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A DISCOURSE
ON THE
PRESENCE OF GOD,

DELIVERED BY
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AT THE
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THE
PRESENCE OF GOD.

“Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and the heart of those that are contrite.”
—Isaiah lvii. 15.

TO undervalue knowledge and learning never can be wise; nor do we undervalue them in saying that moral qualities and strong common sense are of more avail for religious wisdom than any special or scholastic attainments. How indeed could religion be an affair for all men on any other condition? Nevertheless, as the mind of nations has grown, so has the grandeur of their ideas concerning God. The eye of man takes in at a glance the vast interval from this earth to a brilliant star; hence it is easy for a savage to conceive of God as sitting in the heavens, and yet seeing and watching the deeds of mankind. The early Hebrews had not reached the idea that God is present here, and everywhere on earth, as much as in heaven. They certainly supposed him to have a peculiar dwelling-place in the sky. But the master of a house, who sits in the principal chair and can give orders to all who sit or stand in the same room, may be said to be present in every part of that room, in which nothing escapes his eye or his authority. In the same manner, ancient men represented to themselves the universal presence of God, without resigning the imagination that he has a local throne and is surrounded by a special circle of ministering spirits. The moral effect of such belief is nearly the same as that which we now regard as more correct. If the

Supreme Spirit knows everything that goes on everywhere—if, also, his power (or, as the ancients called it, his hand) reaches to every spot, the result to us is just that of his universal presence.

All ancient peoples imagined the Heaven in which God dwelt to be *aloft*, over our heads. Locally, as well as morally, he was to them the High and Lofty One. The grosser idea that he had some definite shape was at an earlier period effaced among the Hebrews by the belief that he was ever shrouded in a luminous cloud. To this the Apostle Paul alludes, when he entitles God “the Blessed and Only Potentate, who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see.” This is a splendid advance on the mean ideas of God set forth in Genesis and Exodus, and in every moral aspect is as noble and pure a representation as any that we can now attain. Yet a modification has been made inevitable by the discoveries of modern science. We know, beyond contradiction, that we are living on the surface of a globe; that, when a ship sails from England to the Cape of Good Hope, the stars overhead change, week by week; the mid-day sun rises higher and higher, being at first to the south, but at length right overhead, and afterwards is left to the north; also, that if the voyage be continued to Australia and New Zealand, the opposite side of our globe is at length reached. The stars which are above *our* head are beneath *their* feet. If Tartarus, or the region of the Dead, were, as the ancients supposed, immeasurably deep, then our *Tartarus* would be to the dwellers in New Zealand *Heaven*, and their Heaven would be our Tartarus. Thus, to mankind at large, no one direction is up or down, and it becomes an arbitrary fancy to fix the divine abode in one part of the heavenly vault rather than in another. Moreover, science has discovered that the stars are at distances from us vastly diverse; that the

nearest star is prodigiously more remote from us than is our own sun; and that the idea of a blue crystal vault in which sun and stars are fixed is a mere illusion of the eye. We now understand that God is not more *immediately present* in one point of space than in another, but, wherever we are—in this chapel or in a private chamber—we are for ever in God's immediate presence, for ever in God's own Heaven.

There are many who speak with shuddering of Death, as a passing into the immediate presence of God. Dear friends, the shudder is certainly needless. Solemn the thought must be, happy it ought to be, that God is here, and that you cannot get nearer to him by dying. Many talk of the flesh as a curtain that hides him from us. Only in so far as the flesh is able to distract, to dull, to defile the spirit, can that statement be true. But God certainly is not the less present when our eyes are blinded to the fact of his presence. Man differs from man, and each of us differs from himself, in vividness of conception that God is present; and on this vividness largely depends the energy of spiritual life. In the Sermon on the Mount, according to Matthew, Jesus is reported to say, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they *shall see* God;" but in the Arabic translation (which of all modern tongues comes nearest in genius to the Hebrew in which he spoke), the verb is in the present tense: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they *have vision* (or *insight*) of God;" and to me this carries conviction. Akin to this thought, though not identical, are the epithets in the passage with which I opened, where the prophet makes the High and Holy One say, "I dwell with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit." Moral conditions are primarily needed by those who believe in a Holy God, that they may be able to live in a realization of his presence. The Hebrew prophet seems to have believed, *on the one hand*, that God sympathizes with

