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SERMON CLXXIII.

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THE MAN THAT GATHERED STICKS ON THE SABBATH.

NUMBERS XV. 32—36.—*And while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man that gathered sticks upon the Sabbath-day. And they that found him gathering sticks brought him unto Moses and Aaron, and unto all the congregation. And they put him in ward, because it was not declared what should be done to him. And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall surely be put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died; as the Lord commanded Moses.*

THIS is truly, says the profane man and the infidel, *a case of oppression*. A man publicly put to death, and that too under divine authority, for so small an offence as gathering a few sticks upon the Sabbath day. And it would be well for the church and the world, if a similar sentiment of irreverence for God were not cherished, and in many cases extensively acted upon, even among the professed disciples of the Lord Jesus.

1. It is freely acknowledged that public opinion even in Christian lands will support the sentiment of the profane man and the infidel in this case, rather than the sentiment of the man of piety and devotion. But public opinion, though never to be despised, is very far from being always a safe rule of action. Public opinion, however correct, or however accurately ascertained, is only the aggregate opinion of the multitude which composes the community. The wisest and the best of men have been often very confident that they were in the right, yet have afterwards found and

SERMON CLXXIV.

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THE SECRET COUNSELS OF GOD.

DEUTERONOMY XXIX. 29.—*The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*

THE Bible is not designed to give universal knowledge to man; nor to bring within the reach of our feeble comprehension all the principles and purposes of the divine administration. On the contrary its declared object is to afford such information as to the great facts, in which we are essentially concerned, as may render us "wise unto salvation." Those doctrines and precepts, which it is important for us *thoroughly* to know, are clearly stated, lucidly explained, and urgently enforced by argument and illustration. But in making known those great mysteries of godliness, which are wholly beyond the ken of our dim intelligence, and which we are yet bound assuredly to believe, the sacred writers simply declare the facts under the sanction of, *Thus saith the Lord.*

It is thus evidently not the design of revelation to gratify curiosity or foster the pride of intellect; but rather to afford such glimpses of the great system of God's government as will bring the lofty looks of man in the dust, with a humbling sense of his ignorance; that the Lord alone may be exalted.

There are important reasons why God has reserved so much that is connected with the subject matter of divine revelation to himself, wrapped in an impenetrable veil from the view of mortals. Some things are secret, because with our present powers, we are utterly unable to comprehend them: and some, because a full knowledge of them is inconsistent with a state of probation. It seems to have been the special design of God to render the disclosure of truth sufficiently full and explicit to satisfy a humble spirit, willing to repose a filial confidence in divine wisdom and goodness—and yet to leave enough of mystery to cause a development of the real feelings of the un-sanctified heart.

If the great things of religion, and all the destinies of the spiritual world were fully unfolded to our senses, our state of probation would be at an end. As all men must know the truth of things thus revealed, whether they loved or hated them; such belief would be no evidence of the subjection of the heart to the fear and love of God. Whereas, now, we find it a remarkable fact, that truth is *so* revealed, that while the honest inquirer is fully satisfied, the captious objector finds ample materials for caviling—the proud heart very plausible pretexts for its opposition. The Bible, therefore, is so admirably adapted to be a decisive test of character, that a cordial belief in its doctrines is the best evidence of a renewed, humble spirit; while a disposition to raise objections evinces the predominating influence of the carnal heart which is enmity against God.

A further reason, why so small a portion of universal truth is actually revealed, doubtless is, that the grand development is reserved to form the employment of eternity. How absurd is it for feeble man, in this infancy of his being, to push his inquiries into those illimitable fields of knowledge, which are only to be opened by the angel of death, and whose survey will occupy his immortal energies through the whole of an endless duration.

Infinite wisdom, clearly discerning what degree, and what kinds of knowledge are adapted to our condition, and are adequate to our necessities in this brief existence, has imparted just so much light and instruction, as are exactly commensurate with our present exigencies and the proper exercise of our limited capacities. While at the same time, lest we should be elated by an abundance of revelation, we are effectually humbled by a reference to regions of truth which we cannot penetrate, and fountains of light not yet opened.

Thus the matters contained in the holy scriptures are divided into two distinct classes—the one consisting of subjects fully revealed—brought entirely within our comprehension; which we are required to understand and treasure up as the principles of our conduct and the very elements of our spiritual life. The other class consists of those high, mysterious doctrines, which we are neither required nor permitted fully to understand, but which it is the office of faith to receive simply on the divine authority.

