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THE SPIRITUALITY OF GOD.

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"God is a spirit."—JOHN iv. 24.

WE learn from the necessity of assigning one first great cause in order to account for the origin, nature, and power of the universe, of man, and of the Bible, that there is a God. There is a supreme, personal Being, upon whom we are dependent for existence and preservation, to whom we are responsible for our character and conduct; who made, endowed, preserves, controls, employs all around us; who spake by the prophets, recorded by the evangelists, and empowers by his energy the words of truth; who guides all events, shapes all history; who is in the church, and subserves all the voluntary and involuntary powers and resources of the world to its progress and ultimate universal triumph. As soon as the fact of God's existence is settled in our minds, we instinctively seek to know something of his nature. Who is he? What is he? The religious nature in man which compels him to feel after God, if haply he may find him, is not satisfied, but stimulated to new inquiry by the discovery of His being. Now that it knows there is a God, it must know "*what is God.*" As the fact of God's existence is needful to furnish the possibility of a religion, so the knowledge of His character and relations to men must give the form of religion. Religion, as a science, is the systematized knowledge of God. Religion, as an experience, is the appreciation and employment of the knowledge. Experimental religion is the effect of the truth concerning God upon the heart, and will, and life. The nature of the experience, there-

fore, will be determined by the character of the facts perceived and apprehended. According as God is viewed in the mind, He will be loved, honoured, worshipped in the heart; obeyed, served, glorified in the life. When God is misunderstood, religion is false—false in fact, false in experience. When God is rightly apprehended, religion is pure and undefiled.

My brethren, we ask to-day the most important question human lips have ever put to the oracles of God. What is God? It brings us into the presence of the sublimest and most awful things in the range of human thought. We take the key that opens the mysteries of the infinite and eternal. We stand, with the prophet, with expectant eyes upturned to the throne of the highest, praying the prayer of Moses, the man of God, "Show me thy glory." If we reverently listen, we shall hear the inspiring answer, "I will make all my goodness to pass before thee," and we shall know God. If we know Him we shall love Him as we ought, and serve Him with acceptance. We shall be saved. "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." And may the spirit of truth open our eyes and enable us to perceive the invisible things of Him in His works and word, and by His sanctifying grace number us among "the pure in heart" who shall "*see God.*"

In endeavouring to know God, who is infinite, we shall be able to obtain only a partial view. When we have compassed all revealed truth, in nature and in the word, we shall still exclaim, "Lo, these are but parts of His ways." What we do discover concerning Him is nevertheless certain and reliable. We may also know enough to elevate us to the highest degree of intellectual and moral excellence of which we are capable here; we shall know enough to satisfy us to all eternity, when we pass into the school of the hereafter. Let us, then, reverently bear in mind the limits of our powers, and not attempt to pry too closely, or push our inquiries too far. For now we know in part; we see in a mirror darkly reflected the faint image of the glorious reality. By-and-bye we shall know more, we shall see face

to face, know even as we are known. Until then, let us be content with what is revealed.

From what has been said, it is impossible to define God in the strict sense of the term definition. To define is to mark or indicate limits which describe within their extent the object defined. To define Palestine is to declare its limits. To define truth is to draw the distinctive line of thought which divides the real from the unreal. God cannot be defined, for He is infinite. We can put no limits to His nature and attributes; we cannot go out after them into infinity with our finite minds; but we can define what God is, in the sense of stating to what class of beings He belongs, and how He differs from all others of that class. For example of this sort of definition observe this: "Man is a rational animal." Here the class of animal existences is stated, and the difference between man and other animals—his possession of a rational soul.

By this method of definition, the question, "What is God?" is answered in the Catechism, "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."

At present your attention is called to the consideration of God's SPIRITUAL NATURE; *i. e.*, GOD IS A SPIRIT.