those who are crushed in body or soul, and, *on the other hand*, that the consciousness of his presence is not a terror, but a comfort, to the afflicted. It revives their heart. And, without further discussing what he meant by *contrite*, we may from this point of view examine the subject.

What makes the thought of a Holy God terrible? Perhaps it will be replied, The consciousness of sin. That is partly true, yet it is not the whole truth. If sin mean only moral imperfection, sin is our state for ever. "God putteth no trust in his servants, and his angels he chargeth with folly"—says the poet in the Book of Job. Surely it is not a sense of imperfection, but a sense of hostility, that makes the nearness of a mighty superior painful. The humble man may perhaps think himself not only lower than the lowest of all saints, but guiltier than many a profligate; nevertheless, if he be contrite in heart, he hates his own iniquity, he longs for holiness, while he knows himself unholy; hence the thought of the Holy God revives his heart, and the consciousness of that purifying presence is a delight. With this harmonizes that utterance of Jesus, "The pure of heart have vision of God." We see most distinctly that for which we look eagerly.

The life of religion is not *opposed* to nature; rather, it is in fullest accordance with our best normal state. Yet it certainly is not natural, in the sense of coming easily or without effort to the individual or to the race. Mankind through long ages had a dim perception of the superior Power in which it unhesitatingly believed, and went through various forms of absurd opinion and wild fancy, the vulgar through ignorance, or the poets through wilfulness, spoiling the best thoughts of more earnest meditators. Thus numerous fantastic religions, which we now call Pagan, arose, some with many noble elements predominant; but in most the baser

and sillier fancies swamped the better thoughts. Very slowly indeed has mankind collectively moved towards more reasonable notions of the divine existence and character. Moreover a constant tendency displays itself to degeneracy and retrogression into old error, so that the latest stages of each creed are apt to be the worst. These facts have occurred on a very wide scale, and scarcely can be mistaken. Maturity of mind, which combines sobriety with active thought, is needed as an intellectual condition for a reasonable theology; also, if national morals be in a degraded state, the same degradation will appear in the religious notions. We now inherit the net results of at least four thousand years' mental history; yet not very many among us can wholly avoid the puerile errors of the past. At the same time, individuals often pass through a special history of their own, ere they can attain for themselves practical results from the notions which they theoretically receive. I do not speak of those who are content with a religion that rests in the head; nor may I digress concerning others who are disquieted by superstitious error. But, apart from all these, some of us are strongly impressed with the conviction, that, *if man alone of earthly beings has a discernment of God, man cannot be without moral relations to God.* Then follows the question, What are those moral relations? and the individual perhaps asks, "Wherein does my perception that God is my God, affect my life?" I call your close attention to this deeply practical question.

No two human minds are quite alike, and the richer the soil the more various is the plant. But though the course by which religion is developed and practically established probably differs in all, yet all these have in common a deep sense that religion is not a mere theory of the intellect, but is a state of heart pervading the whole life. Many go through a process which the old divines call, "Seeking after

God," while the heart is inwardly striving to ascertain its due *moral relation* to him, and keep up a happy perception of his near presence. Each of us can but guess at the pains or pleasures in other souls; nevertheless it is reasonable to believe, that, unless some moral frailty darken and distort the inward actions, this solemn seeking after God will have its appropriate delight. A Hebrew Psalm seems to allude to it with beautiful simplicity. "O Lord, when thou saidst, 'Seek ye my face,' my heart replied, 'Thy face, Lord! will I seek.'" How child-like and straightforward! No artificial straining, no distraction by bashfulness, no alarm at God's immeasurable grandeur; but, as the philosopher believes that Man has natural relations to Infinite Truth, and that the universe (as it were), calls aloud, inviting us to the study, so the practical worshipper of the Most High believes that man has natural relations with him, and that the Infinite One virtually invites his finite creature to fellowship and intimacy.