A careful regard to this distinction is practically important, because it guards us against two opposite dangers. For as on the one hand it is criminal to undervalue the knowledge of those things which are fully revealed in the inspired volume; so on the other, it is offensive to God and dangerous to the souls of men to extend our speculations beyond the limits which divine wisdom has prescribed, or to attempt to investigate and decide upon those things in religion which the

Deity has not been pleased to make known. No language, indeed, can express the impious arrogance of those who resolve to be wise above what is written, and vainly attempt to break through the barriers which divine wisdom has erected to limit the inquiries of mortal man. It is a practical denial of the right of our Almighty Maker to decide what knowledge is attainable and necessary in this preparatory existence; and what subjects are unsuited to our present condition and are therefore wisely veiled from our examination.

As life is brief and time exceedingly precious, we have none to waste in needless, fruitless speculations; especially as those mental efforts which are thrown away in striving to penetrate the deep things of God, and to obtain clear views of those spiritual objects which no man can see and live, might be profitably and delightfully devoted to those plainly revealed doctrines, in the knowledge of which is life everlasting. These doctrines in which we are so abundantly instructed, and which are so solemnly urged upon our attention, furnish so wide a field, that the longest life and the mightiest intellect are insufficient for its full investigation.

In order properly to discriminate between those secret things which belong to God, and those revealed truths which belong to us, it is only necessary to remark, that the former are made known by a simple naked declaration of God's word; whereas the latter are commended to our attention by explanations and instructions. As to *those*, we are only to inquire what hath the Lord spoken, and to place implicit confidence in his word. As to *these*, we are to give all diligence to add to our faith knowledge, and to search the scriptures daily, that we may be as scribes well instructed in the things of the kingdom.

These preliminary remarks may be illustrated and exemplified by considering some of those *secret things*, whose existence and reality the Bible most forcibly declares, and yet whose *nature* and *essence* are not so revealed, as to be within the scope of human comprehension.

It is evidently an important object of the sacred volume to make known to men the divine existence and perfections. It holds up the character of God, and commands every intellectual eye to be fixed upon it with intense regard, and to contemplate it with overpowering emotions of reverence and love. But in what manner is this infinite object presented to our minds? Does the Bible make an effort to explain the divine essence? Does it attempt to lead men to find out the Almighty to perfection? Does it ever profess to bring down to the level of human comprehension the high and awful theme of God's eternity, or his all pervading presence and knowledge? Evidently not. These deep things of God are clearly announced to men, and they

are required, not to comprehend them, but to receive them on the divine testimony. If our hope of enjoying the divine favor depended upon our fully understanding the essential attributes of Deity, we must sink down in utter despair. But, though we cannot penetrate these secret things of God; we enjoy a full disclosure of every thing in the divine character and government, which it is important for us to know, and in which we are immediately concerned. His laws, precepts, promises and threatenings are so plainly stated, that a child can understand them. His holiness, justness and goodness are written as with a sunbeam; and the principles of his moral government are engraven upon our hearts as with a pen of iron or the point of a diamond. It is as absurd as it is impious for men to seek for profound explanations to accompany the revelation we enjoy of the nature and perfections of God. The proud skeptic asks, Where is the evidence that God existed from eternity and was before all things? Where are the witnesses that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth? It is obvious in the very nature of things that no such testimony can exist. We must receive these great truths on the simple declaration of God's word, or else, rejecting the only light we can enjoy, be left to wander in utter darkness.

Equally fruitless and presumptuous are all inquiries and conjectures as to the events or history of a past eternity. If the divine existence be without beginning of days, then an infinite duration had already passed, before the creation of our world. It is sometimes asked what transactions took place under the divine government, what was done by the Almighty, in that illimitable expanse of being which preceded the creation of our world! Why was not man created millions of ages sooner? Where is the history of the races of beings which constituted the subjects of the divine government in far distant periods of the past? To such questions it is evident that no answer can be returned—they may be urged and repeated, but heaven and earth continue silent, because they relate to secret things which belong to God. The Bible gives us no useless information—it instructs us in nothing as to which we are wholly unconcerned. Certainly it is not necessary for us to know what took place in the periods of a past eternity; and therefore we are left wholly in the dark upon the subject. Our condition in this world, so replete with danger and responsibility, requires that our undivided attention should be fixed upon the things which belong to our own everlasting peace; therefore, all disclosures in relation to other portions of the empire of Jehovah, and other periods of his government, are reserved for a state of being where guilt and fear and death shall be no longer.