As far as our knowledge extends, we know of the existence of only two substances: the one, with qualities that are known to us by our senses, we call matter; the other, known only to us by consciousness, is spirit. We are as sure of the essential difference between matter and spirit as we are of our own existence. You pick up a stone; it has weight, hardness, cohesion. You call it matter. You cast it down beside a tree. The tree is also matter. It has weight, hardness, cohesion, taste, odour. And yet it differs from the stone. It grows. This the stone cannot do. The stone may be increased by accretion from without; the tree increases by its own energy, by development from within. It selects, appropriates, assimilates, organises into form the matter that lies in the soil or floats in the air. We say here is a new principle, and we call it life—vegetable life. But

while we examine it an animal leaps out from the undergrowth. He sees us, fears us, turns aside, and flees from our presence. The animal is matter also. His flesh, sinews, bones, have the qualities that belong in common to the stone and tree. But there is a difference in the form of action exhibited by the tree and animal. He recognizes our presence, is able to move from it, is actuated by fear, and chooses the direction and measure of his activity as he flees in the opposite course to escape us. Here is life manifesting itself by intelligent, voluntary activity, and we call the newly discovered principle the life of instinct—the *spirit* of the animal. We compare ourselves with the animal, and perceive the same intelligent, voluntary action in ourselves. It is directed, however, by intelligent judgment, not incited by mere instinct, but resting upon reasons apprehended, and moral motives in operation, and we call the new principle a rational spirit—a soul. This principle in man is not composed of matter, it is not the result of the combination of matter into nerves and brain, it is a separate substance that forms and acts through the material body. This fact is as well settled as any fact of human knowledge.

Now why is the word *spirit* employed to denote the vital, intelligent, voluntary principle? The word literally signifies wind or breath. As spirit is devoid of all the qualities of matter, the wind, which manifests fewest of the qualities, is used to represent it. Hence the immaterial soul is called the wind—the *spirit*.

And now what is this spirit of man? The only wise answer is, we do not know. We do not know matter except as a something that is always and everywhere possessed of certain qualities, such as extension, weight, cohesion. It can be seen, touched, modified, separated into particles. You may decompose it, and give the separated parts new names; you may divide it again and again, until you can go no further in your chemistry; it is still a thing unknown, except that it retains certain qualities, and is called matter. So is it with spirit. It is a certain something that has none of the qualities of matter, but has

qualities peculiar to itself, and therefore claims a separate character and name from matter.

Now God is a spirit, inasmuch as he possesses none of the qualities of matter, and is a living, sensitive, conscious, intelligent, voluntary being. The Pantheists teach that God is material—he is the world; that when the matter out of which he is composed is formed into the organization we call man, then it educes life, and intelligence, and consciousness. God did not therefore exist as a conscious, intelligent, voluntary being until man grew out of him. Mr. Emerson thinks that God came to perfection in Daniel Webster, Theodore Parker, and probably in Mr. Emerson too. It is singular how common sense diminishes when speculation goes beyond its limits. What more horrible than this materializing of God and deifying of man! It is inspired of the pride that hurled Satan from heaven, and made in the fair universe of God a hell. It is the very spirit that seduced Adam, in the woeful temptation, “Ye shall be as God.” Of necessity this doctrine destroys all religion. God is material—a thing. This thing cannot be worshipped, loved, trusted, served, glorified. When it becomes conscious in man he is a God, and may worship, love, serve himself. Be warned, my hearer, how you tamper with the speculations of these scientific dreamers, for greater minds than yours, by yielding themselves to the seductions of a false philosophy, have been “given over to believe a lie.”

Our confession of faith adds to its definition of God, a word not found in the definition in the catechism. It reads, “God is a *pure* spirit.” It adds a phrase explanatory of this word: “A most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions.”

The spirit of man abides in a body. It is dependent upon a body; it cannot receive or impart ideas except by means of the bodily senses, at least in its natural state. Under supernatural influence, as in divine illumination and inspiration, the spirit may receive knowledge from within, but this is not its natural method of receiving thought. It is inseparably connected with the body, and is dependent upon it for its emotions,

exercises, thoughts. God is entirely spiritual. He is confined to no material organization—has no part, no material sense or passions. He is a most pure spirit.

Several important and interesting facts follow from this truth.

