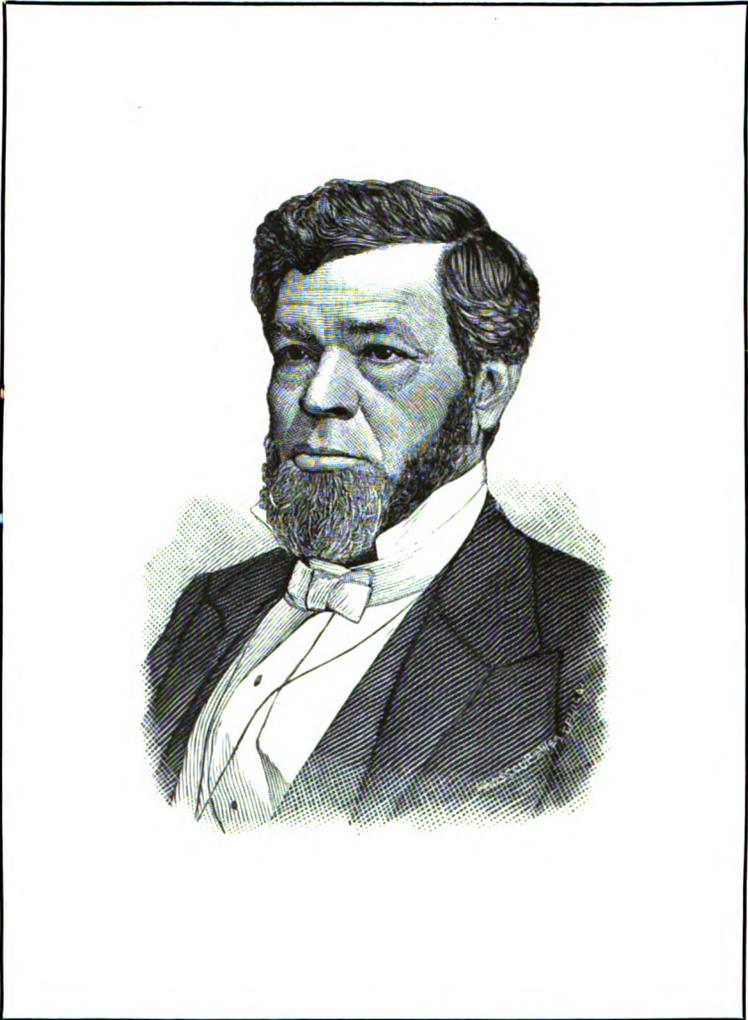
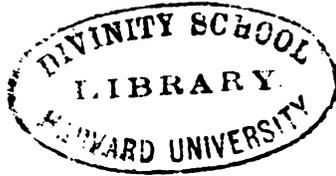


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— Sermons —

FEELING AFTER GOD.

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That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us.—ACTS xvii., 27.

THE insensibility is not to be envied which does not melt under the exquisite pathos of this Scripture. Let us picture the scene. Here lies Athens before us in her ancient splendor, as in the days of the great Pericles. In the heart of the city is the famous Agora; not a mere "market place," as you might infer from the seventeenth verse of this chapter; but a beautiful valley, whose slopes were studded with the statues of historical and deified heroes. It was the place where all Athens delighted to assemble for enjoyment. Here, philosophers, wrapping their mantles around them, discoursed wisdom to their followers as they walked. The surrounding heights were crowned with temples and altars dedicated to the gods of classic mythology; in the midst of which was the altar with the melancholy inscription, "To the unknown God"—a sad confession that in all their search after God, they found only nature; whose wide domain was parcelled out amongst divinities, which were only the personifications of human attributes. But who is this solitary man that with solemn tread and thoughtful mien moves amongst these triumphs of Grecian culture and art? It is the man of Tarsus; versed in all

this proud philosophy and poetic lore; with a mind sharpened by the same subtle dialectic; who at the feet of Gamaliel had scanned the grander symbols of the Hebrew faith; whom God arrested with His own light, on his journey to Damascus; who during three years of silence amid the solitudes of Arabia, had penetrated the significance of the Jewish ritual, and now came forth to be the apostle of an universal faith for all mankind. How his breast heaves with an ocean-tide of feeling, as he pauses before that mysterious altar, which like a monumental stone bears upon it the epitaph of heathenism; and then with an orator's gesture summons the Epicureans and the Stoics to listen to his speech—"Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you." Oh, the profound sadness of the thought that man should be feeling after God, always so nigh, and yet fail to find Him! I desire this morning to surrender myself to the meditation of this fact, and invite you to consider with me what it involves.

