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CHRIST, THE MANIFESTATION OF GOD.

BY

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God was manifest in the flesh.—1 TIM. iii. 16.

THERE was a deep truth conveyed by that inscription read by Paul, upon an Athenian altar, "To the unknown God." God is the great unknown; not only because there are depths in his nature which we cannot fathom, because his is an immensity which the utmost reaches of intellect fail to grasp; a duration which man knows not how to measure; an omnipotence which baffles all attempt at conception; and because such is the infinitude of every one of the divine perfections, that after exhausting all our strength in the intense pursuit, and rising to the dizziest heights, and pressing to the remotest verge of thought, we come back from the contemplation of the Godhead, astounded by the vastness, a trifling part of which only we have been able to see, and able but to articulate the humiliating question, Who by searching can find out God? In saying that God is unknown, we mean now not to speak of him as incomprehensible, as one whose nature never can be perfectly understood by his capacities, even when he has been revealed to

them with all possible clearness ; but we mean to speak of him as undiscoverable in any measure however imperfect, or to any extent however limited, unless as he reveals himself. It is not the impossibility of man fully comprehending the glorious nature of God, exploring to its utmost boundaries a field which is so absolutely limitless, and taking in with his finite capacities the full sweep of a subject which is infinite ; but the impossibility to which we now have reference, is that of attaining to any knowledge even the least and most inadequate of the Divine Being, except as he furnishes it to us. We have no faculty by which to obtain an immediate perception of the Great Supreme. He is not far from every one of us. He fills all that is around, above, beneath us ; and yet the eye cannot see God, with our hands we cannot feel him, the ear catches no sound of his footsteps. He is covered with an impenetrable veil ; and though he is ever with us, ever beholding us, though it is He that supports every faculty of our natures, holds every fibre of our frames, guides every motion of our bodies, directs every pulsation of our hearts, superintends every exercise of our minds, yet we cannot behold him any more than if all the space which he fills were void unconscious emptiness. And though we had the faculties of angels, or with a vision supernaturally assisted, like that of Elisha's servant, we were able to see the celestial visitants that throng our world, or to see the human soul as it forsakes its tenement of clay for its upward or its downward flight, still though able to discern created

spirits, we would not be able to penetrate the thick darkness in which He dwells enshrouded. It is not within the reach of any creature-faculty to uncover the awful mystery of His nature, nor to look direct upon the essence of the Godhead. The King eternal, immortal, invisible, is by all unseen; and in his existence, his perfections, his purposes, he is to all beings a profound secret, except as he voluntarily discloses himself to them.

With what angels may know of God, or with what devils may know of God, we are not now particularly concerned. We shall not undertake to inquire how far his glory and his grace are made known to the one, or what are the methods by which they are conveyed; nor to what extent the others learn to know him, whose just vengeance has lighted the fires of their torment. The text speaks of a manifestation of God to man. Man was not created to eat, and drink, and die; to pass his earthly existence absorbed in carnal pursuits, and earthly cares, and transitory pleasures. He was made to have communion with God, to serve him, to contribute to his glory. But a God unknown and unrevealed cannot be worshipped nor obeyed. He may awaken a sort of mysterious dread, such as silence and night inspire; but he can neither be praised, adored, nor loved. Jehovah has therefore made himself known to men. Our text tells us '*God was manifest in the flesh.*'

I do not feel it necessary to prove to you now that this actually took place at the incarnation of Jesus Christ. It is as plain as it can be upon the

face of the passage, that this is the event to which the sacred writer refers. I shall not go into any labored criticism to prove to you that this verse stands uncorrupted as it came from the pen of Paul. I shall not detail to you the various ways by which men have sought to evade its plain testimony to the Deity of Jesus. I shall not cull arguments from the rest of Scripture, by which the doctrine of this passage may be corroborated. I may presume that so elementary a truth of our religion as the union of Deity and manhood in the person of Jesus, is understood and embraced. Or if there be among my hearers any who have doubts upon so fundamental a point, I shall just leave my text to stand out before them in its own simple majesty, and with all the positiveness of its declaration, 'God was manifest in the flesh.' I shall not mar the effect of this utterance of the oracles of truth, by presuming that it needs to be substantiated, which God has delivered, or that it can gather confirmation from argument which He has declared. I bring no other witness. I present no farther demonstration. I give you this one statement to which God's spirit has set his seal: and I do not ask, I demand your belief.

