of his instituted means of grace. God, it is true, can work without means; but he has not given us ground to expect that he will do so. When, therefore, we seek help from him, it must be in his own way. Again, let us take heed that we do not abuse this divine perfection, by a distrust of God, or by dependence on an arm of flesh. Let us not, on the one hand, limit the Holy One of Israel, by saying, Can God do this or that for me, with respect either to spiritual or to temporal concerns? nor, on the other hand, rest in any thing short of him, as though omnipotence were not an attribute peculiar to himself. As he is able to do great things for us that we looked not for; so he is much displeased when we expect blessings from any one short of himself. 'Who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man, that shall die, and forgettest the Lord thy Maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundation of the earth?'

## **The Omniscience of God**

God knows all things. It has been before considered, that his being a Spirit implies his having an understanding, as a Spirit is an intelligent being. His being an infinite Spirit, therefore, must argue that 'his understanding is infinite.'—His omniscience farther appears from his having given being to all things at first, and from his continually upholding them. He must necessarily know his own workmanship, the effects of his power. This is especially evident, if we consider the creation of all things, as a work of infinite wisdom, which is plainly discernible therein, as well as of almighty power. He must know all things; for wisdom supposes knowledge. Moreover, his being the proprietor of all things, results from his having created them; and certainly he must know his own.—His omniscience appears, again, from his governing all things, or from his so ordering them in subserviency to valuable ends, that all shall redound to his glory. Both the ends and the means must be known by him. The governing of intelligent creatures, in particular, supposes knowledge. As the Judge of all, he must be able to discern the cause, else he cannot determine it,—and perfectly to know the rules of justice, else he cannot exercise it in the government of the world.—Moreover, God's knowing all things, appears from his knowing himself; for he that knows the greatest object, must know things of a lesser nature. Besides, if he knows himself, he knows what he can do, will do, or has done; which is as much as to say that he knows all things. And that God knows himself, must be granted; for if it be the privilege of an intelligent creature to know himself, though his knowledge be but imperfect, surely God must know himself. And because his knowledge cannot have any defect—for that would be inconsistent with infinite perfection—he must have a perfect, that is to say, an infinite knowledge of himself, and consequently of all other things.

The knowledge of God, as having the creature for its object, is distinguished, in scripture, into his comprehending all things, or seeing them or having a perfect intuition of them, and his approving of things; or it is either intuitive or approbative. The former of these is what we principally understand by the attribute of omniscience. This is referred to when it is said, 'Known unto God are all his works

from the beginning of the world;' and 'Thou knowest my down-sitting and up-rising, and art acquainted with all my ways; for there is not a word in my tongue, but lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether;'c and 'The Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts.' As for the approbative knowledge of God, it is less properly called knowledge; because it is seated rather in the will than in the understanding. Of this we read in several scriptures. Thus God tells Moses, 'I know thee by name,'e—a saying which is explained by the following words, 'And thou hast found grace in my sight.' So when our Saviour says, concerning his enemies, 'I will profess unto you, I never knew you,' he speaks of a knowledge, not of intuition, but of approbation. In the former sense, he knows all things,—bad as well as good,—that which he hates and will punish, as well as what he delights in; in the latter, he knows only that which is good, or is agreeable to his will.

God is said to know what he can do, and what he has done, or will do. He knows what he can do, even many things that he will not do; for as his power is unlimited, so that he can do infinitely more than he will, so he knows more than he will do. This is very obvious. We ourselves, as free agents, can do more than we will; and, as intelligent, we know in many instances what things we can do, though we will never do them. Much more must this be said of the great God; who 'calleth things that be not as though they were.' Accordingly, when David inquires of God, 'Will Saul come down? and will the men of Keilah deliver me up into his hand?' God answers him, 'He will come down, and the men of Keilah will deliver thee up;'h which implies, that God knew what they would have done, had not his providence prevented it. Thus things known by him are said to be possible, by reason of his power; while the future existence of them depends on his will. [See Note 2 D, page 125.]—Again, God knows whatever he has done, does, or will do, namely, things past, present, or to come. That he knows all things present, has been proved, from the dependence of things on his providence, and from his knowledge being inseparably connected with his power. That he knows all things past, is no less evident; for they were once present,

and consequently known by him; and to suppose that he does not know them, is to charge him with forgetfulness, or to suppose that his knowledge at present is less perfect than it was,—which is inconsistent with infinite perfection. Moreover, if God did not know all things past, he could not be the Judge of the world; and particularly, he could neither reward nor punish,—both which acts respect only things that are past. Such things, therefore, are perfectly known by him. When Job considered his present afflictions as the punishment of past sins, he said, 'My transgression is sealed up in a bag; thou sewest up mine iniquity,'—a metaphorical way of speaking, which implied that God remembered it. So when God threatens to punish his adversaries for their iniquity, he speaks of it as remembered by him, 'laid up in store' with him, and 'sealed up among his treasures;' and when, on the other hand, he designed to reward or encourage the religious duties performed by his people, who feared his name, it is said, 'a book of remembrance was written before him, for them.'

But what we shall principally consider, is God's knowing all things future, namely, not only such as are the effects of necessary causes, where the effect is known in or by the cause, but such as are contingent with respect to us. This is the most difficult of all knowledge, and possesses properties which argue it to be truly divine. By future contingencies, we understand things which are accidental, or which, as we commonly say, happen by chance, without any forethought or design of men. Now that many things happen so with respect to us, and therefore cannot be certainly foreknown by us, is very obvious. But even these are foreknown by God. For things that happen without our design, or forethought, and therefore are not certainly foreknown by us, are the objects of his providence, and therefore known to him from the beginning. Thus the fall of a sparrow to the ground is a casual thing; yet our Saviour says, that this is not without his providence. Hence, that which is casual or accidental to us, is not so to him; so that though we cannot have a certain or determinate foreknowledge of it, it does not follow that he has not. He has, accordingly, foretold many such future

events; as appears by the following instances. Ahab's death by an arrow, shot at random, may be reckoned a contingent event; yet this was foretold before he went into the battle,<sup>n</sup> and accomplished accordingly. That Israel should be afflicted and oppressed in Egypt, and afterwards should be delivered, was foretold four hundred years before it came to pass. And when Moses was sent to deliver them out of the Egyptian bondage, God tells them beforehand, how obstinate Pharaoh would be, and with how much difficulty he would be brought to let them go.<sup>p</sup> Joseph's advancement in Egypt was a contingent and very unlikely event; yet it was made known several years before, by his prophetic dream. That also which tended more immediately to it, was his afterwards foretelling what happened to the chief butler and baker, and the seven years of plenty and famine in Egypt, signified by Pharaoh's dream, all which were contingent events, and were foretold by divine inspiration, and therefore foreknown by God. Again, Hazael's coming to the crown of Syria, and the cruelty that he would exercise, were foretold to him, when he thought he could never be such a monster of a man as he afterwards appeared to be.<sup>r</sup> Also, Judas' betraying our Lord, was foretold to him; though at the time he seemed as little disposed to commit so vile a crime as any of the disciples.

Having thus considered God's knowledge, with respect to the object, either as past, or as future, we shall now observe some properties of it; whereby it appears to be superior to all finite knowledge, and truly divine.—1. It is perfect, intimate, and distinct, and not superficial, or confused, or general, as ours often is. It is said concerning him, that 'he bringeth out his hosts by number, and calleth them all by names;' and this denotes his exquisite knowledge of all things, as well as his propriety in them, and his using them at his pleasure. And since all creatures 'live and move,' or act, 'in him,'<sup>u</sup> or by his powerful influence, it follows that his knowledge is as distinct and particular as the actions themselves. Even the most indifferent actions, which are hardly taken notice of by ourselves, such as 'our down-sitting and up-rising,' and all transient thoughts, which are no sooner formed in our minds than forgotten by us, are known by him 'afar off,' at the



greatest distance of time, when they are irrecoverably lost with respect to us. That God knows all things thus distinctly, is evident, not only from their dependence upon him, but also from their accordance with his divine purpose. Accordingly, when he had brought his work of creation to perfection, 'he saw every thing that he had made, and behold it was very good; 'that is, it was agreeable to his eternal design, or, if we may so express it, to the idea, or platform, laid in his own mind. And this he pronounced concerning every individual thing,—which is as much the object of his omniscience as the effect of his power. Now what can be more expressive of the perfection and distinctness of his knowledge than this? The apostle might well say, therefore, that 'there is not any creature that is not manifest in his sight; but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.'y—2. He knows every thing, even future contingencies, with a certain and infallible knowledge, without the least hesitation, or possibility of mistake. And as opinion or conjecture is opposed to certainty, it is not in the least attributable to him. In this, his knowledge differs from that of the best of creatures; who can only guess at some things that may happen, according to the probable fore-views they have of them.—3. He knows all things directly and not in a discursive way, agreeable to our common method of reasoning, by inferring one thing from another, or by comparing things together, and observing their connexion, dependence, and various powers and manner of acting, and thereby discerning what will follow. Such a knowledge as this is acquired, and presupposes a degree of ignorance. Conclusions can hardly be said to be known, till the premises whence they are deduced be duly weighed. But to do this is inconsistent with the perfect knowledge of God, who sees all things in himself, things possible in his own power, and things future in his will, without inferring, abstracting, or deducing conclusions from premises.—4. He knows all things at once, not successively as we do. For if successive duration is an imperfection—as was before observed, when we considered the eternity of God—his knowing all things after this manner, is equally so. Indeed, his knowing things successively would argue an increase of the divine knowledge, or a making

advances in wisdom by experience, and by daily observation of things, which, though experienced by all intelligent creatures, can by no means be supposed of him whose 'understanding is infinite.'

We shall now consider what improvement we ought to make of God's omniscience, in relation to our conduct in this world.

1. Let us take heed that we do not practically deny this attribute, Let us not act as though we thought that we could hide ourselves from the all-seeing eye of God. Let us not say, to use the words of Eliphaz, 'How doth God know? Can he judge through the dark cloud? Thick clouds are a covering to him, that he seeth not, and he walketh in the circuit of heaven.' How vain a supposition is this! for 'there is no darkness, nor shadow of death, where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves.'<sup>b</sup> Hypocrisy is, as it were, an attempt to hide ourselves from God,—an acting as though we thought that we could deceive or impose on him, and is called, in scripture, 'a lying to him,' or 'a compassing him about with lies and deceit.'<sup>d</sup> This all are chargeable with who rest in a form of godliness, as though God saw only the outward actions, but not the heart. Let us likewise not be more afraid of man than of God, or venture, without considering his all-seeing eye, to commit the vilest abominations, which we would be afraid and ashamed to do were we under the eye of man. 'It is a shame,' saith the apostle, 'even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret.' And God, speaking to the prophet Ezekiel, says, concerning an apostatizing people of old, 'Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, The Lord seeth us not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth.'<sup>f</sup>

2. The consideration of God's omniscience should be improved, to humble us under a sense of sin, but especially of secret sins, which are all known to him. Thus it is said, 'Thou hast set our iniquities before thee; our secret sins in the light of thy countenance;' and, 'His eyes are upon the ways of man, and he seeth all his goings.'<sup>h</sup> There are many things which we know concerning ourselves, that no

creature is privy to, which occasion self-conviction, and might fill us with shame and confusion of face. But our own knowledge of them falls infinitely short of God's omniscience; 'for if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.' This should make sinners tremble at the thoughts of a future judgment; for if sins be not pardoned, he is able to bring them to remembrance, and, as he threatens he will do, 'set them in order before their eyes.'k

3. The due consideration of God's omniscience' will, on the other hand, tend very much to the comfort of believers. He seeth their secret wants, the breathings of their souls after him; and, as our Saviour saith, 'Their Father which seeth in secret shall reward them openly.' With what pleasure may they appeal to God as the searcher of hearts, concerning their sincerity, when it is called in question by men! And when they are afraid of contracting guilt and defilement, by secret faults, which they earnestly desired, with the Psalmist, to be 'cleansed from,'m it is some relief to them to consider that God knows them, and therefore is able to give them repentance for them; so that they may pray with David, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' To all, likewise, who are affected with a view of the church's troubles, and of the deep-laid designs of its enemies against it, it is a consoling thought that God knows these, and therefore can easily defeat them, and turn them into foolishness.

4. The due consideration of God's omniscience will be of great use to all Christians, to promote a right frame of spirit in holy duties. It will make them careful how they behave themselves, as being in his sight; and tend to fill them with a holy reverence, as those that are under his immediate inspection, that they may approve themselves to him, in whose presence they are.

## **The Wisdom of God**

God is most wise, or is infinite in wisdom; or, as the apostle expresses it, 'he is the only wise God.' This perfection, considered as absolute, underived, and truly divine, belongs only to him. Even the angels, the most excellent order of created beings, are said to be destitute of it, or to be 'charged with folly.' For our understanding what this divine perfection is, let us consider that wisdom contains in it more than knowledge; for there may be a great degree of knowledge where there is but little wisdom, though there can be no wisdom without knowledge. Knowledge is, as it were, the eye of the soul, whereby it apprehends, or sees, things in a true light, and so is opposed to ignorance, or not knowing things; but wisdom is that whereby the soul is directed in the skilful management of things, or in ordering them for the best, and it is opposed, not so much to ignorance, or error of judgment, as to folly or error in conduct. It consists more especially in designing the best and most valuable end in what we are about to do,—in using the most proper means to effect it,—in observing the season most fit and the circumstances most expedient and conducive for accomplishing it,—and in foreseeing and guarding against every occurrence that may frustrate our design, or give us an occasion to blame ourselves for doing what we have done, or to repent of it, or to wish we had taken other measures. Now,

1. The wisdom of God appears in the reference or tendency of all things to his own glory. This is the highest and most excellent end that can be proposed; as he is the highest and best of beings, and his glory, to which all things are referred, is infinitely excellent. Here let us consider, that God is, by reason of his infinite perfection, naturally and necessarily the object of adoration,—that he cannot be adored, unless his glory be set forth and demonstrated, or made visible,—that there must be an intelligent creature to behold his glory, and adore his perfections, which are thus demonstrated and displayed,—and that every thing which he does is fitted and designed to lead this creature into the knowledge of his glory. Now that every thing is thus fitted and designed, is an eminent instance of divine wisdom, and is a fact so obvious that we need not travel far to know it. Wherever we

look, we may behold how excellent God's name is in all the earth. And because some are so stupid that they cannot, or will not, in a way of reasoning, infer his divine perfections from things that are without us, he has instamped the knowledge of them on the souls and consciences of men; so that, at times, they are obliged, whether they will or not, to acknowledge them. There is something which 'may be known of God,' which is said to be 'manifest in, and shown to' all; so that 'the Gentiles, who have not the law,' that is, the written word of God, 'do by nature the things,' that is, some things 'contained therein,' and so are 'a law unto themselves,' and 'show the work of the law written in their hearts.' [See Note 2 E, p. 125.] God has led us farther into the knowledge of his divine perfections by his word; which he is said to have 'magnified above all his name.' And having thus adapted his works and word to set forth his glory, he discovers himself to be infinite in wisdom.

2. The wisdom of God appears in his doing whatever he does in the fittest season, and in circumstances all of which tend to set forth his own honour, and argue his foresight to be infinitely perfect; so that he can see no reason to wish that anything had been otherwise ordered, or to repent that it was done. 'For all his ways are judgment.' 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven;' and 'he hath made every thing beautiful in his time.'<sup>t</sup> But since wisdom is known by its effects, we shall, for farther illustrating the wisdom of God, observe some of the traces or footsteps of it in his works. We remark, therefore,

3. That the wisdom of God appears in the work of creation. As it requires infinite power to produce something out of nothing; so the wisdom of God appears in that excellent order, beauty, and harmony, which we observe in all the parts of the creation,—in the subserviency of one thing to another,—and in the tendency of all to promote the moral government of God in the world, and the good of man. In this manner was this lower world fitted up for man, that it might be a convenient habitation for him, and a glorious object, in which he might contemplate, and thereby be led to advance, the

divine perfections, which shine forth therein as in a glass. We have therefore the highest reason to say, 'Lord, how manifold are thy works; in wisdom hast thou made them all.' 'He hath made the earth by his power; he hath established the world by his wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by his discretion.'<sup>x</sup> But as this argument hath been insisted on, with great ingenuity and strength of reason by others, we shall say no more upon it, but proceed to observe,

4. That the wisdom of God appears in the works of providence. It produces unexpected events for the good of mankind, and brings them about by means that seem to have no tendency to this end, but rather the contrary. This will appear in the following instances. Jacob's flying from his father's house, was wisely ordered, as a means not only of his escaping the fury of his brother, of the trial of his faith, and of humbling him for the sinful method he took to obtain the blessing; but also of building up his family, and of increasing his substance in the world, under a very unjust father-in-law and master, as Laban was. Joseph's being sold into Egypt, was ordered, as a means of his preserving not only that land, but his father's house, from perishing by famine. His imprisonment also was the occasion of his advancement. And both events led the way to the accomplishment of what God had foretold relating to his people's dwelling in Egypt, and their wonderful deliverance from the bondage they were to endure therein. The wisdom of God was seen, likewise, in the manner of Israel's deliverance out of Egypt,—in his first laying them under the greatest discouragements, by suffering the Egyptians to increase their tasks and burdens,—in his hardening Pharaoh's heart, that he might try his people's faith, and make their deliverance appear more remarkable,—in then plaguing the Egyptians, that he might punish their pride, injustice, and cruelty,—and finally, in giving them up to such an infatuation, as effectually secured their final overthrow, and his people's safety. His wisdom was seen further, in his leading Israel forty years in the wilderness, before he brought them into the promised land, that he might give them statutes and ordinances, and that they might experience various instances of his presence among them, by judgments and mercies,

and so be prepared for all the privileges he designed for them, as his peculiar people, in the land of Canaan. We have, moreover, a very wonderful instance of the wisdom of Providence recorded in the book of Esther. When Haman, the enemy of the Jews, had obtained a decree for their destruction, and purposed, as a first step, to sacrifice Mordecai to his pride and revenge, providence turned upon himself whatever he intended against him. There was, in all the circumstances that led to this, something very remarkable, which brought about the church's deliverance and advancement, when to an eye of reason this seemed almost impossible.