I. IN WHAT SENSE, THEN, IS IT TRUE THAT GOD IS NOT FAR FROM EVERY ONE OF US? To which I make a threefold reply:

1. *Because we reach the fact of His existence by an immediate and necessary inference from the works of His hands.* See how the Apostle puts it in his Epistle to the Romans: "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them: for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse." But I do not pause this morning upon the grand argument from design, the cumulation of proof from the innumerable adjustments of nature of the Divine wisdom and power. I come rather to an argument which is shorter and more direct—and an argument which gives us, not a mere artificer, but an august Creator. We are surrounded on every side by finite existences; and we, ourselves are finite. By necessary correlation of thought, the finite always draws after it the infinite; the limited, the illimitable; the relative, the absolute; the contingent, the necessary; the creature, the Creator. These are but the two poles of the same conception, and cannot be thought of in their disjunction. We define by means of the contrast between the two. The proof, therefore, of the Divine existence is this immediate and necessary inference from the finite to the infinite, which makes God a necessity of thought. It is not an intuition. On the contrary, the knowledge is purely inferential; but the inference is so immediate and necessary, that it carries with it the self-assertion of a truth which is intuitive. The difficulty in proving the existence of God lies in the fact it is so nigh to us that we cannot get behind it. It has the power to stand upon its own evidence. The moment it is suggested, it fastens upon the mind without the possibility of being dislodged. We do not by it discover God, but only verify the fact to our own reason. In this respect, therefore, God is nigh to us—that we cannot exercise thought, in any direction, without the implication of His being.

2. *God is nigh to us, in the consciousness of creaturely dependence upon His providence and power.* This is the precise form of the Apostle's thought, "for

in Him we live, and move, and have our being." If we must postulate necessary being, in order to account for existence that is contingent, then the former must always be present, in order to provide for the needs of the latter. There is probably not a moment in which we are entirely free from the sense of our insufficiency as creatures; and there are moments when we are overpowered by the sense of this dependence. In the tempest, when God opens His fist and lets loose the winds, and they come shrieking around us, as if they would smite the four corners of the dwelling and tumble it into ruins—or, when with wilder freedom, they howl like demons after their prey; when death steals upon us like an assassin with his stiletto; in seasons of bitter bereavement, when we draw the curtain over the window, to shut out the glare of day, that in the gloom of our sorrow we may feed upon the memories of the past; when in the sick chamber, friends gather round our bed, and hand us gently down from ledge to ledge, in the valley of the shadows, until we reach at last the spot from which there is no return: or, not to speak of these exceptional seasons, are there not solemn pauses in human life, when a great hush is thrown upon the hurry and noise of this world? And do we know, at such a moment, how nigh God is to us, and how nigh we are to Him?

3. *God is not far from every one of us, because He is the goal to which every faculty of the soul tends, and in whom each finds its consummation.* Here, again, we strike the form of Paul's thought, "for we are also His offspring." What human fancy embalms in poetry, the Scriptures didactically unfold: man is made in the image of God, and this is seen in every faculty of the soul. The thought is much too large for expansion: I can only dwell upon it in the briefest illustration. There is the intellect, the organ of knowledge; and right over against it is all Nature stored with truth for investigation and discovery, like the mineral deposits in the bowels of the earth: and as science plows her way, digging up the deeper secrets which are hidden in her chambers, we construct those grand systems of knowledge, which are the pride and boast of our age.

But what are all these sciences but so many highways of thought by which man mounts up into the presence of God? They are like the milky way which belts the sky, paved with sapphire stars, "rising in sunny dust behind the chariot of God." They are like those Roman roads, which engineering skill, more than two thousand years ago, built everywhere, every one of which led to Rome. Far away, even amongst the forests of Germany, solid adamantine roads, the ruins of which remain to this day, led up to the Imperial City. What would you have said, if any one of those roads should have led you into the pathless wilderness and left you there? And what do you say of any science, or of any philosophy, which does not lead up into the presence of the most high God? The Appian Way could lead the traveller nowhere, save into the City which was the centre of the world: and so these highways of human thought, in all the departments in which they are found, lead us only into the presence chamber of Jehovah—where He unfolds the glory of His face, and we bow before the splendor of His throne.