I assume then, as undisputed, what my text declares; or if any dispute it they must contend with their Maker, not with me. That which we design at present is to occupy you with a few thoughts directed to the illustration of the fulness of meaning contained in the inspired expression before us. Our aim shall be simply to educe the idea, which is pre-

sented to the mind when it is said, God was manifest in the flesh; we wish, in other words, to consider the incarnation as a manifestation of God. And if we confine ourselves to this single truth, since it is alone presented in our text, we shall not, we trust, be considered as either denying or underrating the other ends of the incarnation, because it does not fall within the range which we propose to ourselves to speak of them. It is, we gratefully acknowledge, by the incarnation of the Son of God alone, that we are provided with a competent mediator between God and man. It was thus alone that an adequate atonement could be made for human sin. It is by the incarnation that we have set before us our only perfect example; by it that we are permitted to indulge that confidence in our divine Redeemer, as one who can sympathize with us in trials which he has himself experienced. But while we would not forget, and mean not to undervalue these and other inestimable benefits which we owe to the incarnation of the Son of God, we wish now to abstract your minds from every other advantage it confers, and fasten your attention upon the single one presented in the text, which is itself enough to make us adore this sacred mystery and devoutly prize it as of inestimable worth. If the incarnation were nothing more to us than a manifestation of God; if it gave us no mediator, brought us no atonement, set before us no example, provided us no compassionate High Priest, but merely brought God down to us, and enabled us to look, still with adoring awe, and yet with admiring

confidence upon him, and to gain fresh and enlarged views of his nature and glory, still this mystery of godliness would have deserved our wonder, and we should have pointed you to it as to a thing second in importance to nothing that we can imagine. And though it is not for us to limit the wisdom and grace of God, nor to say what he might have done, or what he might not have done under other circumstances, yet it does appear as though we would be almost warranted in saying, not only that the incarnation shines with a lustre far superior to every other communication God has made of himself to our race, but that it is superior to any other which could have been devised for making himself known. It does appear as though God, whose it is to bring good out of evil, and to make the wrath of man to praise him, had made the guilty trespass of man which needed the incarnation in order to its atonement, the occasion of bringing himself nearer to his creatures, and laying himself more open to their astonished and admiring gaze, than he could have done, had not that which he abhors presented the occasion. It is ours, then, at this time to contemplate this master-stroke of divine wisdom, and to see how completely the enemy was made to overreach himself; and how that which was done out of no desire to promote the divine glory, and from no regard for human welfare, but out of hostility both to God and man, was nevertheless made in this case, as in so many others, to turn in favour of both, so that to God there is gathered a more ample harvest of glory,

and to man is afforded the opportunity, as we cannot but think, of a fuller acquaintance with his Maker, and a more intimate communion with him, than though sin had not entered, and the putting of it away required that God should become manifest in the flesh.

We mean not to imply, of course, that God was wholly unknown in the world before the incarnation, and that no other way existed or was possible than this, of arriving at a knowledge of his existence and attributes. We do not say that the incarnation stands alone as the sole method by which God can reveal himself to his creatures; it does stand alone as the only case in which God was manifested, personally exhibited to men; and its glory consists in the fact, that while there were many successive modes of divine communication, rising one above the other in fulness and clearness, this towers loftily above them all, surpassing stage after stage of revelation, to each of which, had we known only that, we should have ascribed perfection.

There is a light in nature which reveals God, and there are lessons respecting him spread out before the eyes of all men. The invisible things of God are clearly seen from the creation of the world; his eternal power and Godhead are distinctly written there; and, as if to make the testimony of nature full, and to the last degree complete, man himself was made in the image, after the likeness of God; so that to know his Creator, all that he had to do was to turn inward and look upon himself, and trace the lineaments of his Maker there.

