

THE
ONLINESS OF
GOD.

BACCALAUREATE SERMON

Southwestern
Presbyterian University
Sunday, June 11, 1899.

By Rev. B. M. Palmer, D. D., LL. D.,
Pastor First Presbyterian Church,
New Orleans, La.

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THE ONLINES OF GOD.

Isaiah XLV: 5. "I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me."

WE were standing, a company of four, near the top of the Catskill Mountains, with our feet braced upon the roots of two or three small trees overhanging the abyss below, and drinking in the glory of a landscape stretching as far as the eye could reach, when the silence was suddenly broken by the voice of one of the party exclaiming: "There is but one word to be uttered here, and that word is God!"

I was startled; for I was mentally reciting these lines from the Hymn of Coleridge, entitled, "In the Vale of Chamouni at Sunrise."

"God! let the torrents, like a shout of nations,
Answer! and let the ice-plains echo, God!
God! sing ye meadow-streams with gladsome voice!
Ye pine-groves, with your soft and soul-like sounds!
And they too have a voice, yon piles of snow,
And in their perilous fall shall thunder, God!
Ye living flowers that skirt the eternal frost!
Ye wild goats, sporting round the eagle's nest!
Ye eagles, playmates of the mountain-storm!
Ye lightnings, dread arrows of the clouds!
Ye signs and wonders of the elements!
Utter forth God, and fill the hills with praise!
Dread hierarch! Tell thou the silent sky,
And tell the stars, and tell yon rising sun,
Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God!"

We bowed our heads in worship of Him "in whom is the strength of the hills."

We stood again, the same party of four, just above the Falls of Niagara, and caught the first glimpse of the sleepy waters quickening their pace as they were drawn within the influence of the fatal maelstrom, dashing madly against the rocks which impeded their course, then shouldering against each other in the terrific recoil, finally leaping the shaggy precipice and hissing in the boiling depths below. We saw the mists slowly ascending, through whose transparent gauze the sunlight was weaving the mimic rainbow, rising like holy incense from the altar of Nature to the Eternal Throne, before which we stood in awe, reflecting that for centuries before the foot-fall of man had waked the echo in that primeval forest this mighty cataract had pealed forth its triumphant anthem of praise to Him who sits as King upon the floods forever!

Young men of the University, was it strange that in the solemnities of this nature-worship, I should have recalled the words you have heard recited four times in the chapter which has just been read in your hearing: "I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me?" I ask you to enter with me through the door of this text into the more sacred pavilion of Jehovah Himself, and learn what it imports to us that there should be only this one God, beside whom there is none else.

I. Consider, then, in the first place, the Onliness of God in the supreme mystery of His eternal self-existence. The mind of man in its search after truth must have its starting point in some primary and fundamental faiths, which it receives from the simple necessity of receiving them. These fundamental faiths perform the double office not only of sending the mind out in its search after knowledge, but also of verifying at the bar of reason the conclusions which are reached. They are at the starting post and at the goal of all the processes of reason. Thus the exercise of faith precedes every act of knowledge, just as in matter itself, a

point must be assumed whose movement shall generate the line. Such a fundamental faith is our belief in the relation between cause and effect. We look around us through all nature and see myriads of objects. Immediately we recognize each one of them as having been produced. Something went before as a procuring cause; and when these shall perish they shall give way to successors as effects that have been operatively produced.

With this great fundamental faith which we can never discard from our minds, see how we are obliged to bow before the supreme mystery in the being of God Himself. If we ascend through all the objects in the material universe through an endless succession, not stopping to count the links in this vast chain of existence, the question arises, where is the ring-bolt above to which we can attach this chain and find its beginning? By the law of cause and effect there must be a beginning somewhere; and the first producing Cause in this chain of visible effects must be found just there, in that beginning. This obliges us to postulate the existence of a supreme Creator, necessarily self-existent, as the First Cause from whom all other existence is derived. Thus our belief in a personal God, as the Creator of all things, comes by an immediate and necessary inference from all that we behold in Nature, and carries with it the binding force of an almost intuitive truth. For what was there before the beginning, before there was any creation, any chaos, out of which should spring the earth and the seed, before that wonderful word should be spoken which should make to come out of nothing all created existences? The mystery of the Un-caused is not solved; yet it must be assumed as the necessary Cause of all that is produced. We are constrained to cry aloud with the word of God: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"; and so we bow this day before the mystery of Him who said, "I am the Lord, and beside Me there is none else."

