

Sermon XXXVI

"The Sincerity of the Divine Compassion"

Part 2

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

We come now to ask, why did the Lord thus grieve at his heart?

1. He grieved to see the change which sin had made in the work of his hands. Once it was "very good," and in this he had rejoiced. Now, how altered! So altered that it could hardly be recognized as the same. Creation was a wreck. The world lay in ruins. Man's glory had departed. The fair image of his Maker was gone! How could the Creator behold so sad a change, and not be "grieved at his heart!" How could he look upon the sin, the ruin, the darkness, the defilement, and not *feel*? God cannot be indifferent to the desolation which sin produces, even when righteousness constrains him not to interfere for its prevention, but only for its punishment. Yes, he feels it, he mourns over it, all the more, because mercy has reached its utmost limit, and righteousness demands the forthputting of his almightiness to avenge, and not to save. It may seem strange that a being of infinite power should grieve over that which the exercise of almightiness could have prevented. But let us not forget that there is *righteousness* as well as *almightiness* in God, and that, while his power can be limited or restrained by nothing out of himself, it is and must be limited by his other perfections, so that his almightiness cannot accomplish anything that is unrighteous. When, therefore, his power has reached its righteous limits, and can no longer be put forth towards the sinner, then it is that he is grieved at heart. He is grieved that sin has got to such a height that the works of his own hands must be destroyed, that they must be put away from his sight as an unclean thing.

2. He grieved at the dishonor thus brought upon himself. It was, indeed, but a temporary dishonor; it was one which he would soon repair; but still, it was an obscuration of his own fair character; it was a clouding of his glory; it was an eclipse, however transient. It was like a wound inflicted by a most unlooked for hand, which, however quickly healed, could not but be sorely felt. How could he but be grieved at heart at being thus dishonored by those whom he had made to glorify him,--dishonored by a favorite child,--dishonored by those who, he might well expect, would have been specially sensitive on such a point, peculiarly tender and jealous of his honor.

3. He grieved at man's misery. Man had not been made for misery. Happiness, like a rich jewel, had been entrusted to him. He had flung it away, as worthless and undesirable. Not only had he taken no pains to retain the treasure, but he had labored to alienate it. He had offered it for sale to every passer by; nay, he had cast it from him as vile. He had plunged himself into misery; he had refused to be happy; he had not only said to evil, "Evil, be thou my good;" but he had said to sorrow, "Sorrow, be thou my joy." This wretchedness filled his soul, and overshadowed this once blessed earth. How, then, could God but grieve? He is the infinitely *blessed* God; he knows what blessedness is, and what the want of it must be.

Could he, then, fail to be grieved at his heart? He grieves over the sinner's wretchedness, as Jesus wept over Jerusalem. These fears and that grief are the same. "How often would I have gathered you!" "If you had known." "O that you had hearkened to my commandments!" "You will not come to me that you might have life." Such are some of the utterances of this divine grief. And then he saw the *eternity* of man's wretchedness. It was no *lifetime's* sorrow that lay before man. It was an *eternal* woe. The infinite eye of Jehovah looked through that whole eternity, realized its bitterness and anguish,--saw the torment, the darkness, the worm, the fire, the second death; and seeing these, he was grieved at his heart. For he has no pleasure in man's sorrow, either the sorrow of an hour, or the sorrow of a whole eternity. It is no joy to him that man should be wretched. Nay, it grieves him at his heart. Fury is not in him. Vengeance is his strange work. His joy is to bless, not to curse; to save, not to destroy. He takes oath before the uni-verse that he has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they should turn and live.

4. He grieved that now he must be the inflictor of man's misery. No alternative remains. There had, for long years, been an alternative. He could be gracious; he could be long-suffering; he could pardon; or, if not actually pardon, he could suspend the gathering vengeance, he could delay the stroke. But now this alternative is denied. Such was the accumulation of sin; such was its hatefulness; such were its aggravations, that grace can no longer hold out against righteousness; long-suffering has exhausted itself, and judgment must take its course. If matters are allowed to go on as they have been going, the law will become a dead letter, the divine holiness will be called in question, the faithfulness of God in his threatenings will be suspected; nay, the very power of Jehovah will be denied,--as if it were insufficient either to restrain the evil from arising, or to crush it when it has risen to such a pitch. Mercy had long prevailed against judgment; now judgment prevails against mercy. Grace had done wonders for the sinner. To do more would be to subvert righteousness, and to tamper with the awfulness of law.

As the gracious Father, he had hitherto delayed the vengeance; but now, as the righteous Judge, he must interpose. He has long lingered in his love, yearning over his rebellious children; he can linger no more. His strange work must be done, at whatever sacrifice, either to himself or to man. He must not only withhold the good, he must visit with the evil, and he must do it *himself*. He, the Maker, must be the destroyer too. Man must be given up! He has gone beyond the limit within which grace can be righteously exercised. He has made it impossible for God to bless him. He has put it out of God's power to do anything more in his behalf. He has made it a matter of *righteous necessity* that God should execute vengeance upon him. God wanted to bless, man has compelled him to curse. God wanted to save, man has compelled him to destroy. Condemnation, wrath, ruin, wretchedness for ever, must now be man's portion! The vessel which God had made, and meant for honor and for gladness, must become a vessel of shame, eternal shame, filled with gall and wormwood! No wonder that it grieved him at his heart!