5. The wisdom of God appears yet more eminently in the work of our redemption. This work is what 'the angels desire to look into,' and cannot behold without the greatest admiration; for herein God's 'manifold wisdom' is displayed. It solves the difficulty involved in a former dispensation of providence, respecting God's suffering sin to enter into the world; which he could have prevented, and probably would have done, had he not designed to overrule the event, for bringing about the work of our redemption by Christ,—so that what we lost in our first head should be recovered, with great advantage, in our second, the Lord from heaven. But though this matter was determined, in the eternal covenant, between the Father and the Son, and the necessity of man seemed to require that Christ should become incarnate, as soon as man fell; yet it was deferred till many ages after. And in this delay the wisdom of God eminently appeared. By means of it, he tried the faith and patience of his church, and put them upon waiting for, and depending on, him who was to come. So that though they had not received the promised blessing of his coming, yet 'they saw it afar off,' and 'were persuaded of it, and embraced it,' and, with Abraham, 'rejoiced to see his day,' though at a great distance.<sup>a</sup> They thus glorified the faithfulness of God, and depended on his word, that the work of redemption should be brought about, as certainly as though it had been actually accomplished. Our Saviour, in the mean time, took occasion to display his own glory, as the Lord and Governor of his church, to whom he often appeared in a human form, assumed for that purpose

as a prelude of his incarnation. They had hence the greatest reason to expect his coming in our nature. Moreover, the time of Christ's coming in the flesh was such as appeared most seasonable. The state of the church was very low, religion was almost lost among them, and the darkness they were under was exceeding great; so that it seemed very necessary that the Messiah should come. When iniquity almost universally prevailed among them, then 'the deliverer came out of Sion, and turned away ungodliness from Jacob; and when the darkness of the night was greatest, it was the most proper time for 'the Sun of righteousness to arise, with healing in his wings.'b

6. The wisdom of God farther appears, in the various methods he has taken in the government of his church, before and since the coming of Christ. Till Moses' time, as has been before observed, God left his church without a written word, that he might take occasion, in the exercise of infinite condescension, to converse with them more immediately, and to show them that, though they had no such method of knowing his revealed will as we have, yet he could communicate his mind to them another way. And when the necessity of affairs required it, his wisdom was seen, in taking this method of oral revelation, to propagate religion in the world.—Again, when he designed to govern his church by those rules which he hath laid down in scripture, he revealed the great doctrines contained therein, in a gradual way. The dispensation of his providence towards them, like the light of the morning, was increasing to a perfect day. He first instructed them by various types and shadows, leading them into the knowledge of the gospel, which was afterwards to be more clearly revealed. He taught them, as they were able to bear instruction, like children growing in knowledge, till they arrive to a perfect manhood. He first gave them manifold predictions as a ground to expect the blessings which he would bestow in after-ages; and he afterwards glorified his faithfulness in their accomplishment.—He sometimes, also, governed them in a more immediate way, and confirmed their faith, as was then necessary, by miracles, and raised up prophets, as occasion served, whom he furnished, in an extraordinary way, for the service to which he called them, to lead his church into the



knowledge of those truths on which their faith was built.—To this we may add, that he gave them various other helps for their faith, by those common and ordinary means of grace, which they were favoured with, and which the gospel church now enjoys, and has ground to conclude will be continued until Christ's second coming.—Here we might take occasion to consider how the wisdom of God appears, in furnishing his church with a gospel ministry,—in adapting the management of it to the necessities of his people,—in employing those persons about it who are duly qualified for it,—in assisting them in the discharge of its duties, and in giving success to their humble endeavours; and all this in such a way, that the praise shall redound to himself, who builds his house, and bears the glory. But on this topic we may have occasion to insist, in a following part of this work,d

7. The wisdom of God appears, in the method he takes to preserve, propagate, and build up his church in the world. As his kingdom is not of this world, but is of a spiritual nature, he hath ordered that it shall not be promoted by those methods of violence, or of carnal policy, by which the secular interests of men are often advanced. He has no where appointed that wars should be proclaimed to propagate the faith, or that persons should be forced to embrace it against their will, or be enlisted under Christ's banner by bribery, or by a prospect of worldly advantage. Hence, all the success, worthy of the name, which the gospel has had, has been such as is agreeable to the spirituality of Christ's kingdom. His house is to be built, 'not by might, nor by power, but by his Spirit.'—Again, that the church should flourish under persecution,—that those methods which its enemies take to ruin it, should be overruled to its greater advantage,—that, in consequence, shame and disappointment should attend every weapon which is formed against Sion,—and that the church should appear more eminently to be the care of God, when it meets with the most injurious treatment from men,—are plain proofs of the glory of divine wisdom. On the other hand, that its flourishing state as to outward things, should not be always attended with such marks or evidences of the divine favour as those which more immediately

respect salvation, is equally an illustration of the divine wisdom; as God hereby incites his people to set the highest value on those things which are most excellent, and not to reckon themselves most happy in the enjoyment of the good things of this life, when they are destitute of his special presence with them.—Moreover, the preserving of the rising generation, especially the seed of believers, from the vile abominations which are in the world, and the calling of many of them by his grace, that there may be a constant reserve of them to be added to his church, and to preserve his interest in the world, as others, who have served their generation, are called out of it, are further proofs of the wisdom of God, as well as of his other perfections.

From what has been said concerning the wisdom of God, we may infer that none can be said to meditate aright on the works of God, such as creation, providence, or redemption, who do not behold and admire his manifold wisdom displayed in them, as well as his other perfections. As we conclude that man to be a very unskilful observer of a curious picture or statue, who takes notice only of its dimensions in general, or of the matter of which it is composed, without considering the symmetry and proportion of its parts, and those other excellencies of it by which the artist has signalized his skill; so it is below a Christian to be able to say only, that there are works of God done in the world, or to have a general idea of its being governed by providence, without having his thoughts suitably affected with the harmonious subserviency of things, and the design of all to set forth the glory of Him who is a God of infinite wisdom.

If we cannot understand the meaning of some particular dispensations of providence, so as to admire the wisdom of God in them, let us compare all the parts of providence together; and one will illustrate and add a beauty to another,—as our Saviour says to Peter, 'What I do, thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.' Let us, in particular, compare the various dark dispensations, which the church of God is under at one time, with the glory that shall be put upon it at another.

From the displays of the wisdom of God in all his works, let us learn humility, under a sense of our own folly. The psalmist, when he had been meditating on the glory of some other parts of God's creation, which he calls, 'The work of his fingers,' that is, creatures in which his wisdom is displayed in a very eminent degree, takes occasion to express his low thoughts of mankind in general, and says, 'What is man, that thou art mindful of him?' But, besides this, we may take occasion to have a humble sense of our own folly, that is, of our defect of wisdom; for it is but a little of God that is known by us, and the wonderful effects of divine wisdom are known but in part by us, who dwell in houses of clay.

Let us subject our understandings to God, and have a high veneration for his word, in which his wisdom is displayed, and which he has ordained as the means whereby we may be made wise unto salvation. And whatever incomprehensible mysteries we find contained in it, let us not reject or despise them, because we cannot comprehend them.

Finally, since God is infinite in wisdom, let us seek wisdom of him. 'If any of you lack wisdom,' says the apostle, 'let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.'

## **The Holiness of God**

God is most holy, or infinite in holiness, which is essential to him. He is often styled, 'The Holy One of Israel;' and this attribute is thrice repeated by the seraphim, who, with the utmost reverence and adoration, 'cry one unto another, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts.'<sup>k</sup> And he is said to be holy, exclusively of all others; as this is a divine perfection, and as he is infinitely and independently holy. 'O Lord, thou only art holy;' and the reason of this is assigned, namely, that he is the only God. Holiness is his very nature and essence. 'There is none holy as the Lord; for there is none besides him.'<sup>m</sup>

In considering this divine perfection, we shall inquire, first, what we are to understand by it. Holiness is that whereby God is infinitely opposite to every thing that tends to reflect dishonour or reproach on his divine perfections. He is holy, especially, as he is infinitely opposite, in his nature, will, and works, to all moral impurity. As his power is opposed to all natural weakness, and his wisdom to the least defect of understanding; so his holiness is opposed to all moral blemishes, or imperfections, which we call sin. Holiness, therefore, is not so much one perfection as the harmony of all his perfections, as they are opposed to sin. Hence it is called, 'The beauty of the Lord.' And when the psalmist prays, that the church may be made an holy people, and dealt with as such, he says, 'Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us.' God's holiness is that which, if we may so express it, adds a lustre to all his other perfections; so that if he were not glorious in holiness, whatever else might be said of him, would tend rather to his dishonour than his glory, and the beauty of his perfections would be so sullied that they could not be called divine. As holiness is the brightest part of the image of God in man, without which nothing could be mentioned concerning him but what turns to his reproach, his wisdom would deserve no better a name than that of subtilty, his power would be injurious and destructive, and his zeal furious madness. Thus, if we separate holiness from the divine nature, all other excellences would be inglorious, because impure.

We shall next consider the holiness of God, as glorified or demonstrated in various instances.

1. The holiness of God appears in his works. This perfection was as eminently displayed in the work of creation, especially that of angels and men, as his power, wisdom, and goodness. He made them with a perfect rectitude of nature, with a power to retain it, and without the least spot or propensity to sin. There was no natural necessity laid on them to commit sin, which might infer God to be the author of it.— Furthermore, as a moral expedient to prevent it, as well as to assert his own sovereignty, he gave them a law, which was holy, as well as just and good, and warned them of those dreadful consequences

which would ensue on its violation,—showing them that it would render them unholy, deprive them of his image, and consequently separate them from him, and render them the objects of his abhorrence.—We may add, that his end in making all other things was, that his intelligent creatures might actively glorify him, and be induced to holiness.

2. The holiness of God appears in the government of the world and of the church, in all the dispensations of his providence, either in a way of judgment or of mercy. He shows his displeasure against nothing but sin,—which is the only thing that renders creatures the objects of punishment; and all the blessings he bestows are a motive to holiness. As to his people, whom he hath the greatest regard for, they are described, as 'called to be saints;' and it is said of the church of Israel, that it was 'holiness unto the Lord.'<sup>q</sup> All his ordinances also are holy, and are to be engaged in with such a frame of spirit as is agreeable to holiness. Accordingly he says, 'I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me;' and 'holiness becometh his house for ever.'<sup>s</sup> We are hence to estimate the success of the divine ordinances by their sanctifying effects,—when, through the divine blessing accompanying them, they tend to promote internal holiness in those who are engaged in them, so that they become distinguished from the rest of the world, and 'sanctified through his truth.'

It may be objected by some, that God's suffering sin to enter into the world, which he might have prevented, was a reflection on his holiness. It must be allowed, indeed, that God might have prevented the entrance of sin into the world, by his immediate interposition, and so have kept man upright, as well as made him so. Yet let it be considered, that he was not obliged to do this; and therefore might, without any reflection on his holiness, leave an innocent creature to the conduct of his own free will, so that this creature might be tempted, but not forced, to sin,—especially as he designed to overrule the event to the setting forth of the glory of all his perfections, and, in an eminent degree, of that of his holiness. This point, however, will

be more particularly considered when we come to discuss some other questions.

From what has been said, concerning the holiness of God, let us take occasion to behold and admire the beauty and glory of it, in all the divine dispensations. He can neither do, nor enjoin, any thing but what sets forth his infinite purity. And as he cannot be the author of sin, we must take heed that we do not advance any doctrines from which this consequence may be inferred. The holiness of God ought to be the standard by which they are to be tried,—as we shall take occasion to observe in several instances; and we ought to think ourselves as much concerned to advance the glory of this perfection, as that of any other. Yet it is one thing for persons to oppose what appears to be a truth, by alleging this popular objection, that it is contrary to the holiness of God; and another thing to support the charge. This will be particularly considered, when the objection, as brought against the doctrine of predestination, and several other doctrines, is answered in its proper place.

It is an excellency, beauty, and glory, in the Christian religion, which should make us more in love with it, that it leads to holiness, which was the image of God in man. All other religions have indulged, led to, or dispensed with many impurities; as for example, those of the Mahomedans and the Pagans. And the different religions professed by persons called Christians, are to be regarded as more or less valuable, and to be embraced or rejected, as they tend more or less to promote holiness. Here I cannot but observe, that it is a singular excellency of the Protestant religion above the Popish, that all its doctrines and precepts have a tendency to holiness, while the other admits of, dispenses with, and gives countenance to manifold impurities. This will appear, if we consider some of the doctrines held by Papists, which lead to licentiousness. Of this class, is their doctrine that some sins are, in their own nature, so small as not to deserve eternal punishment,—that satisfaction is to be made for them, by undergoing some penances enjoined them by the priest,—and that on this condition, he gives absolution to the offenders, and

discharges them from any farther concern about their sins. This doctrine is certainly subversive of holiness, as well as contrary to scripture, which says, 'The wages of sin is death.' The word of God knows no distinction between mortal and venial sins, especially in the sense which the Papists entertain. Again, the doctrine of indulgences and dispensations to sin, given forth at a certain rate, is contrary to holiness. This doctrine, as displayed in practice, was a matter of great scandal to those who, among other reasons, took occasion from it, to separate from the church of Rome in the beginning of the Reformation; and, by their protesting against it, and expressing a just indignation against the vile practices to which it led, they gave glory to the holiness of God. The Papists, it is true, allege, in defence of the practice of indulgences, that it is maintained in compassion to those whose natural temper leads them, with impetuous violence, to those sins which are dispensed with; and that it is, in some respects, necessary, in as much as the temptations of some, arising from their condition in the world, are greater than others are liable to. But no such excuses will exempt a person from the guilt of sin,—much less warrant the practice of those who, by their indulgences, encourage them to commit it. Another doctrine maintained by the Papists is, that the law of God, as conformed to human laws, respects only outward actions or overt acts, as they are generally called, and not the heart, or the principle whence they proceed; and that, therefore, concupiscence, or the corruption of nature, which is the impure fountain whence all sins proceed, comes not under the cognizance of the divine law, nor exposes us to any degree of punishment. They entertain this view of concupiscence, either because they suppose it unavoidable, or because every sin is an act, and not a habit,—the offspring or effect of 'lust;' and to obtain countenance to their sentiment, they pervert the words of the apostle, 'And lust, when it has conceived, bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.' Now, how much soever actual sins may be supposed to be scandalous and pernicious to the world in proportion as they are visible, the spring of defiled actions is, in reality, more corrupt and abominable, than the actions themselves. If the fruit be corrupt, the tree which brings it forth must

be much more so. And though this is not so discernible by others, yet it is abhorred and punished by a jealous God, who searches the heart and the reins. This doctrine of the papists, therefore, is contrary to his holiness.—Another doctrine which reflects on the divine holiness, is that of the merit of good works, and our justification by them. This doctrine makes way for boasting, and is inconsistent with that humility which is the main ingredient in holiness. It also casts the highest reflection on Christ's satisfaction, which is the greatest expedient for setting forth the holiness of God; and argues it not to have been absolutely necessary, and substitutes our imperfect works in its room.—We may instance, further, the doctrine of purgatory, and of prayers for the dead. This the papists are as tenacious of, as Demetrius and his fellow-craftsmen were of the image of Diana at Ephesus. The destruction of it would endanger their craft; and any disregard of it would bring no small detriment to them. But what renders it most abominable, is, that it extenuates the demerit of sin, and supposes it possible for the living to do that for the dead by their prayers which the latter neglected to do whilst they were alive. Persons, from this presumptuous supposition, do not see an absolute necessity of holiness to salvation. These, and many other doctrines which might have been mentioned, cast the highest reflection on the holiness of God, and not only evince the justice and necessity of the Reformation, but oblige us to maintain the contrary doctrines. If by way of reprisal, it be objected that there are many doctrines which we maintain, that lead to licentiousness, I hope we shall be able to exculpate ourselves; but this subject we reserve for its proper place, that we may avoid the repetition of things which we shall be obliged to insist on elsewhere.

As a further practical improvement of what we have taught respecting the holiness of God, let us not practically deny, or cast contempt on, this divine perfection. This we may be said to do, when we live without God in the world, as though we were under no obligation to holiness. The purity of the divine nature is proposed in scripture, not only as a motive, but so far as conformity to it is possible, as an exemplar of holiness. We are exhorted to be holy, not



only because God is holy, but 'as he is holy,' or so far as the image of God in man consists in holiness. They who 'live without God in the world, being alienated from his life,' that is, his holiness, 'and giving themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness,' regard not the holiness of his nature or law. These sin presumptuously, and, accordingly, are said to 'reproach the Lord,' as though he were a God that had pleasure in wickedness; or if they conclude him to be infinitely offended with it, they regard not the consequence of being the objects of his displeasure and fiery indignation.—Again, men reflect on the holiness of God, when they complain of religion, as though this were too strict and severe a thing, a yoke that sits very uneasy upon them; and when they resolve to keep at the greatest distance from it, unless they may have some abatements made, or indulgence given, to live in the commission of some beloved lusts. These cannot bear a faithful reprove. Thus Ahab 'hated Micaiah, because he did not prophesy good concerning him, but evil.' Thus also the people in Isaiah's days, did not like to hear of the holiness of God; and desired that the prophets would 'cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before them.'—We may add, that they also do, in effect, deny or despise God's holiness, who entertain an enmity or prejudice against holiness in persons whose conversation is not only blameless, but exemplary. Such make use of the word 'saint,' as a term of reproach; as though holiness were not only a worthless thing, but a blemish or disparagement to the nature of man,—a stain on his character,—a thing to be avoided by all who have any regard to their reputation; or, at least, as though religion were mere hypocrisy, particularly when it shines brightest in the conversation of those who esteem it their greatest ornament. What is this, but to spurn at the holiness of God, by endeavouring to bring that into contempt which is his image and delight?