1. God is invisible. We can see only that which has form. Spirit not material in its substance cannot have that modification of matter which, by the laws of light, is presented to us, and which we call form. Sight is given to us only to take cognizance of that which has form. It is, therefore, no imperfection of our vision that we cannot see a spirit. Those who are superstitious may dismiss their fears, for they never have seen, they never will see, a ghost. A spirit can only be known by its operations through a material body. This is all we know of each other. You never have seen your most intimate friend. You have seen his body, you have not seen him—the spirit that loves and cherishes you. When he dies, does not your heart tell you he is gone? Yet here is his body. It is not he. You see all you have ever seen, but you do not see him. So you never have seen God. You cannot see him. He manifests himself not to your senses, but to your experience. You walk by faith, and not by sight; as seeing, but not seeing, him who is *invisible*, “who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, whom *no man hath seen or CAN SEE.*”

2. But does not God surround himself with a form, not indeed a part of him, not indeed dependent upon it for his activity exercised upon other objects, but to indicate his presence, as the body of a man indicates his presence. We answer, God assumes no invariable form as the token of his presence, the form in which he *abides*. A form has limits, or it cannot be a form. A body infinite could not be seen, for it would have no boundaries to give it shape. A form must be limited in space. God cannot assume a material form, for it would confine him in a portion of the universe. This could not be, for he is everywhere present, beholding the evil and the good. “God is a spirit, infinite in his being.” Who ever imagined the form of

God? The most rapt prophet has only seen light unapproachable as a symbol of his presence. Only light the most diffusive, pervading, unbounded, visible thing can represent his local presence. "Who clothes himself with light as with a garment." To whom, then, will ye liken God, or what likeness will ye compare unto him? "Lo, he goeth by me, and I see him not; he passeth on also, but I perceive him not." "O that I knew where I might find him; that I might come even to his seat. Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward; but I cannot perceive him; on the left hand where he doth work, but I cannot behold him; he hideth himself on the right hand that I cannot see him. But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me I shall come forth as gold."

3. God has occasionally assumed forms by which he has manifested himself specially to some of his people.

Some of the elements have been employed by God, on account of their fitness to image some of the attributes of his nature, to indicate his especial presence. The peculiar form of manifestation was determined by the nature of the transaction which called for its exhibition. It is written in the sacred history of Israel that "the Lord appeared in the tabernacle in the pillar of a cloud." This symbol represented his presence in the tabernacle, associating with it his mysteriousness and incomprehensibility, as elsewhere, in a figure, clouds and darkness are said to surround his throne. To Moses he appeared in the burning bush, making fire a symbol of his presence. There was no form in the fire, but a voice came out of the bush, saying, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whercon thou standest is holy ground. I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God. In the journeying of the children of Israel, the presence of God was indicated by the cloud and fire alternately: a cloudy pillar led them by day, and assured them of their deliverer's nearness at night by illuminating its face toward the host, while it was still dark and obscure toward the enemy of the people

behind. Veiled by the cloud by day, beaming through it at night, Jehovah led and guarded the church in the wilderness.

On Sinai the elements were mustered to declare and defend the awful presence of the Ruler and Judge of all the earth. Power, vengeance, wrath, separation, alienation were symbolized there. "There were thunders and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud, so that all the people that were in the camp trembled. **And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.**"

In the vision of Isaiah a more definite form is seen. "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." A king, a human form, clad in a royal robe the skirts of which, radiant and resplendent, swept the temple. Above this form stood the seraphim, covering with their wings their faces and their feet, crying, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that spoke, and the scene was veiled again, for the house was filled with smoke."

In Daniel's history we have the wonderful story of the three captives. Nebuchadnezzar had ordered them to be cast into the seven times intensified fiery furnace. The order was obeyed in presence of the tyrant, when suddenly he exclaimed, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said unto the king, "True, O king." He answered and said, "Lo! I see four men walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God." God in the form of man was in the furnace with His servants. This, prophetic of the incarnation, was the most frequent mode of divine manifestation. It was a man in outward form and feature that communed with Abraham. A man, one of the three, sent to Abraham to warn him of the impending ruin of Sodom, represented the Angel of the Covenant, Jehovah of Israel, and after the covenant mission, disappeared and left the two to visit the guilty plain, messengers of wrath. A man wrestled with Jacob until the break of day,

and touched him upon his thigh, and sent him halting over the brook, a prince that had power with God and prevailed.

