

MODERN SERMONS BY WORLD SCHOLARS

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IN TEN VOLUMES
VOLUME X—THWING TO ZWEMER
GENERAL INDEX

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CONTENTS

VOLUME X

	PAGE
THE TWO REVELATIONS— <i>Thwing</i>	1
THE CONCERN OF JESUS FOR THE FAITH— <i>Tucker</i>	15
THE ANGEL OF GOD'S FACE— <i>Van Dyke</i> . .	37
JESUS CHRIST, THE SAME YESTERDAY AND TO-DAY, AND FOREVER— <i>Warfield</i> . . .	59
THE PREACHING OF PAUL— <i>Warman</i> . . .	77
LESSONS FROM AN ANCIENT PROPHET— <i>Weid-</i> <i>ner</i>	85
THE VALUE OF DISCONTENT— <i>Willett</i> . . .	107
HUMAN SUFFERING— <i>Wood</i>	125
ON DISCERNING GEMS— <i>Wortman</i>	139
PROVIDENCE AND DUTY— <i>Wright</i>	157
THE NEW HEAVENS AND THE NEW EARTH— <i>Zenos</i>	177
BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT CONSCIENCE— <i>Zwemer</i>	193

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THE ANGEL OF GOD'S FACE¹

PROF. HENRY VAN DYKE

"In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them."—Isa. 63 : 9.

THERE is a difference between our theories about God and our thoughts of God. If you and I were perfect in knowledge and wisdom, if there were no separation between our intellectual and practical life, if reason and love were in complete harmony, if we really knew all that we feel and really felt all that we know, then, of course, there would not be any possibility of such a difference. Our theories about God, which are our theology, and our thought of God, which are our religion, would be in clear and sweet and perfect unity. And surely this would be a blessed and happy thing for us; this would be true spiritual peace and joy; this would be the deepest inward rest and satisfaction.

Let me try to make this plain. You have a theory of friendship. You reason about it as something of which human nature is capable. You form a conception of its different elements, of its true conditions, of its modes of

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action, of its powers and possibilities. And that theory of friendship is a good thing for you to have. It is precious. It elevates and cheers your mind. But presently, as you go on your way through the world, you find a friend; one who comes close to you in that mysterious contact of personalities which is the most wonderful thing in the world; one who knows you, cares for you, loves you, gives you the sacred gifts of fellowship and help. Trouble befalls you. Your friend stands by you, strengthens you, counsels you, helps you to fight your way out of that which is conquerable and to endure patiently that which is inevitable. Sorrow enters your house. Your friend is there, sharing your grief, bearing it with you and for you, coming closer to you than ever before, and quieting your wounded heart with sympathy,

“ Like the song of a mother who soothes into rest
The tired child lying at peace on her breast.”

And now your theories of friendship are translated into your thoughts of your friend. They are clarified, corrected it may be, purified and intensified if your experience is a deep and true one; at all events, they are transformed into something very different from what they were before. Once you reasoned about them; now you feel them. Once they belonged to your philosophy; now they

belong to your life. Once you believed in friendship; now you trust your friend.

It seems to me that it is just this strange and beautiful transformation of abstract theory into living thought that God means to work out in our relations with Him by the experience of life. He reveals certain truths to us about Himself. Or, if you like to put it in another way, reason leads us to certain conclusions in regard to Him. He is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, righteousness, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. We believe that. Our minds assent to such a noble statement. Yes, but God wants us to go beyond that. He wants us to know Him; for only personal knowledge, only knowledge that is woven into the very fabric of our souls, abides with us for ever.

Our theories about God are our theology. It is well to value them, to try our best to keep them pure and high. But the deeper question is, What is our religion? What are our real thoughts of God? In that deep and secret place of our inmost consciousness, where all our desires and feelings and hopes and aspirations are born, what is God to us? This is the great question, the searching question. And on the answer to it our peace, our happiness, our usefulness depend.