## **The Justice of God**

God is most just. This attribute differs but little from that of holiness. The two are sometimes distinguished thus: as holiness is the

contrariety or opposition of his nature to sin, justice is an external and visible display of that opposition. In particular, when God is said to be just, he is considered as the Governor of the world. Hence, when he appears in the glory of his justice, he bears the character of a Judge; accordingly, it is said concerning him, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' and he is said, 'without respect of persons to judge according to every man's work.'<sup>e</sup> The justice of God is sometimes taken for his faithfulness, which is a doing justice to his word. This view of it, however, will be more particularly considered, when we speak of him as abundant in truth. According to the most common and known sense of the word, it is taken either for his disposing, or for his distributive justice. The former is that whereby his holiness shines forth in all the dispensations of his providence; all his ways being equitable, of what kind soever they are. The latter, or his distributive justice, consists either in rewarding or punishing, and so is styled either remunerative or vindictive, [See note 2 F, page 126.] In these two respects, we shall more particularly consider this attribute.

As to the remunerative justice of God, he may be said to give rewards to his creatures, without our supposing the persons who are the subjects of them to have done anything by which they have merited them. We often find, in scripture, that the heavenly glory is set forth as a reward; and it is called, 'a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give at that day,'<sup>g</sup> that is, when he appears, in the glory of his justice, to judge the world in righteousness. Scripture says also that it is 'a righteous thing with God to recompense to his people who are troubled, rest, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven.' As to the meaning of such expressions, I humbly conceive that they import the necessary and inseparable connection that subsists between grace wrought in us, and glory conferred upon us. Glory is called, indeed, a reward, or a crown of righteousness, to encourage us to duty; but it is so called, without supposing that what we do is in any degree meritorious. If we ourselves are less than the least of all God's mercies, then the best actions performed by us must be so; for the action cannot have more

honour ascribed to it than the agent. Or if, as our Saviour says, when 'we have done all, we must say we are unprofitable servants,'<sup>i</sup> and that sincerely, and not in a way of compliment, as some Popish writers, consistently with their doctrine of the merit of good works, understand it: we must conclude that glory is a reward not of debt, but of grace. The phrase, remunerative justice, therefore, is taken in an accommodated sense. The reward is not a blessing purchased by us, but for us. Christ is the purchaser, we are the receivers. It is strictly and properly the reward of his merit; but, in its application, it is the gift of his grace.

Next, there is the vindictive justice of God. By this he punishes sin, as an injury offered to his divine perfections, an affront to his sovereignty, a reflection on his holiness, and a violation of his law. For these he demands satisfaction, and inflicts punishment, proportioned to the nature of the crime; and this he continues to do, till satisfaction be given. This is called his 'visiting iniquity,' or 'visiting for it;'<sup>l</sup> it is also called, his 'setting his face against' a person, and 'cutting him off from amongst his people.' When he does this, his wrath is compared to flames of fire,—it is called, 'the fire of his jealousy;'<sup>n</sup> and they who are the objects of it are said to 'fall into the hands of the living God,' who is 'a consuming fire.'

But that we may farther consider how God glorifies his justice, and thereby shows his infinite hatred of sin, we may observe that an eminent display of it was made in his inflicting that punishment which was due to our sins, on the person of Christ our Surety. It was, indeed, the highest act of condescending grace that Christ was willing to be charged with the iniquity of his people, or to have it laid upon him; but it was the greatest display of vindictive justice, that he was accordingly punished for it. He is said to have been 'made sin for us, who knew no sin;' and God gave a commission to 'the sword' of his justice, to 'awake' and exert itself in an uncommon manner, against him, 'the man his fellow.'<sup>r</sup> In this instance, satisfaction was not only demanded, but fully given; and in that respect it differed

from all the other displays of vindictive justice. On this subject, however, more will be said under some following answers.

Again, the vindictive justice of God is displayed in punishing sin in the persons of finally impenitent sinners in hell. There a demand of satisfaction is perpetually made, but can never be given. For this reason the punishment inflicted is eternal; and it is accordingly called, 'everlasting destruction, from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.' This subject also we shall have occasion to insist on more largely, under a following answer.u

In the two instances we have specified, punishment is taken in a strict and proper sense. There is, however, another sense, in which, though many evils called punishments are inflicted for sins committed, the word is taken in a less proper sense. In this sense, believers, who are justified on account of the satisfaction which Christ has given for their sins, are said to be punished for them. Thus it is said, 'Thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve;' and 'If his children forsake my law, and keep not my commandments, then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes; nevertheless, my loving-kindness will I not utterly take from him.'y And the prophet, though speaking of some for whom God would execute judgment, and to whom he would be favourable in the end, so that they should behold his righteousness, yet represents them as 'bearing the indignation of the Lord, because they had sinned against him.' As these evils are exceedingly afflictive, being often attended with a sad apprehension and fear of the wrath of God, and as sin is the cause of them, they are called punishments. Yet they differ from punishment in its most proper sense; for though justice inflicts evils on believers for sin, it doth not in doing so demand satisfaction: in as much as they are considered as justified, that is supposed to have been given; and, to speak with reverence, it is not agreeable to the nature of justice to demand satisfaction twice. Nevertheless, it is one thing for God really to demand it, and another thing for believers to apprehend or conclude that such a demand is made. This they may often do, as

questioning whether they are believers, or in a justified state. God's design, however, in these afflictive dispensations, whatever he determines shall be the consequence of them, is to humble his people greatly, and to show them the demerit of sin. Moreover, the persons who are the subjects of these punishments, are considered not as enemies, but as children, and therefore as the objects of his love, at the same time that his hand is heavy upon them. For this reason some have called them castigatory punishments, agreeably to what the apostle saith, 'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth;' and 'He dealeth with them as with sons.'<sup>a</sup>

From what has been said, concerning the justice of God in rewarding or punishing, we may learn that, since the heavenly blessedness is called a reward, to denote its connection with grace and duty, no person may presumptuously expect the one without the other. The crown is not to be put upon the head of any one, but him that runs the Christian race; and it is a certain truth, that 'without holiness no man shall see the Lord.' On the other hand, as this is a reward of grace, founded on Christ's purchase, let us take heed that we do not ascribe that to our performances which is founded wholly on Christ's merit. Let every thing, in the idea of a reward, that may be reckoned a spur to diligence, be apprehended and improved by us, to quicken and excite us to duty; but whatever there is in it of praise and glory, let it be ascribed to Christ. When we consider the heavenly blessedness in this view, let us say, as the angels and the blessed company who are joined with them are represented as saying, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.' It is the price that he paid which gives it the character of a reward; and therefore the glory of it is to be ascribed to him.

From what has been said concerning the vindictive justice of God in inflicting punishment on his enemies, let us learn the evil and heinous nature of sin, and take warning, that we may not expose ourselves to the same or like judgments. How deplorable is the condition of those who have contracted a debt which they can never

pay,—who are said 'to drink of the wrath of the Almighty, which is poured out, without mixture, into the cup of his indignation!' This consideration should induce us to flee from the wrath to come, and to make a right improvement of the price of redemption, which was given by Christ, to deliver his people from wrath.

Believers, who are delivered from the vindictive justice of God, have the highest reason for thankfulness; and under all the afflictive evils which they endure, it is a very great encouragement to them, that the most bitter ingredients are extracted. Their afflictions, it is true, are not in themselves 'joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterwards they yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness to them who are exercised thereby.' And let us not presume without ground, but give diligence to have good reason for concluding, that these are the dispensations of a reconciled Father, who 'corrects with judgment, not in anger, lest he should bring us to nothing.' It will afford great matter of comfort, if we can say, that he is, at the same time, 'a just God and a Saviour,' and that, as one observes, though he punishes for sin, yet it is not with the punishment of sin.

## **The Benignity of God**

God is most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness. These perfections are mentioned together in Exod. 34:7. We shall consider first his goodness, which, in some respects, includes the others; though in other passages, it is distinguished from them, as will be afterwards more particularly observed. This being one of his communicable perfections, we may conceive of it by comparing it with that goodness which is in the creature; for by separating all the imperfections of it as it exists in the creature we may arrive at some idea of it.

Persons are denominated good, as having all those perfections that belong to their nature. This is the most extensive sense of goodness. It is taken also in a moral sense, and so consists in the rectitude of

their nature. In this sense, we call a holy man a good man. Lastly, it is affirmed of one who is beneficent, or communicatively good, and so is the same with benignity. Now, as seen in this light, the goodness of God includes in it either all his perfections, or his holiness in particular, or his being disposed to impart or communicate those blessings to his creatures which they stand in need of; and thus are we to understand it, as distinguished from his other perfections. This goodness of God supposes that he has, in himself, an infinite and inexhaustible treasure of all blessedness, enough to fill all things, and to make his creatures completely happy. This he had from all eternity, before there was any object in which it might be displayed, or any act of power put forth to produce one. It is this the psalmist intends, when he says, 'Thou art good;' and when he adds, 'Thou doest good,' as the former implies his being good in himself the latter denotes his being so to his creatures.

Before we treat of this perfection in particular, we shall observe the difference that there is between goodness, mercy, grace, and patience, which, though they all are included in the divine benignity, and imply in them the communication of some favours which tend to the creature's advantage, as well as to the glory of God, may be distinguished with respect to their objects. Goodness considers its object as indigent and destitute of all things; and so communicates those blessings that it stands in need of. Mercy considers its object as miserable; and though an innocent creature may be the object of the divine bounty and goodness, it is only a fallen, miserable, and undone creature, that is an object of compassion. Grace is mercy displayed freely; and its object is considered as not only miserable but unworthy. At the same time, though the sinner's misery and his unworthiness of pity, may be distinguished, the two ideas cannot be separated; for that which renders him miserable, constitutes him at the same time guilty, misery being inseparably connected with guilt, and no creature being miserable but as a sinner. We are considered, therefore, as unworthy of mercy, and in consequence objects of divine grace,—which is mercy extended freely to those who have rendered themselves unworthy of it. Patience and long-suffering, is

the suspending of deserved fury, or the continuing to bestow undeserved favours,—a lengthening out of our tranquillity. These attributes are now to be considered in particular. And, first,

## **The Goodness of God**

As God was infinite in power from all eternity, before there was any display or act of omnipotence; so he was eternally good, before there was any communication of his bounty, or any creature to which it might be imparted. The first display of this perfection was in giving being to all things; which were the objects of his bounty and goodness, as well as the effects of his power. And all the excellencies or advantages, which one creature hath above another, are as so many streams flowing from this fountain. 'He giveth to all, life, and breath, and all things.'

## **The Mercy of God**

The mercy of God considers its object as miserable, and is illustrated by all those distressing circumstances which render sinners the objects of compassion. Are all by nature bond-slaves to sin and Satan? It is mercy that sets them free, 'delivers them, who, through fear of death, were all their life-time subject to bondage.' Are we all by nature dead in sin, unable to do what is spiritually good, alienated from the life of God? Was our condition miserable, as being without God in the world, and without hope,—like the poor infant, mentioned by the prophet, 'cast out in the open field, to the loathing of our persons, whom no eye pitied?' It was mercy that 'said to us, Live.' Accordingly, God is said to have 'remembered us in our low estate, for his mercy endureth for ever.'

The mercy of God is either common or special. Common mercy gives all the outward conveniences of this life; which are bestowed without distinction. 'He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good,



and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.' 'His tender mercies are over all his works.'o But his special mercy is that which he bestows on, or has reserved for, the heirs of salvation, and which he communicates to them in a covenant way, in and through a Mediator. Accordingly, the apostle speaks of God, as 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort.'

## **The Grace of God**

As God is said to be merciful, or to extend compassion to the miserable; so he doth this freely, and accordingly is said to be gracious. And as grace is free, so it is sovereign, and is bestowed in a discriminating way. That is given to one, which he denies to another; and only because it is his pleasure. Accordingly, one of Christ's disciples says, 'Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world?' And our Saviour himself glorifies God for the display of his grace, in such a manner, when he says, 'I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes;' and he considers this as the result of his sovereign will, when he adds, 'even so Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight.' The discriminating grace of God appears in several instances.

1. It appears in his extending salvation to men, rather than to fallen angels. Our Saviour 'took not on him the nature of angels, but the seed of Abraham,' because he designed to save the one, and to reserve the other 'in chains, under darkness, unto the judgment of the great day.' And among men, all of whom were equally unworthy of this invaluable blessing, only some are made partakers of it, and their number is comparatively very small. They are called 'a little flock;' and 'the gate' through which they enter 'is strait;' and 'the way is narrow that leads to life, and few there be that find it.'t There are many who make a considerable figure in the world for riches, honours, great natural abilities, bestowed by common providence,

who are destitute of special grace; while others, who are poor and despised in the world, are called and saved. The apostle observed it to be so in his day, when he said, 'Not many mighty, not many noble, are called; but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty, and base things of the world, and things which are despised hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.'

2. The discriminating grace of God appears in several things relating to the internal means whereby he fits and disposes men for salvation. Thus the work of conversion is an eminent instance of discriminating grace; for herein he breaks through, and overcomes, that reluctance and opposition, which corrupt nature makes against it,—subdues the enmity and rebellion that were in the heart of man,—and works a powerful change in the will, whereby he subjects it to himself, contrary to its natural bias and inclination. That which renders this grace more illustrious, is, that many of those who are thus converted, were previously notorious sinners. Some were 'blasphemers, persecutors, and injurious.' The apostle says this concerning himself before his conversion, and concludes himself to have been 'the chief of sinners;' and he tells us, how he 'shut up many of the saints in prison,' and how, when they were put to death, 'he gave his voice against them, and punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme, and, being exceedingly mad against them, persecuted them even unto strange cities.' But you will say, "He was, in other respects, a moral man." He, therefore, gives an instance elsewhere of some who were far from being so, whom he puts in mind of having been 'fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, abusers of themselves with mankind, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, extortioners.' 'Such,' says he, 'were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified.' Moreover, the change wrought in the soul is unasked for; and hence it may truly be said, 'God is found of them that sought him not.' The change is also undesired; for though unregenerate sinners desire to be delivered from misery, they are far from desiring to be delivered

from sin, or to have repentance, faith, and holiness. If they pray for these blessings, their desires are conceived in such a manner, that the Spirit of God hardly calls them prayer. The Spirit of grace and of supplications, by which alone we are enabled to pray in a right manner, is what accompanies or flows from conversion. If, therefore, God bestows this blessing on persons so unworthy of it, and so averse to it, it must certainly be an instance of sovereign and discriminating grace.

3. The discriminating grace of God appears, farther, if we consider how much they who are the objects of it, differ from what they were, or if we compare their present with their former state. Once they were blind and ignorant of the ways of God, and going astray in crooked paths. The apostle speaks of this in the abstract: 'Ye were sometimes darkness;' and 'The god of this world had blinded the minds of some, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ should shine unto them;' but now they are made 'light in the Lord,' and brought into the way of truth and peace. Their hearts were once impenitent, unrelenting, and inclined to sin, without remorse or self-reflection. Nothing could make an impression on them; for they were 'past feeling, and gave themselves over to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.'<sup>b</sup> But now they are penitent, humble, relenting, and broken under a sense of sin, afraid of every thing that may be an occasion of it, willing to be reprov'd for it, and desirous to be set at a greater distance from it. Once they were destitute of hope, or solid peace of conscience; but now they have hope and joy in believing, and are delivered from that bondage in which they were formerly enthralled. A happy turn is thus given to the frame of their spirits. And as to the external and relative change which is made in their state, there is no condemnation to them as justified persons. Hence, they who were formerly in the utmost distress, expecting nothing but hell and destruction, are enabled to lift up their heads with joy, experiencing the blessed fruits and effects of this grace in their souls.

The discriminating grace of God farther appears, in his bestowing saving blessings on his people, at seasons when they appear most suitable and adapted to their condition. He is a very present help in a time of trouble; and when their straits and difficulties are greatest, then is his time to send relief. When sinners sometimes have wearied themselves in the greatness of their way, while seeking rest and happiness in other things than the divine favour, and finding only disappointment, and when they are brought to the utmost extremity, then he appears in their behalf. So with respect to believers, when their comforts are at the lowest ebb, their hope almost degenerated into despair, their temptations most prevalent and afflicting, and they ready to sink under the weight that lies on their spirits,—when, as the psalmist says, their 'hearts are overwhelmed within them,' then 'he leads them to the rock that is higher than they.' When they are even 'desolate and afflicted, and the troubles of their hearts are enlarged, then he brings them out of their distresses.'

Thus the grace of God eminently appears, in what he bestows on his people. But if we look forward, and consider what he has prepared for them, or the hope that is laid up in heaven, then we may behold the most amazing displays of grace, in which they who shall be the happy objects of it, will be a wonder to themselves, and will see more of the glory of it than can now be expressed in words. Hence the psalmist says, in a way of admiration, 'O how great is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee; which thou hast wrought for them that trust in thee, before the sons of men!'