As yet, however, we are brought only to the threshold of this mystery. He is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Ghost, one yet trinal, the mystery of mysteries lying enclosed within the earlier

mystery of a self-existent and infinite Jehovah. This is a distinction, not a separation, so real that throughout the Scriptures we find the personal pronouns I, thou and he, used, signifying offices which are of such a nature that they never could be consolidated upon an individual agent. How can any single party be, at one and the same moment, the sender and the sent? How can he be, at the same time, the administrator of the law and the victim upon whom the vials of the wrath of the offended law are emptied to their uttermost? Here stands before us the mystery within the mystery of a Triune Being. What does it mean? It is confessedly beyond explanation. But it is not necessary that we should understand or explain anything that, in its nature, transcends human reason. We accept it as a final truth, by the faith that believes in the unseen and eternal, because compelled thereto by the laws of our own mental and moral constitution.

II. *Consider the Onliness of God in the combination of His Attributes.* Will you undertake to define Him? Accept then the definition given you in the Scriptures: "God is a spirit." But what, after all, do we know about spirit? True, we are spirits ourselves. There is something in us that is not of the body, something that sparkles in the eye, and trembles in the tone. To appropriate a striking thought of Isaac Taylor, there is something that comes forth through the five senses, as the gates of the body, and walks up and down through a world that is foreign to itself and takes possession of it all, something invisible that with the last, gurgling breath escapes, and wings its flight upward to Him who is the only pure and holy Spirit. But what do we know about our own spirits? If you exclaim against it as a mystery to be discarded, I remind you that it is no more difficult to explain the nature of spirit than it is to tell what matter is, that which you see, handle and recognize through your bodily senses. What, pray, is that which you call substance? Is it anything but the mere matrix, needful to hold together certain properties that belong to individual objects, by which they may be known? If you then cannot define substance, how can you and I exclaim against the mystery of

spirit? But though we cannot tell exactly what spirit is, cannot bring it before us in definite shape, color or dimension, we can to some extent know what spirit is through the properties which belong to it. Take the definition given in the Shorter Catechism: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." Here are the attributes of spirit, to some degree comprehensible by us because their shadow, at least, has been impressed upon us. In the faculty of mind, we have the shadow of God's wisdom and so can partly understand how that attribute shall apply to Him. In the conscience, which defines for us the distinction between right and wrong, we have the likeness of Him who is infinite in His holiness and justice. In the affections, binding us to those we love, we are able to form some idea of the infinite love that dwells in the heart of the infinite Father. In that executive faculty, which concretes together all the operations of mind, conscience and heart into a single act, you may see the shadow of the infinite will, which called man himself into being and created a world from chaos. I wish you to feel today, as educated men going forth from the walls of this institution to take your places in society and the world, that the true glory of man is, at last, that he is made in the image of God, reflecting dimly in the disclosures of reason, in the decisions of conscience, and in the acts of the will, the very nature and attributes of Him who rules us all.

Though God possesses wisdom, power, justice, we are utterly unable to discover the process in which any of these attributes are exercised by Him. We say that God is infinite in knowledge, because He is infinite in wisdom. Now have we any idea of the way in which God knows? Does He know as we know? How do we come to knowledge? We start from certain premises and walk with extreme caution along a line of investigation, until we reach a definite conclusion; then we retrace our steps to discover if we have allowed any of these premises to slip from our hand. When we have gone over the whole course of our reasoning, and have assured ourselves by inspection and re-inspection that noth-

ing is incomplete, then and then only we can stand and proclaim: I know. Now does God know after that fashion? Does He start from this or that premise, and by and by reach His conclusion? Is the knowledge of God a successive knowledge, as it is with us? Surely not. There can be no succession to God's knowledge, for this would construe Him limited and imperfect. His knowledge is one all-comprehending thought, even as His being is an ever-present Now. This is a wonder which brings us to our knees,—absolutely no limitation to His justice, to his power, to His goodness, to His wisdom. In accomplishing the purpose of His will, all things were known to Him from the beginning. Charnock has beautifully put the whole matter in a nut-shell, when he says: "God has seen all things that may be, in the glass of His power, and all things that shall be, in the glass of His will." Thus we stand amazed before the immeasurability of His attributes and the manner in which God moves.