There is again the *conscience*, through which we have the sense of right. This faculty is the organ of law, and puts upon man the pressure of obligation. I ask you if conscience is anything but the most solemn impertinence, unless it conducts us to Him, whose unchangeable character must remain the standard of right to the creature?

There is, also, the *æsthetic faculty*. Why has God endowed man with this attribute of taste, and then scattered around him innumerable forms of beauty, unless through these, as typical representations, he shall mount to Him in whom all beauty and grandeur reside?

But these suggestions are enough for the purpose of illustration. I need not go round the entire circle of man's powers. It is easy to push this line of remark through the affections, the imagination and the will—to find them all terminating upon God as their goal, and in whom alone they have complete satisfaction and repose.

II. IN WHAT SENSE IS IT TRUE THAT MEN FEEL AFTER GOD? It may prove a voyage of discovery to many of you, to learn that in every process of intellection and feeling, man is blindly groping after the unknown God. For example:

1. *In the outgoing of our sympathies and affections to every object around us in Nature.* How strangely we knit our affections to those inanimate objects which are associated with the happiness of our childhood? Why, the little shrub that grew in the garden walk lifts its slender form before the eye of memory until it closes in death. The broad oak, beneath whose ample branches we sported in infancy, rises up before us in the days when our shoulders stoop under the burden of care. The great mountain that lifts its rugged form against the sky, throws its shadow over all the future, until that shadow deepens into the darkness of the grave.

And "the wide resounding sea," as Homer loved to describe it, how its music murmurs still in every shell you gather upon the beach! You have heard of the Nostalgia of the Swiss. Men of iron frame and of iron heart, unmoved in the shock of a thousand battles, yet die from homesickness, as they remember their mountains from which they are severed. The dwellers by the sea hear the noise of its waves, and see the glitter of its foam, even in their dreams.

Consider the elective affinity which goes out to find the one individual amongst the myriads of the race, who is to be from that moment the other half of us, and with whom we build on the conjugal tie all the future relations of life. How readily the affections diffuse themselves over these various circles—widening as they expand, until they become the patriotism which can embrace a country, or the philanthropy which can embrace a world! They grow into a love which fills the entire basin of the earthly life, and then laps over with a full remainder into that which is beyond—even into the bosom of God. Just as the mighty river which girdles our city rolls into the gulf, and the gulf widens into the broad Atlantic; so all these affections of the human heart, which find their beginning in these human relations, point to God as the Being in whom alone they find their satisfaction and their scope.

2. There is, too, *the inextinguishable longing for fellowship*. You have read, perhaps, the story of Picciola; how the prisoner knelt down and nursed the little flower, which sprung up between the flagstones in his walk—how, in his loneliness, he talked to it as though it had a soul that could speak back to him—and how, at length, the strong heart was broken within him, when, with the heat of the sun, it at last withered and died. Or, that stronger illustration of the prisoner of the Bastille who knit his affections to a spider, weaving his web in a corner of the cell; and then wept as one weeps for his first-born, when it was killed through the wanton cruelty of the jailor.

Far beyond this is the joy we have in the fellowship of our own kind—and yet how imperfect is that very fellowship itself! Who is so happy in this world as not to have felt the sorrow that cannot be put into speech?—the sorrow which, like a great stone, is rolled over the mouth of some sepulchre we have in our hearts—a sorrow so big that we ourselves only know it by its power to choke us. Who can translate it into speech? Nothing utters it but the unutterable groaning, which only God is able to hear, and to which God only is able to respond. On the other hand, who does not know how the tide of joy rises up from the happiness within, until it fills the soul, just as the mighty waters fill the basin of the sea? Who can put into language either the grief which crushes, or the happiness that lifts him upon its pinnacle to the joys of heaven?

Again, there are influences which render it impossible to make any human being the complete recipient, even of what we *can* tell. But when we find ourselves locked up within the limits of our own personality, unable to break over these walls which shut us within ourselves, the Divine Spirit, just because He is pure Spirit, is able to glide into the sanctuary of the soul, and to feel the pulse of our very thought.