It may, perhaps, be objected, that the afflictions which God's people are exposed to in this life, are inconsistent with the glory of his grace and mercy. But afflictive providences, so far from being inconsistent with the glory of these perfections, tend peculiarly to illustrate them. Afflictions are needful as an expedient to humble us for sin, and to prevent it for the future; and however grievous they are, yet as they are overruled by God, as the apostle says, to 'yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them who are exercised thereby,' they are far from being inconsistent with the mercy and grace of God. This will

farther appear, if we consider that the outward afflictions are often attended with inward supports and spiritual comforts. Accordingly, the apostle says concerning himself, 'As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation aboundeth by Christ;'g and 'though the outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.' Nothing but this could make him say, 'I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong.'i

It is farther objected, that the doctrine of free grace leads men to licentiousness, and therefore that what we have said concerning it, is either not true and warrantable, or at least, should not be much insisted on, lest licentiousness should ensue. Now those sinners only abuse the grace of God who presumptuously take occasion from it to go on, as they apprehend, securely in sin,—alleging that God is merciful and gracious, and ready to forgive. The vile and disingenuous temper of such persons the apostle observed in some that lived in his days; and he expresses the greatest abhorrence of it: 'Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.' But does it follow, that because the doctrine of grace is abused by some, as an occasion of licentiousness, through the corruption of their nature, it therefore leads to it? The greatest blessings may be the occasion of the greatest evils; but yet they do not lead to them. That which leads to licentiousness must present some motive or inducement which will warrant an ingenuous mind, acting according to the rules of equity and justice, to take occasion to sin; but this nothing can do, much less the grace of God. His great clemency, indeed, may sometimes give occasion to those who hate him, and have ingratitude and rebellion rooted in their natures, to take up arms against him; and an act of grace may be abused, so as to make the worst of criminals more bold in their wickedness, who presume that they may commit it with impunity. But this is not the natural tendency or genuine effect of grace; nor will it be thus abused by any, but those who are abandoned to every thing that is vile and ungrateful. As the law of God prohibits all sin, and his holiness is opposed to it; so his grace affords the strongest motive to holiness. It

is therefore the neglect or contempt of this grace, and a corrupt disposition to act contrary to the design of it, which leads to licentiousness. Grace and duty are inseparably connected; so that where God bestows the one, he expects the other. Yea, duty, which is our act, is God's gift, as the power to perform it is from him. Thus, when he promises to give his people 'a new heart,' and to 'put his Spirit within them, and cause them to walk in his statutes,' he tells them, that they should 'remember their evil ways and doings, and loath themselves in their own sight for their iniquities.' This is not only a prediction respecting the event, but a promise of what he would incline them to do; and when he adds, that 'for this he would be inquired of by them,' or that they should seek the blessings by fervent prayer, he secures to them by promise a disposition and grace to perform this great duty, which is inseparably connected with expected blessings. God himself, therefore, will take care that, however others abuse his grace, it shall not lead those who are, in a distinguishing way, the objects of it, to licentiousness. We may add that it is a disparagement to this divine perfection to say, that because some take occasion from it to continue in sin, its glory is therefore to be, as it were, concealed, and not published to the world. As some of old did not care to hear of the holiness of God, and required the prophets, if they would render their doctrine acceptable to them, not to insist on that perfection, but to 'cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before them;' so there are many who are as little desirous to hear of the free and discriminating grace of God, which contains the very sum and substance of the gospel, lest it should be abused. The glory of it, on the contrary, cannot be enough admired; and it ought, therefore, to be often recommended, as what leads to holiness, and lies at the very root of all religion.

That the grace of God may be so improved, let it be farther considered, that it is the greatest inducement to humility, as well as one of the greatest ornaments and evidences of a true Christian. This appears from the nature of the thing; for, as has been but now observed, grace supposes its object unworthy. It argues him a debtor to God for all that he enjoys or expects; and this consideration, if

duly weighed, will make him appear vile and worthless in his own eyes, and excite in him a degree of thankfulness in proportion to the ground he has to claim an interest in it, and the extensiveness of its blessed fruits and effects.

## **The Patience of God**

We proceed to speak of God as long-suffering, or, as he is styled by the apostle, 'the God of patience.' Sometimes this attribute is set forth in a metaphorical way, and called a 'restraining of his wrath,' and 'refraining himself,' and 'holding his peace,' or 'keeping silence.' While he exercises patience, he is represented, speaking after the manner of men, as one that is 'weary' with forbearing; and he is said to be 'pressed,' under a provoking people, 'as a cart is pressed that is full of sheaves.' By all these expressions, the patience of God is set forth in a familiar style, according to our common way of speaking. But that we may briefly explain the nature of it, let us consider, in general, that it is a branch of his goodness and mercy, manifested in suspending the exercise of his vindictive justice, and in his not punishing in such a degree as sin deserves. But that we may consider this more particularly, we shall observe something concerning the objects of it, and the various instances in which it is displayed; how it is glorified; how the glory of it is consistent with that of vindictive justice; and lastly, how it is to be improved by us.

1. As to the objects of God's patience, since it consists in deferring deserved wrath, an innocent creature cannot be the object of it. Vindictive justice makes no demand upon him; nor has it any reserves of punishment laid up in store for him. Such a one, indeed, is the object of goodness, but not of forbearance; for punishment cannot be said to be deferred where it is not due. On the other hand, they cannot be said to be the objects of patience, in whom the vindictive justice of God is displayed to the utmost, when all the vials of his wrath are poured forth. Whether the devils are, in some sense, the objects of God's forbearance, as having ground to expect a

greater degree of punishment after the final judgment, is disputed by some, who contend about the sense of the word 'forbearance.' They are said, indeed, to be 'reserved in chains, under darkness, unto the judgment of the great day;' that is, though their state be hopeless, and their misery great beyond expression, yet there is a greater degree of punishment, which they bring upon themselves, by all the hostilities they commit against God in this world. This farther appears, from what they are represented as having said to our Saviour, 'Art thou come hither to torment us before the time?'<sup>t</sup> a saying from which it is sufficiently evident that their misery shall be greater than now it is. Yet the less degree of punishment inflicted on them is never called, in scripture, an instance of God's patience or long-suffering towards them. We must conclude, therefore, that they are not, properly speaking, the objects of the glory of this attribute. Patience, then, is extended only to sinful men, while in this world. Accordingly it is called, in scripture, 'the riches of his goodness, and forbearance, and long-suffering,' and is said to 'lead' those who are the objects of it 'to repentance.'<sup>e</sup> Hence there must, together with the exercise of this perfection, be a day or season of grace granted, which is called, in scripture, with a peculiar emphasis, the sinner's day, or 'the time of his visitation;' in which it ought to be his highest concern 'to know the things which belong unto his peace.'<sup>x</sup> And the gospel that is preached, in this season of God's forbearance, is called, 'the word of his patience;' so that there is something more in this attribute than merely a deferring of punishment. Accordingly, God is said, to 'wait that he may be gracious;'<sup>z</sup> and the effects and consequences of his waiting are various,—as may be said of all the means of grace. Sinners, who neglect to improve it, have in consequence of it not only a reprieve from deserved punishment, but also all those advantages of common grace which attend it. But with respect to believers, it may be said, in the words of the apostle, 'The long-suffering of our Lord is salvation.' God spares them, therefore, not that he may take a more fit opportunity to punish them, but that he may wait the set time to favour them, and then extend to them salvation. In this respect more especially, the exercise of this perfection is founded in the death of Christ. And as the elect, who



were purchased thereby, were, by the divine appointment, to live throughout all the ages of time, and to have the saving effects of his redemption applied to them, one after another, it was necessary that the patience of God should be so long continued. This perfection, therefore, is glorified more immediately with respect to them, as the result of the plan of redemption; and, in subserviency to this, it is extended to all the world.

2. The patience of God has been displayed in various instances. It was owing to it that God did not destroy our first parents as soon as they fell. He might then, without the least impeachment of his justice, have banished them for ever from his presence, and left their whole posterity destitute of the means of grace, and have punished them all in proportion to the guilt contracted. That the world is continued to this day, is therefore a very great instance of God's long-suffering. Again, when mankind were universally degenerate, and 'all flesh had corrupted their way,' before the flood, and God determined to destroy them, yet he would not do this, till in the display of his patience he had given an intimation of this desolating judgment, an hundred and twenty years before it came. And Noah was, during this period, 'a preacher of righteousness;' while 'the long-suffering of God' is said to have 'waited' on them.<sup>c</sup> Further, the Gentiles, who not only worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, but committed vile abominations, contrary to the dictates of nature, and thereby filled up the measure of their iniquity, are said to be the objects of God's patience,—though in a lower sense than that in which believers are said to be so. Accordingly, the apostle observes, that 'in times past God suffered all nations to walk in their own ways;' that is, God did not 'draw forth his sword out of its sheath,' by which metaphor, the prophet sets forth the patience of God; he did not stir up all his wrath, 'but gave them rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling their heart with fruit and gladness.' Moreover, the church of the Jews, before the coming of Christ, had long experience of the forbearance of God. It is said, that 'he suffered their manners forty years in the wilderness.'<sup>e</sup> And afterwards, when they often revolted to idolatry, following the customs of the nations round

about them, he did not utterly destroy them, but, in their distress, raised them up deliverers. And when their iniquity was grown to such a height, that none but a God of infinite patience could have borne with them, he spared them many years before he suffered them to be carried away captive into Babylon. And finally, when their rebellion against him had arrived at the highest pitch,—when they had crucified the Lord of glory, he spared them some time, till the gospel was first preached to them, and they had rejected it, and thereby 'judged themselves unworthy of everlasting life.' After this, the patience of God was extended to those also who endeavoured to pervert the gospel of Christ, namely, to false teachers and backsliding churches,—to whom he 'gave space to repent, but they repented not.'g We may add, that he has not yet poured forth the vials of his wrath on the antichristian powers; though he has threatened, that 'their plagues shall come in one day.'

3. We are next to consider the method which God takes in glorifying his patience. We have already observed that, with respect to believers, the patience of God is glorified in subserviency to their salvation. With respect to others, by whom it is abused, it discovers itself in giving them warning of his judgments before he sends them. 'He speaketh once, yea twice, but man perceiveth it not, that he may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from man.' Indeed, all the prophets were sent to the church of the Jews, not only to instruct them, but to warn them of approaching judgments; and they were faithful in the delivery of their message. In what moving terms doth the prophet Jeremiah lament the miseries which were ready to befall them! And with what zeal doth he endeavour, in the whole course of his ministry, to bring them to repentance, that the storm might blow over, or, if not, that their ruin might not come upon them altogether unexpected!

When the divine warnings are not regarded, and wrath must be poured forth on an obstinate and impenitent people, it is inflicted by degrees. God sends lesser judgments before greater, or inflicts his plagues, as he did upon Egypt, one after another, not all at once. So,

in his judgments upon Israel of old, as the prophet Joel observes,—first the palmer-worm, then the locust, after that the canker-worm, and then the caterpillar, devoured the fruits of the earth, one after another. The prophet Amos also observes, that first God sent a famine among them, which he calls 'cleanness of teeth in all their cities;' and afterwards 'some of them were overthrown, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.' Some think that the gradual approach of divine judgments is intended by what the prophet Hosea says, when 'the judgments of God' are compared to 'the light that goeth forth.'m This language implies more than is generally understood by it,—more than that the judgments of God should be rendered visible, as the light of the sun is; for the prophet seems to intimate, that the judgments of God should be progressive like the light of the morning, which increases until a perfect day. It is more than probable that the same thing is intimated by the same prophet, when he represents God as saying concerning Ephraim, that he would be to them 'as a moth;' which doth not consume the garment all at once, as fire does, but frets it by degrees, 'or like rottenness,' which is of a spreading nature. Thus the judgments of God are poured forth by degrees, that together with them there may be, comparatively at least, a display of divine patience.

Again, when God sends his judgments abroad into the world, he often moderates them. None are proportionate to the demerit of sin. Accordingly, it is said of him, that being full of compassion, he 'forgave the iniquity' of a very rebellious people; that is, he did not punish them as their iniquity deserved, and therefore he 'destroyed them not, and did not stir up all his wrath.' So the prophet Isaiah says concerning Israel, 'Hath God smitten him, as he smote those that smote him? or is he slain according to the slaughter of them that are slain by him? In measure, when it shooteth forth, thou wilt debate with it: he stayeth his rough wind in the day of the east wind.'p

Further, when God cannot, in honour, defer his judgments any longer, he pours them forth, as it were, with reluctance; as a judge,

when he passeth sentence on a criminal, doth it with a kind of regret; not insulting his misery, but rather pitying it as unavoidable, because the course of justice must not be stopped. Thus the prophet says, 'God doth not afflict willingly,' that is, with delight or pleasure, 'nor grieve the children of men;' that is, he doth not punish them because he delights to see them miserable, but to secure the rights of his own justice in the government of the world. So when Israel had been guilty of vile ingratitude and rebellion against him, and he threatens to turn his hand upon them, and destroy them, he expresseth himself in such terms, speaking after the manner of men, as imply a kind of uneasiness: 'Ah! I will ease me of mine adversaries, and avenge me of mine enemies.' And before he gave up Israel into the hands of the Assyrians, he seems, again speaking after the manner of men, to have a hesitation or debate in his own mind, whether he should do so or not: '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.' And when our Saviour could not prevail upon Jerusalem to repent of their sins, and embrace his doctrine,—when he was obliged to pass sentence upon them, and to tell them that the things of their peace were hid from their eyes, and that their enemies should cast a trench about the city, and should lay it even with the ground, he could not speak of it without tears; and 'when he beheld the city, he wept over it.'

4. The next thing to be considered, concerning the patience of God, is, how the glory of it is consistent with that of his vindictive justice; or how he may be said to defer the punishment of sin, and yet appear to be a sin-hating God. It is certain, that the glory of one divine perfection cannot interfere with that of another. As justice and mercy meet together in the work of redemption, so justice and patience do not oppose each other in any of the divine dispensations. Their demands, it is true, seem to be different: justice requires that the stroke should be immediately given, while patience insists on a delay. Without this, patience does not appear to be a divine perfection; and if it is so, and its glory is as necessary to be displayed as that of any of

his other perfections, it must be glorified in this world, by delaying the present exercise of the highest degree of vindictive justice, or it cannot be glorified at all. Justice will be glorified throughout all the ages of eternity, in those who are its objects; but patience can then have no glory, since, as has been before observed, the greatest degree, either of happiness or of misery, is inconsistent with its exercise. This being, therefore, a perfection which redounds so much to the divine honour, we must not suppose that there is no expedient for its being glorified, or that the glory of vindictive justice is inconsistent with it.

Now the harmony of these two perfections must be a little considered. [See Note 2 G, page 126.] Justice, it is true, obliges God to punish sin; yet it does not oblige him to do it immediately: the time, as well as the way, is to be resolved into his sovereign will. In order to make this appear, let us consider, that the design of vindictive justice, in all the punishment it inflicts, is either to secure the glory of the holiness of God, or to assert his rights as the Governor of the world. If, then, the deferring of punishment doth not interfere with either of these, then the glory of God's patience is not inconsistent with that of his vindictive justice.

Now the glory of his holiness, as connected with the display of his patience, is sufficiently secured. Though he delays to punish sin in the highest degree, yet, at the same time, he appears to hate it, by the threatenings which he hath denounced against sinners, which shall certainly have their accomplishment. If he says that 'he is angry with the wicked every day,' and that 'his soul hateth them,' is there any reason to suppose the contrary? Or if he has threatened that 'he will rain upon them snares, fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest, which shall be the portion of their cup,' and that because, 'as the righteous Lord, he loveth righteousness,' is not this a sufficient security for the glory of his holiness, against any thing that might be alleged to detract from it? If threatened judgments be not sufficient, for the present, to evince the glory of this divine perfection, it will follow, on the other hand, that the promises he has made of blessings

not yet bestowed, are to be as little regarded for the encouraging of our hope, and the securing of the glory of his other perfections; and then his holiness would be as much blemished in delaying to reward, as it can be supposed to be in delaying to punish. If, therefore, the truth of God, which will certainly accomplish his threatenings, be a present security for the glory of his holiness, it is not absolutely necessary that vindictive justice should be immediately exercised in the destruction of sinners, and so exclude the exercise of God's forbearance and long-suffering. Moreover, there are many terrible displays of God's vindictive justice in his present dealing with sinners. 'The Lord is known by the judgment which he executes,' as well as by those which he designs to pour forth, on his enemies. The wicked are now 'snared in the work of their own hands;' and in the end they shall be 'turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.'<sup>x</sup> If vindictive justice takes occasion to inflict many temporal and spiritual judgments upon sinners in this world, then the glory of God's holiness is illustrated at the same time that his patience is prolonged. This may be observed in God's dealing with his murmuring and rebellious people in the wilderness; which gave him occasion to take notice of the abuse of his patience, and to say, 'How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have showed among them?' Justice was now ready to strike the fatal blow. 'I will,' says God, 'smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them.' This gave Moses occasion to intercede for them, and to plead the glory of God's patience. 'The Lord is long-suffering, and of great mercy: Pardon,' said he, 'I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people, as thou hast forgiven them from Egypt, even until now;' by which he means, as I humbly conceive, 'Spare thy people, as thou hast often done, when, by reason of their provocations, thou mightest justly have destroyed them.' And God answers him in the following words, 'I have pardoned, according to thy word;' but he adds, 'As truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord,' that is, with the report of the glory of his vindictive justice, which should be spread far and near; and then he threatens them that they, that is, those who murmured against him, should not see the land of Canaan.