It is another inexplicable mystery, which human reason in vain

attempts to fathom, that in the creation and moral government of this world sin and misery should have gained admission. Why, it is often asked, did not Omnipotence utterly exclude moral and physical evil from the system? Why did he not preserve our race from its pollutions? Why did he suffer the powers of darkness to effect their fell purpose and spread such desolation through our world? Why have not the ravages of sin been long since arrested, and the race of man rescued from its accursed dominion? These are questions which no mortal can answer; because they relate to secret counsels of God, which he has not been pleased to disclose. But it is as unreasonable, as it is wicked, to draw a conclusion from the fact that no reasons are assigned, that none exist. A child is very perverse and foolish who despises his father's proceedings because he cannot understand the reasons which govern them. Shall mortal man then be more just and wise than his Maker? Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God? It does indeed appear awfully mysterious, that such a direful invasion of the holiness and happiness of the universe should have been permitted—that this fair world should have been suffered to become a theatre of rebellion—a moral aceldama—that so many millions of immortals should have been ruined forever by the great destroyer, and that the direful consequences of human guilt are to be perpetuated in the torments of eternal death. But may we not be assured that all our difficulties arise from our dim, partial, and limited views of the subject? As we always find in those affairs where the reasons of the divine conduct *are* given, that it is characterized by perfect wisdom and goodness; would it not be a fair inference that the same attributes are really present in those cases where the reasons which govern the proceedings, are not given? When we perceive that the Creator of the world, with all possible events fully in his view, and in the exercise of perfect benevolence, did see fit to permit sin to be introduced, with all its fearful consequences; does it not become us to rest perfectly assured, that such reasons for the divine conduct must have existed as to render it perfectly consistent with infinite goodness, and a supreme desire to promote in the highest degree the holiness and happiness of the intelligent universe?

Many volumes have been written and much mental labor wasted, in controversy whether the admission of sin was in accordance with, or in opposition to the divine will; whether such a system of mingled good and evil was chosen, as is on the whole promotive of the greatest good; or whether the principles of unholiness came into operation by their own uncontrollable force, the divine will and purposes to the contrary notwithstanding. But to what good purpose is the discussion? Nothing has been decided. It is one of the secret things which belong to God. All that concerns us in the affair is fully revealed.

We are distinctly informed that man came from his Maker's hand pure and holy, capable of perfect and endless blessedness. We are assured that the corruption and depravation of his nature was the result of wilful transgression, deliberate rebellion, and that in consequence of this wicked apostasy our whole race became polluted and guilty; inclined to evil and bent upon self-destruction. God's holy word declares that so far from being the author of sin, it is the abominable thing which his soul hateth. The gospel makes known to us the amazing sacrifice which divine love has offered, to satisfy the claims of law and purchase deliverance and pardon for guilty men, and proclaims the terms on which we may escape the direful evils in which we have involved ourselves by sin, and become heirs of everlasting life. With such plain directions as to the way of salvation, so full a disclosure of our condition as sinners and the provisions of divine mercy for our relief, what farther revelation is necessary? Our danger, our duty, and our way of escape are all made plain. And it were far wiser in sinful dying men to embrace immediately the terms of the gospel treaty by repentance and faith; to give all diligence to secure the blessings of the great salvation; and thus escape the wrath to come and lay hold on endless life, than to employ themselves in finding out doubts and objections about the origin of evil and its admission into our world. When they shall be required to create a world, it will be time enough for them to state their difficulties and urge the inquiry, how it can be made and kept perfectly holy. Our first great work is to get safe to heaven. If through rich grace we secure admission there, we shall have ample scope and opportunity to survey all the regions of light and knowledge which shall then be thrown open to our inspection. But at present we have more appropriate employment than fruitless speculations as to these secret things which belong unto God.

