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THE CHARACTER OF GOD.

Exodus 33: 18. *And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.*

THE great system of the material universe incontestibly refutes every surmise of the eternity of its past existence. It so eloquently attests, in the constant activity of inert matter, and the harmony and order of inanimate things, the traces of design, and the existence of a designing mind, and so loudly proclaims, in all its operations, in the organs, senses and instincts of living beings, and the intellectual faculties and active powers and moral affections of man, the being and the constant presence of that pure and mighty SPIRIT, from which all must have proceeded,—that an argument in proof of your own existence would seem more necessary, than one intended to establish his. He that can look without and within, and witness the fullness of a wise and designing power, in innumerable forms of contrivance and adaptation, and yet see not the hand, and recognize not the presence of this greatest and noblest of BEINGS, is one whom the first laws of human belief do not bind, and whom, of course, no possible reasoning could convince.

The same voice that so distinctly announces the fact of the divine existence, as distinctly asserts His own single, independent, undervived, and absolute perfection; and reason concurs with revelation in declaring the certainty of his moral administration over the universe, and the actual responsibility of all other intelligences to HIM, who for his own glory made, and sustains, and governs all. Without regarding it as expedient to present at this time even an outline of the argument, in proof of the divine existence, it seems proper, prior to a distinct consideration of the several attributes of

God,* to endeavor to impress upon the mind, a proper sense of the transcendent **IMPORTANCE OF JUST AND CORRECT VIEWS OF HIS GLORIOUS CHARACTER**, as most vitally connected with every department of theological knowledge and practical religion. If to the earnest and prayerful study of God's true character, our every power of thought and reasoning and devotion is summoned, from a belief of its necessity to the eternal good of the soul, it is not less so from the greatness and grandeur of the object of our investigation. If we contemplate *his essential pre-eminence* in the universe, as that first, underived, eternal, immutable, all-wise, all-powerful, every where present Being, most simple, and most pure in his nature, and illimitable and all-sufficient in his attributes, who is the cause of all things, and the final disposer of all creatures and events;—as the Maker and sustainer of all mental as well as material existences, with all their varied properties, capacities, and susceptibilities; as the Fountain of all intelligence and of all moral distinctions, and as boundless and incomprehensible in the perfection of his felicity, his goodness and his moral rectitude, as he is in the immensity of his presence, and the glory of his power:—Or, if we contemplate *his infinite superiority, in relation to all other beings and things*, as the source of all knowledge in dependent minds, by its direct communication, or the provision of the means of it in the forms and examples of things presented to them in his works; as the Author of all the magnificence, and beauty, and happiness, which fill the universe;—as the great Lawgiver to matter and mind, the supreme Legislator of all worlds, and the perfect pattern of all goodness; as the Author of that religion whose actual and moral pre-eminence has in all ages and in every land proclaimed the source of its emanation, and of that system of redemption, which has been the astonishment of angels and the deepest mystery of love to men: And if we contemplate him not only as *the source* of life, and light, and truth and love, but the *grand object of hope or fear, of delightful attraction or of miserable aversion* to all created minds; as the Being, to know and serve and enjoy whom will constitute throughout eternity the life and immortality of heaven,—we cannot but feel, that to acquire just, and true, and adequate ideas of **HIM**, must be the most reasonable of all requisitions, the most imperious of all duties, and for time and eternity the noblest of all pursuits. As the being and perfections of God most fitly form the first and most glorious chapter in all religious investigations, so correct impressions here are most vital, because they will go to influence men's opinions on every other subject of revelation. Misapprehensions of the *character of him* who reveals, will diffuse their effects over every part of the revelation. To mistake the true character

* The Editor has expressed a desire, and, as far as possible, a determination, to follow something like a regular order, and a systematic arrangement, in the several topics of theology to be discussed in the *Presbyterian Preacher*, and this subject was taken in compliance with this plan.

of him who in the bible legislates, is but in fact to misinterpret its every law; and to want just views of the Deity, is to want a power to be duly moved by his heavenly promises, or awed by his fearful threatenings. Here is a centre in which all the various lines of truth do meet. Here is a fountain, whose pure or infected waters are diffused over all fields of sacred knowledge! A small mistake here, like a slight derangement at the heart, will carry forth its effects into the whole system of one's faith and duty. Perhaps it is not too much to say, that *every act of sin* in the universe, is to an omniscient mind, referable to the diminished impression on the mind of some one principle of moral truth, and that every such defection begins in an erroneous or impaired impression in respect to the character of God, just as the beauty and impressiveness of every principle of revelation, are rendered more luminous and sanctifying on holy minds, in proportion as they understand and have a felt impression of the character of Him from whom it came. As a matter of truth and duty, then, the acquisition of correct views of the character of God deservedly claims a priority to every other, as every man's ideas of *himself*, his *relation* to others, and the nature and importance of his salvation, as well as the force upon his mind of every subject of thought, or tie of moral obligation, contained in the bible, will derive an influence from this, which it can itself control in others.