Vindictive justice, therefore, had its demands fulfilled in one respect, while patience was glorified in another. The psalmist referring to the occurrence, says, 'Thou answeredst them, O Lord,' namely, Moses' prayer for them; 'thou wast a God that forgavest them, though thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.'

Consider, again, the vindictive justice of God, as tending to secure his rights as the Governor of the world, and as being ready to take vengeance for sin, which attempts to control his sovereign authority, and disturb the order of his government. The stroke of justice may be suspended for a time, that it may make way for the exercise of patience, provided there be no just occasion given for men to trample on the sovereignty of God, despise his authority, or rebel against him, without fear. Now these consequences will not necessarily result from his extending forbearance to sinners. We do not find that delaying to inflict punishment among men is any prejudice to their government; and why should we suppose that the divine government should suffer any injury by it? When a prince puts off the trial of a malefactor for a time, in order that the indictment may be more fully proved, and the equity of his proceedings may more evidently appear, the postponement is always reckoned a greater excellency in his administration, than if he should proceed too hastily. And we never find that such a course tends to embolden the criminal, as impunity would do; for he is punished, in part, by the loss of his liberty, and if he be convicted, he loses the privilege of an innocent subject, his life is forfeited, and he is in daily expectation of having it taken away. Now if such a method, or the allowing of a reprieve to some for a time, tends to secure the rights of a government, may not God stop the immediate proceedings of vindictive justice for a time, without the least infringement either on his holiness, or on his rectoral justice?

5. We come now to consider how the patience of God is to be improved by us. Since it is a divine perfection, and there is a revenue of glory due to God for the display of it, we ought to exercise those graces, which it engages us to. Some of the divine attributes tend to

excite our fear; but this should draw forth our admiration and praise. We have special reason to adore and admire it, when we consider how justly he might destroy us. The best man on earth may say, with the psalmist, 'If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?' He need not watch for occasions, or diligently search out some of the inadvertencies of life, in order to find matter for our conviction and condemnation. The multitude and the heinous aggravation of our sins, proclaim our desert of punishment, and might provoke his vengeance, and immediately draw it down upon us. What farther enhances our guilt is, that we provoke him, though laid under the highest obligations to serve and love him. How easily, too, might he bring ruin and destruction upon us! He does not forbear to punish us for want of power, as earthly kings often do; or because the exercise of justice might weaken his government, or occasion some rebellions which could not easily be put a stop to. David says concerning himself, that he was 'weak, though anointed king,' and that on occasion of Joab's having forfeited his life, when the necessity of affairs required the suspending of his punishment, 'the sons of Zeruah were too hard for him.'z No such thing can be said of God; he is represented as 'slow to anger, and great in power;' that is, he does not punish, though he easily could. It would be no greater difficulty for him immediately to destroy an ungodly world, than it is to crush a moth or a worm, or to break a leaf. Finite power can make no resistance against that which is infinite. What are briars and thorns before the consuming fire?

Let us take heed that we do not abuse the divine patience. It is a crime to abuse the mercy of God, even in the smallest instances of it; and much more is it so to slight and contemn the riches of his forbearance or mercy, as extended to so great a length as it has been to most of us. This crime is committed by those who infer from his forbearing to pour forth his fury on sinners, that he neglects the government of the world; or who take occasion from it to deny a providence; or who, because his threatenings are not executed at present, do, as it were, defy him to do his worst against them. This some are represented as doing, with an uncommon degree of



presumption, and with a scoff; for they are termed 'scoffers, walking after their own lusts; saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were, from the beginning of the creation.' Again, God's patience is abused by those who take occasion from it to sin presumptuously; and who, because he not only delays to punish, but, at the same time, expresses his willingness to receive returning sinners at what time soever they truly repent, become emboldened to persist in their rebellion, concluding that it is time enough to submit to him. This is not only to abuse, but, as it were, to wear out his patience: it is to provoke his indignation, like them of whom it is said, that 'because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.'<sup>c</sup> But you will say, "These are uncommon degrees of wickedness, which only the vilest part of mankind are chargeable with." We add, therefore, that a bare neglect to improve our present season and day of grace, or to embrace the great salvation offered in the gospel, is an abuse of God's patience. This will certainly affect the greatest number of those who are favoured with the gospel-dispensation. Indeed, who are they that improve it as they ought? All therefore are said, more or less, to abuse the patience of God,—a consideration which affords matter of great humiliation in his sight. Now, that we may be duly sensible of this sin, together with the consequences of it, let us consider that it argues the highest ingratitude,—especially, in a professing people. The apostle, when reproofing the Jews for this sin, puts a very great emphasis on every word when he says, 'Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness, and forbearance, and long-suffering?' Let us consider, also, that the consequence of this sin is very destructive; in as much as the opportunity afforded us by the divine patience is the only one which we can ever enjoy for seeking after those things which relate to our eternal welfare. What stress does the apostle lay on the word 'now,' which is twice repeated, as well as on the word 'behold,' which notes that he had something remarkable to communicate, when he says, 'Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.'<sup>e</sup> Another consideration, and a very awakening one, is, that the abuse of God's patience will expose

finally impenitent sinners to a greater degree of his vengeance. When the forbearance of God had been extended to Israel for many years, from his bringing them up out of the land of Egypt, and the exercise of it had been attended all that time with the means of grace, and many warnings of approaching judgments, he tells them, 'You only have I known, of all the families of the earth; therefore will I punish you,' that is, my wrath shall fall more heavily upon you, 'for all your iniquities.' And when God is represented, as coming to reckon with Babylon, the cup of his wrath, it is said, must be filled double. 'How much she hath glorified herself,' saith God, 'and lived deliciously, so much sorrow and torment give her; for she saith in her heart, I sit as a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow.'

Let us, on the other hand, improve God's patience, by duly considering the great end and design of it, and what encouragement it affords to universal holiness. It is a great relief to those who are at the very brink of despair; for if, apprehending themselves to be yet in a state of unregeneracy, they cannot say that it has hitherto led them to repentance, let them consider that a door of hope is still open, and that the golden sceptre is held forth, the invitation given to come to Christ. Let this consideration excite us to a diligent attendance on the means of grace; for though forbearance is not to be mistaken, as it is by many, for forgiveness, yet we are encouraged to wait and hope for it, in all God's holy institutions, according to the tenor of the gospel. And they who are not only spared but pardoned, to whom grace has not only been offered but savingly applied, may be encouraged to hope for farther displays of grace, as well as to improve, with the greatest diligence and thankfulness, what they have received.

Finally, Let us consider the great obligation we are laid under, by the patience of God, to a constant exercise of the grace of patience, in our behaviour towards God and man. We are laid under the highest engagements by it to submit to God's disposing will, and, in whatever state we are, therewith to be content, without murmuring, or repining, when under afflictive providences. 'Shall we receive good at his hand, and shall we not receive evil?' Has he exercised so long

forbearance towards us, not only before we were converted, when our life was a constant course of rebellion against him; but has he since, not only passed by, but forgiven, innumerable offences—and shall we think it strange when he testifies his displeasure against us in any instances? Shall we be froward and uneasy, because he does not immediately give us what we desire, or deliver us from those evils we groan under? Let us exercise patience, also, in our behaviour towards men. Shall we give way to, or express unbecoming resentment against those whom we converse with, for injuries done us, which are often rather imaginary than real? Or if they are very great, as well as undeserved, let not our passions exceed their due bounds; much more, let us not meditate revenge, but consider how many injuries the great God has passed over in us, and how long his patience has been extended towards us.

## **The Faithfulness of God**

God is abundant in truth. That we may understand what is meant by this perfection, we may observe the difference between his being called a true God, and a God of truth; though they seem to import the same thing, and are not always distinguished in scripture. Thus he that receiveth Christ's testimony, is said to 'set to his seal that God is true,' that is, that he is a God of truth, in accomplishing what he has promised respecting the salvation of his people; and elsewhere it is said, 'Let God be true, but every man a liar,' that is, let God be esteemed a God of truth. Yet his being the true God, and his being the God of truth, are, for the most part, distinguished. Hence when he is called the true God, or the only true God, the phrase does not denote one distinct perfection of the divine nature, but the Godhead; and it includes all his divine perfections, and represents him in contrast to all others who are called gods, but are not so by nature. This point, however, will be more particularly considered in the next Answer. When, on the other hand, we speak of him as the God of truth, we mean that he is true to his word,—a God that cannot lie,—whose faithfulness is unblemished, because, as a God of infinite

holiness, whatever he has spoken, he will certainly bring to pass. This perfection respects either his threatenings, or his promises. As to the former, it is said that 'the judgments of God,' that is, the sentences he has passed against sinners, 'are according to truth;' and the display of his vindictive justice is called, 'his accomplishing his fury.'<sup>k</sup> This renders him the object of fear; and it is, as it were, a wall of fire round about his law, to secure its glory from the insults of his enemies. As to his faithfulness in his promises, he is said to be 'the faithful God, who keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him, and keep his commandments, unto a thousand generations.' This is that which encourages his people to hope and trust in him, and to expect that blessedness which none of his perfections would give them a sufficient ground to lay claim to, were it not promised, and the promises of it secured by his infinite faithfulness. Almighty power is able to give us happiness, and mercy and goodness can communicate every thing that may contribute to it; but it does not follow that they will do so, since God is under no natural obligation to glorify these perfections. But when he is pleased to give us a promise of happiness, and the accomplishment of this is made sure to us by his infinite faithfulness, the blessings we need become not only possible but certain, and strong consolation is afforded to the heirs of salvation. It is this that renders things future as certain as though they were present, and so lays a foundation for our rejoicing in hope of eternal life, whatever difficulties may seem to lie in the way.

Here we may take occasion to consider the blessings which are secured by the faithfulness of God. Some of these respect mankind in general, or are bestowed in the ordinary course of divine providence,—such as that the world should be preserved, and 'all flesh not perish out of it,' from the deluge till Christ's second coming, and that, during this time, the regular course of nature should not be altered; but 'that seed-time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, should not cease.' There are also promises made to the church in general,—such as that it should have a being in the world, notwithstanding all the shocks of persecution which it is

exposed to, that the ordinances of divine worship should be continued, and that, 'in all places where he records his name, he will come to his people and bless them.'<sup>n</sup> He has promised also that his church shall be increased and built up,—that to Shiloh, the great Redeemer, should the 'gathering of the people be,'—that he would 'multiply them that they should not be few, and also glorify them that they should not be small,'—and that the glory should be of an increasing nature, especially that which it should arrive to in the latter ages of time, immediately before its exchanging this militant state for a triumphant one in heaven. Moreover, there are many great and precious promises made to particular believers. These every one of them have a right to lay claim to; and this they are often enabled to do by faith, which depends entirely on this perfection. These promises are such as respect the increase of grace,—that they shall 'go from strength to strength,' or that 'they who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength,'<sup>p</sup>—that they shall be recovered after great backslidings, and be enabled to persevere in that grace which is begun in them, till it is crowned with complete victory,<sup>r</sup>—that they shall be made partakers of that inward peace and joy which accompanies or flows from the truth of grace,—and that all this shall be followed by perfect blessedness in heaven at last.<sup>t</sup> The scripture abounds with such promises, suited to every condition, and fitted to afford relief to God's people under all the difficulties they meet with in the world; and the accomplishment of them is made sure to them by the divine faithfulness.

It is objected against this divine attribute, that God, in some instances, has not fulfilled his threatenings, which has tended to embolden some in a course of obstinacy and rebellion against him,—particularly that the first threatening was not executed as soon as man fell; for though God told our first parents, that 'in the very day they should eat of the forbidden fruit, they should surely die,' yet Adam lived after this nine hundred and thirty years. It is also objected, that though God threatened to destroy Nineveh, within forty days after Jonah was sent to publish this message to them,<sup>x</sup> they continued in a flourishing state many years after.—As to what

respects the first threatening, that death should immediately ensue upon sin being committed, we shall have occasion to speak on it in its proper place. All that needs be replied to it at present is, that the threatening was, in some respect, executed the day, yea, the moment in which our first parents sinned. If we understand it in a legal sense, they were immediately brought into a state of condemnation; which, in a forensic sense, is often called death. They were immediately separated from God, the fountain of blessedness, and plunged into all those depths of misery which were the consequence of their fall. Or if we understand 'death' to mean, what certainly was one ingredient in it, either the separation of soul and body, or the greatest degree of punishment, consisting in everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and the glory of his power, it is sufficient to say, that man's being liable to it was the principal thing intended in the threatening. Certainly God did not design to tie up his own hands, so as to render it impossible for him to remit the offence, or to recover the fallen creature out of this deplorable state. If you take 'death' for that which is natural, which was not inflicted till nine hundred and thirty years after, we may say that his being on the very day that he sinned exposed to it, or brought under an unavoidable necessity of dying, might be called his dying from that time. The scripture will warrant our using the word in this sense; for the apostle, speaking to those who were, by sin, liable to death, says, 'The body is dead because of sin,' that is, it is exposed to death, as the consequence of sin, though it was not actually dead. And if we take death for a liability to eternal destruction, the threatening must be supposed to contain a tacit condition implying that man was to expect nothing but eternal death, unless some expedient were found out which the miserable creature then knew nothing of, to recover him from the state into which he was fallen.—As to what concerns the sparing of Nineveh, we have sufficient ground to conclude that there was a condition annexed to the threatening that it should be destroyed. The meaning therefore, is, that they should be destroyed in forty days, if they did not repent. This condition was designed to be made known to them; otherwise Jonah's preaching would have been to no purpose, and the warning given would have answered no

valuable end. It is plain, too, that the Ninevites understood the matter in this sense; otherwise there would have been no room for repentance. God, therefore, connected the condition with the threatening. And as, on the one hand, he designed to give them repentance,—so that the event was not dubious and undetermined by him, as depending on their conduct, abstracted from his providence; so, on the other hand, there was no reflection cast on his truth,—because the provisional expedient for their deliverance was as much known by them as the threatening itself.

It is objected that several promises have not had their accomplishment. Thus there are several promises of spiritual blessings which many believers do not experience the accomplishment of in this life,—a circumstance which has given occasion to some to say with the psalmist, 'Doth his promise fail for evermore?' All the promises of God are not literally fulfilled in this world to every particular believer. The promise of increase of grace is not actually fulfilled, while God suffers his people to backslide from him, and while the work of grace is rather declining than sensibly advancing. Nor are the promises respecting the assurance and joy of faith fulfilled to one that is sinking into the depths of despair,—or those that respect the presence of God in ordinances, to such as are destitute of the influences of his grace in observing them,—or those of victory over temptation, to such as are not only assaulted but frequently overcome by Satan, when it is as much as they can do to stand their ground against him. There are also many other instances of a similiar nature. Notwithstanding all these, however, the faithfulness of God may be vindicated, if we consider, that there is no promise of which there are not some instances of accomplishment. This fact is a sufficient evidence to the world, that there are such blessings bestowed as God has promised. Those, again, who are denied these blessings, may possibly be mistaken when they conclude themselves to be believers; and then it is no wonder that they are destitute of them, for God has promised to give joy and peace only in a way of believing, or to give first the truth of grace, and then its comfortable fruits and effects. But we will suppose that they

are not mistaken, but have experienced the grace of God in truth, and then their graces are so defective that they know but little of their own imperfections, if they do not take occasion from a consciousness of these to justify God for withholding his blessings from them, and to adore, rather than call in question, the equity of his proceeding. If remunerative justice be not laid under obligation to bestow these blessings by any-thing performed by us, then certainly the faithfulness of God is not to be impeached because he is pleased to deny them. Again, in denying these blessings, he often takes occasion to advance his own glory in some other way: he tries the faith and patience of his people, corrects them for their miscarriages, humbles them by his dealings with them, and overrules all events for their good in the end,—which is an equivalent for those joys and comforts which are withheld. Indeed, God has never promised these blessings to any, but with this reserve, that if he thinks it necessary for his own glory and their good, to bring about their salvation some other way, he will do it; so that, when he does so, not the least occasion is given to detract from the glory of his faithfulness. All those promises, moreover, which have not had their accomplishment in kind, in this world, shall be accomplished in the next, with the greatest advantage. Believers will then have no reason to complain of even the least unfaithfulness in the divine administration. If rivers of pleasure at God's right hand for ever, will not compensate for the want of some comforts while we are in this world, or silence all objections against his present dealings with men, nothing can do it; or if the full accomplishment of all the promises hereafter will not secure the glory of God's faithfulness, it is a sign that men who deny it are disposed to contend with the Almighty. To such, therefore, we may justly apply God's own words to Job, 'He that reproveth God, let him answer it.' 'Wilt thou disannul my judgment? Wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?'