But it is to the combination of the attributes that I wish particularly to direct your attention. Infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in justice, He is also infinite, eternal and unchangeable in mercy. How shall these two infinities be reconciled, and how can infinite mercy dwell within and be encircled by infinite justice; and also the converse of the proposition? Justice demands the execution of the law. Mercy cries aloud for pardon to the cringing transgressor. How then shall these seemingly opposing attributes not only be reconciled in the administration of His government; but antecedent to that, how shall they dwell in the Divine Being Himself? How is it that these shade into each other, as the colors of the spectrum blend into the pure, white light? How do these attributes, which seem to move in opposite directions, blend into that holiness which is the glory of God, and before which the angels cry aloud when they worship before the throne, saying: "Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? for Thou only art holy"! In the Sacred Scriptures the contradiction is not only removed, but mercy is even found to have its seat in the bosom of justice itself. In the Sixty-second Psalm, we read these

words: "God hath spoken once, twice have I heard this, that power belongeth unto God; also unto Thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy, for Thou renderest to every man according to his work." It is, therefore, in the exercise of rectoral justice, that God has the power to manifest His quality of mercy. The solution of this mystery is found only in the scheme of grace through the redemption of a lost world by Jesus Christ. We discover then that God is alone, not only in the mystery of His self-existence and in the trinal nature of His being, but in the attributes through which He is made known to us as God, and in the mode of their operation.

III. *Consider His Onliness in the universal supremacy of His law.* By whatever terms we define man, he is a being under law. Hence it is that all intelligent created beings must necessarily be put upon probation. Angels and men, the only two classes of beings of whom we have any definite knowledge, both of them are placed on trial, passing through a probation, because they are under the jurisdiction of law. This law is needed in order that each may have his individual character developed, and have that which is personal to himself indicated and emphasized, developing and differentiating those traces of holiness originally implanted in the heart of each and which we recognize in the obligations of conscience. The law of God is simply the exposition of the divine character. It is this fact which gives to law its tremendous vitality and its awful majesty. The law is God's expression of Himself. It is the unfolding of the principles of His own nature. And the instant that the law is broken, all these outraged attributes leap forth like the fierce lightning from an angry cloud, pursuing the transgressor to his overthrow. This avenging justice is the expression of what is essential to the very nature and being of the government of God.

I rise now to a higher generalization. Not only is the law under which men and angels were alike placed the expression of the Divine Nature, but because it is so there can never be but one law. There can no more be two laws than there can be two Gods. If from some archangel's throne we could survey the universe, we

should find the whole intelligent creation moving and acting under this one perfect moral law which expresses the whole character and rightful authority of the Divine Being. However varied to suit the varying conditions of each, it must everywhere set forth the essential principles of justice, holiness and truth, in which all moral beings are equally concerned. From His own august throne, Jehovah looks down upon myriads of worlds which He has thrown into space, bringing all created intelligence under the sway of one imperial law, the embodiment of His moral right to rule over all in His unchangeable holiness. Let us then bow with adoring awe before the mighty sway of this universal law, recognizing in it one of the supremest revelations of God to man.

An apt illustration, showing how a law essentially the same may be variously adapted to different classes, is furnished in the different constitutions under which angels and men were severally placed. The former were put individually upon probation, each standing or falling for himself alone. This appears from the revealed fact that some of them kept their first estate of holiness, whilst others fell by transgression and are now "reserved in chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." The human race, on the contrary, was placed under what may be technically termed a Federal Constitution, in which all the generations of men were represented in the first Adam, to be accepted or condemned before God, through his obedience or disobedience reckoned to them as their own. Human nature, thus tainted by sin at its fountain head, is transmitted from sire to son through succeeding generations by natural descent, and the whole world becomes guilty before God of actual transgressions against His holy law. The difference between these two constitutions is sufficiently obvious, and the reasons for it are patent on every page of Scripture; in the scheme of Redemption therein revealed. The dispensation under which the angels were placed was one of pure law, whose authority should be upheld through an administration of absolute justice. The dispensation under which man was placed was designedly federal in its character, to illustrate the