We say that God is perfect in wisdom. But do we feel that He is wise for us? Do we trust His wisdom to guide and direct us? Do we

think of Him as the one who always knows what is best for us?

We say that God is perfect in righteousness. But do we know Him as "the Lord, our righteousness?" Do we trust assuredly in Him to cleanse us from the guilt and deliver us from the power of sin? Do we yield ourselves to His will and purpose to purify us by the discipline of life?

We say that God is omnipresent:

"His dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."

It is a grand doctrine, an inspiring doctrine, this of the divine omnipresence. But do we think of God as present with us personally in all the experiences of life? Such a thought of Him is infinitely more needful, infinitely more precious than any theory of His omnipresence.

Go back to the illustration that we drew from the theory of friendship. You know that a true friendship must have in it a wide and generous sympathy with all the trouble that there is in the world. But when trouble comes to you, you want to be sure that your friend knows of it, and feels it, and is ready to help you bear it. A general thought of your friend's goodness is not enough. What

you long for is the saving presence of a personal sympathy.

It is not otherwise in our relation to God. What we want, to speak plainly, is to feel that God knows what happens to us, and is with us while it happens, and loves us steadily and tenderly through it all. The time when we want this most is in the time of affliction, because that is the time when it is hardest to find, and yet without it we must perish in despair. In prosperity, in happiness, we feel that we can get on, after a fashion, without God. But when the clouds gather around us and the storms descend, when our dreams are broken and our dearest treasures take wings and fly away, then we know that to be without God in the world is to be without hope. Soon or late that time comes to every man and woman. Soon or late we cross the dry places where we must be unutterably lonely unless God is with us. Soon or late the path of life dips down into the shadowed valley where we must walk in darkness and stumble among the graves unless the Lord God giveth us light. And so this text of ours is like a lamp which the prophet kindles and puts into our hands that we may use it when we need it.

Not all men may feel that they have any necessity for it at any specified time. There may be some to whom the world seems all bright; life smooth and pleasant; the ways of Providence as plain and easy to understand as

a child's picture book. But some day or other you will stumble over something and fall, and when you rise and look about you the world will be changed: it will look very dark and mysterious; many things will seem to be against you; there will be conflicts and fears; you will stand face to face with that which dismays you and makes your heart shrink within you in terror of great darkness. Probably most men have known something of that experience already. Bright as our lives have been, some shadows have fallen upon them. Even the young, the strong, the fortunate, the light-hearted, have their disappointments, their misgivings, their trials, their afflictions. "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" Yes, we all of us need something of the strength and cheer and comfort and guidance which dwell in this word of the prophet. Let us try to see what it means to translate the theory of God's omnipresence into the living thought that God is with us in all the trials and troubles of life. Let us try to learn how it is that the angel of God's presence saves us in the midst of our afflictions:

This truth cannot mean anything to us unless we realize what kind of a presence it is of which the prophet speaks. And surely this

ought not to be hard to discover and understand. He looks backward over the tribulations and distresses of Israel, this man of God, Himself a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as he surveys the long story of trouble and suffering he sees God's presence shining through it all, like the face of a friend. In the joy of this vision the prophet speaks for God. "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his face"—the angel who stands before His face continually, or, it may be, the angel who represents and reveals Him as the face reveals the spirit—"the angel of his face saved them."

Now surely this means, first of all, a gracious, friendly, loving, sympathizing presence. God is with us in our troubles, not merely because He has to be there, since He is everywhere; He is there because He wants to be. Just as truly as you desire to be near your friends, your children, when they suffer, just so truly does God desire and choose to be near us in our afflictions. He would not be away from us even if He could. He is not present as a mere spectator, looking at us curiously while we suffer. That cold and distant conception of Him as the great on-looker

"Who sees with equal eyes as God of all
A hero perish or a sparrow fall,"

is not the thought of the Bible. He is with us as one who has the deepest interest in it all,

feels all that happens to us, cares infinitely for us through it all. Nor is He present merely as the author of our pains and sorrows who could have spared us from them if He would, but who insists upon inflicting them on us, whatever it may cost us to bear them. It costs Him as much as it costs us. "He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men." There is a wondrous power in the precise words in which the prophet voices this profound truth. Literally they are translated, "In all their adversity he was no adversary."