We shall now consider how the faithfulness of God ought to be improved by us. The consideration of it may be a preservative against presumption, on the one hand, and despair, on the other. Let no one harden himself in his iniquity, or think that, because the



threatenings are not yet fully accomplished, they never shall. It is one thing for God to delay to execute them, and another thing for him to resolve not to do it. Because 'our houses are safe from fear, and the rod of God is not upon them,' we may vainly conclude that 'the bitterness of death is past;' but let it be considered, that 'the wicked are reserved for the day of destruction,—that they shall be brought forth to the day of wrath.' The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. His threatenings lay him under an obligation to punish finally impenitent sinners; because he is a God of truth. Let none therefore harden themselves against him, or expect impunity in a course of open rebellion against him. On the other hand, let not believers give way to despair of obtaining mercy, or conclude that, because God is withdrawn, and hides his face from them, he will never return, or that because his promises are not immediately fulfilled, they never shall. His faithfulness is their great security. 'He will ever be mindful of his covenant.'d

Again, Let us compare the providences of God with his word, and see how every thing tends to set forth his faithfulness. We are very stupid, if we take no notice of the great things which are done in the world; and we behold them to little purpose, if we do not observe how this divine perfection is glorified in them. The world continues to this day, because God has several things yet to do in it, in pursuance of his promises. The whole number of the elect are to be gathered, and brought in to Christ; their graces must be tried, and their faith built up in the same way as it has been in former ages. The church, in consequence, is preserved; and, according to his promise, 'the gates of hell have not prevailed against it.' As it was of old, so we observe now, that the various changes which are made in civil affairs are all rendered subservient to the church's welfare. 'The earth helps the woman,'f—not so much from its own design, as by the appointment of providence. And why does God order it so, but that his promises might be fulfilled? The continuance of his ordinances, and the efficacy and success of them in the experience of believers, as the consequence of his presence with them, which he has given them

ground to expect 'unto the end of the world,' are blessings in which his faithfulness is eminently glorified.

Further, This divine perfection is a sure foundation for our faith. As his truth, with respect to what he has revealed, is an infallible ground for our faith of assent; so his faithfulness, in fulfilling his promises, affords the highest encouragement for our trust and dependence on him. Hence we are said to 'commit the keeping of our souls to him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator;' and when we lay the whole stress of our salvation upon him, we have no reason to entertain any doubt about the issue. Moreover, are we exposed to evils in this world? We may conclude, that as 'he has delivered, and does deliver,' so we have reason to 'trust in him, that he will deliver us.'<sup>i</sup> And is there much to be done for us, to make us meet for heaven? We may be 'confident of this very thing, that he that has begun a good work in us, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.'

Again, The faithfulness of God should be improved by us, as a remedy against that uneasiness and anxiety of mind which we often have about the future, especially when events seem to run counter to our expectation. When, for example, there is but a very melancholy prospect before us, as to what concerns the glory of God and the flourishing state of his church in the world, and we are ready to say with Joshua, 'Lord, what wilt thou do unto thy great name?' or when we have many sad thoughts of heart about the rising generation, and are in doubt whether they will adhere to or abandon the interest of Christ; when we are ready to fear whether there will be a reserve of faithful men, who will stand up for his gospel, and fill the places of those who are called off the stage, after having served their generation by the will of God; when we are too much oppressed with cares about our outward condition in the world; when, like Christ's disciples, we are immoderately thoughtful 'what we shall eat, what we shall drink, or wherewith we shall be clothed,'<sup>m</sup> or how we shall be able to conflict with the difficulties that lie before us,—our great relief against all our solicitude is to be derived from the faithfulness of God. Since godliness has the promise annexed to it, of 'the life that

now is,' as well as of 'that which is to come,' this promise shall have its accomplishment, so far as shall most redound to God's glory, and our real advantage.

Finally, The consideration of the faithfulness of God should be improved, to humble us, and to fill us with shame and confusion of face, when we consider how treacherously we have dealt with him,—how unsteadfast we have been in his covenant,—how often we have broken our own promises and resolutions, that we would walk more closely with him,—how frequently we have backslidden from him, contrary to all the engagements which we have been laid under. Have we found any unfaithfulness in him? Has he, in the least instance, been worse than his word? As God says, when he reproveth his people, 'What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain?'

## **NOTES.**

### **The Communicable and the Incommunicable Perfections of God.**

—The distinction between communicable and incommunicable perfections of Deity, ought not to be made. All the divine perfections are alike absolute, alike glorious, alike infinite, alike identical with divinity. They are not, as Dr. Ridgeley himself afterwards teaches, to be considered as apart from God, or as properties of the divine subsistence. God's perfections are God himself, and God himself is his perfections. To suppose some of them to be more and some of them less distinctive of Deity, or some to be communicable and some incommunicable, is to conceive of the divine subsistence abstractedly from itself, or to compare God with God. Mere 'resemblances' between the creature and the Creator do not lessen the distance between finitude and infinitude. Holiness, power, and faithfulness,

as they exist in Deity, are as truly infinite, as truly characteristic of divinity, as though no resemblances of them were found in men and angels; and, as divine perfections, are as strictly incommunicable, and as entirely remote from any properties of a creature, as immutability and independence. All resemblances between what is infinite and what is finite are distant, analogical, and remotely comparative. If holiness be called a communicable perfection, because man was created a sinless being, immutability may as justly be called so, because the physical movements and agencies of the universe were made uniform and unvarying. Durability and unchangeableness are as much illustrated by the stability of the earth and of the 'everlasting hills,' and the regularity of the seasons and of chemical agencies, as holiness and truth are by the character impressed on Adam in creation. What some writers have termed distinctively the natural and the moral perfections of God, are displayed respectively in his natural and his moral works, and have produced in these just those remote resemblances whence' we derive our ideas of their nature. Hence any distinction which is warrantable, has reference, not to the perfections themselves, but to the sphere in which they are displayed, and the effects which they produce. When we think of God as making worlds out of nothing, we speak of his power; when we think of him as the source of all created being, we speak of his self-existence; when we think of him as sustaining universal nature, we speak of his independence; when we think of him as entertaining uniform purposes, and as governing his creatures by uniform laws, we speak of his immutability; when we think of him as opposing sin, as creating minds imbued with love to his service, and as regenerating and sanctifying depraved intelligences, we speak of his holiness; when we think of him as making promises, and invariably fulfilling them, or as establishing principles, and invariably verifying them, we speak of his faithfulness; and when we think of his delaying to inflict punishment on transgressors, of his planning, revealing, and establishing the covenant of redemption, and of his enlightening the understandings, subduing the hostility, renewing the wills, and captivating the affections of believers in Christ, we speak of his patience, his mercy,

and his grace. In all of these cases, however—in each or any as truly as in others—there is simply a display of his perfections,—a display of Deity. In none, is there a communication of his perfections; in none, the imparting of such a peculiar or distinguishing resemblance of himself, as occasions or warrants an abstract conception of one of his attributes from another. Every thing divine is essentially, or in its very nature, incommunicable.

The distinction between communicable and incommunicable perfections of Deity, like many other distinction produced by the scholastic theology, has named the simplicity of scripture instruction, and afforded encouragement to caring speculation and to error. High Arianism, in particular, avails itself of it, to sanction and defend its insidious and destructive dogma respecting the semi-divinity of Christ. But let just views of the divine perfections be entertained, let them be seen as essentially incommunicable, and as just Deity himself, and all such speculations as those of Arianism will stand as stultified in the view of reason as they appear wicked in the eye of revelation.—ED

**NOTE 2 A. Connexion between Uncompoundedness and Eternal Duration.**

—The argument for the future eternity of God from his being 'void of all composition,' is based on false premises, and ought not to be used. The dissolution of some beings, and the future eternal duration of others, does not, as Dr. Ridgeley assumes, depend on their being compounded or not compounded of parts. Angels and the souls of men are 'void of composition,' and yet are not necessarily eternal. The duration as truly as the origin and the sustenance, of their being, depends entirely on the divine will, and arises solely from the divine purpose. The glorified bodies of saints, on the other hand, will be compounded of parts, and yet will not be subject to dissolution, but will exist for ever. Even man's natural body, as it was originally

created, possessed perfect adaptation to perpetuity of existence; and not till doomed to corruptibility by the divine will in punishment of sin, did it contain any seed or germ of dissolution. Dr. Ridgeley's idea that 'dissolution arises from the contrariety of the parts' of compounded beings, and from 'the tendency of these to destroy one another,' is utterly incompatible with the doctrine of the divine sovereignty, with the penal nature of mortality and corruptibility in man, and with the redemptional and gracious character of the eternal existence of the souls and bodies of the saved. His adoption of the idea, and the use which he makes of it in raising an argument for the future eternity of God, are an illustration of how prone even so well toned and strong a mind as his is to ear, when it wanders from the supreme guidance of revelation, and attempts to prove an abstract or elementary doctrine from what he terms 'the light of nature.' So obvious a truth as God's future eternity is peculiarly liable to be obscured, and rarely receives elucidation, when attempted to be proved or illustrated by any but plain scriptural considerations.—ED.

### **[NOTE 2 B. Omnipresence**

—Dr. Ridgeley, in this paragraph, distinguishes four kinds of omnipresence,—first, such as Paul had when he was at Corinth in spirit, while absent in body,—secondly, such as a king has, when he is in many places by his authority,—thirdly, such as matter has, when viewed as in all parts of the universe,—and lastly, such as is proper and peculiar to Deity. Now these are so essentially different each from the others, that they ought to be all designated by different names, and treated as entirely distinct things. The first is metaphorical ubiquity; the second is representation; the third is extension; and only the last is omnipresence. Extension is a property of matter, and ought no more to be placed in the same category with a divine perfection, than cubicity, opacity, colour, or any other physical property. Representation—especially the representation of a king in the person of viceroys and inferior magistrates—implies the necessary absence and even the personal ignorance of the individual represented; and, so far from possessing affinity or resemblance, it

exhibits contrariety or contrast, to the divine perfection. Ubiquity, indeed, may require to be distinguished from omniscience; but as a literal property, it does not exist. What is denoted by it is the capacity of being in many places at once; and it is simply an invention of the schoolmen, applied to the glorified humanity of Christ to obviate the physical difficulties, or the physical impossibility, implied in their doctrine of transubstantiation. Metaphorical ubiquity, or the capacity of being in many places 'in spirit' or in imagination, is, 'as a phrase,' only a remote accommodation of the scholastic invention; for even it does not imply the capacity of thinking of many places at once, but the capacity of thinking of many places, or of imaginarily visiting them, in rapid succession. Words and ideas are only obscured and confounded, when extension, representation, and metaphorical ubiquity, are placed in the same connexion, and classed under the same generic epithet as divine omnipresence.

Dr. Ridgeley, in the paragraph which follows, makes another distinction, which, though not so grotesque and mischievous as this, is at least unnecessary, and ought therefore to be avoided. He distinguishes between the essential and the influential presence of God; and again distributes the influential presence into common and special. Now the essential presence of God is just his omnipresence. Why, then, depart from that designation, and introduce another? Can any reason be assigned, except that an opportunity is sought to flourish a distinction,—to exhibit an antithesis,—to attract the ear with the alliterative jingle 'essential presence,' 'influential presence?' Better phrases, because more scriptural, may be found, too, to denote what is meant by 'the common' and 'the special' presence of God. If by God's common presence is meant, as Dr. Ridgeley says, 'that by which he upholds and governs all things,' its proper name is either power or providence. 'Special presence,' though not seriously objectionable, would be advantageously substituted by 'gracious presence.' Either let it be retained, however, and let Dr. Ridgeley's other distinctions—or rather the scholastic distinctions which he adopts—be exploded; and there will remain only two phrases of kindred character,—'special presence,' and 'omnipresence;' while

other terms will be used—'providence,' 'ubiquity,' 'representation,' and 'extension'—as distinct from one another, and from the word 'omnipresence,' as the ideas which they respectively express. How preferable is a terminology which possesses a distinct word for every distinct idea, to one which clusters under the same epithet the most various, or even contrary conceptions, and creates occasion for ostentatious and bewildering distinctions! On all subjects, indeed, such a terminology does not exist; but whenever, as on the subjects clustered under the head of omnipresence, it is sanctioned by scripture, and virtually presented in its simple phraseology, it ought to be followed and cherished as no mean expositor of revealed truths.  
—ED.

### **NOTE 2 C. The Absolute and the Ordinate Power of God.**

—The distinction between absolute and ordinate power is founded on a metaphysical view of the human mind. Man's will is determined by motives. He has the power of acting in one of two, or in any of several ways; and he acts in only one of them, according to the determination of his will. His power, viewed irrespectively of his will, is called absolute; and, viewed as determined or defined by it, is called ordinate. But can the same distinction be with propriety made in reference to God? Man's motives, or those qualities in objects, considerations, or inducements, which determine his will, and define the exercise of his power, are all exterior to himself. His will is dependent and relative: it is swayed by objects and influences which come unbidden before him, and acts, not absolutely, as if he stood alone and independent, but in relation to the circumstances in which he is placed by supreme sovereign disposal. God's will, on the contrary, is strictly absolute: it is his mere good pleasure,'—the counsel of his own will:' it acts, as to motive, in self-existent and supreme independence. God, and his will, and his power, and his glory, are phrases expressive, not of distinct things, but of different modes of contemplating Deity. His power, view it as we may, is co-extensive with his will and his glory: it is power to do whatever he wills, or whatever comports with his holiness and wisdom. He wills



whatever his power performs; and his power performs whatever his will determines. Contemplated either as resolving, or as acting, or as displaying any one perfection, he is supreme, infinite, independent, incomprehensible, the same in character, the same in subsistence, the same in essential manifestation. Caution, therefore, ought to be used not to raise a distinction which suggests any such idea, in our views of Deity, as that of 'ordinate power' in man,—of a limitation or defining of ability by volitions dependent on exterior motives. Whatever is proper or peculiar to the creature, must not, by any analogy, be made the basis of a distinction with reference to the Creator. The instance adduced by Dr. Ridgeley in illustration of his distinction—the divine economy with regard to the fallen angels—ought to be viewed in connexion, not with God's power, but with the character or glory of his moral administration.—ED.

#### **NOTE 2 D. The Objects of God's Knowledge.**

—'As intelligent agents, we know, in many instances, what things we can do, though we will never do them.' Does Dr. Ridgeley, by this statement, mean that we know what things we have resolved not to do,—that we know what things we have power but not inclination to do,—or that we know contingently effects of our power which may be prevented by our will? His words may be construed to bear any of the three meanings; and, whichever of the three they bear, they fail to sanction or illustrate his position in reference to the objects of God's knowledge. To know what things we have resolved not to do, is only negatively to know what things we have resolved to do: it is to know actual objects or events in the light of their opposites; for there is no knowledge, no idea of an absolute nonentity or negation. To know what things we have power but not inclination to do, is simply to know, in any given circumstances, that we are dependent creatures, influenced by motives, and that, in the exercise of freedom to adopt any of several modes of acting, we are restricted to one by the determination of our will. Again, to know contingently effects of our power which may be prevented by our will, or to know things as contingently existing, is simply either to conjecture what shall

happen or exist, or to substitute fiction for reality, imagination for discernment. Now, in none of these three ways which have been named is there any affinity between man's 'knowing what things he can do, though he will never do them,' and God's 'knowing many things that he will not do.' Knowledge, on God's part, of what he has purposed not to do, is either knowledge of nonentities, or knowledge, negatively considered, of what he has proposed to do. But knowledge of nonentities is no knowledge whatever, and is not to be predicated of God. Again, knowledge of several modes of action, one of which must be adopted to the exclusion of the others, according to the determination of the will by motives, is predicable only of a dependent being, the circumstances of whose position are disposed and controlled by a superior power. As to knowing things contingently, in the sense either of conjecture or of imagination, so far from being predicable of God, it exhibits a direct contrast to the infallible certainty of his knowledge. Dr. Ridgeley, in all he says respecting 'God's knowing many things that he will not do,' seems to forget the essential difference which exists between the will of God and the will of man. Possibility and contingency, in reference to what may or can be done, are ideas which affect only the imperfect, dependent, finite knowledge of the creature. What can exist, what shall exist, and what are objects of knowledge, are all the same thing with God. His power to do, his purpose to do, and his knowledge of what he will do, are strictly one thing viewed in different phases. His knowledge, his will, and his power, are matters of distinct conception only in accommodation to the capacities of the creature: they are not distinct in themselves, nor are they distinct from God. All are different from the corresponding attributes of the creature, not only in degree, but in essential nature. Man's power is derived and contingent; his will is dependent and relative; his knowledge is exoteric in its sources and evidential in its basis. To say that 'he knows many things which he can do, though he will never do them,' is consistent with the imperfection of his nature; but to say the same thing of God seems derogatory to his independence, and to the undividedness of his attributes.

Dr. Ridgeley's appeal in support of his sentiment to scripture, appears to be far from successful. God's 'calling things that be not as though they were,' is simply his creating something out of nothing,—his acting with the same power without materials as with them. His knowledge respecting Saul and the men of Keilah, was not knowledge of 'what they would have done, had not his providence prevented it,' but knowledge of the secret and vain purposes of their hearts: in other words, it was not knowledge of events as contingent, but absolute knowledge of actual and ineffective intentions.—ED.]

**NOTE 2 E. Man's natural knowledge of God.**

—To say that God has 'instamped the knowledge of his perfections on the souls and consciences of men,' savours strongly of the doctrine of innate ideas. Are men born with a knowledge of God's perfections? Have they it constitutionally 'in-stamped' on their minds? If so, they are born with a revelation,—they have constitutionally an acquaintance with the divine justice, the divine patience, the divine mercy, the divine grace, and, by consequence, the divine method of saving the guilty. An innate revelation, a constitutional 'instamping' of religious knowledge, must either be so defective as to be useless, or include all the clements of divine truth. But where is the evidence from consciousness, observation, or the testimony of scripture, that, even in one particular such a revelation or instamping is possessed? Do not universal experience, universal history, the condition even of man in paradise, the principles of all God's moral administration in our world, and the existence and progressive grant of a written revelation, expressly and forcibly contradict it?