This is that, which religious people call the Spirit of God moving within them. They know not what impels them, some day, to address the Unseen Presence as a child speaks to a father. It appears an impulse not their own. When innocent instinct pervades an entire race, we do not ascribe it to the individuals of the race, but to the Author of their nature: much more then the nobler movements of the soul, so far as they are normal to man, may not unreasonably be called the workings of God within us. Hence, says Paul, God has sent forth the spirit of sonship into our hearts. Ordinarily this is the result of the heart's full surrender to God as the centre of all righteousness. When we deliberately judge that the highest virtue is man's best portion and that all sin is shameful and miserable, then the law of the Spirit is to us perfect freedom; a righteous God becomes a lovely object, and our earnest aspira-

tion is that his holy fire may burn out all our unholliness. This desire is the germ of perfect peace; for, our will being subdued to God's will, the sense of his nearness is delightful; and inevitably with it the faith springs up, that the holy will of God must triumph over human sin. No one who is conscious that his will is on God's side, can dread the thought of God's immediate presence; and the belief of our direct moral relations with him is likely to grow up into gradually increasing strength with inward exercises of the heart in this communion.

Does any one present say, that such thoughts are too lofty,—are mystical,—are fanciful? If I could for a moment believe them fanciful, if I did not deem them to be words of entire soberness, I could not utter them here; but that they are mystical, I freely concede. Spiritual religion is nothing, if it be not mystical. To walk as seeing him who is invisible, to be conscious that God is in us, and that we have our life in him, is essentially mystical and mysterious; yet not the less true and certain. Of God himself we can only speak by metaphor and analogy, because our primitive vocabulary is made for things of sense, and is only gradually added to, as experience in things supersensible accumulates. If any one wants a religion which is developed out of, and measured by, Physical Science, he can get it; but it will have no element of spirituality, no relation to human morals, and will be of no concern whatever for daily life, any more than a theory concerning Gravitation or Electricity. But if Religion is to be a universal and moral bond, its very nature is inward, spiritual, mystical; but not the less,—nay, so much the more,—accessible and important to every human soul. If we were to allege that "Religion is the true poetry of life," we should misrepresent it; yet in common with poetry and all high Art it must have a mystical element.

Sound religion never can delude us into the immoralities of fanaticism: for it does not prescribe and dominate the law of morals, but is dominated thereby. Moral law rests on the universal reason of mankind, and prescribes to religion. True religion submits to this law, not accounting it a yoke or a burden, but a basis, and a purpose for which we are made and live. On this critical point depends its perfect sobriety. The very idea of a HOLY God (whether primitively Egyptian or Hebrew or Persian or Buddhist, let antiquarians settle), distinguishes the noble tradition which Christians, Jews, Mohammedans, and Brahmaes honour, from the defective counterfeit. "Thus saith the high and lofty One whose name is Holy." Neither to the Pagan nor to the mere Physical philosopher is the supreme Power a Holy Spirit. But when we cannot conceive of God himself but as in harmony with moral law, much more do we regard subjection to moral law as our own noblest and best state; and this is the fit interpretation of the words: "Be ye holy, for I am holy." No inward impressions, imagined to be divine, must be adduced as dictating to us right and wrong. Only when we know our inward suggestions to be intrinsically good, can we presume to attribute them to the Father of Lights, from whom cometh down every good and perfect gift. Such is the sufficient reply to those who dread lest spiritual impetus dictate some new and false morality.