We may not pause here; but if we could stop and gaze about us, and gaze inward, and see how the knowledge of God streams in upon us from ten thousand sources, and then think how much more the pure eye of unfallen man could have read where we see nothing, and how the image of God impressed upon the heart, now so blurred and defaced, was then distinctly traceable in every feature, we would almost be prepared to say, if we knew of no further communications God had made, Surely this is the most ample, the most certain, the most direct instruction concerning an invisible, incomprehensible Creator that can possibly be imagined. To write his name and his attributes on everything about us, on all that lives and moves; yea, on every leaf and flower, and fleecy cloud, and babbling brook, and ray of light and drop of dew; and then to grave his very image on the soul of man itself! how can God be forgotten or unknown in such a world, by such a soul?

But revelation has surpassed nature. We speak not now of its meeting those new necessities which the apostasy has introduced, and for which nature has not the semblance of a remedy; but of this one particular, which is now before us—the making known of God. We cannot here delay to tell of the teachings of the Scriptures, and to unfold what they with all plainness of speech declare, respecting the existence, the perfections, and the purposes of Jehovah, and to show you what a flood of light direct from heaven itself is here, above all the light that nature had, and all that nature taught. We

might do this in a manner which would make you feel that here was an immense advance, not only upon what man in the blindness and the degradation of his present state knows without a revelation, but upon all that in the uprightness of his original condition he could have known without it. The race was kept in pupilage for centuries; teacher after teacher was sent, inspired from above, to train the world in divine knowledge; lesson after lesson was given fresh from heaven; and, as if words alone could not sufficiently convey ideas of celestial objects, a complete system of symbolic representation was introduced, after the shadow and example of heavenly things; holy places were made, by a celestial pattern, as figures of the true; and thus invisible things were embodied and made visible and tangible. Prophet and priest fulfilled each their course to teach the people knowledge; psalmists added their heaven-born strains; the Spirit of God, himself the author of these various lessons, taught them to the heart illumined by his grace. And here, again, if we knew not, from the actual fact, what was yet in reserve, we might be ready to ask what farther could be added to these teachings, so abundant, so comprehensive and so explicit of the Word of God, to make Jehovah better known?

And yet, though the language of inspired communication may leave nothing untold which words can convey, and nothing farther to be desired, nothing even possible, in the way of description of the nature and perfections of the Most High; still it would introduce us to a nearer acquaintance with

this dread Being if, instead of merely distantly hearing about him, we should be made witnesses of his acts, and be permitted to gaze direct upon positive exhibitions of those attributes of power, and justice, and grace, of which we had been told. Here is another advance in the presentation of the knowledge of God. Neither can we dilate upon this, but only refer you in the general to those immediate workings of his miraculous power, by which he has, again and again, accomplished his designs of mercy and of justice. Thus, the fearful overthrow of Sodom, the plagues sent on hardened Pharaoh, the judgments on murmuring Israel, speak more impressively than any language, the holiness, the justice, and the dreadful vengeance of our God. So the various interpositions of God on behalf of his people, for their deliverance from danger and for their rescue from their foes, the magnificence of his descent on Sinai, the food he vouchsafed them in the desert, the guidance of the pillar of cloud and of fire, give a more vivid conception of God, and let us more into the beatings of his gracious heart, and show us more of the glory of his nature than any words could express.