Another subject which is placed wholly out of the reach of our investigation, is the entire consistency of the divine purposes with the freedom of human agency. The question arises, How can it be that our uncontrolled and voluntary volitions and actions can be reconcilable with that predetermination of all events, or that absolute foreknowledge which renders them equally certain, which the Bible ascribes to the moral Governor of the world? In this case, predestination and foreknowledge amount to the same thing. For if an event be infallibly foreknown, its occurrence is just as certain and inevitable as it could be made by any possible decree. The fixed certainty of future events, and this invariable plan of action which exists in the mind of God are abundantly revealed in Scripture. The whole system of prophecy rests upon this basis, that all the acts of created

agents in all future times, have a present existence, a fixed certainty of taking place, in the divine mind. And these statements of revelation are in unison with the dictates of enlightened reason. It is impossible to conceive of an infinite law-giver, the Maker and sovereign of all things, without ascribing to him an all-comprehending view of all events, a perfect control of all inferior agents, and a clear discernment of the end from the beginning. It is thus abundantly taught in the Bible, that all events which take place were certainly and unalterably fixed in the divine mind. The Bible also declares with equal plainness, that we are entirely and justly accountable, that we act freely in view of motives, and that the divine decrees put no restraint at all upon our choice and determinations. And every man knows this is absolutely true. In every mind there is a consciousness of complete freedom of purpose and action. And however objectors may argue upon this subject, the pangs of remorse which follow crime, clearly prove that the transgressor has an inward assurance he has acted freely, voluntarily and wickedly. Thus the predestination of all events and the perfect freedom of human agency are clearly and fully revealed. The secret which is hidden from man is, the consistency of these with each other. It seems difficult to conceive how men can act freely in doing that which the divine purposes have already fixed unalterably: and yet we know it is even so. The hearts of Joseph's brethren were agonized at the recollection of their cruelty and wickedness in selling him into bondage, and yet God employed their guilty instrumentality in sending Joseph into Egypt to effect a great deliverance. The pangs of remorse and despair which rent the heart of Judas were not assuaged by knowing that his direful treason was certainly predetermined and foretold by the prophets of old—because he knew that his crime was voluntary and intentional. It was “by wicked hands” that our Lord was crucified and slain, although he was “delivered by the determinate counsel and fore-knowledge of God.” The question thus arises, How can we be free and accountable agents, and yet act in invariable accordance with the divine predetermination? This is not revealed. It is a secret reserved to be disclosed by the light of eternity.

As the Bible reveals both these facts, and we cannot deny either without falling into the grossest absurdities, it is our wisdom to cherish an unshaken confidence in the divine declarations as to the truth of these seemingly conflicting propositions, and rest assured that in a manner very mysterious and above our present conceptions, the freedom of human agents is entirely harmonious with the foreordination of all their actions. We are moreover to recollect that the secret counsels of God do not form our rule of conduct: as we cannot know what those counsels are, we are not to be governed by them in our conduct, but to act at

all times with reference to the *revealed* will of God, *without any practical reference to his secret decrees.*

We find another of the secret things which belong to God, in those mysterious dealings of Providence, into which human wisdom and sagacity attempt in vain to penetrate. In these matters clouds and darkness are round about the Almighty, and man is manifestly shut out from the counsels of his hand. The seeming prosperity of wicked men and the afflictions of the righteous have perplexed the wise from the days of Job to the present time. Scripture history is replete with striking examples and affecting illustrations of this profound mystery. There is Potiphar in splendor, and Joseph in prison. Herod triumphs on a throne, while John the Baptist groans out his life in a dungeon. Nero exults in royal robes, while the apostle Paul is bound in chains. And often it has been asked with deep solicitude, How, under a government of infinite wisdom and rectitude, can these things be permitted? But the question is urged in vain. No response is heard from the throne above. Similar dispensations occur in our own age. We see the most useful, important members of society removed by death, and the lights of the world extinguished, while the profligate and worthless are spared to be a burden to the earth. What multitudes of our race just open their eyes in helpless infancy, and closing them forever, lie down in the grave. Innocent prattling childhood struggles in the tortures of disease and expires in agonizing convulsions, while the vilest of mankind enjoy health and spend their days in mirth. The young mother is torn from the cradle of her helpless babe by the ruthless hand of death, while the outcasts of society live to hoary hairs.