How that thought glows with light! The deepest gloom of adversity comes from the idea that God must be against us. How can He be good and yet afflict the world so bitterly? How can He be loving and yet pierce us with the arrows of pain, and torture us with loathsome diseases, and crush our hearts with disappointment, and smite the innocent little children with death? We must face the question, for it is a part of our life. We cannot run away from it. We ought not to cover it up with flowery words. The only answer to it comes along the line of this blessed text.

Even in the midst of our adversities God is not our adversary. These things are not His works. They are the works of human sin and folly and perversity—a strange power, a hostile power—hostile to Him as to us. Why He has permitted it to enter the world we cannot

understand. Surely He would not have done so if it had not been necessary. And surely there is no necessity with God which is not a means of ultimate and transcendent good,

“At last, far off, at last to all.”

But now that evil is here, with all its attendant train of suffering, God is with us, not as our enemy in causing the pain, but as our Father and Friend in sharing it.

There is nothing that we regret with pure hearts that He does not regret far more. There is nothing that makes us honestly sorry that does not give Him an infinitely deeper sorrow. Do we grieve as we think of the anguish of the many generations of the children of men? He grieves far more profoundly. “His soul was grieved,” says the prophet, “for the misery of Israel.” Does it fill us with pain that death has entered this beautiful world, and walks to and fro among the springing flowers and the singing birds, and touches our fairest and loveliest with his cold hand and lays them low? The pain, the pity, the deep regret of it all is infinitely greater in the divine heart. Death as we know it and shrink from it, is God’s enemy just as truly as it is ours. “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” It is the other side of death, the side that we do not know, the side that God has made to counterbalance and con-

quer this dark and painful side, the messenger that leads the soul into peace and light and joy, that is God's friend, God's angel. And while we suffer in this world from death as a bereavement, an affliction, while we endure the manifold ills that flesh is heir to, while we are disappointed and troubled and distressed, God is with us as one who bears our griefs and carries our sorrows.

Do you say that it is hard to think of God as thus entering into our afflictions? Yes, it is hard. And yet there were men even before Christ came, as our text proves, who rose to the nobility of that thought of a sympathizing God who suffers with us. And if we believe that God revealed Himself in Christ to draw the world unto Himself, then surely it ought to be possible for us to lay firm hold upon the thought of the divine sympathy in all our afflictions.

What sorrow is equal to His sorrow? Do you think His tears at the grave of Lazarus did not come from the heart? Tho He knew all—resurrection, immortality, heaven—yet Jesus wept at the sadness of death. Do you think His tears over Jerusalem did not come from the heart? Tho He knew all—the victory of His atoning death, the triumph of His faith—yet Jesus lifted up His voice and wept over the sufferings of men. Do you think the drops of blood in the garden did not come from the heart? Tho He knew all—the merit

of His sacrifice, the joy of His reward, the glory of His kingdom—yet the soul of Jesus was exceeding sorrowful even unto death. Ah, my friends, do you not know the meaning of this? When we look on Jesus Christ as the revealer of the heart of God, what affliction of our mortal life is there into which it does not bring God as our fellow-sufferer? “In all our afflictions he is afflicted, and the angel of his face saves us.”

God’s presence with us in the time of trouble is then a personal, gracious, loving, sympathizing presence. But more than this, it is a covenanted presence, it is promised and promised forever, for all time and in every experience. The text teaches us this. The angel of His face is none other than the angel of the covenant in whom God’s pledge to be with His people for ever is redeemed. Turn back to the ancient Scriptures and hear Him give this pledge to Jacob: “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, . . . for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.” Hear His promise to Joshua: “I will not fail thee nor forsake thee.” Hear His promise through Isaiah: “I the Lord will hear thee; I the God of Israel will not forsake thee. When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee. And even to your old age, I am he, and even

to hoar hairs will I carry you; I have made and I will bear, even I will carry and will deliver you." And then hear the pledge of Jesus Christ: "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."

