

— *Preface*

The writer of this little volume has been influenced to attempt its production by special circumstances, involving peculiar needs. Very early in life he was led to the study of the Holy Scriptures and to the exercise of a personal and saving faith in their Author. While yet but a child he was assured of a divine call to the office of the gospel ministry, for the duties of which office he had no means of preparation. Having no instructor, he sought to inform himself by means of books, the Bible being his chief reliance.

The progress made in systematic knowledge of holy things—as might have been expected—was very slow and exceedingly tedious. He needed a work on Systematic Theology. At last he began to meet with such works, but as their authors wrote in the midst of educational surroundings, their style was far above his comprehension. Hence the advance he made was still slow and tedious. But in time, in the absence of a person better qualified, he came to the position of instructor of Ministers' and Deacons' Institutes, in which it was necessary to discuss the doctrines of the Bible after something like a regular system. The men were unlearned, and hence the system needed to be especially simple. The works extant all supposed some educational attainments in their readers. Therefore, though at this time the books on theology were useful to him, they gave but little direct assistance to his pupils. An independent course, taking in the forms of thought and modes of expression peculiar to the people, was attempted as the only means to the desired end. Of course, it was then expected that the need for such a special plan would soon pass away, when the plan itself would necessarily cease. But as the necessity has continued the plan has continued also. And even now circumstances call, not for the discontinuance of the special system, but for its perfection and extension. The doctrines of our holy religion need to be studied in order,

according to some definite system; but simplicity should prevail—simplicity of arrangement and simplicity of language.

This plea for plainness is made because of these facts: 1. The great masses of mankind are still unlearned, still unaccustomed to the rules of logic, to long processes of reasoning, while they know nothing of the mysteries of science. 2. Leadership—natural leadership—is often born in the hovels of the poor and the homes of the uneducated. 3. The private members of churches who have but little time for books, but have great need for the truths that books teach, should find the truth suited to their time, their understanding, and their wants. Indeed, our hope lies in the religious education of the whole people.

These remarks are by no means intended as criticisms upon theologians or upon the theological works extant. All the writer means to say is this: There are people who live on a plain so far beneath the mental heights of these works as to be unable to reach up to them and enjoy their spiritual blessings. For these people there come to us calls for the preparation of special works—calls which, in the name of Christ, we must try to answer.

The writer would therefore remind the reader that this little book's only mission is to help *plain* people in the study of the *first* principles of divine truth. Critical examinations and exhaustive discussions do not fall within the purpose of this work. Hence, trusting that its purpose may be understood by the learned, and praying to God to give it acceptance in the hearts of the earnest and simple minded, the author respectfully submits the humble production to the candid judgment of his fellow men.

— CHAPTER

1

Being and Character of God

The knowledge of God and of the divine government is sometimes called the science of theology. If this be so, it is the science of all sciences. God is first, then come his works. Man is made to obtain knowledge; Solomon says:

“Also, that the soul be without knowledge, it is not good” (Proverbs 19:2).

When ignorant, a man is helpless, defenseless; he knows not what to do nor which way to go; and what knowledge can avail more to our security, peace, honor, and prosperity than that knowledge which acquaints us with the character of our Creator, Saviour, Preserver, and Judge, and instructs us in those laws which determine our relations in life and fix our hopes for eternity?

Before the charge “know thyself,” ought to come the far greater charge, “know thy God.” But, though the study of the being and character of God is a duty which we dare not disregard, still, let us not be unmindful of the fact that we vile, short-sighted worms should approach the solemn task of studying God with feelings of humility and awe. God is found of the lowly, but hides himself from the proud and self-sufficient man. When Daniel fasted and prayed and made confession of sin, the secrets of the Lord were unfolded to his view.

Let us consider:

I. WHERE GOD APPEARS TO US

(1) IN THE WORKS OF CREATION

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge” (Psalm 19:1–2).

“The invisible things of him [of God], from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead” (Romans 1:20).

When we look upon the heavens and the earth, fashioned by almighty power, and guided by the excellency of wisdom, we see with our eyes and handle with our hands the evidence of the existence and personality of a superior Being.

Man has met no being greater than himself, and he knows that the starry hosts, the mountains, the seas, and the living creatures around him, are not the workmanship of his skill and power: he knows they did not come from his hands. Then who did make these things? That they came from a Being infinitely greater than man is plain, from the fact that the works of creation infinitely excel anything in the works of man. A human track in a desert would be to me conclusive evidence that a human foot had trodden that desert. Thus Paul argues that the things which are seen and handled are proofs of the unseen things.

We have never seen a thought, nor a purpose, nor an emotion; yet we know that there are thoughts, purposes, and emotions, by what we can see and hear; even the words and deeds which thoughts and purposes create. It is thus that we see God in creation.