administration of law under the guidance of mercy. Thus the federal representative in the person of the first Adam only opened the way for the federal representative in the person of the second Adam. Through the work of redemption accomplished by the latter, a dispensation of grace is introduced, which is henceforth grafted upon law, and mercy is forever blended with justice. This world of ours becomes thus the platform upon which are solved all the problems of justice and of law. The solution is found for the existence of sin in the manifestation of God's glory in His boundless love which blends in sweetest harmony the terror of His justice and the tenderness of His mercy. These awful problems being once solved are doubtless solved for the universe, and solved forever. When this dispensation on earth shall end, a final arrest shall be put upon the propagation of sin, which will, after the judgment, exist only in one dismal world where the lost, who have sinned against mercy as well as against justice and law, will be forever confined. The principle of grace thus wrought out in the forge of Christ's penal sufferings and death, and henceforth engrafted upon law, admits of application in different directions in God's infinite wisdom and love. As applied to a sinful race, it secures redemption and eternal salvation; as applied to a holy race, it secures confirmation indefectibly in holiness forever. In this latter case, we find the relation which Christ sustains to the holy angels in His exaltation over them as their Ruler and Head. Thus Peter testifies: "Jesus Christ is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him." Paul also bears witness in Ephesians that "God hath set Him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come." In thus "putting all things under His feet and giving Him to be head over all things to the church," we find the supremacy of one universal law grandly exhibited in the application to distinct classes of moral beings, under two varying dispensations.

IV. *We may consider the Onliness of God in the mystery of the manifestation of Him that is invisible, the invisible God.* "No man hath seen God at any time;" the word "*man*," being in italics, may be deleted and the language become broader still, "no being hath seen God at any time, and lived." He is pure spirit, to emphasize which he has strictly forbidden us in the Decalogue to form any image of him, either material or mental. We may not give to Him, even in our mental conception, shape or dimension of any kind. Mental idolatry is as strictly forbidden as that which is material. Notwithstanding this inhibition, history presents the astounding fact that idolatry has prevailed almost universally ever since the Flood. In the antediluvian world the apostasy of man consisted in materialistic atheism, which resulted in such gigantic wickedness that the earth itself needed to be purified from its stain by the waters of the Deluge. By virtue of the Covenant, afterwards made with Noah, this raging depravity seemed to be restrained within a narrower limit; and before the Tower of Babel we find the apostasy of man taking the less blasphemous form of materialistic idolatry. God is recognized; indeed, but worshipped through images which human hands have made.

Here is a problem which challenges attention. How comes it to pass that nineteen centuries after the birth of Christ, notwithstanding all the efforts to spread the knowledge of the Gospel, this gross idolatry should still prevail over three-fourths of the earth's surface? Can any reasonable solution be found for such a continuous and almost universal perversion of the worship of Him who is a pure spirit? May not the explanation be found in the real difficulty of holding before the mind a distinct conception of a Being whom we do not see and cannot bring before our mental vision in any definite shape? This has been the apology for idolatry in every age, that the idol is not itself the object of adoration, but only the representative symbol of the unseen Jehovah. Even under the old dispensation, God went before the Israelites under the symbol of the pillar of fire by night, which became the

pillar of cloud by day. Still later, in the construction of the Tabernacle, and afterward in the Temple at Jerusalem, the symbol of the divine presence was the Shechinah, a visible splendor resting between the Cherubim upon the mercy-seat. All this goes to show the difficulty to be real in holding distinctly before the mind an unseen being as the object of our worship. The solution of this brings us to the mystery of the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus-Christ; and this in turn carries us back to the earlier mystery of the triune subsistence of the God-head. It is the Second Person, the Only-begotten of the Father, who becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth; and He, the Eternal Word, who spoke the universe into being, becomes the Revealer of God forever to the creature. Thus it has pleased the infinitely wise, merciful and loving God to provide a remedy for this great want. Through all eternity, the glorified humanity of our exalted Redeemer will be the manifestation of the unseen Jehovah. The explicit proof of this is found once for all in the Revelation 21:23: "And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof." In the original Greek, two different words are employed for the term "light" which is here used. The first term represents the glory of God as a diffused light, like that of the sun at noon-day, filling all heaven with its splendor. The second term represents the Lamb as the luminary through which this light is transmitted. The glorified form of our Christ is the grand transparency through which all the glory of the God-head shall forever stream forth upon the myriads of saints and angels that are continually worshipping God in that place where they hunger not neither are there any more tears. Here, then, according to the testimony of the Apostle; is the great mystery of Godliness, "God manifest in the flesh"—the invisible Spirit disclosing His nature and will to creatures who have been formed in His own image through a Being who combines in Himself the attributes of both natures, the human and divine.