A vivid sense of God's presence cannot alter our tranquil estimate of the right and the wrong in human action. It leaves our code of morals wholly undisturbed. It does but stimulate us to act up to our highest convictions of right, and brace us up (where needful) to brave self-sacrifice. In this respect it is comparable to the presence of a revered and elder friend: at least the comparison makes it easy to understand the moral influence of this sublime faith. If our creed no longer comprizes many

matters believed by pious men of old, *still* for us as for them remains the truth, that a life of religion is a life of faith. *Still*, as ever, it conduces to the elevation of man by exercising him in the noblest sorrows and the loftiest joys, while it tends also to maintain him in that imperturbable state which Stoicism admired, without any danger of losing tenderness. A bitter and painfully true complaint has of late been uttered against certain physical and metaphysical philosophers, that with Reverence towards God they had lost Mercy towards Brutes, even while maintaining that the human race is derived from brute progenitors. But if we love and trust in a glorious and holy God, who, though he be the lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, yet by his in-dwelling revives every contrite and weak soul of man,—how can we but feel tenderly towards those who are weaker than ourselves? Nay, love to the Unseen and Mighty One is so much harder than compassion to those whom we see, that the higher attainment pre-supposes the lower; insomuch that John the Elder asks, How shall a man who loves not his brother whom he hath seen, love God whom he hath not seen?

Let no one then suppose that religion is or ever could be an affair of opinions and notions, whether concerning historical facts, physics, or metaphysics, any more than it can consist in the endless genealogies and old wives' fables at which good Paul scoffs. What we need is a heart harmonized to our highest attainable morality, devoted to justice and mercy, and thereby to tenderness and purity; a heart thus prepared to rejoice in the belief of a holy God, and esteeming his approbation more than all worldly objects. Through all the devotional Hebrew literature which has been esteemed sacred, and equally in the Christian Scriptures, a remarkable metaphor is stereotyped. *The light of God's countenance* is identified with the highest spiritual joy. That which the

eye cannot see, faith alone sees. Thus, to behold the face of God is the bliss of Heaven itself, and is supposed to have a transforming effect on the beholder. "We shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." "I shall behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness." So deep, fervent, and continuous for more than 2000 years has been the conviction, that mentally to see and know God is both the highest bliss and the most purifying influence. Have we not here an instructive assurance that my present topic is one of sober reality, not of flighty and personal fantasy? Brethren and sisters of my own age, we have not long to abide in this tabernacle of flesh; we are ripe for the supremacy of the spirit. It is high time for us to stay our souls on the thought of the Eternal. And oh ye who are either in full maturity or in the dawn of life, receive kindly the word of exhortation. We have inherited a vast series of noble and instructive experiences, chiefly of Jews and Christians, most diverse in detail, but agreeing notably in the simple faith that God is holy, just, and tender, and that to live in a daily sense of his presence is to walk by faith, and enter into intimate relation with him. Such communion cannot be long together conscious, nor would that be healthful; for it would impede our practical duties to man, which (in my judgment) are the end for which we exist. But the remembrance of God ought to be the happy home, to which the secret heart naturally falls back in the intervals of duty and business. Our strength for self-sacrifice and our buoyancy on the waves of life, the soundness of our moral judgments and the nobleness of our characters, can hardly fail of being increased, when we habitually take delight in a tranquil sense that God is within us and around us. Cultivate this heavenly intimacy in your secret moments, and your reward from it will be great. A

Hebrew Psalmist of old, in his own peculiar dialect, expressed this thought energetically:—

“Justice and Judgment are the habitation of thy throne:
Mercy and Truth go before thy face.
Blessed is the people that know this joyful tidings:
They shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance.
In thy name shall they rejoice all the day,
And in thy righteousness shall they be exalted.”

Let me, in conclusion, quote side by side the words of our poet Cowper, where he speaks, not as a sectarian Christian, but as uttering the essence of Christianity:—

“But oh! Thou bounteous giver of all good,
Thou art of all thy gifts thyself the crown.
Give what thou wilt, without thee we are poor,
And with thee rich, take what thou wilt away.”

Such, in my vehement conviction, is to be the Religion of the Future.