Nor was the dignity of God humiliated by this favourite form of manifestation beyond the humiliation of stooping to man at all. His wisdom judged it needful to manifest himself to the sensual apprehension of man. Among all the possible forms of personal existence, what could have been chosen more fitting than the human form? If some form had been *invented*, it would have been startling, overpowering, or fearful to man. Nothing higher in organization than man could have made familiar communication to him. Nothing lower than his form would have been appropriate to a God in his estimation, and could not, therefore, have commanded his respect. And what could have been so intelligible to man as man? What could so speak to him as his own face and gesture and voice? Looking forward to the great mystery of our religion—the humanity of the Son of God—what appropriateness and power of meaning was there in the human form of the Angel of the Covenant! How is the unity of the old Covenant and the new most beautifully asserted by the forms walking in the midst of the visions of ancient time, and substantial and real in the temple and city, on Olivet, Horeb, and Calvary, the form like unto the Son of God!

Finally, the presence of God is revealed in a personal manifestation in the humanity of Jesus Christ. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” The co-equal, co-eternal Son of God has manifested the Godhead to men. He has performed the office of revealer in all that God hath done to make himself known. In creation, providence, redemption, he is the active agent in displaying the divine attributes. He, dwelling from all eternity in the bosom of God, shared his knowledge, participated in his plans, and in time carried into execution all God’s great purposes. Thus is he the revealer. All the personal manifestations of God were made by him. He dwelt in the bush; he led Israel in the desert; he was the Angel of the Covenant. But in the incarnation he became the

image of the invisible God. In him, as God-man, is displayed the brightness of the Father's glory, the express image of his person. Great is the mystery of godliness, "God manifest in the flesh."

The Son of God took of the substance of Mary a true body. In the divine apparitions, the body was unsubstantial, unreal; when it was material, it was summoned into being for the time, and then instantly dissipated when the manifestations ceased. The body of Jesus is real, assumed for all eternity. As it was glorified on the mountain of the transfiguration, so is it now glorified; yet it is the same human body still. A human hand sways the sceptre of universal dominion. Angels bow before the Son of Man. Stephen, in his vision, saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God." Paul, on his way to Damascus, saw the heavens opened, and heard a voice saying, "I am Jesus, the Nazarene, whom thou persecutest." And Paul testified that he had seen the risen Messiah, David's son. Conspicuous for ever among the glorious beings of the heavenly world, sits enthroned the "Word made flesh."

But will there be no other way in which we shall see the Father? Not unless there be a new sense by which a spirit may be seen. We need not see a spirit in order to be satisfied with his presence. Such a presence is not an object of sight, but of blessed companionship, of spiritual communication and sympathy. It is not revealed that we shall see God in any form save as we see him in the face of Jesus Christ. "Philip saith unto him, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou, then, show us the Father?"

But is a human form a fit embodiment of God in the celestial glory and majesty of his presence? Yes; glorified with Immanuel's transfiguration glory, it may present Him to our view in grandeur inexpressible. Let your imagination rise to

the conception of a perfect human form, complete in every part, moulded in exquisite proportion and harmony, clothed with every grace, and purified from every taint and blemish of corruption. Dream the sculptor's dream, and colour it with the splendors of the painter's vision. How noble and peerless a thing is the human form! Then inspire it with divinity. Let the mind of God speak its deep expressiveness, and lift its lofty thoughts through the flashing eye; let divine excellence shine pure on its lofty brow, and God's mighty heart thrill through every motion, and send the current of its infinitely fervid sensibilities to blush upon its cheek and wreath about its matchless lips, and tremble on its heaven-attuned voice, and well may rapt angels fling their jewelled crowns at the feet, and strike their quivering harps to the praise, of Him who is the fullness of the Godhead embodied. Oh, yes. Draw nearer, ye ransomed; see in those now transparent palms where once the nails were driven. Look! in those alabaster feet are the seamed scars that mark the piercing of the nails; and in that side, just underneath the heart of love that beat for your salvation and broke that you might live—see, see! where the cruel spear was thrust. Ah! yes. Well may the God of our redemption wear for ever the form that trod Gethsemane and hung on Calvary, while all heaven sings in one eternal chorus, Worthy art thou, for thou hast redeemed us by thy blood, to receive glory and honour and power and wisdom and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Christian brethren, let us learn the lesson Jesus taught at Jacob's well. God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. He has no sensual eyes to behold the splendid ritual, He has no ears to hear high sounding music; He has not sense to discern the costly incense, the precious oblation. His heart of love wants the returning throb of spiritual affection. "My son, give me thine heart." Come, then, to his mercy-seat with repentance, love, obedience; come, though sinful: come, though polluted! "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."