And now one might, with strong appearance of reason, conclude that the various modes of revealing God must be complete, and that nothing more can be imagined to be added to those already recited. The existence and the perfections of God are written upon every fragment of creation; his very image is impressed upon the soul of man; his nature and attributes are fully and explicitly taught

in his Word; they are clearly displayed in the acts of power, and mercy, and judgment, done by him amongst men. Possessed of these, we would have said that no new plan could be devised to add anything to the completeness of those already in existence; and that, if any accession were to be made to the knowledge we possess respecting God, it must come, not in some new form of communication, but by enlarging the channel of the old; it must be by God's making an increased display of himself in his works of creation and providence, or enabling us to see with greater distinctness what is already written there; or by rendering his image on man's heart more distinct and perfect; or by adding some new revelation regarding himself to his inspired word; or by some yet unheard-of, immediate, and supernatural exhibition of his attributes. And still the wisdom of God has shown us that it was not yet exhausted, that there was something yet possible, superior to them all. We would have pronounced it incredible, had it not actually occurred. It is for the invisible God to make himself visible, and assume a habitation among men, to be born, and live, and die. This, which was in appearance forbidden by his spirituality, his omnipresence, and his eternity, was nevertheless accomplished, by God being manifested in the flesh; and now, in the language of one of the appointed witnesses of this stupendous event, we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked upon him, and our hands have handled that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us.

The unseen, eternal, omnipotent God dressed himself in a human form, and gave himself a local, temporal, tangible existence, so as to bring himself within reach of our corporeal senses; he came down to dwell among us, not by a mere symbol of his presence, but really, personally, visibly. And thus he disclosed himself to man, not at second hand, through the ministry of his servants, nor by occasional and momentary displays of his own dread power and magnificence, but by a life of intimate, uninterrupted converse in their midst. We now no longer merely read about him, or hear of him, or reason respecting him, or look upon his likeness which we bear within us (alas! almost obliterated), or gaze upon the dread workings of one himself concealed from sight; but we have been with him and seen him, listened to his words, observed his acts, witnessed his Spirit, marked the tenor of his life, been admitted to a close, endearing familiarity with him. We have not, indeed, been taken up to heaven to see God there; but, what is better far for us, he has come down to earth and manifested himself here. And he is disclosed to us, not attended by the voice louder than the peal of seven thunders, the dread magnificence, the blinding glory, the terrific displays of power which would have made our flesh to quake upon us, and deprived us of all conscious exercise of reason, if not of life. But the Divinity is so softened down to our weak senses, that we can bear to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In seeing him we see the Father. The God whom no

man hath seen at any time, the only begotten Son hath declared. In the person of Jesus, who was himself the true God and eternal life, who is the image of the invisible God, the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, the Word of God, he has been exhibited to view. What the written word of God labours to spread out for us on the page, that Jesus was in his whole person—the revelation of God. In seeing Christ, we gaze on him, whom else no man can see and live. He is no longer the unseen, the unknown,—he is the manifested Deity.

It is interesting, after contemplating the great truths and important facts of the Bible, in the certainty of their presentation and the perfection of their outline, and it gives us a fresh conviction how admirably they are adapted to the wants of man, to turn to those without a revelation and see how the deep necessities of human nature made themselves felt even there, and created earnest longings and dim anticipations of the truth even among those who were ignorant of it in its reality; to find that as we stray among the distorted fancies of heathendom, and their gross absurdities, and their frantic abominations, we may pick up, here and there, battered unsightly fragments of the polished and symmetrical statue of truth, which, it is true, we could never gather into one, nor even from these confused and scattered fragments image to ourselves the figure that they formed, but which, with a model of the statue before us, we can nevertheless recognize and assign each to its place. And

now, the human form they mostly gave their gods, their incarnations and apotheoses, the fabled intercourse of gods and men, gods dwelling on the earth, and great deliverers born of a pure virgin,—what are these, found up and down the Pagan world, but blind nature unconsciously yearning after the truth, which we behold in Jesus, of “God manifest in the flesh?”