The fact, that the *Gentile world*, with the benefits of tradition, the lamp of reason, and the light of nature, experienced an utter loss of all just ideas of God, and turned all "the truth" concerning him "into a lie," admonishes us not to rely upon the resources of reason and philosophy for this most precious acquisition. And when we see thousands enjoying the external light of revelation, having minds so perverted by sin and ignorance, as to think of him only as an object devoid of every thing lovely and endearing, and inspiring dread and aversion, it should arouse us to a sense of the dangers of neglect and inattention. Now the bible, we are assured, when attended by the Spirit, and when it meets with minds sincere, and pure, and bright enough to receive its spiritual and lucid impressions, can, by its simple statements, and its varied presentations of God's character to the mind, effect for him who applies all the resources of his intellect, and heart, and his experience, this most important communication.

Instead of resting in vain resolutions, or intellectual efforts, or outward means, should we not, (like Moses, when the trying duties of a most responsible station were likely to produce discouragement unless fresh and sanctifying views of the divine character were presented to his mind,) go often and earnestly to the throne of grace, and join all our researches to become truly wise and holy with the fervent petition, *I beseech thee, O Lord, shew me thy glory*. What we propose, at this time, is,

I. TO EXPLAIN THE NATURE AND ILLUSTRATE THE IMPORTANCE OF CORRECT APPREHENSIONS OF THE CHARACTER OF GOD; AND,

II. ADVERT TO SOME EXISTING SOURCES OF ERROR, MISTAKE, AND IMPERFECTION ON THIS SUBJECT.

Correct views of the divine character, are such as imply a harmony or agreement between those representations of what Jehovah is, and what he is not, which his revealed word contains, and which his works of creation, providence, and grace, serve to illustrate, and those ideas of him which exist in the mind. This harmony necessarily implies, (as truth when rightly apprehended and believed is in its own nature operative,) that, in point of fact, just impressions of God's character, are such, and such only, as do produce in the mind, in comparison to all other and less correct ones, the strongest convictions of the power, wisdom, purity, goodness, and justice of God; of the essential and incomprehensible excellence, and rectitude of his nature; such as produce the strongest emotions of admiration, gratitude, and love, in the heart; and, as an established consequence, such as are connected with the actual production of the highest degrees of inherent purity, practical holiness, and active benevolence. Without stopping to inquire how far just ideas of any of the divine perfections can exist as mere matters of theological science in unrenewed minds; or to inquire into the nature of that direct operation of the Holy Spirit on the powers of the soul, in consequence of which it possesses those right desires and affections that fit it to receive from the *Word of Life* just, and pure, and delightful apprehensions of the divine character, it is sufficient to say, that to the instrumentality of the word, and the efficiency of the Spirit, operating upon perceptive and rational beings, we refer the actual existence among men of all true and sanctified knowledge of God. When a heart before totally depraved, is prepared by the Spirit for the reception of spiritual and holy impressions, and is supernaturally illuminated to perceive the real glories of the divine character, as presented in his word and in his works, the invariable consequence of such perception will be, to make the mind itself most active in entertaining these bright and cheering manifestations of God, in being humbled in the comparison of its own darkness and impurity and nothingness with Him, and in yielding itself up to those varied impressions by which the Holy Spirit thus sanctifies the "inner man," and forms and moulds it into the divine likeness.

In thus making every act and instance of misbelief in respect to the divine character to be a crime, because it weakens the strength of grace, or augments the power of sin, and in tracing the existence in the mind of such apprehensions of God as are really though imperfectly just and true, to the sovereign act of the Spirit, and their gradual improvement to the concurrence of human with divine agency, we but give a rational and scriptural extent to man's moral respon-