However incomprehensible the subject may be; still these words of our text are plain. We would not explain them away. We would not dilute them, or rob them of that solemn tenderness, to which they give such mournful utterance. We would not add to them; but neither would we take from them. And surely they do affirm that God's grief is both sincere and deep. It is a Creator's grief. It is a Father's grief. It is grief such as afterwards uttered itself, over Israel, in such words as, "How shall I give you up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver you up, Israel? how shall I make you as Admah, how shall I set you as Zeboim? my heart is

turned within me; my repentings are kindled together." It is grief such as, at a still later day, gave vent to itself in Christ's tears over Jerusalem. And is not all that *reality*? Was there ever reality like it? Yet all this does not make hell less true, nor the everlasting burnings less terrible.

Many seem to suppose that, because God has not passions such as we have; that because he is not liable to emotions like ours; that because there are no such swellings and subsidings of feverish excitement, interfering with the infinite serenity and blessedness of his divine being, that therefore *God does not feel*; that it would be degrading him to suppose that he can be affected, in the remotest degree, by the alternations of joy or sorrow,—especially insofar as the condition of his creatures can be conceived as being the source of either.

It is not so. This would be indifference, not serenity. It would make Jehovah not the God who is revealed to us in the man Christ Jesus. It would make him inferior to his creatures in all those tender affections which constitute so noble a part of our being. It would invest him with the insensibility of Stoicism. But with him whom we call our God, there is no such insensibility, no such Stoicism. He is love. He is the God of all grace. He is merciful and gracious, long-suffering, slow to anger, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. He so loved the world as to give his only-begotten Son. It is written of him, that "his soul was grieved for the miseries of Israel;" that "in all their affliction he was afflicted." He stoops over us in the fondness of parental love. He yearns over us. He longs to see us happy. He delights to bless. His strange work is to curse. Nay, he is the very fountainhead of love.

All the affections of man's soul are but the copy of his; faint indeed and dim, yet truly the copy, the counterpart, the earthly likeness of the heavenly reality. Man's heart is, in all the affections that are holy, the very transcript of God's. In God is the birthplace of all feeling, and shall *he* not feel? With him is the well-spring of all affection, and shall *he* be cold, and divested of all loving sympathies? Shall he give to man such powers of emotion, constituting the divinest part of our nature, and shall he himself be unmoved and immoveable? He is the Father of spirits, and shall he so entirely differ from the spirits that he has made? He made them in his own image; and is that image nothing but unsympathizing [unsympathetic] callousness? Is it but the ice, or the rock, or the iron? He sent his Son to be the revelation of his mind and heart; and do we not see, from that Son, how deeply the Father feels? Do we not see in *him*, who is his perfect image, what is the Creator's sympathy for his creatures in their joys and sorrows? Do we not see in him, with what strength he can hate the sin, and yet love, nay, weep over, the sinner? Ay, and does not the Holy Spirit also unfold his feelings? And do we not read of that Spirit being resisted, *vexed, grieved*, as if sorrowing over our coldness, our neglect, our unbelief, our ungodliness?

What, then, can these things mean, but that our God truly and deeply feels? There can, indeed, be nothing carnal, nothing allied to imperfection or weakness, in such sensibility; but to suppose him to be devoid of feeling, as we too often do, is to deny him to be perfectly and truly God! Ah! it is only when we learn how profoundly he feels, that we know aright the character of that God with whom we have to do. It is only when we realize how sincerely he yearns, and pities, and joys, and grieves, and loves, that we understand that revelation which he has made of himself in the gospel of his grace, and in the person of his Incarnate Son. Nor till then do we feel the unutterable malignity of sin, as being a grieving of God, a vexing of his loving Spirit, and become rightly alive to the depravity of our own rebellious

natures. It is only then that we can cordially enter into God's condemnation of the evil, and sympathize with him in that which makes him grieve. Never, till we give him credit for *feeling* as he says he does, can we really long for deliverance from that which is not only the abominable thing which he hates, but that thing of evil and sorrow over which he so sincerely mourns.

It is this which gives such power to God's expostulations with the sinner, and his appeals to the sinner's conscience and heart. We are apt to treat these utterances of God as mere words of course, or, at least, as words which, however gracious in themselves, could not be supposed to embody the *feelings* of him from whom they come. It is far otherwise. God not only *means* what he says, but he *feels* what he says. He is not unconcerned about our condition, or indifferent to the reception or rejection of his messages. When he says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked," he utters the deep feeling of his heart. When he says, "How shall I give you up?" he shows us how he *feels*. When he says, "that you had hearkened to my commandments," he tells us how he *feels*. And when his only-begotten Son, in the days of his flesh, said to the unbelieving Jews, "You will not come unto me, that you might have life," he showed us how truly, in this respect, the Father and the Son are one, and that to each poor child of earth, however erring, however dark, however unbelieving, however rebellious, he is stretching out his hands in love, and, not the less sincerely, because, to tens of thousands, he is stretching out these hands in vain.

"The Sincerity of the Divine Compassion," part 2, by Horatius Bonar, *Family Sermons* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1863). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, long paragraphs divided, and UK spelling changed to US.