3. There is, too, *the instinct of acquisition*, and, if you will allow me to couple with it, *the impulse of ambition*. The first is that impulsive force, which is in every man, driving him to outward exertion; and which we must take into account in all our moralizing, simply because God is at the other end of the line, the everlasting portion and reward of the soul. We get gold and silver, and houses, and lands—we get this, and we get that, in our earthly struggle for subsistence; all which is typical of the principle, the blessed type of that sanctified by grace, which leads us to labor for the “inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and which fadeth not away.”

In like manner, the impulse of ambition belongs to every noble nature. Surely, if we are made in God's image, and every faculty of the soul is but the dim reflection of some attribute of the Deity, man ought to aspire. Unless he extinguishes within him the principles of a true and generous manhood, he is bound to lift himself from grade to grade, until he reaches the highest ideal excellence that ever passed through the chambers of his thought. Oftentimes from the pulpit, as well as in elaborate ethical treatises, we encounter unwise, because indiscriminate and reckless, denunciation of both these elements of our nature. The Bible tells us that we shall at last be the peers

of the angels—that the redeemed in glory will stand nearest the Redeemer's person in the day of His triumph. The Bible tells us that those redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, renewed and sanctified and at last glorified by the Spirit, will teach the angels themselves how to praise the God of our salvation. From these human lips shall be given the notes of that new song, which no man is able to learn, save those who have had the experience of sin, and the experience of the redemption from sin. It is right to acquire, it is right to aspire; but let the acquisition and the ambition be alike directed by the blessed Spirit of God. Let the acquisition be the eternal rest, and the ambition the everlasting and infinite glory.

4. Not to fatigue with specifications too numerous, *we feel after God in the awful necessity of worship.* Did you ever reflect how near we come to worship in those emotions which have in them the element of reverence? and how easily these emotions glide into forms of devotion? You listen to the notes of that organ, until your soul is flooded with the music. And you rise upon that music, as upon the wings of a seraph, almost into the presence of God. Or, you stand upon some lofty peak and survey the landscape spread before your eyes—you drink in the beauty which is sprinkled here and sprinkled there—until blending all these beauties into one complete whole, you become almost delirious with the delight it affords. You gaze upon the mighty tides rolling up from the heart of the sea, and fringing the earth with their foam; or at the foot of Niagara you see the mighty waters leap the precipice, and hiss in the boiling depths below—spanned as these waters are by a mimic rainbow—and you must be far less than a man, if your spirit does not bow down in the presence of that majesty with something like adoration for the God who created it.

Now understand me (for upon this particular point I shall guard against the possibility of misapprehension), I am very far from saying that this is the pure worship of a heart rightly affected towards God. But I do say it is typical of that; and it reveals the particular feature in the constitution and nature of man, out of which a true and pure worship may proceed, by the power of divine grace resting on it. We inquire into the psychological principle or ground, out of which a true worship may spring. We find it just here in these very emotions which are so easily transformed by God's renewing and sanctifying Spirit into the frames of the most spiritual devotion. Thus, in every emotion men are continually groping, blindly "feeling after God, if haply they may find Him."

III. HOW, THEN, DO THEY FAIL TO FIND HIM? I answer, simply because sin has separated between man and his God. Perhaps you will reply, no; it is because God, in His nature, is incomprehensible—and all that has been alleged in this discourse only yields God as a conception in human thought, and not God in the reality of His being. To this I rejoin, it was always God's purpose to *make Himself known in a personal revelation.* He does reveal Himself in His majesty before the angels of heaven. He walked in the Garden of Eden, as a friend walking with a friend. It was only when man

sinned, and a cloud was drawn over his understanding, and his affections became perverted, that he lost the power to commune with God. Then, in his blindness and despair, he looked around for representative symbols by which to recover God again to his thought. First, sun, moon and stars—then, as he became more and more degraded, the beasts of the field, the fishes of the sea, and at length even images of brass, of marble and of clay, were put before the eye, in order through them, as representative symbols, to bring the unseen Jehovah within the reach of their sympathy. It always was God's purpose, infinite as He is, to make Himself known to His creatures; even when man had sinned, and lost the power of construing God aright, grace makes provision for the revelation of Jehovah in the scheme of redemption.