The Gentiles 'who have not the law doing by nature the things contained in the law, and being a law unto themselves,' proves only that they had consciences; just as Red Indians' acquaintance with sounds and colours, though they are destitute of science, and their ability to reason, though destitute of formal logic and mathematics, prove that they have the faculties of perception and judgment. Man is born with a power of perception; and, as his mind expands, he

finds himself possessed of organs and exterior facilities for acquiring ideas. He is born with a power of judging; and, as his mind expands, he enjoys constant occasion to detect relations among objects, and to form opinions. He is born with a power of distinguishing between right and wrong; and as his mind expands, he has access to continual lessons, practical and theoretic, for obtaining moral perceptions. Only his powers, however, are innate: the objects of them are exoteric, and the materials with which they work are acquired. Just as he is not born with ideas of towns and landscapes, or with opinions of cookery and the chase; so is he not born with a knowledge of God and of duty. Yet as certainly as his faculty of perception is addressed by sounds and colours, and his faculty of judging by the collisions or juxtaposition or chemical influences of objects, so certainly is his faculty of moral discernment—his power of knowing right from wrong—his conscience—addressed immediately, preceptively, or traditionarily by revelation. Heathens, even in their darkest state, enjoy some remnants of teaching from heaven. All educationally acquire some perceptions of right and wrong,—some remote discernment of religious obligation and moral duty. All, in the absence of 'the law'—'the law of Moses,' a written revelation—'are a law unto themselves;' and though they are 'natural men,' though they are still in the state of 'nature' peculiar to the children of wrath, they do 'by nature the things,' some things, 'contained in the law.' Who does not see, however, that the state of 'nature' in which they are a law unto themselves, is the state not of their constitutional structure, not of their birth, not of their fœtus or suckling condition, but of their unregeneracy, their alienation from the life of God, their destitution of spirituality and of a written revelation?—ED.

**NOTE 2 F. The disposing, the vindictive, and the remunerative Justice of God.**

—The scholastic distinctions, which Dr. Ridgeley adopts, between the disposing and the distributive, and again between the vindictive and the remunerative, justice of God, tend, not to illustrate, but to obscure a subject of great simplicity. The divine justice, view it as we

may, is simply infinite rectitude, infallible equity, God doing what is right. To speak of his 'disposing justice,' and define it to be 'the shining forth of his holiness in all the dispensations of his providence,' is just to give a general and not very appropriate name to the mingled exercise of the divine wisdom, the divine mercy, the divine grace, and what is called the divine vindictive and remunerative justice. Confusion of ideas is the sure and only result. The rectitude or equity of God's moral administration, is a notion which fully contains and clearly exhibits whatever is alluded to by distinctions as to his justice. His dispensations in chastising or punishing for sin, are simply his equity in reference to his law; his dispensations in allotting men's external condition in the world, are simply his equity in reference to his sovereign good pleasure; and his dispensations in bestowing the blessings of salvation and eternal glory on believers in Jesus, are simply his equity in reference to the substitutionary and redemptional sufferings of Christ. He is just in punishing sin, because he inflicts only what is deserved; he is just in allotting to men various conditions in life, because he bestows on all undeserved kindness, and withholds from none any merited favour; and he is just in delivering believers from the curse and raising them to blessedness, because Christ became a curse in their stead, and has united himself to them as a source of unending life and glory. In all of the dispensations, justice is simply equity, rectitude, doing what is right and holy.—ED.

### **NOTE 2 G. The Harmony of the Divine Perfections.**

—In the preceding paragraph, and in other passages, Dr. Ridgeley uses language respecting the distinguishableness of the divine perfections which is incautious. To say, as he does, that the glory of divine patience is as necessary to be displayed as that of any of the other divine perfections,' suggests to the mind a notion that the perfections are distinct not only from Deity but even from one another. Such a notion, it is true, is not intended to be conveyed; yet phraseology which suggests it ought, as carefully as possible, to be avoided. The very phrase, 'harmony of the divine perfections'—so

approved, so common, so popular among theologians—ought either to be discarded, or to be carefully defined. In a literal, or in a strictly analogical sense, it is utterly objectionable. What is meant by it is the perfect, the infallible consistency, of the divine actings or modes of manifestation. If, for illustrating this, the various actings or modes of manifestation are compared, we shall find it safe, instead of using a metaphor not sanctioned by scripture, to adopt the beautiful images of the inspired penman: 'Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne; mercy and truth shall go before thy face. Blessed are the people that know the joyful sound; they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance; in thy name shall they rejoice all the day, and in thy righteousness shall they be exalted.' (Ps. 89:14, 15.) 'Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other; truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven; yea, the Lord shall give that which is good, and our land shall yield her increase; righteousness shall go before him, and shall set us in the way of his steps.' (Ps. 85:11–13.) The metaphors employed in these texts possess a significancy and an appropriateness which cannot be found in any of man's devising. They appear to allude to the visible and peculiar manifestations of Deity in connexion with the Old Covenant, and particularly to the Shechinah or cloud of the divine glory in the Holy of Holies. The 'throne' of the Shechinah was over the ark of the covenant, containing the tables of the law, the records of 'justice and judgment.' The oracles of the Urim and Thummim, and the tokens of acceptance of sacrifice and complacency in the people—or 'truth and mercy,'—went forth or forward from the Shechinah toward the priest or congregation who were waiting without. The ministration of sacrifice was upward, from the court of the tabernacle, the symbol of 'the earth,' to the Holiest of all, the symbol of heaven; and both the oracles of the Urim and Thummim and the manifested tokens of accepting sacrifice and blessing the people, were from the Holiest of all toward the outer sanctuary; and thus an emblem was afforded of 'truth springing out of the earth' in our Lord's ministrations on earth, and of righteousness looking down from heaven, in his appearing for his people in the heavenly places to give them repentance and

remission of sins, and sending the Holy Spirit to lead them into all truth, and perform in them the good pleasure of his goodness and the work of faith with power. There is hence, in the metaphors in question, an instructive significancy which has no counterpart in such phraseology as that employed by Dr. Ridgeley.—ED.

## **THE SUPREMACY AND UNITY OF GOD**

QUESTION VIII. Are there more Gods than one?

ANSWER, There is but one only, the living and true God.

### **The Supremacy of God**

IN this answer, God is described as the living and true God. Life is the greatest excellency belonging to the nature of any finite being. Some have concluded that the lowest degree of it renders a creature more excellent in itself, than the most glorious creatures that are without it. Intelligent creatures, in the same way, have a superior excellency to all others; because, that which gives life to them, or the principle by which, as such, they act, is most excellent. So the life of God is that whereby he infinitely excels all finite beings. When, therefore, he is called the living God, the phrase does not denote one single perfection of the divine nature, but is expressive of all his divine perfections. Accordingly, when God represents himself, in scripture, as giving his people the highest assurance of any thing which he designs to do, and as using the form of an oath, and swearing by his life, 'As I live,' or 'As truly as I live,' the language imports the same thing, as when he says, 'By myself have I sworn,'<sup>q</sup> Hence, when he is called the living God, his glory is set forth as a God of infinite perfection. This, however, has been considered under the last answer.

We may farther observe, that when God is styled the living God, the phrase denotes the display of all his perfections, in connection with life being a principle of action. Hereby he is distinguished from lifeless idols, who were reputed gods by their stupid and profane worshippers. The apostle lays down the terms as antithetic, when he speaks to some, as having 'turned from idols,' or false gods, 'to serve the living and true God.' Here we might consider the origin and progress of idolatry. Men were inclined to 'worship the creature more than the Creator,'s or 'to do service to them who by nature are no gods.' Some seemed to have been destitute of common sense, as they were of true religion, when they not only worshipped God by idols of their own making, but prayed to them, and said, 'Deliver us, for ye are our gods.' This the prophet takes notice of;u and he exposes their unaccountable stupidity, observing to them that these gods were first growing among the trees of the forest, then cut down with their own hands, and fashioned into their designed form, and part of them cast into the fire, as destined for common uses. These were literally lifeless gods; and their senseless worshippers were but one remove from them: 'They that make them,' says the psalmist, 'are like unto them, and so is every one that trusteth in them.' But this subject we shall have occasion to insist on in a following part of this work,y and therefore shall pass it over at present, and consider,

### **The Unity of God**

Scripture is very express in asserting the unity of the Godhead. It is said, 'The Lord our God is one Lord;' and 'I, even I, am he; and there is no God with me;'a and 'The Lord, he is God; there is none else besides him;' and elsewhere, 'Thou art God alone.'c This truth is not founded merely on a few places of scripture which expressly assert it, but may be deduced from every part of it. Yea, it is instamped on the very nature of man, and may be as plainly proved from the light of nature, as that there is a God. Every one of the divine perfections, which were particularly considered under the last answer, will supply us with arguments to confirm our faith in it. But that this may farther appear, let it be considered,



1. That the idea of a God implies, that he is the first cause of all things. In this respect he is opposed to the creature, and existed from all eternity. Now there can be no more than one being, who is without beginning, and who gave being to all other things. This appears from the very nature of the thing; for if there are more gods, then they must derive their being from him,—and then they are a part of his creation, and consequently not gods, for God and the creature are infinitely opposed to each other. There is but one independent being, who is in and of himself, and derives his perfections from no other; and therefore there can be but one God.

2. There is but one Being, who is the ultimate end of all things. This necessarily follows from his being their Creator. He that produced them out of nothing, must be supposed to have designed some valuable end by doing so; and this, ultimately considered, cannot be anything short of himself, for that is inconsistent with the wisdom and sovereignty included in the idea of a Creator. Accordingly, he is said to have 'made all things for himself.' Hence the glory which results from creation is unalienable, and cannot be ascribed to any but himself. To suppose therefore that there are other gods, is to ascribe a divine nature to them, divested of that glory which is essential to it. We may add, that if God is the ultimate end of all things, he is to be glorified as such; and all worship is to terminate in him: and we must proclaim him to be our chief good and only portion and happiness,—consequences which are plainly inconsistent with a plurality of gods. Besides, he that is the object of adoration must be worshipped, and loved with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Our affections must not be divided between him and any other. And since man is under a natural obligation to give supreme worship to him, it follows that there is no other god that has a right to it, and that he is the only true God.

3. Infinitude of perfection being implied in the idea of a God, as has been proved under the last answer, it is certain that it cannot belong to more than one. As it implies that divine perfection is boundless, so it denotes that he sets bounds to the perfections of all others. If,

therefore, there are more gods than one, their perfections must be limited; but that which is not infinite, is not God. And as infinite perfection implies in it all perfection, it cannot be divided among many; for no being that has only a part of it, could be said to be infinitely perfect. And since there is but one who is so, it follows that there is no other God besides him.

4. Since omnipotence is a divine attribute, there can be but one almighty being, and therefore but one God. This will farther appear, if we consider, that if there were more gods than one, all of them must be said to be able to do all things; and then the same individual power which is exerted by one, must be exerted by another,—an idea, than which nothing is more absurd. It will also follow, that he who cannot do that which is said to be done by another, is not almighty, or able to do all things, and consequently that he is not God.

5. There is but one being who has an absolute sovereign will,—who, though he can control all others, is himself subject to no control,—who has a natural right to give laws to all who are his subjects, but is subject to none himself; for absolute dominion and subjection are as opposite as light and darkness. Two persons may as well be said to give being to each other, as to have a right to give laws to each other. Moreover, if there were more Gods than one, there would be a confusion in the government of the world; for whatever one decrees, another may reverse; or whatever is done by one, the contrary might be done by the other. This would follow from a sovereignty of will. And as there might be opposite things commanded or forbidden, pursuant to the different wills of a plurality of gods; so the same thing, with respect to those who are under an obligation to yield obedience, would be both a sin and a duty, and the same persons would be both condemned and justified for the same action. [See Note 2 H, page 133.]

6. There is but one being who is, as God is often said to be, the best and the greatest. If there were more Gods than one, either one must be supposed to be more excellent than another, or both equally

excellent. If we suppose the former of these, then he who is not the most excellent, is not God; and if the latter, that their excellencies are equal, then infinite perfection would be divided. But this, as was before hinted, is contrary to the idea of infinite perfection: it is contrary also to what is expressly said by God, 'To whom will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One.' From these, and several other arguments to the same purpose, which might have been taken from every one of the divine attributes, and from all that essential and relative glory which belongs to him, the unity of the divine essence appears, even to a demonstration. Indeed, to assert that there are more Gods than one, is, in effect, to say that there is no God. So the apostle deems it, when he tells the church at Ephesus that, before their conversion, when they worshipped other Gods, 'they were without God in the world.' This implies as much as that they were 'atheists in the world,' as the words may with propriety be rendered.e

Having considered the unity of the Godhead, not only as evinced from scripture, but as it may be demonstrated by the light of nature, it will be necessary that we obviate an objection that may be brought against this latter method of proving it. The objection is, that, if the unity of the Godhead might be known by the dictates of nature, or demonstrated by other arguments besides those which are matter of pure revelation, how comes it to pass that the heathen owned and worshipped a plurality of gods? It was not one particular sect among them that did so; but the abominable practice of polytheism universally obtained where revealed religion was not known. Though, therefore, the unity of God is an undoubted truth, it does not seem to be founded in the light of nature. Now, that the heathen did worship a plurality of gods, is beyond dispute, especially after idolatry had continued a few ages in the world, and so had extinguished those principles of revealed religion which mankind, before this, were favoured with. Yet it must be considered that, though the ignorant and unthinking multitude among them believed everything to be a god which the custom of the countries where they lived had induced them to pay divine adoration to, yet the wiser sort

of them, however guilty of idolatry, by paying a kind of lower worship to idols, maintained, notwithstanding, the unity of the Godhead, or that there is one God superior to them all, whom they often called "the Father of gods and men." It was probably to this supreme Deity that the Athenians erected that altar on which the apostle Paul observed this inscription, 'TO THE UNKNOWN GOD;' because he says, in the words immediately following, 'Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.' The heathen sages, however in other instances their conduct seemed to run counter to their method of reasoning, plainly, by their assertions, discover their belief in but one supreme God, who has all the incommunicable perfections of the divine nature. Many of them, in their writings, assert that there is a God, who is the first cause or beginning of all things; that he was from eternity, or in the beginning, and that time took its rise from him; that he is the living God, the fountain of life, and the best of all beings;g that he is self-sufficient, and cannot, without absurdity, be supposed to stand in need of, or to be capable of, receiving advantage from any one; that he is the chief good, or contains in himself whatever is good, and that by him all things consist; and that no one hath enough in himself to secure his own safety and happiness, but must derive these from him. There are others also who plainly assert the unity of God in as strong terms as though they had learned it from divine revelation,—calling him the beginning, the end, and the author of all things, who was before and is above all things, the Lord of all, the fountain of life, light, and all good, yea, goodness itself, the most excellent being,—and giving him many other designations of a similar nature. I could multiply quotations to this effect from Proclus, Porphyry, Iambliens, Plotinus, Plutarch, Epictetus, and several others; but this has been already done by other hands.k From the sayings of these heathens, it appears that, though they mention other gods, they suppose them to be little more than titular or honorary gods, or at best, persons who were the peculiar favourites of God, and admitted to the participation of divine honours, as well as employed in some part of the government of the world. They frequently speak of them as having derived their being from God, whom they call, "the cause of causes, the God of

gods." Some of them speak of God in the singular number, throughout the greatest part of their writings, and only make mention of the gods occasionally; especially when they treat of those works that are worthy of a God, or the greatest honours that are due to him. This is specially the case with Seneca and Plato. The latter, in particular, says, that when he wrote anything in a grave and serious manner, his custom was to preface his epistles with the mention of one God; though, it is true, when he wrote otherwise, he used the common mode of speaking, and talked of other gods. It is observed, that he sometimes, in his writings, uses the phrase, "If it please God," or, "by the help of God," not the gods. Notwithstanding what has been said, however, the heathen sages were all idolaters; for they joined in the rites of worship performed to the false gods of their respective countries. Yea, Socrates himself, who fell under the displeasure of the Athenians for asserting the unity of the Godhead, and in consequence lost his life, did not refuse to pay some religious honour to the heathen gods. It is plain that they paid some religious worship to them. Yet this was of an inferior and subordinate nature, not much unlike to that which the papists give to saints and angels. They are far from setting them upon a level with God. They confess they were but men who formerly lived in this world; they give an account of their birth and parentage, and of where they lived and died; they write the history of their lives; they mention what procured them the honour they suppose them after death to have been advanced to,—how some of them attained it as the reward of virtue, or in commemoration of the good they had done to the world in their life,—and some, in consequence of their having been inventors of arts, beneficial to mankind, or conquerors in war, or a public blessing to the country where they lived. Others, especially among the Romans, were deified at the request of their surviving friends. This, after Julius Cæsar's time, was done by the decree of the senate, who, when they ranked them among the number of their gods, at the same time appointed the rites that should be observed in their worship. And some of the Roman emperors obliged the senate to deify them while they were alive. These things are very largely insisted on by many ancient and modern writers. Upon the whole,

therefore, it plainly appears that, whatever they say of a plurality of gods, the wiser sort among the heathen did not deny the unity of the divine essence, in the highest and most proper sense. And as they received the knowledge of this truth from the light of nature, we may conclude that it might be known in that way, as well as by divine revelation. [See Note 2 I, page 133.]

As a practical inference from the doctrine that the object of our worship is the living God, let us feel reprov'd for that lifeless formality with which many address themselves to him in the performance of religious duties, and for the want of reverence of, and due regard to, the divine perfections which are exhibited in this character of the Godhead. It is also a very great aggravation, not only of apostacy, but of any degree of backsliding in those who have made a profession of religion, that it is 'a departing from the living God.' Is he the God and giver of life, and shall we forsake him who 'has the words of eternal life,' whose sovereign will has the sole disposal of it? The consideration of his being the living God, likewise renders his judgments most terrible, and his wrath insupportable. 'It is,' as the apostle says, 'a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.'