Some have busied themselves in the search for heathen parallels to this and other Christian truths, with the view of bringing them into discredit, by thus impliedly rating them as of equal authority with acknowledged falsehoods. And they have paraded the results of their search with an air of triumph, as though they had convinced themselves that the incarnation of Jesus was no more entitled to belief than the incarnations of Brahma, or the trinity in Jehovah were no more to be regarded than that of the Hindoo godhead, and as though the infinite superiority of Christian truth above Pagan error did not prevent both from standing on a precise level. But no amount of spurious coin that can be shown me, shall make me cast away the genuine of which it is the attempted though worthless representation. I find in Christianity the truth pure and unadulterated—the genuine coin bearing the stamp of Heaven. And I shall not relinquish it because there may be discovered analogies in the superstitions of the Pagan. I have no fear of such discoveries. I rather welcome them, and lay hold of every one that is brought me, as to my mind affording additional

confirmation of the Bible faith; for I find in such analogies fresh evidence that the Scripture truth is the truth which man requires, seeing that by necessity of nature, as it were, he still blindly gropes after it, even when it is not given him from above.

And now we ought, for the proper presentation of our subject, to go into some detail regarding the various perfections of the Divine Nature, and show how, in respect to them all, our knowledge receives new confirmation and additional clearness by this manifestation of God in the flesh; and how, in the case of many, it receives large accessions above all that was previously known, or could, apart from the incarnation, be known regarding them. And here be it observed, that we are not now speaking of Jesus as a teacher. We are not comparing the instructions which He the seal of all the prophets delivered, with those which had previously been communicated by others under the guidance of His Spirit. Though if this were our theme, we would claim for Him emphatically the name and the character of the Great Teacher, and we fancy that we would not find it difficult to show, that the new truths which He delivered, and the new force and clearness which old truths received from His lips, place the dispensation which He introduced in comparison with that which preceded it, as the brightness of noonday to the early dawn. It is not, however, the superiority of the instructions which He, who spake as man never spake, communicated, that our subject invites us to consider, but simply the manifestation of God in His person.

The very existence of God receives new confirmation here. Indeed, some have referred to the miracles of Jesus as affording to their minds the only argument which was absolutely irrefragable, that there is an intelligent being, the author and the Lord of Nature. The unity of God is also freshly demonstrated both against the thousand deities of an idolatrous Paganism, and the two independent principles of good and evil of the Persian superstition, by the unlimited authority which Jesus freely exercised, commanding obedience in the kingdom of darkness as well as that of light. But we cannot delay on these and similar points.

We pass to the holiness of God. This was set in a light by the incarnation in which it never appeared before, and in which (without designing to limit the wisdom or power of God) we may say that, as far as we can judge, it could not have appeared without it. Our proof of this is drawn not from the fact, melancholy as it is, that the idea of holiness is entirely lost among the heathen, to whom God has not made Himself known. They have not only parted with its reality within themselves and in their own practice, but the very notion of it has vanished from among them. And among all the attributes which the Pagan ascribes to his deities,—some of them of the most horrible and shocking character,—that of holiness is never once to be met with. And when Christianity comes to be introduced among them, our missionaries have to grapple with this giant difficulty in the outset, of waking in the breasts of a people an idea, which

has died out ages since, of which none among them have any sort of conception, and for which not even a tolerable equivalent can be found in their language.

But though the heathen world had lost this most necessary idea of God's holiness, it was preserved among the people who possessed a revelation; yet even among them God's holiness was not known, and it was impossible that any verbal revelation should teach it as it became known through the medium of the incarnation. And here we cannot pretend to detail the various ways in which the incarnation illustrated God's holiness. It will doubtless spontaneously occur to you all that the very errand of Jesus was to magnify God's holy law, and to destroy sin as the object of His supreme abhorrence; and that the necessity here exhibited of a perfect atonement for sin, before even God himself can consistently with His nature deliver the sinner from death, sheds a lustre on the holiness of God which nothing that we can conceive of but this could ever have put there. Without, however, stopping to unfold these and other considerations to which your minds will readily turn, and which amply establish the point before us, there is another aspect less frequently presented, and which perhaps may not immediately suggest itself to all my hearers, in which the incarnation illustrates, as nothing else could, God's holiness.