Look only at these three features of the Gospel. God, in order that He might be known to His creatures, *became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ*. Men no longer need, like the ancient Persian, to look upon the sun, and then say fire is the symbol of the Deity: or, like the sages of ancient Greece, fix upon the elements of matter and say earth, fire and water are the illustrative symbols of God. For "God is in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." God clothed with all the attributes of man, with a human body and a human soul, laying aside the dialect in which Father, Son and Holy Ghost spake the one with the other, comes to earth in order that He may speak with a human voice, and with the affections of the human heart, and with those human sympathies which address themselves to the soul which He would save. God, through the incarnation of His Son, bridges over the immense chasm, and stands upon the earth, that He may be known to the sinner.

Then there is *the glorious atonement*, through the blood shed upon the cross, whereby sin is expiated; removing all the difficulties in the way of the most perfect reconciliation with God. Over and beyond this, *the Holy Spirit breathes the spiritual life* into him who was "dead in trespasses and sins." As at the beginning the Spirit brooded over chaos, so now He broods over the human heart and brings order and beauty out of deformity, and makes the sinner "meet to be partaker of the inheritance of the Saints in light." Thus does God meet the difficulties which sin has interposed to prevent our full communion with Himself—taking us at length into His own bosom, in order that we may lie there and feel the blessedness of His love through all eternity.

I have only to say, in conclusion of this discourse, that the sinner, who knows the Gospel, is far more guilty than the heathen, if he fails to find the God of his salvation. There is not a soul in this assembly to-day, out of Christ, who is not inexcusable at the bar of his own conscience—as he will be held, without excuse, at the bar of Final Judgment. God is not far from every one of you. In all the instincts of your nature, you have been blindly feeling after Him. He comes to you through His Son, and through the Gospel which reveals Him, that you may lay your hand upon Him in affectionate embrace. Oh, just open your hearts to Him who is knocking for admission.

For it is melancholy beyond all utterance, that the great God, who fills immensity with His presence, should find Himself barred out from the sinner's heart. I beseech those of you who have not embraced the Lord Jesus, to accept Him to-day, as He offers Himself, a Saviour from all sin.

But if you do not, then consider the dreadful loneliness of that eternity to which you are hastening. Eternity! Eternity! where is the east, the west, the north, or the south—where are the limits by which it is bounded? And what a fearful doom, to be lost in its vast solitudes! To be lost at sea is nothing in the comparison. You may be upon the wreck of a vessel, upon a single spar. You look around you, there is nothing but water beneath, and nothing but the sky above—only the horizon touching the ocean, showing you the fearful loneliness and desolation thereof. Yet the sea can be measured; you may float upon its surface, from the one shore to the other. But a lost soul is like a lost star, wandering into "the blackness of darkness" forever, further, and further, and further, and forever further "from the presence of God and from the glory of His power." You may scoff at the figures under which the doom of the lost is represented in Scripture; you may sneer at the fire, and make sport of the worm; but, there remains the dreadful doom of a soul that must be forever alone—a soul with affections, and tastes, and sympathies, which are never to be gratified—a soul forever crushed into itself by the weight of the curse. It will be a fearful doom to be in eternity without God, without a Saviour, without fellowship, without scope for the exercise of any power or faculty of the human soul—locked up in eternal solitude, to be always oppressed by the loneliness and desolation of expulsion from Jehovah's presence.

THE SOUL REJOICING IN GOD (LUKE i., 46, 47).—Religious satisfaction and joy in God is one of the few things—almost the one only thing—that having possessed we can really keep. As the years pass we part first with one friend—then with another. Life becomes more and more solitary and desolate. There are many acquaintances, but if we live on there are fewer and fewer friends. The store in Paradise, we trust, grows, but earth becomes more and more a desert for the heart. The heart cannot place all its resources at the disposal of every new claimant. The heart, as the years go on, withdraws more and more into itself, and at the grave it must part with all that is earthly that is yet left. "He shall carry nothing away with him when he dieth; neither shall his pomp follow him," said the Psalmist of the wealthy three thousand years ago. All is left at the gate of death, except, *except*—that knowledge and love of the everlasting Being who binds us to Himself and which is our true outfit for eternity. It is something in a world of shadows to come into contact with the real; it is something when all is passing from us to lay firm hold on the eternal, on the indestructible.—*Canon H. P. Lid- don, D.D. (Episcopal).*