(2) IN THE WORKS OF PROVIDENCE (GENESIS 9)

“Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways; nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:16, 17).

In the fall of 1889, Henry M. Stanley, writing to the *New York Herald*, says, with reference to his most eventful African expedition: “A veritable divinity seems to have hedged us as we journeyed. I say it with all reverence. It has impelled us whither it would, effected its own will, but nevertheless guided

and protected us I endeavored to steer my course as direct as possible, but there was an unaccountable influence at the helm." The vulgar will call it luck, unbelievers will call it chance, but deep down in each heart there remains the feeling that in verity there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in common philosophy. I refer to this experience and confession of Stanley, not because of the novelty or oddity of the experience, but because of the boldness of the confession. For whether we are manly enough to confess it or not, we all, at times, feel with Shakespeare —

*"There is a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will."*

Let it not be forgotten that I am contending that then. There is such a thing as a general as well as a special providence; there is the supervision of the works of creation, especially of the intelligent creation.

Where is the philosopher who can declare and explain the laws by which the winds and clouds are forced to beat to the fields and springs a full and regular supply of dew and rain? They seem to be subject to freaks, and yet for thousands of years they have been held to the line as with bit and bridle, and so have been the carriers of life, beauty, and gladness to plant, to beast, to man. The following paragraph is taken from an article by Dr. Townsend, published in a number of the "Golden Rule," in the year 1889, and is worthy of note, because it shows that the masses of mankind perceive in nature that God is there: in other words, it shows that the human mind is possessed of the idea of the presence of God in the works of nature:

"The leading thought to which we call attention is this, that the human mind is in possession of the idea that there is something in the universe that properly may be called a Supreme Being. The proof of this is beyond reasonable question. The testimony, for instance, of Aristotle, is of weight. 'By the primitive and very ancient men,' he says, 'it has been handed down in the form of myths, and thus left to later generations, that it is the Divine which holds together all nature.'

"The words too of Plutarch are equally weighty: 'If we traverse the world, it is possible to find cities without walls, without letters, without kings, without wealth, without coin, without schools and theatres; but a city without a temple, or that practiseth not worship, prayer, and the like, no one ever saw.' And says Dr. Livingstone, speaking of the then newly discovered tribes of the interior of Africa, 'They have clear ideas of the Supreme God.' Different

names have been used, but all peoples have had the idea of some kind of a God or Supreme Being. The early Chinese called this Being the 'One God'; the Northmen called him the 'Invisible Odin'; the North American Indians called him the 'Great Spirit'; the ancient Peruvians called him the 'Sun God'; the Persians called him the 'Source of Light'; the people of India called him 'Brahm'; Plato called him the 'All'; the Greeks called him 'Zeus'; the Romans called him 'Jupiter'; the Mussulmans called him 'Allah'; the Jews called him Jehovah, and most civilized nations of the present time call him God.

"It always has been and it is now difficult to find any person who is an out and out atheist [or a no-God man]. It is admitted that now and then a man is met who says, 'I don't believe in a God.' But such a man is usually very superstitious, and when exposed to danger or death he will be found praying for help. Professor Tyndall, in his Belfast address, speaking of the strength of this God idea, says:

"No atheistic reasoning can, I hold, dislodge religion from the heart of man; logic cannot deprive us of life, and religion is life to the religious; as an experience of the consciousness, it is perfectly beyond the assaults of logic.'

"Faith in a God,' says Lichtenberg, 'is instinct. It is natural to men, just as going on two legs is natural. With many it is modified, and with many it is stifled; yet it exists, and is indispensable to the (internal) symmetry of consciousness.'

"Naturally as the new-born draws nourishment from its mother's breast,' says Jacobi, 'so the heart of man takes hold on God in surrounding nature.'

"Renan seemed for a while to be drifting into Atheism: but his words of late represent the feelings of many person who belong to his class of thinking, and at least imply a personal God.

"One thing only is certain,' he says: 'it is that the *fatherly* smile at *certain* hours shines across nature, and assures us that there is an eye looking at us, and a heart which follows us.'

"Such are the facts in support of the statement that the human mind is possessed with the idea of a Supreme Being."

See Nehemiah 9:6; Psalms 36:6; 2 Chronicles 16:9; 2 Corinthians 4:17.

(3) IN THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

(a) In the harmony of the records with the voice of nature.

Of the works of creation they simply say:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

Speaking of the providence to which I have alluded, they say:

“While the earth remaineth, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease” (Genesis 8:22).

Agreeing with the experience of Stanley and all other men who have lived with their eyes open, it is written:

“O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23; see Proverbs 16:1, 9; 19:21).

“Man’s goings are of the Lord” (Proverbs 20:24; see Daniel 2:20–23; 1 and 2 Kings).