We are told of the spotless holiness of God. We see it in all His acts, and all His dealings with His people. We witness ourselves, or have confirmed

unto us by those who did, the immediate exertions of His power, which had for their object the display of His holiness. And yet this is the holiness of God in heaven—a God who has all things at His command, to whom no possible temptation can consequently be presented, and who, apart from the holiness of His nature, cannot, from His very independence and all-sufficiency, have even the slightest shadow of a motive to do what is wrong. What is there to exhibit to us that this unsullied holiness of God arises from the perfect purity of His being, and is not in part the mere effect of His infinite exaltation? If holiness is always triumphant, what is there which so evidently brings out that this is due to His ineffably righteous nature, and which so positively excludes the thought that this may in part be because a triumph is easily gained by one who is beyond the reach of a foe, and where no danger could possibly be apprehended? And what is there which positively excludes the thought that He is requiring something hard of man, when He demands of him never to yield to a temptation, nor to be overcome by an assault, when they come so thickly and so powerfully upon him? But who is not conscious that a new and decided impression is made upon his mind, when he sees the Most High resign for a season the infinite exaltation he possesses, take a frail and feeble nature with all its sinless infirmities, and expose Himself to temptation, and then observes how with all the weaknesses of His assumed nature, in all the trials to which He was subjected, and though He was tempted in

all points like as we are, He was nevertheless entirely free from the least taint of sin, and that Christ fainting in the desert equally with Christ ruling on the throne of the heavens, is perfect in holiness? This reveals to us a side of this attribute, and under an impressive aspect, which but for the incarnation never could have been seen.

And thus it is with all the attributes of God. They all gather fresh lustre from the mystery of the incarnation; and when they are viewed in the face of Jesus Christ, they appear with an impressiveness which they never before assumed. Where was the long-suffering of God ever so exhibited as we see it in Jesus? The sparing mercy of God to rebellious men is indeed exhibited in His providence perpetually toward each individual sinner and toward the whole race. It is a proof of most amazing long-suffering, that He has not lost all patience with our guilty race, and that the iniquities, and the crimes, and the abominations which are perpetrated in the world, have not provoked Him to sweep the whole out of existence, and to bear with such provocations no longer. But it gives us a more vivid sense of this long-suffering, when we see God coming in human form, and dwelling in the very midst of these iniquities and provocations, becoming himself the object of unmeasured hostility, bearing every form of reproach and indignity, and with a power at His command which would have consumed offenders in a moment, allowing Himself to be led unresistingly as a lamb to the slaughter, and making use of His divine prerogative

only to open paradise to the penitent thief, while from His lips, instead of imprecations, we hear the voice of intercession, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

If He had given proofs before of His regard for the human race, what a nearness does this induce beyond anything else that is conceivable, that He should come and live among us and wear a human nature, become bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, partake of our infirmities and weaknesses, that He might deliver us from them, and take our nature with Him to glory, and seat it on the throne as a pledge that we should be glorified with Him as His brethren, as the members of His body, as a part of Himself! And how is the love of God illustrated by the incarnation! This, in fact, is the great proof of divine love, beside which every other, however vast in itself, appears diminutive. God commendeth His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

And so if we had time to speak of the truth of God and His justice, and His wisdom, and the other perfections of His nature, we should see how all of them gain a new radiance from God manifest in the flesh. This is our warrant for saying as we have said, and now repeat, that the incarnation manifests God to men as He was never exhibited to them before; and that if it brought no other benefit with it than this, that it brought God nearer to us, and made Him better known, it would deserve still to be reckoned an unspeakable gift, and would be worthy

of the highest praises that can throughout eternity be paid.

There is another side of our subject which we had desired to present, but which the lateness of the hour forbids us now to touch. We have shown you how the character of God is exhibited to man in the incarnation. We would like to have pointed out to you how the feelings of man's natural heart toward God were exhibited here likewise, in their treatment of God manifest in the flesh; how perfect goodness and celestial excellence raised against Him the malice which betrayed, condemned, and crucified Him; and how it is the same enmity of the natural heart still which leads so many to side with His persecutors, and if they do not madly cry Away with Him, nevertheless to show by their lives as well as by their professions, that they will not have this man to reign over them.