These judgments of the Lord are a great deep which no man can fathom. We tremblingly inquire the reasons for such dispensations; and the only answer from the lively oracles is, "What thou knowest not now thou shalt know hereafter." We must therefore "Wait the great teacher death, and God adore." Though we have the fullest confidence that all these inexplicable events will be fully explained in a future state, yet the whole subject is now shrouded by an impenetrable veil. The design of this concealment seems to be, to bring our feelings to the test—to ascertain whether we can repose implicit confidence in the divine goodness and rectitude, even when his doings appear most unequal, and no reasons are given to explain them. The great moral effect of the divine dispensations would often be wholly frustrated by the disclosure of the secret purposes of God. When Jacob's darling son was taken from him, the blessed effect of that chastening stroke would have been destroyed by the knowledge that Joseph was taken from him to be made chief ruler in Egypt. And Joseph himself would not have derived so much spiritual benefit from his impris-

onment, had he known it was preparatory to such high exaltation. It was needful for the trial of Abraham's faith, that he should suffer all the heart-breaking anguish which arose from his ignorance that another victim would be provided to be slain instead of Isaac. And the patience of Job would not have been so signally tested, if he had been apprised that his latter end would be *greater than his beginning*. We cite one more instance.

The Bible brings life and immortality to light, and makes known to us that we shall exist forever. But the nature of that future existence and almost every thing relating to the world of spirits are among those secret things which belong to God. God has made known to us that we shall have a conscious existence when separate from the body—that our bodies will be raised incorruptible—that body and soul will be reunited and stand before God in judgment; and that after judgment we shall enter upon an everlasting state of blessedness or woe, according to the character we form in this life. But after all, what is our knowledge of the invisible world and of the realities of future being? Literally we know nothing of the essence of the soul and of its separate existence. And we are equally in the dark as to the process of the resurrection and the nature of a spiritual body.

It seems to be the fixed purpose of God to limit our information to this state of being; and to say to human curiosity which would surpass these barriers, Hitherto shalt thou come but no farther. Some general, unexplained facts are declared, leaving all beside wrapped in a dark pall of mystery, never to be lifted but by that hand which opens to man the gate of eternity. It is indeed wonderful how entirely all increase of knowledge upon this subject is precluded. While information is increasing upon so many things, we have not advanced a jot in our inquiries as to the invisible world, beyond those of a former generation. While so many thousand millions of our race have gone through that dark mysterious passage which leads to the world of spirits, not a word of information has been returned; and that gloomy pathway is just as new and untried to every traveler now, as it was to Abel who first explored the fearful labyrinth.

It is worse than useless to indulge speculations, or pretend to any discoveries as to those things which eye hath not seen nor ear heard, and which have never entered into the heart of man. The whole subject is involved in solemn secrecy which defies human investigation, and casts utter contempt upon a proud philosophy which aspires to be wise above what is written. The humbling truth is, we have deathless spirits within us, but we are very ignorant of their nature and properties—we talk familiarly of the intercourse of departed souls—though such intercourse is completely beyond our comprehen-

sion : we are constantly experiencing a spiritual influence upon our minds, while we cannot pretend to understand what spiritual influence is, or how it is exerted ; and we are continually on the brink of entering the invisible world, while that world is shrouded from our perception and knowledge by an impenetrable veil.

Thus we have taken a hasty and imperfect survey of some of the secret things which belong to God. A few brief inferences will bring us to a conclusion.

1. The first reflection which arises from the views we have taken is, that after all we are of yesterday, and know nothing.

2. The subject which has now employed our minds is well calculated to produce deep humility.

3. We infer the folly and wickedness of those who doubt the truth of revelation because it does not afford them all the information they desire, and because it contains some things which to their limited understandings may seem inconsistent.

4. The views which have now been presented exhibit in a strong light the impious arrogance and senseless absurdity of those, who presume to demand that all truth must be brought to the level of their capacities, and who boldly declare they will believe nothing which they cannot fully comprehend. Upon this principle the articles of their creed must be very few ; and if they practically conform to the decisions of their unbelief, their condition will be pitiable indeed. How, in consistency with their principles, can they act at all, as they certainly cannot understand how the volitions of the mind move the muscles of the body ? How can they sow their fields, when the process of germination in a corrupting grain of corn is manifestly beyond their comprehension ? While they are hopelessly ignorant of the operations of their own spirits, how can they consistently believe that they have souls at all ? Nay, how can they believe they are alive, as they will not pretend to understand or explain the essence or the cause of animal life, or the constituent properties of vitality ? In a word, if men receive as truth nothing which they cannot comprehend, they must take refuge in almost universal skepticism.

Finally, we may infer from the discourse, how irrational as well as desperately wicked those are, who are continually finding fault with the Bible because it contains mysteries ; and how much wiser those, who "receive with meekness the ingrafted word which is able to save their souls."