As long as God lives and our souls live, so long does this pledge stand. It is true, we cannot always feel this presence. But we can always know that it is there, always think of it, so long as thought endures, always rest upon it forever and forever: and the reason why this promise is given is that we may hold fast to this truth.

There may be a moment in the very depth of sorrow and anguish when the presence is hidden from us. But it is not because God is absent. It is because we are stunned, unconscious. It is like passing through a surgical operation. The time comes for the ordeal. The anesthetic is ready. You are about to become unconscious. You stretch out your hand to your friend, "Don't leave me, don't forsake me." The last thing you feel is the clasp of that hand, the last thing you see is the face of that friend. Then a moment of darkness, a blank—and the first thing you feel is the hand; the first thing you see is the face of love again. So the angel of God's face stands by us, bends above us, and we may know that He will be there even when all else fails. Our friends die, our possessions take wings and fly

away, our honors fade, our strength fails, but beside every moldering ruin and every open grave, in the fading light of every sunset, in the gathering gloom of every twilight, amid the mists that shroud the great ocean beyond the verge of mortal life, there is one sweet, mighty voice that says, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. In all thy afflictions I will be with thee, and the angel of my face shall save thee."

If this is how we are to think of the presence of God in our lives, as a personal, sympathizing, loving presence, pledged to us for all times and all possible occasions, it ought to be easy for us to see how it will save us. The power of such a thought of God always with us, and most of all in our times of weakness and trial and trouble, must be a redeeming, delivering, upbearing power.

It must save us, first of all, from the sense of meanness, littleness, unworthiness which embitters life and makes sorrow doubly hard to bear. The presence of God must bring a sense of dignity, of elevation into our existence. It was a great king who once said, "Where I sleep, there is the palace." The life that has the presence of God in it can be neither trivial nor unworthy.

Our daily existence sometimes seems to us a thing of small account. It appears to be made up of endless petty tasks and a few petty pleasures and many petty trials. It produces

no great results, makes no large mark on the page of history, contributes no striking figure to the panorama of the world. We just go on attending to the details of business in a small office, or keeping house in a quiet street; and the children are a little larger this year than they were last year; and we have a few more gray hairs; and we have managed to meet our obligations fairly well. But we wonder what we were sent into the world for. My friend, you were sent into the world to live your life with God. If He can come into this life of yours you ought to think well of it. It ought to be adorned and ennobled by His presence. All its daily duties, all its small delights—for there is no life so narrow that it has not room for the spirit of joy—should seem to you refined and uplifted by the divine participation in them. Let us get out of the false notion that the only way to be dignified is to be distinguished, the only way to be good is to be heroic, the only way to help the world is to make a sensation, the only way to serve Christ is to do something big. Let us learn that the whole Christian life, whether it is lived on a scale of miles or of inches, is a beautiful and worthy life, and that what God requires of us is not to accomplish anything wonderful, but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God. God has two thrones—one in the highest heaven, one in the lowliest heart.

The angel of God's face saves us also from

that feeling of reckless indifference, dumb carelessness, which sometimes tempts us to let our lives go blundering and stumbling along on the lower levels. It brings a new conscience into our thoughts, desires, and efforts, awakens a noble dissatisfaction with our half-hearted work, quickens within us a longing to be more fit for the divine companionship.

It is one mark of a good friend that he makes you wish to be at your best while you are with him. The blessed persons who have this influence are made in the likeness of that heavenly Friend whose presence is at once a stimulus and a help to purity of heart and nobleness of demeanor. A man's reputation is what his fellowmen think of him. A man's character is what God knows of him. When we feel that the angel of His face is with us, a careless life, a superficial life no longer satisfies us. We long to be pure in heart, strong in purpose, clean in deed, because we know that nothing else will satisfy Him.