V. *Consider, in the last place, the Onliness of God in His supreme blessedness.* He is called "the blessed God." The dignity of this

passage might be impaired, but it would come closer to us if it were literally and colloquially rendered, "the happy God." There are three words used in Scripture, to define the Divine Being. He is life, He is light, He is love. In the first, He is the author of our being; in the second, He is the source of our knowledge; in the third, He is the substance of our joy. God is infinitely blessed in the fact that He is love; and His love has its full expansion in His triune subsistence. The love of the Father, like His infinite being, is ever flowing upon the Son, and through the Son upon the Spirit, in its returning tide ever flowing through the Son to the Father. It is this eternal interchange of love between Father, Son and Holy Ghost which constitutes the joy of the God-head. Jehovah is thus the only being who is sufficient in and of Himself. He needs no created worlds upon which to expend His Love, but is infinitely the blessed God within Himself. The great mystery is that, supreme in His own blessedness, He should form creatures capable of sharing in any degree that blessedness, and constituting them the heirs of His bliss. Yet this is precisely revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures, that glorified saints and angels, in Jesus Christ their Head, shall forever share in the joy of their Lord.

I have already spoken of the supremacy of God's moral law, the climax of which was reserved for connection with the present topic. One of the most splendid triumphs of modern science is the discovery, through the spectrum analysis, that the planets of our solar system are constituted of elements similar if not identical with those of our own earth. This makes them all akin by nature, in addition to which they all revolve with a common movement, in their respective orbits around the sun. Who shall say that all the stellar worlds in the vastness of space are not distributed into families or groups like our own, each particular orb held to its center by the combined action of centrifugal and centripetal force? Turn your telescope to one of those fixed stars in which no parallax has ever been disclosed; why may not each one of these be a central sun, with its system of worlds revolving around it? It is moreover declared that our solar system, a unit in itself,

moves in its wider orbit around some more distant center, at a rate of progress so slow that since the morning of the creation it has advanced only the one three-thousandth part of the immense orbit in which it moves. Carry out the analogy here again, and suppose all the systems of worlds to partake of the same revolution in their respective orbits around the center common to them all. Thus, worlds around worlds revolve, "orb upon orb, cycle upon epicycle," until thought reels under the mighty suggestion, that the burning throne of the infinite Creator may be the pivot upon which the universe is balanced, the center from which all the paths are described in which unnumbered worlds move in perfect harmony, the source of that eternal power which gives to all force its energy and to all law its form.

It is certainly possible that all these worlds may be inhabited by sentient beings, like ourselves, differing in minor particulars but possessing a like moral nature, and amenable to law. If now the principle of grace, which has been applied to angels in confirming them in holiness forever, is applied for the same purpose to holy beings throughout the universe, what a spectacle of moral sublimity is presented to view! The God of love, in this way arresting the propagation of sin, secures the holiness and happiness of all His creatures except the lost, and makes them partakers of His own blessedness and joy forever.

I have endeavored, young gentlemen, to bring you into acquaintance with the Science of God Himself, which is to be the Science of Eternity. It is well to read the stars and learn all that astronomy can teach, to go down into the bowels of the earth and know all that geology can teach, to turn diligently the capacious volume of nature, and inform ourselves of all that we can know. But nature is finite, and the finite can be exhausted. But God is the infinite; ever to be explored with advancing knowledge. It is of immense consequence to you and to me to know what our relations are to this God, who proclaims that He is the only God. You are now standing in the gateway which closes upon the past and opens upon the future. This then to you is the very hour of decision. I

wish to know what you are going to do about it. Shall this God be your God, henceforth and forever? There can be no escape from Him. His will rules the universe. "If we take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall His hand lead us, and His right hand shall hold us. If we say, Surely the darkness shall cover us, even the night shall be light about us. Yea, the darkness hideth not from Him, but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to Him." I wish to impress this truth upon your hearts. There is no getting away from God or from His law. Will you make this God your friend? In order to do this you must find Him in Christ. There He manifests Himself. There all His attributes are reconciled. There is the revelation of all His glory. You need not raise any idol, or scale some distant star, to give you truest knowledge of the infinite God. "God is in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them", and when you are in Christ, and God is in Christ, you are together with God and He will no longer impute your transgressions unto you. God is already in Christ removing all the obstacles that stand in the way of a perfect reconciliation with Himself. It is only needed that you and I be in Christ too. And when Christ has gathered up all His redeemed, He will lay them in the bosom of the Father, and there shall be their joy and portion forever, as lasting as eternity, as deep and perfect as the very nature of the only God Himself. Surely you must feel there is nothing in all this universe greater than God, supreme in the majesty of His Onliness, ruling all things, pervading all things, from whom there is no escape, and before whose awful presence we must all come at last to be judged "according to the deeds done in the body." Accept Him therefore, making your life here a benediction, and winning hereafter the "crown of righteousness which the Lord will give to all them that love His appearing."