

Sermon XXXV

"The Sincerity of the Divine Compassion"

Part 1

by
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*"It repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth,
and it grieved him at his heart."
Genesis 6:6*

The manner in which God here acknowledges man as his handiwork is specially to be noted. The words are, "It repented the Lord that he had made man upon earth." It is not said generally "that man had been made," but definitely that "he *had made* man." He had spoken of man in his primeval goodness as coming from his hand. So now he does not fail to remind us that it is this same man, this very race, that has now become so worthless and hateful.

He might have drawn a veil over this point so as to prevent our being so vividly reminded that man was truly his own workmanship. But he does not. Nay, he brings the sad fact before us,--a fact that seems to reflect upon his own skill and power. He does not disavow creation. He does not disown man. He does not speak or act as one ashamed to be known as the Maker of one so miserably apostate, so incurably depraved. Even when making known man's extremity of guilt, he openly owns him as his creature. He does not keep silence on the matter as one desirous that it should be forgotten or unnoticed. He brings it directly forward as if to call attention to the fact.

When man fails in some great or favorite project,--as when an architect plans and builds a palace, which by reason of some essential defect almost immediately tumbles down,--he is anxious that its failure should not be proclaimed, and that the work thus ruined should never be known as his. He cannot bear the reproach which is sure to fall upon him. He shrinks from the responsibility which has been incurred. He cannot afford to lose the reputation he may have gained.

But with God there are no such feelings, no such desire of concealment, no desire to shake off the responsibility devolving on him as Creator. He can afford to bear man's petty censure. He can afford to have it said, "Behold the work of thy hands." He is not concerned to keep back anything from his creatures, as if their blame or praise could affect him. Hence it is that we discern something altogether unlike man, something truly God-like in that simple form of expression here, "It repented the Lord that he had made man upon the earth."

Marvelous words indeed; words such as no man could have ventured to use respecting God; words too strong and bold for any one to have employed but God himself! Let us look calmly into them, for they are too full of solemn meaning to be lightly passed over, or generalized into a vague expression of God's hatred of sin, or explained away into a mere figure used by God after the manner of men. In endeavoring to discover what the words *do* mean, let us first inquire what they do *not* mean.

1. *They do not mean that God's purpose had been frustrated.* That purpose shall stand, for it is the perfect combination of infinite wisdom and power. It is not within the limits of possibility that the creature should thwart the purpose of the Creator. It cannot fail. It must be carried out, though at times its movements may seem checked, or even become apparently retrogressive. To suppose aught else would be to say that the will of the creature was stronger than the will of the Creator, and that the folly of the creature had baffled the wisdom of the Creator.

2. *They do not mean that an unexpected crisis had arisen.* With man it may be so. A crisis may come to him unexpectedly so as entirely to disconcert himself and defeat his schemes. With God there can be nothing unexpected, nothing sudden, nothing unforeseen or unprovided for. The whole future, with its endless turns and intricacies, lies before him as open and as clear as the past. No evil, however great, shoots up unpermitted or unlooked for. Neither Satan's wiles nor man's apostasy, neither the rejection of Noah's warnings, nor the spread of sin, nor the ruin of the race were unexpected evils.

3. *They do not mean that God is subject to like passions and changes as we are.* He does not vary as we vary, nor repent as we repent. Instability is the property of the creature, not of the Creator. Frailty is for man, not for God. There is no vacillation, no fluctuation in him. That he does *feel*, we know. If he did not, he would not be God. But his feeling is not weakness. That he alters his procedure we know, but not as we alter ours. There is no caprice in his emotion or his acting. All is the serenity of highest wisdom, which cannot be taken by surprise, nor blinded by anger, nor rendered unavailing by fickleness or facility or arbitrary will.

4. *They do not mean that He has ceased to care for his creatures.* Wrath indeed has gone out against the transgressor; the righteous wrath of the righteous, though loving, God; and "the soul that sins it shall die." Yet neither man himself nor his habitation, the earth, has been overlooked by God, far less hated and spurned. The words intimate neither the coldness nor the dislike of the Creator toward the creature. It is something very widely different which they convey; a sadder, tenderer feeling; a feeling in which, not indifference, but profound compassion is the prevailing element. They do not intimate the quenching of his love nor even imply coldness or distance. They are not the utterance of resentment, as if pity had now been extinguished and the fondness of affection been supplanted by the fierceness of revenge.

But still it may be asked, How are the words to be reconciled with the character of God as the all-knowing Jehovah, seeing the end from the beginning, and ordering everything from eternity according to the counsel of his will? To clear up this, let me remark--

1. That God is represented to us here as looking at events or facts simply *as they are*, without reference to the past or future at all. He isolates or separates them from all connection with his own purpose; and looking at them simply as they stand alone, he declares what he thinks and feels. Insofar as they stood connected with his own vast purpose, which age after age was evolving, he did not repent, or change his mind, or wish them undone. But insofar as they were exhibitions of human wickedness or wretchedness, he did grieve and he did repent. For let us remember that there must ever be two kinds of feelings in such matters,--one called up by looking at each event by itself, and another by looking at it as part of a

mighty plan, which in its origination and developments is from eternity to eternity.