From his being the true God, we infer, that all hypocrisy, both in heart and life, is to be avoided; and that we should draw nigh to him with a true heart and faith unfeigned, and not like those whom the prophet reprov's, when he says, 'God was near in their mouth, and far from their reins.' Let us take heed, moreover, that we do not set up any idol in our hearts in opposition to him as the true God. Whatever has a greater share in our affections than God, or is set up in competition with him, is to us a god; and the setting of it up is inconsistent with our paying that regard to him which is due. Accordingly, our Saviour says, 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon.' On this account, 'covetousness' is styled 'idolatry,' because, where it exists, the world is loved more than him. We read also of some 'whose god is their belly,' who 'make provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof,' as though this was their chief good. And when, in a religious way, we confide in anything below God, or expect that from

the creature which is only to be found in him, or when we esteem men as lords of our faith, or when God's sovereignty, or right to govern us, is called in question, and we presumptuously or wilfully rebel against him, we, in effect, dethrone him, or deny that he is the true God. But more of this when we consider the sins forbidden in the first commandment.

From the unity of the Godhead, we may infer that we ought to take heed not to entertain any conceptions of the divine Being which are inconsistent with his unity. As we are not to assert a plurality of gods, so we are not to think or speak of God in such a way as tends to overthrow the simplicity of the divine nature. We must therefore not conceive that it is compounded of various parts, all which, being taken together, constitute the divine essence. This conception, as opposed to a proper idea of the divine unity, gives occasion to that known aphorism, generally laid down by those who treat of this subject, that 'whatever is in God, is God.' This we must reckon one of the incomprehensibles of the divine Being, when we attempt to speak of which, we only give an evident proof of the imperfection of our finite understandings, and of our inability to order our words by reason of darkness. It is necessary, however, when we lay down this proposition, that we define what we intend by it, that so we may not be supposed to use words without ideas. It is necessary, in particular, that we should so define it, as to account, in some measure, for those modes of speaking which, agreeably to scripture, describe God as having a plurality of perfections, and perfections in some respects distinct; and yet, at the same time, that we may not be led to infer a plurality of Gods.

Let it be considered, then, that we have not the least similitude or resemblance of divine unity in any finite being. Every thing below God is composed of parts. In some cases, we call these integral; as the parts of matter, which, when taken together, constitute the whole. In other cases, the parts are called essential; as when we say an intelligent being has various powers or properties. These are essential to it; it would not be complete without every one of them;

and they are all distinct. We cannot say that whatever is in the soul of man is the soul; but all its powers or properties, taken together, constitute the man. This, however, is by no means to be affirmed of the divine Being. When we conceive of God as holy, powerful, just, good, &c. we must not suppose that these perfections are so many ingredients in Deity, or that, when taken together, they constitute it, as the whole is constituted of its parts. In that case, each of them would have no other than a partial perfection; and the essential glory of one of them would not be equal to the glory of the Deity, which is supposed to consist of them all. There would, hence, be something in God less than God, or a divine perfection less than all the divine perfections taken together,—which we are not to suppose. Such are the properties of composition; and when we speak of God as a simple or uncompounded being, we mention them as what are inconsistent with his perfection as such. Neither are the divine perfections distinct or different from one another, as the various parts of which the whole is constituted are said to be distinct. This follows from the former consideration, that the divine essence has no parts. We are not to suppose, then, that the divine attributes, considered as they are in God, are distinguished as one thing or being is from another, or as wisdom, power, justice, mercy, &c. are in men. This would be to suppose the divine being to have several distinct, infinitely perfect beings contained in it,—contrary to its simplicity or unity. Or, were we, on such a supposition, to say that it has unity, it would have it only by participation and dependence: just as a general or complex idea is said to be one which partakes of, and depends on, all those particular or simple ideas that are contained in it, or as one hundred is one, as containing such a number of units as taken together, are equal to a hundred. This is not what we mean when we say God is one. Moreover, when we speak of the divine perfections, as being in God, we suppose them all essential to him, as opposed to what is accidental. An accident is generally described as what belongs, or is superadded, to a being or subject, which might have existed without it, or which might have been destitute of it, and yet sustained no loss of that perfection which is essential to it. Thus wisdom, holiness, justice, faithfulness, are accidents in men; so that they who have



them not, do not cease to be men, or to have the essential perfections of the human nature. But this is by no means to be affirmed of the divine being and attributes; for to suppose God to be destitute of any of them, is as much as to say that he is not infinitely perfect, or that he is not God. What I have now stated is, I think, the meaning generally intended, by the saying, 'Whatever is in God, is God.' This proposition may be reckoned by some a metaphysical speculation; and I should for that reason have avoided to mention it, had not an advertence to it been, in some respects, necessary: the unity of God cannot well be conceived of, unless his simplicity be defended; and I do not see how the latter can be well maintained, if this proposition be not duly considered. If in attempting to explain it, I have used more words than are needful, or repeated the same ideas too often, I have done so to avoid some scholastic modes of speaking, or with a design to render what I said more intelligible. [See Note 2 K, page 134.] We may add, that when, as we often, on the warrant of scripture, do, we speak of the divine perfections as many, or as distinct from one another,—when we speak of the justice of God as different from his mercy, or these from his power, wisdom, faithfulness, &c., we must not be thought to speak inconsistently with what has been said concerning the divine simplicity. The nature and perfections of God, it is to be remembered, are incomprehensible. Hence all the ideas which we have of them, are obtained from our discerning some small resemblance of them in intelligent creatures, and, at the same time, separating from this whatever argues imperfection. It follows that we are supposed not to know, or to be able to describe, what God is in himself, and as I humbly conceive, never shall. Such knowledge as this is too great for any but a divine person. Our conceptions of him, therefore, are taken from, and conformed to, those various methods by which he condescends to make himself visible or known to us, or his acts in reference to objects in which he is said to manifest his perfections. Thus when an effect is produced, we call that perfection that produces it his power; or when divine acts are distinguished with respect to their particular object or to the manner of their glorifying him, we call the perfections displayed in them his wisdom, justice,

goodness, &c. This is what we mean when we speak of various perfections in God. Some, however, suppose that they express themselves more agreeably to the nature of the subject, or to the simplicity of God, by speaking of the divine perfections as denominated from their effects. When, for example, they take occasion to mention the power of God, they call it God acting powerfully; or of his justice and faithfulness, they call them, God acting justly or faithfully. But however we express ourselves, when we speak of the distinct perfections of the divine nature, we mean what is strictly consonant with divine unity and simplicity. Here our thoughts must stop; and what is too great for a finite mind to conceive of, we must make the subject of our admiration; and what we cannot comprehend, we must adore: 'Such knowledge is too wonderful for us; it is high, we cannot attain unto it.'

[NOTE 2 H. **Proofs of the Unity of God from Reason.**—All Dr. Ridgeley's proofs of the unity of God from reason, are variations of one proposition,—God is a self-existent, infinite being, and as such, is necessarily one. The proposition assumes all the points which a polytheist demands to be proved, and gathers all its matter and evidence from revelation. Only a fondness for abstract argumentation, for the claims of what is termed 'natural religion,' or for appearing to establish a great doctrine of theology by the light of reason, could induce any man to parade this proposition as proof of the divine unity, or to exhibit its various phases as separate and independent arguments. Why not rest the unity of God simply on the testimony of revelation,—or on that testimony as directing the mind to corroborative evidence in the uniqueness and sovereign management of divine works? That God is one, is a doctrine which the scriptures teach with remarkable frequency, and in a great variety of forms. While some other doctrines are but incidentally inculcated, or are silently interwoven with the fabric of faith and precept, this is often and carefully taught,—taught in express terms, and in almost all possible connexions. Does not this fact clearly indicate, that reason is not to be trusted for the conservation and defence of the doctrine,—that here, as truly as with respect to the

doctrines of redemption, we must sit under the shadow of God's word, and regard it as the sole bulwark of our faith?

Dr. Ridgeley's fifth argument is an instance of how mere reason will sometimes rather injure than serve the cause of one of the simplest points in theology. He states that God has 'an absolute sovereign will,' and is therefore one. To work this proposition into an argument, he supposes two absolute sovereign wills, or two Gods, and hypothetically depicts the effects of their simultaneous operation. An opponent might justly ask, by what imaginable process a man can suppose or fancy consequences or effects, be they what they may, of an impossibility. That which cannot exist cannot act: that which is contrary to all possibility, cannot be imagined. To suppose two absolute sovereign wills, is a hypothesis of the same idle nature as to suppose that a part is greater than a whole. How, then, can consequences or effects of two absolute sovereign wills be supposed? The hypothetical cause being an impossibility, all the supposed effects are, in the idlest sense, conjectural. An opponent might, therefore, assert just the opposite suppositions to Dr. Ridgeley's,—he might assert that two absolute sovereign wills would be in all respects alike,—that they would be the same in infinite excellence, the same in their designs, the same in all their effects; and if he did assert so, he could be rebuked for the temerity of his speculations, only in terms which would equally apply to the hypothetizing of Dr. Ridgeley. The doctrine of the divine unity needs no metaphysical abstractions, no abstruse reasonings, no impossible hypotheses, for its defence; but stands out in luminous glory, intrinsically recommended, and divinely demonstrated, in the testimony of revelation. One sentence of scripture, viewed in connexion with the circumstances in which it was spoken, and the history of the people to whom it was addressed, discloses incomparably higher evidence of it than a whole library of scholastic ratiocination: 'Hear, O Israel, Jehovah, our God, is one Jehovah,' Deut. 6:4.—ED.]

[NOTE 2 I. **Knowledge of the Unity of God among the Heathen.**—One would think that the universal prevalence of polytheism in regions where the light of written revelation is not enjoyed, is a practical demonstration that the doctrine of the divine unity could never have been discovered or proved by mere reason, or by what is termed 'the light of nature.' Dr. Ridgeley thinks otherwise. But how does he support his hypothesis? First by writing what looks very like an apology for polytheism, and next by assuming that the highest theological notions of the heathen sages were acquired without aid from revelation.

He is obliged to grant that the sages, including even Socrates, were all idolaters; yet he asserts, and labours to prove, that they were not polytheists. Idolatry, it seems, consists in 'worshipping false gods;' while polytheism consists in acknowledging supreme gods. How futile a distinction! What matters it whether the object of faith or of adoration,—the object which receives the homage due to Deity, which has ascribed to it the glories peculiar to Jehovah, which attracts the veneration and trust and religious affections of the human heart—what matters it whether this object be an imaginary spirit or a deceased mortal, a figment of the fancy or a portable and pocketable mass of matter, a hero or a crocodile, the Jupiter or Minerva of the Romans, or the cat or leek of the Egyptians; does not the divine commandment, the first in the decalogue, exactly define and directly denounce it: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me?' Plato's idea of a supreme God subject to fate, was a conception as far distant, in a sense, from the true notion of Deity, as the most grovelling polytheist's idea of the divinity of a stock or a stone. Its quality just as little exempted him from the charge of not knowing the true God, as the quality of the faith of an ancient Egyptian or of a modern Hindoo. All the high titles which he gave it, 'The fountain of life, light, and all good,' 'The cause of causes, and the God of Gods,' only demonstrated, when viewed in their connection, that the idea, besides being false in itself, involved and assumed the notion of a plurality of gods. That all the gods but one were subordinate, was just a demonstration of how resolute, how desperate, the sages were

in their polytheism. They knew enough to be convinced that there cannot be two supreme beings; yet rather than want a plurality of gods, or confess the doctrine of the divine unity, they deified mortals, and worshipped fictions of the mind. Such are the facts with respect to the heathen sages; they are the facts even according to Dr. Ridgeley's own showing; and, if ever facts proved anything, they show to demonstration, that the heathens, viewed as disciples of mere reason, were inveterate and incurable polytheists. Their rejection of the doctrine of the divine will, may have been more moral than intellectual,—more a dictate of the heart or an effort of the will, than a deduction of the understanding; but be it what it might, it was invariable and universal—it characterized alike the sage and the savage—it was co-extensive with the absence of written revelation—and it hence speaks volumes as to the utter inadequacy of the vaunted 'light of nature.'

We have stated, however, but half the case. Dr. Ridgeley assumes—without offering a syllable of proof—that such knowledge as the heathen sages had of a supreme Deity, was obtained without aid from revelation. All history opposes his assumption. Reasons and authorities without number might be adduced to show that, not only by traditions from patriarchal revelation, but by intercommunication with the Jews, if not even by immediate access to the pages of the Old Testament scriptures, the heathen philosophers were indebted to a supernatural origin for all their higher and more refined conceptions. Considering what facilities for information they enjoyed, what streams from remote or proximate revelation flowed across their path, we may feel, not wonder that they entertain some theological views akin to truth, but unmingled astonishment that they entertained so few, and entertained them in so distorted and obscure a manner. The doctrine of the divine unity was promulged by revelation after revelation to the ages preceding the Mosaic; it was made known to Adam's family before the flood, and to Noah's family after it; it was inculcated by oral communication upon mankind at large, and was afterwards made the foundation and the apex of the fabric of revealed truth set up

among the Israelites; it was exhibited in every land through which a Jew travelled, in every house in which he lodged, in every company to which the fame of his religion was carried; it went with the ships and the armies of Solomon 'from the river to the ends of the earth;' it was daily, during seventy years, displayed throughout all the provinces of the Babylonian empire; it was attested in the temples of a numerous colony of Jewish emigrants to Egypt, under the successors of Alexander the Great; and it was maintained, toward the close of the Mosaic era, by communities of Jews in almost every section of the civilized world,—by 'Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphilia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and by strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians,' Acts 2:9–11. How, in such circumstances, could the heathen sages, by any possibility, have heard nothing, how could they have heard only a little, how could they otherwise than have heard much and often, from revelation, of the doctrine of the unity of God? But when they heard it, they rejected it; when they were, in a manner, forced to receive it in fact, they divested it of its glory, and associated it with ideas of their own multitudinous deities; when they 'saw' it to demonstration in their understanding, they 'perceived' it not in their hearts; 'when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened; professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things,' Rom. 1:21–23. What a demonstration is this of the utter futility of the light of nature! If heathens—even the best and wisest of them—universally continued polytheists in spite of indirect though valuable lessons from revelation, how absolutely incompetent were they to discover or defend the doctrine of the divine unity by the efforts of mere reason!—ED.]

[NOTE 2 K. **The Simplicity of God.**—'The simplicity of God' is not a significant or happy phrase, and is altogether unnecessary. As

illustrated by Dr. Ridgeley, it is distinguished partly from the unity of God, and partly from his spirituality. As respects the former, there is really no distinction; and, as respects the latter, the distinction attempted is founded on mistake.

That God is not composed of parts,—that his perfections are not a number of ingredients which taken together constitute a whole,—that they are not accidental,—that his perfections are himself, and he himself is his perfections, are important truths, and ought to be carefully remembered in every contemplation of the divine character. They are truths, however, all embodied in the doctrine that God is one, and fully and correctly expressed in the phrase, 'the unity of God.' To designate them by another phrase, and exhibit them as distinguishable from the doctrine of the divine unity, or as attachable to it in the way of inference, is to produce confusion or error of conception.

Apart from the idea of unity, there is nothing which, with any propriety as to the meaning of words, can be called 'the simplicity of God.' What Dr. Ridgeley says respecting the divine essence not being compounded, as matter or a complex idea is, belongs properly to a view of God's spirituality. But he appears not to be contented with simply the notion of spirituality; and he attempts to show that there is 'a simplicity' in the divine essence which does not exist in created spirits. 'An intelligent being,' he says, 'has various powers or properties which are essential to it, and which'—unlike the divine perfections—'are all distinct. We cannot say that whatever is in the soul of man is the soul; but all its powers or properties taken together constitute the man.' Now, it is true, as he again observes, that 'wisdom, holiness, justice, faithfulness, are accidents in men; so that they who have them do not cease to be men, or to have the essential perfections of the human nature.' But these properties are moral; they belong to man in his relation to the divine law or administration of mercy; they do not—as the attributes of the same name do in God—belong to the essence of his nature; they are only the properties, not the powers, not the essential faculties of man's

mind or soul; they constitute, not his intellectuality, not his spirituality, but simply his moral character,—the aggregate of influences and motives and principles which determine his conduct as a subject of the divine government. But what shall be said of his knowing and reflecting powers,—of his perception, his consciousness, his memory, his judgment? Are these 'parts,' or 'ingredients,' or 'accidents?' Are they distinct from the intellect, or apart from one another? Or is not perception the entire mind receiving an idea from without, consciousness the entire mind receiving an idea from within, memory the entire mind recalling an idea, and judgment the entire mind comparing one idea with another? The very undividedness of the intellect, its uniqueness, its identity with what are called its powers or faculties, is what we denominate its spirituality, and what is distinguishable in it from a substance which consists of ingredients or parts. To speak of simplicity as something different from spirituality, and, at the same time, inferrible from unity, is, therefore, to speak without warrant, and to occasion confusion or error. That God is one, and that God is a spirit, are the only propositions respecting the indivisibility or oneness of the divine essence, which scripture contains or sanctions. To frame another, and talk of 'the simplicity of God,' is only to adopt one of those unmeaning scholastic distinctions which bewilder and mystify the understanding, and obscure or distort a facile and elementary truth.—ED.]

-----

## MONERGISM BOOKS

The Divine Attributes, by Thomas Ridgeley, D.D. Copyright © 2021

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored



in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of Monergism Books.

ePub, .mobi & .pdf Editions March 2021. Requests for information should be addressed to: Monergism Books, PO Box 491, West Linn, OR 97068