sibility, and but a natural and necessary view of human dependence. That in every act of reasoning and judging of the character and will of God, a right state of the temper and affections of the heart should be imperiously demanded, and that the use of the sacred writings, and all the means of grace, should be attended with a felt conviction that God alone can make them quick and powerful, seem to be just that aspect of the subject which is fitted to put sinful men into the true paths of sacred knowledge, and to urge them forward in it with the most wakeful interest. In his "*lively* Oracles," Jehovah speaks in the language of mortals; and, that the essential elements of instruction contained in this unerring and venerated book may be easily apprehended, the unlearned inquirer is assured that the *obvious* meaning of the text, in every duly accredited version of the Holy Scriptures, is, for the most part, the real and true and only one: and therefore the most material thing to him is, that an honest and conscientious application of his mind should be joined with earnest prayer for the aids of the Holy Spirit. And how necessary to humble the pride of genius and of learning is it to assure the profoundest theological and biblical scholars, and the ablest minds, that to see and know the *true* character of God as unfolded in the scriptures, though it be one of the first and simplest of duties, is a thing which depends infinitely more upon an unbiassed and spiritual mind, and a felt dependence on the Spirit, than the best researches of learning or the most ingenious forms of philosophical reasoning? How otherwise can a conscientious feeling of responsibility for the due exercise of human reason, in searching the sacred scriptures after a just knowledge of the divine character, be secured? Its vast necessity may be shown by the mention of a few particulars. To the natural feelings of mankind, some of the attributes of God are more agreeable than others, and the *natural* less oppressive to human guilt and corruption than the *moral*. But how can man obtain a just idea of the character of God, if he does not give in his own mind just that degree of importance to *each* perfection which it receives in the bible, and if his mind does not recognize the fact that the divine word makes the glory of God pre-eminently to consist in the lustre and plenitude of his *moral* attributes; and in those very manifestations of holiness, which produce the greatest aversion to Him in sinful beings?

Human pride and carnal wisdom, are especially opposed to the acknowledgment of principles which are incomprehensible to reason; and yet to know the divine character at all, man must perceive in this book that the adorable mystery of a *Trinity in unity*, and now the further mystery of the hypostatical *union* of *Deity* and *humanity* in the person of Jehovah-Jesus, constitute prominent and indispensable facts in the mode of divine existence, not so much perhaps from the frequency with which these facts are directly recognized, as the dependence of almost every part of the bible upon them, and their inseparable connection with all the glories of grace and redemption, and all those operations of a quickening Spirit without which the bi-

ble is a dead letter, and the gospel powerless. He must also learn from the varied representations of this unerring volume, that there is such a union and oneness in the attributes of this most pure, indivisible, and almighty Being, that those which to an unenlightened mind would seem most opposite and contrary, are each necessary to the highest perfection of the other.

As the divine word makes known to us the Father of lights chiefly by facts actually developing his perfections, should he not thence learn that as the religion of men must be an active principle, the internal experience of its transforming power and the outward display of its controlling influence and its heavenly temper, claim a pre-eminence above a verbal acknowledgment of its principles, or an attention to its visible ordinances. And yet unless he feels that while he reads or listens, the eye of that Spirit is upon him, who is likely to use the word as the instrument of setting the true character of God before him, just in proportion as he is sincere and humble and prayerful, how can he be expected to look after the spirituality of truth, and honestly separate in his ideas of God whatever of human mutability, weakness, and imperfection, seem to be appropriated to him in those cases in which the bible, in adapting its language to human infirmity, applies to him those feelings of sorrow, of anger, &c., which in the same circumstances exist in the minds of men. The peculiar importance of right views of the character of God appears not only from the necessity, in all the pursuits of religion, of such a state of mind as it thus produces, but from every view of its connection with other things.

The *spirituality* and *efficacy* of men's attention to the public and private *duties* and *devotions* of religion, materially depend upon their ideas of the divine character. The solemnity and earnestness with which they read their bibles, hear the preached word, and examine their own hearts; and the measure of the disentanglement of their affections from the world; the extent of their active benevolence; their self-denial; and the degree of penitence, humility and fervor with which they draw near to God, will all have a direct relation to their views of *Him*.

The sovereign power of *conscience*, in enforcing the moral and relative duties of life, in sustaining inviolable truth, integrity, and justice between man and man, and subjecting the appetites and passions to the control of reason, depends upon this.

The *law of God* is but a verbal system of very practicable duties, a code entirely nugatory and powerless, as it respects the heart, until its meaning and its glory are unfolded to the eye of the astonished and despairing sinner, through the exhibition of the true character of Him who made it; and then the language of Job, and David, and Isaiah, of the prodigal and the publican, become the dispassionate words of truth and soberness.

Never do just impressions of *the glory of the gospel*; of the infinite love of God to man, in the gift of his Son; the incomprehensible love

of the eternal Son, in undertaking the work of redemption and appearing in this sinful, ruined, benighted world as a man of sorrows, and a victim of persecution, obloquy, and death; the long-suffering patience of that injured Father and insulted Sovereign, to sinful worms; or his untiring and unwearied goodness, as the bountiful Preserver of his creatures, exist in the minds of men, till a correct idea of Jehovah, his independence, his utter contrariety to all sin, and the nothingness of mortals to Him, arises to their view; and then the wonders of redeeming love, and the glory of the cross, seem but feebly foreshown in the fervent expressions of the evangelic prophet, and imperfectly apprehended by the ardent apostle. How can the soul be struck with a sense of the *sinfulness of sin*, and of *its own wickedness*, but as it rightly apprehends the true character of God; and what will determine the measure of the love and gratitude and trust of the saints, but their knowledge of what he really is? How is the mind of the Christian brought, amidst the chafing of disappointment and the sadness and gloom of deep affliction, to yield up all its choice sweetly to the will of God, and become calm and resigned and happy in him, but as, like Job, its "*eye seeth him*" as the steady friend of the soul, who in the act of thus refining in the fire those whom he loves, gives the sincerest token of his affection? Now just in proportion as men's ideas of God's character are wrong or defective, will the *effect* in all these and various other respects appear in a criminal deficiency, or in an utter and fatal delinquency. A presumptuous levity and irreverence will attend their devotions; a light and vain and self-conceited spirit will be brought to the act of communing with the word; a bold, and unsober and unawed use of the sacred writings; and a flippant and noisy and incautious development of new views and fanciful interpretations, will occur; or a cold, philosophical meaning be fastened upon the sacred page. A vain, ostentatious display of zeal, of impulses, and a morbid sensibility; or a cold, heartless, and superficial observance of the customary forms of religion, will proclaim the prevailing misapprehension of the character of the ever-blessed God. Morals will decline; professing Christians will come to their duties with reluctance; they will oppose sin with hesitation and irresolution; they will give with a reluctant, scanty hand, and pray with a cold, divided heart, making all their service a forced work, a matter of cold calculation; Or, under disproportionate and fallacious impressions respecting the divine character and will, they will unfold such inequalities and obliquities, such palpable neglects and such unequal impulses, as make the practical manifestations of Christianity no better than in the former case.

Under these fatal misapprehensions of God, the world of unconverted men, go on in error and transgression, ever sinking deeper in guilt and ruin. As they know not Him, his law and his gospel are alike misunderstood. One, as a victim of superstition, suffers deep remorse and mental anguish, for an imaginary sin, while no compunction is felt for a real one. Another hopes to compensate the

justice of heaven for one class of delinquencies, by the superabundance of a corresponding list of virtues. One, indulges in self-complacency and self-approbation, where there is no show of virtue or of goodness; and another, experiences no remorse amidst the darkest shades of moral delinquency.

Who can cast his eye over the very purest and loveliest portions of Messiah's empire on earth, and not recognize in a thousand forms of personal and social and relative duty; in the current maxims, and standards of society, and in men's practical expositions of what they conceive to be the mind of God, the mournful proofs of the tendency of the understanding and the heart of man to misapprehend the divine character?

With this solemn exhibition of the importance of the duty, and the difficulties and dangers with which it is connected, having the word of God and its appointed ordinances; and the assurance that if you lay your help on the arm of the Lord, the Spirit will descend and overshadow you, you are each placed, my hearers, under the injunction of becoming truly and savingly acquainted with the true character of the God of heaven. As the prospect of your conversion as sinners, and the measure of your growth in holiness as Christians, depend pre-eminently upon yielding up your souls to the pure and powerful manifestations of his character which shine around you; so in a matter of this eternal moment, the utmost sincerity and earnestness are immediately and at all times imperiously demanded. But can we possess no internal evidence that certain impressions, certain views of the divine character, are more just, more accordant with the bible than others? Doubtless we may; and, I observe,

1. That *correct ideas* of God are such as exist in the mind in its best and most spiritual frames,—such as seem most repugnant to sinful, carnal nature,—such as give the deepest permanent convictions of the worth and immensity of his love, and the fearfulness of his anger.

2. *Correct ideas* of God's character are such as impress the mind with the *deepest humility* and *sense of entire dependence* upon him; and therefore those views of human ability which seem to put the grace and salvation of God into the hands of men, instead of leaving guilty man in the hands of God, though they may appear to be more productive of effort in the sinner, are to be avoided as calculated to foster a spirit of pride and self-sufficiency.

3. Just views of the divine character are such as *awaken* in the *mind of man* the *most anxious solicitude and concern*, to do *immediately* whatever He requires, and to become what he demands; and therefore the accuracy of those views of the nature of the coincidence of human with divine agency, are to be suspected, which do not practically illustrate the results of truth; and the genuineness of that repentance and love to God, and joy in the Holy Ghost is to be doubted, which is not actually followed by a corresponding sanctification of the heart and life.

4. Scriptural impressions of the character of the blessed God, are such as leave on the minds of redeemed sinners, the *most soul-humbling ideas* of the *evil of sin*; and, therefore, those apprehensions of God which associate ideas of simple pity, rather than of blame, in his feelings towards sinners, and those views of human nature which make its impotency, an excuse for sin, or for the neglect of an immediate compliance with duty, cannot be accordant with a true knowledge of him.

5. Correct views of the glorious character of God, are such as are productive of the *purest specimens of Christian character*. The various attributes of Christian piety, receive at different times and in different ages, places, and ranks of life, so different a degree of prominence, that what the visible church may regard at one period as the best test of holiness, will become at another of little account. When activity and effort, and the works of public benevolence and charity assume a prominence in society, less stress will be usually laid upon advancement in Christian knowledge; and when this becomes ascendant, the former and the department of private meditation and the varied forms of Christian experience, will be likely to be neglected. Thus the visible fruits of holiness are likely to fluctuate, as different manifestations of this principle are more earnestly and frequently insisted on; and what is here affirmed is, that *just views of the character of God constitute* the surest antidote to these inequalities, because they tend directly to hold up the necessity of an exemplification of the entire character of the follower of Christ. To glorify God by a close, and searching, and meditative communion with him in private, and the conscientious and daily exercise of repentance, faith, and love; by a firm resistance of all the temptations and allurements of the world, and an open, decisive, conscientious exhibition of evangelical principle, in all the walks of public and social life; by the acquisition of all the accessible treasures of Christian knowledge; and an acquaintance with intricacies of religious experience: and by an active and exemplary participation in all the works of faith and labors of charity and love, to which the Redeemer's people are called, will constitute but a general outline of what will be regarded as incumbent, and necessary, and indispensable, by him who possesses just and vivid impressions of the divine character.

To possess true and sanctifying, and refreshing views of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as these views are unfolded in the bible, and often manifested to the heart of the humble disciple, are necessary to the production of the sweetest peace of conscience, and the liveliest joy in the Holy Ghost, and the most substantial increase of grace. These pure and holy conceptions of God, must enter, my fellow-sinner, your light and unsubdued mind, or you are lost forever! These spiritual and saving convictions—these sin-destroying, heart-purifying, and soul-humbling discoveries of the divine character, you must have, fellow-christians by profession, or your hope is vain, and your faith is dead. O, do you suitably

bly feel this when you enter your closets; when you visit the sanctuary; when you try your principles, your graces, and your life, by heaven's unerring rule? The difficulties attending the attainment and the lively preservation in the mind of such views of the divine character are not small. That we may be suitably convinced of this, let us,

II. Proceed to a brief consideration of some of the most obvious sources of danger and error on this subject.

1. Inadequate conceptions of the glorious character of God, must ever be attributable to finite beings; but erroneous and improper ones belong only to *sinning* intelligences. In the former case, as knowledge, purity, and affection, may have no limit but that which exists in the capacity of a dependent being; so this inadequacy may be productive of no evil, and give no wrong coloring to any other principle of revealed truth; but as the latter implies a criminal delinquency, so the effects are certainly injurious. All that concerns us here, is to endeavor to trace to their legitimate causes, those ideas of God which are in their own nature erroneous and criminal. There may exist temporary and accidental misapprehensions of the divine character in the minds of believers which are to be referred to physical rather than moral causes; and the *chief* distinction between renewed and unrenewed minds in their views of the divine character, is that the former are defective, the latter positively erroneous.

2. Man's native aversion to God, his total corruption, and the ascendancy in him of sense over reason, sin over holiness, and the creature over the Creator, sufficiently explain the reason why all just ideas of God are exiled from his mind; as the immersion of his affections in temporal things; his dislike to so pure and spiritual an object of thought and affection; and his consequent inattention to it, explain the reason why obscure and perverted ideas of that ever-present, ever-living, ever-bountiful and most glorious Being, whom he is required to know, and serve, and enjoy, as the perfection of all created good, are suffered to continue with him amidst the most solemn warnings, and the most earnest, and tender, and thrilling remonstrances to the contrary.

But where this inattention is not constant and entire, and where human reason is not directly employed to disprove the fact of his existence and his absolute perfection, these fatal misapprehensions often arise from attempting to derive the true knowledge of God *from other sources than divine revelation, and to the exclusion of it*. The innumerable absurdities and follies into which heathen philosophers and polished nations, in common with barbarous tribes, have fallen, where revelation has not been enjoyed, or its pure light has been forsaken, seem to be insufficient to convince modern infidels, and rational philosophizing Christians, that to the benighted eye and the depraved heart of man, the volume of nature and of providence can give no just and sufficiently practical impressions of God; and hence, through the direct and indirect influence

upon society of vain speculations, the pride of philosophy, and the efforts of boasted reason, every man meets with many barriers in his way to the acquisition of those simple, and scriptural ideas of God, which the world in its wisdom does not know. The less sincere and inquisitive, though perhaps called Christians, have, consequently, few purely scriptural apprehensions of the divine character.

3. *Vice, and passion, and self-indulgence* darken the understanding, and deaden the moral faculty. It is not more certain that a diseased eye will impair the vision, or intoxication derange the exercise of sense and reason, than that immoral conduct, the indulgence of those appetites and passions which have a tendency to bring the soul under the dominion of the senses; that loose and vain thoughts and imaginations will obscure the true lustre of Jehovah's countenance, and impair the ability, as well as enfeeble the desire, to associate the mind with spiritual contemplations. Our Saviour touched a principle of philosophical truth, not less than of moral order, when he said, that the only way to *know* the truth, was to *do* the will of God. A neglect of the laws of moral virtue, and mental discipline, is not only wrong, then, as implying like intoxication and violation of the law, but as it exposes the immortal soul, to all the dangers of an utter deprivation of saving grace and everlasting life, as the other does the body to fatal injury. Of that most potent and purifying knowledge of the divine character, which has often subdued the hardest heart, and reformed the most wicked life, and sanctified the highest powers of intellect, how many of the wise and the learned among us never have known and never will know any thing, simply because the established range of their thoughts, amidst the extended pursuits of politics and legislation, of commerce and of science, are as truly, though not as perversely, remote from the sacred fountain of true knowledge, as the walks of the sceptic or the open transgressor.

4. Another source of the misapprehension of God's character, among professedly religious people, is to be found in their *inattention to, and ignorance of, the divine law*. The ignorance to which we here refer, is not of a kind to be obviated by a frequent exhibition of its terrors, or a terrific display of its penal sanctions, nor a dry and cumbrous exposition of its principles; but by a deep, and close, and practical unfolding of all its requisitions and its attributes, in the light, and life, and glory which it assumes in the bible. Many deluded men have thought to *protect* the lustre of the divine character, by touching lightly on this sublime and searching exhibition of his attributes; as if it were not the grandest manifestation of moral excellence. Others have thought it necessary to set forth the gospel, as an abatement of its rigors, and the promulgation of a less elevated standard of righteousness. But the obvious, the ruinous reaction, of every such expedient, upon the moral character of Jehovah, loudly proclaims the illegitimacy of its origin. Without a thorough apprehension of the holiness of God, as shedding forth its

vital energy in the law, conviction is impossible. Sinners will regard its terrors, when uttered by man, as at best, but well-meant exaggerations, and its Author as a pliant kind-hearted Parent, if they do not understand this immutable standard of right and wrong. Its towering and uncompromising demands need often to be so brought to his view, as to make the *Christian tremble*; that Christ may be endeared to his heart, his whole soul humbled and purified, that in sweeter tones the accents of the *cross* may whisper peace. And the sinner, what other resource is left for him, but at length to be smitten and subdued by the voice of God, speaking through its earnest and awful denunciations? If, then, my beloved friends, you would not miss forever the gate of heaven, take heed that you enter, painful as it may be, into all the disclosures and teachings of that code, to know which is rightly to apprehend the character of God.

Again. Wrong ideas of Jehovah's character are not unfrequently imbibed through the *improper use of scriptural allusions and the application of analogical reasonings*. God rests the glory of his character on the sufficiency and integrity of the bible. This book, without a single particle of human imperfection throughout the entire range of its discoveries of him, comes, with all the inspirations of truth and eternal beauty, to form in man a character for purity, meekness and benevolence, of, to him, a new and unknown kind. But it must employ language which he can understand; and, to do this, it must savor of the times, the mind and the heart of him who "wrote as he was moved by the Holy Ghost." To catch resemblances and allusions, applied only where and to the extent in which they would convey unerring truth, and draw them out in a thousand shapes, and make these the bases of doctrinal and practical principles, is to darken and disgrace the character of God.

Some have attempted to illustrate the divine character, by saying that it was eminently a *parental* one. Now there are some respects in which such a reference may most justly and beautifully hold; but who does not perceive, that if in its main features such an illustration is carried out as the parental character is, exemplified in its best earthly specimens, and if this is made the basis of telling what he would or would not do towards his erring children, that the most injurious impressions will be made? The same remark applies to all similar analogies: and as there is no being like God, no relations like those which we sustain to him, and he to us, so we should resist every train of thought or reasoning which tends to liken him, in our permanent impressions of his character, to any other being whatever; remembering that as the heavens are high above the earth, so is he above all his works.

5. The moral attributes of God may be obscured by erroneous views of the *character and offices of Christ*, and the *nature of the gospel*. In the gospel, the moral character of Jehovah is unfolded in its clearest manifestations: and the *incarnation* is every where represented as such a "dwelling of all the fulness of the Godhead bodily"

in the person of the Mediator, as would give new discoveries of Deity to angels as well as men. In a visible exemplification of its spotless perfection, and a direct recognition of its immutable authority, how was the law and its great Author to be glorified by the life and walk of a divine Redeemer? In the sacrifice of the cross, how was *justice* to acquire a radiance brighter than it could receive in the perdition of a thousand worlds? And the *love* of God, how in the exhibitions of a grace and mercy which can find no sins too great to be forgiven, no offenders too mean to be noticed, and no blessings too precious to be freely given for Christ's sake? Faithfulness, wisdom, and truth, also, how were they to be illustrated in a thousand forms by means of that blessed gospel which is the revelation of the manifold wisdom of God? Every misapprehension of the work and reign of the divine Redeemer, of the nature of the Christian sacrifice, and the essential glory of the gospel, must of course, tend to darken and pervert this grandest exhibition of the divine character.

Again. The true character of God may be obscured through an attempt to account for such things as he has not thought proper to *explain*, and *and make the deep things of God accordant with human feelings*. Thus, to reconcile the existence of moral evil with the wisdom and goodness of God, some have denied his ability to prevent it without the destruction of the freedom of moral agency; while others, regarding its existence as a necessary evil to the attainment of the greatest good, have referred it to the direct agency of God himself. Some have attempted to limit the range of the *divine prescience*, to obviate the supposed difficulties of believing in his absolute foreknowledge of all sin as well as holiness; and others, under the idea of making the full and actual ability of every moral subject co-extensive with the divine requisition, have denied the *justice* of any other principle in the divine administration. At one time, his wisest and best exertions are represented as having failed through the perverseness of his creatures, and at another his own choice and determination to have been dependent upon the contingent actions and choices of sinful men. But we need not enlarge: these illustrations are sufficient to show you how wisdom above what is written,—how reason, proposing to illuminate the bible, on this highest and most fearful of all subjects, may obscure the divine glory, at least to the minds of plain unlettered Christians; and perplex and bewilder those whom an humble faith in testimony of God's word, should enable to use their best energies in far safer and holier efforts.

Once more. The true character of God may be entirely misapprehended, through a *mistaken idea of his attributes, and the elevation of one at the expense of others*. Thus the dominion of God over us, is often founded not so much in his right over us as a Ruler, and his propriety in us as a Creator, as in his goodness and mercy towards us, and our dependence upon him. Thus his title to our love and veneration, is made to consist more in his goodness and benevolence, than in his purity and his justice. To augment the riches of his

grace, some have denied the necessity of practical holiness in believers, and maintained that they could do nothing to displease him; while others, to magnify his goodness, have represented it as requiring the final destruction of sin, throughout the universe, and the universal restoration of all to purity and happiness. It is sufficient to say, however, that the Antinomian in the one case, and the Universalist in the other, diminish our impressions of the *purity* and *justice* of God, without at all exalting our views of his grace and goodness. The surest, and indeed the only certain antidote to these things, is, for the sober-minded Christian to study, with lively joy and spiritual affection, the beautiful and solemn presentments of the word of God, on these subjects, as they disclose, in perfect harmony and affectionate sisterhood, and perpetual co-existence, all his adorable attributes. We may add, also, that in all those public and private duties with which ideas of the divine Being are closely associated, confusion, tumult, artifice, and disorder should be avoided; and in our thoughts and representations of Him, nothing should be admitted inconsistent with that dignity, and solemnity, and profound reverence which becometh his presence forever. A misapprehension in respect to *him* should be dreaded more than any earthly misfortune; and a new and juster perception of his moral glory, should be prized above gold and silver, or the richest treasures of human learning. When the soul rises to this pursuit under the luminous and life-inspiring guidance of the Holy Spirit, freeing herself from the clogs of sin, from every bias, every vain dependence, and every sinister intention, she starts on the track of her eternal destiny, and hastens to ensure her preparation for the exalted sphere which awaits her.

To the *best means of overcoming these and various other obstructions*, and of making the surest and most efficacious advances in the true knowledge of God, we might also, did time permit, direct your attention. Such a sketch, in proportion as it was correct, would have an important reference to the following propositions, already developed, viz.:

1. As verbal representations of the divine character, presented to a mind in which there is no taste for, but a natural aversion to, moral excellence, cannot impart to it, of themselves, any morally correct and operative apprehensions of God whatever; so, an important radical *change of heart* must occur, before even the most luminous and scriptural views of God can so exist within, as to turn the sinner from the evil of his ways, and induce him to choose God as the portion of his soul.

2. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit does, in the progressive sanctification of believers, employ no other instrumentality but that of truth; and, as he may be expected, under ordinary circumstances, to bless those views of the divine character which are most scriptural, in preference to others; it follows, that your growth in holiness, if Christians, and your conversion, if impenitent sinners, are most intimately and solemnly connected with the care and fidelity with which you

resist all difficulties and temptations, and the earnestness and prayer with which you now habitually set yourselves to that noblest pursuit in which saints and angels are forever to be engaged.

3. As the feeblest powers, and the smallest intellectual attainments may, through the sovereign grace of the Holy Spirit, be competent to the possession of saving apprehensions of God, and as our advancement in just views of his character is uniformly more impeded by a wrong state and temper of mind, than intellectual defects and aberrations, which last indeed proceed from that source; so, the first and highest concern of every one of us, should be, that our souls may be replenished with the gifts of the Spirit, and that we may be induced to bring the aids of a holy, self-denied life, a devout and spiritual mind; a meek, docile, and humble spirit, and a true thirsting of soul after God, to private duties and public ordinances, and all those Sabbath and sacramental exercises, through which Jehovah is wont to make known himself to his people.

YE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST! who profess to have known HIM, and to have entered into covenant with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,—on you, the duty of *following* on to know the Lord, lays its most solemn claim. If you have possessed these precious and transforming views of the blessed God, has not your own experience taught you, that as defection and heresy always begin in the affections; and wrong affections first pervert the judgment, and then pollute the life; so a slight omission, a wave of passion, a sinful word or thought, a covetous, vain, or ambitious desire, is often enough to abate that fervor with which you cherish them, and the impressiveness which has distinguished them? The bible shows you how much his servants have been distinguished for their desire to enjoy just, and cheering, and soothing manifestations of his presence; and your evidence of piety must consist in the possession of a similar disposition. A life of watchfulness, and meditation, and prayer, united with singleness of aim, dependence on Christ, and persevering endeavor, can alone afford you the prospect of such advances as shall lighten the sorrows and surmount the temptations of this life, and, when you enter the darksome vale of Jordan, give you to sing the song of the conquering Christian.

To those who are NOT NUMBERED AMONG THE FRIENDS OF GOD, let me also affectionately appeal. Men and brethren, what that measure of knowledge of the divine character is, which accompanies fallen angels and finally impenitent men to the regions of everlasting despair, and in view of which “they believe and tremble;” or what augmentation of it the ceaseless growth of their wickedness and their misery may imply, we pretend not to know; but, it is enough to say, that it never subdues their enmity, softens their hardness, quells the fury of their passions, or turns back their guilty eyes, to behold, with filial love and grateful pleasure, that adorable and lovely Being, whose essential excellence would there seem but to increase the aversion and the misery of his rebel creatures. Doubtless they will know enough of him to feel, in tenfold measure, what

the conscience of every sinner now enforces upon him, that they *ought to obey and love him*, and that the resistance of this most reasonable claim, is the real source of all their interminable anguish. To that gloomy world, where every tender, grateful, affectionate thought of the blessed God, has given place to enmity and dread, and where sin and unbridled passion have kindled up their quenchless fires, will you, beloved hearer, bend your steadfast way? Does not every step towards it betray such incorrect, unkind, ungrateful ideas of God, as you have *no right* to cherish? Angelic throngs, with untiring rapture, fill his pure abode with the swelling chorus, HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, IS THE LORD GOD OF HOSTS, because they see and know him as he *is*. Redeemed sinners on earth, at those favored hours, when, enabling them to see that they are hid in the cleft of Zion's Rock, He passes by and gives them to see the glory of his character, are melted into grief, and bathed in tears, that they have honored and loved him so little, and long for the hour of their ascension to his right hand. And, if you look at this lower world, do not all its animate and inanimate objects, as they smile amidst the silent serenity and cloudless brilliance of the summer morn of the Sabbath, seem to rejoice in Him? Or if you lift your eyes to the wide expanse of the heavens, where unnumbered worlds, in their varied revolutions, pour their brilliant radiance around the throne of God, and proclaim their subjection to his will, do you not *see his works attest* it right that the heavens should declare his glory, and all creation give a grateful expression of his presence and his power? And what right have you to be ignorant or insensible of those *moral glories* in the Godhead which call forth still deeper emotions? The volume of creation and of providence is before you; and you are lost in the wonders of power, and goodness, and love, which each bright page unfolds! The volume of inspiration is in your hand; and it reveals a Saviour whose humiliation and sufferings for us were enough to make angels weep—whose compassion and love would seem sufficient to draw tears from the scoffer's eye, and melt into penitence the murderer's heart. You have the testimony of the clearest evidence, also, that while the bible is thus lifting the veil of uncertainty from every attribute of God, and while the cross is uttering its most thrilling appeals to your sense of duty, you stand yourself on the brink of eternity, to enter which, without having caught a sanctifying vision of God's true character, is to have closed life's harvest season unsaved, and shrouded the eye in everlasting night.

Thus furnished for the work of knowing God, consider well, that while we speak there visits this assembly a Spirit, who if not resisted by you, will now begin those developments of *transcendent excellence* which it will require an eternity fully to make known! Need we then earnestly entreat you *now* to awake from every delusive slumber,—*to-day* to lift your thoughts and your affections to this great and glorious Being, saying, in the language of the text, "I BESEECH THEE, SHEW ME THY GLORY!"