2. That God's purposes do not alter God's estimate of events or his feelings respecting individuals and their conduct. It was by the "determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" that Christ was betrayed and slain, yet that did not affect God's estimate of the crime committed by them that slew him. God's allowing man to fall did not make God the approver of his sin. It did not make him the less to hate and to grieve over the sin whose permission had been foreseen and decreed. Each action or event is a link in God's mighty purpose, yet it must be weighed *separately* in the balances and judged according to the perfect standard of right and wrong.

3. That God is looking at the scene just as a man would look at it, and expressing himself just as a man would have done, in such circumstances. He takes the place of a *finite* being; hears with *finite* ears, looks with *finite* eyes, and utters the sentiments of a *finite* heart. He sees all the present misery and ruin which the scene presents, and they affect him according to their nature. And as they affect him, so does he speak, in the words of man. For the feelings implanted in man must, to some extent, be the same as those existing in the bosom of God. Man was made in God's image in respect of his *feelings* as truly as in respect of his *understanding*; the human heart is the counterpart of the divine, just as Israel's earthly tabernacle was the copy of that which is above. Hence it is that God so often uses the language of human feeling. It is not merely that God is condescending to man (though this is true), but it is also because the heart of man, being fashioned after that of God, the language that gives utterance to the feelings of the former, will, in a greater or less degree, according to circumstances, give utterance to the feelings of the latter. God's love, hatred, wrath, pity, joy, grief, are all *real*; and they are, *in kind*, the same as man's, only there is no sin in them; so that we may say that all the feelings of man that are *holy*, or that can be called forth *without* sin, do exist in God.

But now let us look at the words of our text,--"repenting,"--"grieving at the heart."

1. *Repent*.--The word frequently occurs in the same connection as in our text; Ex. 33:14, "The Lord *repented* of the evil which he thought to do unto his people" (see also 1 Sam. 15:11, 35; Jer. 26:13, 19). In these and other like passages it denotes that change of mind which is produced towards an object by an alteration of circumstances. Nor is this inconsistent with unchangeableness in God. It is true that he is without variableness or shadow of turning; there is no caprice or vacillation in him. But his unchangeableness is not a mere arbitrary principle,--a thing which makes him feel the same towards a person, however he may change from good to evil or from bad to worse. It does not mean that his *proceedings* are unchangeable, though it does mean that his *purposes* are so. Nay, the very change of his proceedings may be the result and manifestation of the unchangeableness of his purposes. When Adam fell, God changed his mind towards him from favor to displeasure; yet that was just the result of his unchangeableness. When a sinner repents, God changes his mind toward him; yet this is not changeableness. Nay, it is the carrying out of his unchangeableness. His "changing," in such cases, is the display of his holiness and wisdom. Were he not to change, it would be mere arbitrariness,--it would not be wisdom but foolishness. His "repentance" is not only the true and necessary expression of holy feeling, but it is part of his unchangeable purpose.

2. *Grieve*.--The word used in reference to *man* is found in such places as the following: 2

Sam. 19:2, "The king was *grieved* for his Son;" and, in reference to God, in such as the following: Ps. 78:40, "How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and *grieve* him in the desert!" and Isa. 63:10, "They rebelled and *vexed*" (Heb. *grieved*) "his Holy Spirit." In these passages the word denotes simply and truly what we call "grief;" and then, in the passage before us, as if to deepen the intensity of the expression, and to shew how thoroughly *real* was the feeling indicated, it is added, "at his heart." The grief spoken of is as true as it is profound. It is not the grief of words. It is not the grief of fancy or sentiment. It is true sorrow of heart. How this can be, in the bosom of the blessed One, it is not easy to show. How he can remain unruffled and unbroken, in his infinite tranquility of being, while "grieved at heart" because of his rebellious creatures, is difficult to explain. How his heaven can abide as bright as ever without a shade over its dwellings or sackcloth upon its dwellers, while he is mourning over the ruin of a world and the wretchedness of a guilty child, we cannot say. We take the words as we find them,--especially as it is but one out of the many similar utterances of which Scripture is full,--utterances all confirmed and reiterated by the Son of God when he wept over the doomed and apostate Jerusalem.

Yet, after all, what greater difficulty should we find in understanding this sorrowful commiseration for the lost than in comprehending the joy with which all heaven is made to resound because of even one sinner saved? Shall heaven ring with gladness when one soul is plucked from the devouring fire, and must it be passive when millions plunge into the everlasting burnings? Is salvation a thing so very blessed as to occasion new joy in the bosom of God and be the occasion of a new song, and is damnation such a trifle as to be beheld unmoved? Is the saved soul's deliverance and recovery of sonship so glorious as to draw forth the utterance of the divine complacency "in the presence of the angels," and shall the sinner's ruin, the lost soul's funeral, call forth no feeling at all? Would this be true perfection? Passivity and insensibility were not the perfection of Him who wept over doomed Jerusalem. Can they be the perfection of Godhead?

"The Sincerity of the Divine Compassion," part 1, by Horatius Bonar, *Family Sermons* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1863). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era verb forms have been modernized and UK spelling changed to US.