The angel of God's face saves us from the sense of weakness, ignorance, incompetence, which often overwhelms us in the afflictions of life. We feel not only that we are powerless to protect ourselves against trouble, but that we are not able to get the good out of it that ought to come to us. We cannot interpret our sorrows aright. We cannot see the real meaning of them. We cannot reach our hand through the years to catch "the far-off in-

terest of tears," We say to ourselves in despair, " God only knows what it means." And if we do not believe that God is with us, then that thought shuts us up in the darkness, puts the interpretation of the mystery far away from us, locks us up in the prison house of sorrow and leaves the key in heaven. But if we believe that God is with us, then the word of despair becomes a word of hope. " God only knows "—yes, but God truly knows, and He is with us to teach us. He is overruling our trouble so that it shall turn to good for us and for those whom we love and for all the world. He knows the joy and peace that have come to those whom we have lost, and He bids us sorrow not for them as those who have no hope. He has undertaken to be our Guide, our Teacher, our Master, through all the sorrow of this mortal life. He is making the present light afflictions work out for us a far more exceeding weight of glory. He is making us perfect through suffering.

This is what He says to us in Christ: " In the world ye shall have tribulations: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." Yes, sorrow is real, sorrow is bitter, but sorrow with God is the path that leads to a larger, richer life.

The angel of God's face saves us from the sense of loneliness, which is unbearable. Companionship is essential to happiness. A solitary Eden would have been no Paradise. The

deepest of all miseries is the sense of absolute isolation. There are moments in the experience of most of us when the mysterious consciousness of the law which made all human souls separate, like islands,

“ And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea,”

fills us with heaviness of heart. In this painful solitude the present friendship of God is the only sure consolation. Nothing can divide us from Him—not misunderstanding, nor coldness, nor selfishness, nor scorn—for none of these things are possible to Him. Nothing can divide us from Him except our own sin, and that He has forgiven and taken away and blotted out by His great mercy in Christ.

A few years ago a man of great talent, famous for his eloquence, but even better known for the entire unbelief in God which he proclaimed, was called to deliver a funeral address over the grave of his brother. In words of somber pathos he compared this life to a narrow, green valley between the cold peaks of two eternities. We walk here for a little while in company with those whom we love. Then our hands are loosed and our companions vanish. We can see but a little way. Beyond the encircling hills all is gloom and nothingness.

How different is the voice of one whose

heart has known and trusted the angel of the face of God: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Companionship is the one thing in the world which is absolutely essential to happiness. The human heart needs fellowship more than anything else, fellowship which is elevating and enduring, stronger and purer than itself, and centered in that which death cannot change. All its springs are in God. Without Him life is a failure and all beyond is a blank. Even reason perceives that the recognition of His being and presence makes life as different from that which either theoretical or practical atheism can produce, as light is from darkness. There is absolutely nothing that man cannot do without, except God. With Him happiness is possible anywhere and always. In deepest perils and darkest prisons, in the languor of sickness and the loneliness of sorrow, in the narrow house of poverty and the fiery furnace of pain, on the cross of disgrace and in the black shadow of death, men and women have been happy because God was with them. Yea, they have sung praises so that the other prisoners have heard them. Call to your mind your own experience. How often has the angel of His face delivered you? How often have you trembled, in the distance, at the chained lions between which you passed

unharméd into the House Beautiful? How often have you said of evil: "This will surely destroy me." Yet you found when the trouble came that you had strength given you to bear it, and that you came out of it as one returns from a perilous and difficult journey with a friend, with new memories of companionship and new proofs of love.

We talk of our possessions—of what we own. What are they all compared with the presence and friendship of God?

"The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine,
But God, who called me here below,
Shall be forever mine."