(b) In its moral law in Exodus 20:1–17, and Deuteronomy 5:1–21. The head and socket at the knee joint, and the tongue and groove in the ceiling do not fit each other so closely and so neatly as this law fits the needs of the human heart. And the world could have day without the light of the sun as easily as man could have life and blessedness without the observance of these commandments. This law demands that men shall worship God and love one another, neither of which principles have origin in the depraved nature of man. Hence the source of this law, like the works of creation, starts higher than the mind of man, and declares the presence of a heart that is pure and holy.

(c) In its prediction of future events.

When some who were carried away captives to Babylon seemed to be hopeful of a speedy return to their own land, Jeremiah sent word to them to build them houses, for they were consigned to captivity for seventy years—to the time of the overthrow of Babylon, at which time they should be allowed to return to their homes.

“Build ye houses, and dwell *in them*; and plant gardens and eat the fruit of them;

“Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished.

“And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.

“For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; let not your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you, deceive you, neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed.

“For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name: I have not sent them, saith the Lord.

“For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place” (Jeremiah 29:5–10; see, also, 25:12).

Seventy years pass by and we come to the following record of the proclamation of Cyrus:

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying:

“Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

“Who is *there* among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (he is the God), which is in Jerusalem.

“And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, besides the freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:1–4; see Daniel 9:22–24).

Compare the following with the present state of Babylon:

“And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees’ excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

“It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there.

“But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there.

“And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses and dragons in *their* pleasant palaces: and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged” (Isaiah 13:19–22).

But here is a declaration of future events covering many hundreds of years. Nothing can be more certain evidence of the presence of a divine mind than the uncovering of times and things and seasons yet to come, especially when these stretch over a great many years. Passing over much very interesting testimony as to the signs of God's presence in the Bible, I come to what to me seems to be the crowning testimony; namely, the *Messianic idea*. Whoever traces the development of this Christ-thought in the Bible, from Genesis 3:15, through all its forms, down to the manger at Bethlehem, and thence to the cross, through the tomb, and on to the ascension—whoever traces this idea, with humble purpose to be informed, must of necessity perceive that it is but the unfolding of an eternal purpose, involving not only all of man's earthly history and mortal career, but having in view his interests in the world to come. Nor can he fail to see that the incidents which were to attend upon the development of the idea were all under the eye of him from whom the purpose came. See Chapter Third on "The Way of Salvation." The works of creation, the operations of providence, and the Sacred Scriptures clearly show the presence of a Being of infinite power, infinite knowledge, infinite wisdom, and perfect excellence of character; and where these attributes appear, there the presence of God is declared.

II. WHAT MAY BE KNOWN OF HIM

(1) "GOD IS A SPIRIT" (JOHN 4:24)

The great truth that meets us at the beginning of our study of the divine nature is that God is not akin to matter; that he is not akin to those things which may be seen with the eyes, heard with the ears, and handled with hands. He is Mind, Spirit; not manifesting himself in weight, measure, figure, etc., but manifesting himself in qualities and activities, in powers, in knowledge, in wisdom, in disposition. We get an idea of the Biblical view of the spirit-nature from the words of Jesus to his frightened disciples:

"Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I, myself; handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have" (Luke 24:39).

From this expression, it would seem that the Master meant by these words that even if the spirit might assume form so as to be seen, or might assume voice so as to be heard, yet certainly it could not have flesh and bones, as he had. Perhaps man, in all things, tends to grow into the features of his sur-

roundings. The man who has never seen other homes and other countries is apt to think that other homes and other countries are like his own. He is also likely to think that spirits must be somewhat like bodies, that God's existence is like the existence of men. God teaches us to guard against this idea in the command:

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4).

Moses, as he rehearses the law to the children of Israel, says:

"Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves (for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire); lest ye corrupt yourselves and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure" (Deuteronomy 4:15, 16).

We have not a single word in the history of Eden which denotes that Adam and Eve ever saw any form of God. It is said that they heard the *voice* of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Indeed, the whole tenor of the Bible is one continuous lesson, teaching men that they must not attempt to make to themselves any image of God, or to worship him in figures and forms. Said Jesus to the woman at the well:

"God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

As the creature-life is one of matter and forms, it is hard for us to understand a higher order of life—a life that has no body and that needs no forms. However, we perceive dimly the truth that God is a spirit, and believe it, waiting for eternity to bring us more light. That there are spiritual essences, we know; for we have perceived the existence of thought, to which we have never attached the ideas of weight, measure, form, of color.

(2) GOD IS SELF-EXISTENT

When God ordered Moses to return to Egypt on his mission of deliverance to Israel, Moses desired to know by what name he preferred to be presented to Israel. God replied:

"I AM THAT I AM. ... thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you" (Exodus 3:14).

After Moses had begun his work of deliverance, and at a time when his faith is sorely tried, God says to him: