

"God's Thoughts and Ways Above Ours"

by
James Richards

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways saith the Lord. For as the Heavens are higher than the Earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8,9).

There needs no argument to show that there is an infinite disparity between God's thoughts and the thoughts of his creatures, between his ways and their ways. Everyone is prepared to admit with the prophet that as the Heavens are high above the Earth, so are God's ways above our ways and his thoughts above our thoughts. And yet, strange as it may seem, there is a proneness in us all to judge of God by ourselves; to measure his wisdom by our wisdom, his righteousness by our righteousness, and his goodness and mercy by ours. Hence it comes to pass that there is so little fear of his majesty, so little confidence in his government, so little faith in his promise, and so little hope in his mercy.

The wicked would tremble at the apprehension of his wrath, if they did not either doubt his existence or fancy he was one altogether like themselves--having as little hatred for iniquity and as little concern for the maintenance of his authority as they. And the good would cheerfully fly into his arms at all times when evils pressed or dangers threatened, if they did not compare God with themselves and entertain low and unbecoming thoughts of his being, his attributes, or his designs. To meet men at this point, and to remove from them that jealousy and distrust which is too apt to rise, when he comes to them even with messages of mercy, the Lord declares that *his thoughts are not their thoughts nor his ways their ways*.

He had just said by the prophet, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God for he will abundantly pardon." But he knew their unbelief would consider this as impossible, or at least as stretching so far beyond the bounds of probability as not seriously to merit their attention or offer a suitable ground for their hopes. He points them, therefore, to the wide difference between his thoughts and their thoughts, his ways and their ways; and illustrates it by a comparison which instantly strikes and overpowers the mind, a comparison whose beauty and sublimity nothing can surpass-- "*For as the Heavens are higher than the Earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*" Not only the wide difference between God's thoughts and ours, but their transcendent excellence above ours is strongly portrayed by this beautiful similitude. We raise our eyes to the starry Heavens, beyond which human sight cannot penetrate. We behold the celestial orbs with their sparkling and cheering light, spread out over our habitations, but at such an immense distance above us as to baffle our conceptions the moment we attempt to compute or even to imagine it. Yet *there* we behold as in a glass the immeasurable height, the boundless extent, the salutary influence of the mercy of Jehovah. *There* we see an instructive emblem of the infinite superiority of all God's thoughts and ways to ours, a superiority which should render our confidence in him the most unshaken and our worship of him the most humble and profound.

But the point to which I wish more especially to direct your attention is, that *God's ways are not as our ways, nor his thoughts as our thoughts, but that a wide and astonishing difference exists between them.* By God's thoughts, we intend not his perceptions merely but his counsels, his purposes and designs; and by his ways, the execution of his purposes in the various operations of his hand, whether in the creation, preservation or government of the world. God's ways are the interpretation of his thoughts and designs. We remark,

1. His thoughts are not our thoughts as [because] there is no succession in them. They all exist in his own infinite mind at the same time and without any variation of their order, or the least shadow of change. He has no new thoughts, and none which are not at all times equally present. Hence his view of objects is always the same, and that view absolutely perfect. It is altogether different with us. Our thoughts follow each other in rapid succession, and are never the same at one moment that they are at another. Many of the same thoughts do indeed return; but it is always with some new combinations and with some diversity in their character and order. And from this source it is that our views and impressions of objects are so fluctuating, even where there is no radical change. Our thoughts may fitly be compared to a stream, whose waters flow on in constant succession but whose depth and breadth, though not perpetually the same, are at all times extremely limited; while God's thoughts are better resembled to an ocean, where the stream disappears and where there is neither bottom nor shore. Which leads me to remark,

2. That God's thoughts are not as our thoughts because they embrace an infinitely greater number of objects. They encompass the universe with all its parts, with its infinite variety of movements---and that not through any given period only but from the first moment of created existence through the boundless ages of an unwasting duration. [There is] Not a leaf in the forest, not a grain of sand upon the shore, not a mote which glitters in the sunbeam, not the merest atom in all God's works which is not the object of his thoughts and the subject of his eternal counsels. He sees it through every part of its duration. He presides over all its changes. He determines all its results, whether single or combined.

How different is it with us. Our thoughts extend but to a few things, even in the world which we inhabit, while we are left almost in total ignorance of the universe which surrounds us. Not only are we creatures of yesterday, and comparatively know nothing, but our sphere of observation is extremely circumscribed. We have contemplated as yet but the minutest portion of God's works. Like some insects which never travel beyond the leaf on which they are formed, we are in a great measure strangers to that infinitude of objects which spread through boundless regions on every side. Nor is this all. How imperfect are our conceptions of those objects which pass under our notice. After all our research, we see but the mere surface of things, and know nothing perfectly in its nature, qualities and relations. But as for God, his way is perfect. All things lie open and naked to his view. He sees and pervades them in the most intimate and perfect manner. Hence we observe,

3. That God's thoughts and purposes never change, a circumstance which renders them widely different from ours. Our schemes of operation are seldom laid with such intelligence as not to undergo considerable modification, as new events unfold or as a deeper investigation presents the subject more fully before us. Often we are obliged to abandon our plans altogether.

It is far otherwise with the Almighty. His counsels are laid with such deep and unfathomable

skill as never to require alteration. He sees the end from the beginning. He has a perfect knowledge of all that does, or will, or can exist. And therefore with him there is no variableness or shadow of turning. There is no motive to change. His views being the same, his purposes must be unalterable. Hence we read, "He is of one mind, and who can turn him?" There be many thoughts in man's heart; but the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand.

4. We notice another striking and important difference between God's thoughts or purposes and ours--he is never disappointed. All his purposes go into full effect. That which he determines, he accomplishes; and accomplishes at the very time and by the very means he before appointed. Nothing of all his eternal counsels, whether great or small, fails of its existence, its manner or its end.

How extremely different with us. We purpose, but often our purpose proves abortive. We do not effect the thing we intend; and even when we do, the event not unfrequently disappoints us. Things continually cross our expectations, what we have often dreaded perhaps never comes to pass, and what we have fully expected and desired is never realized. Nothing is more common than for our hopes to expand with eagerness and delight on some future good, when nothing but the grief of disappointment and the darkness and bitterness of despair are before us. Today our vessel leaves the shore with wide spread sails and prosperous winds. No dark cloud lowers in the horizon to excite our fear or dampen our joy. But ere tomorrow's sun, our sky is overcast. The winds howl, the storm descends, and we are engulfed in the mighty waves. But with God everything moves on in an even course, according to his wise and eternal counsels. The events that occur, so far from crossing his expectations, only present a regular development of the purposes of his own infinite and unsearchable mind.

Shall I remark,

5. That we find a great difference between God's thoughts and ours in the different ends which are pursued by him and by us, even where the same events are concerned. God's purposes and ours in this respect often run counter to each other. We intend one thing by a certain course, he intends another; and therein [He] displays the depth of his eternal counsels. It is thus that the wise are often taken in their own craftiness, and made to minister to purposes and designs which they would willingly and with all their might have contributed to destroy. See an illustration of this in the history of Joseph. His brethren sold him into Egypt with a view to prevent the accomplishment of his dreams. They did, however, but fulfil the divine intimation by the very steps which they took to counteract it. They meant evil against Joseph, but God meant it for good; intending thereby to nourish Jacob's family in a time of famine and to save much people alive, and thus to pave the way for that illustrious manifestation of his own glory which stood connected with the future destination of the Israelites.

We see the same thing illustrated in the conduct of the proud Assyrian king, whom God styles the rod of his anger and the staff of his indignation. He had laid waste Israel and other nations, not with a view to chastise them for their sins or to fulfil any purpose of the Almighty in regard to them, but solely to minister to his pride, his covetousness and his ambition. His views were totally different from God's. And therefore when God said, "I will send him against a hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire in the

streets," he adds, "Howbeit, he means not so, neither does his heart think so, but it is in his heart to destroy and to cut off nations not a few."

The very interesting fact of our Lord's death presents a similar illustration of the same truth. Judas had his ends in betraying Christ. The Jews had theirs in accusing him and demanding his crucifixion. Pilate had his in giving sentence against him contrary to his own conscience and the importunity of his bosom friend. The soldiers had theirs in executing the orders of their governor. And the powers of darkness doubtless had theirs, different probably from all the rest, in stirring up and pushing forward all the guilty actors in this scene. And God had his, not only in permitting but in so ordering and disposing events as to make the death of Christ certain, and all the circumstances of it precisely what they were. For we are expressly told "that they did nothing to his holy child Jesus, but what his hand and counsel had afore determined to be done." What can impress us more that God's ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts, than such deep and unsearchable workings of his providence, where the instruments he raises up pursue ends totally different from his, and yet in the issue do but the more effectually accomplish his own immutable counsels.

6. God's ways and thoughts are very different from ours in the estimate he puts upon objects and events which stand related to our happiness. There are things which we deem of the utmost importance to ourselves and others, which God--who takes all the circumstances into view--regards as no favor at all, and which therefore he will not grant or continue, however importunately we may desire them. And there are things which we deprecate as the greatest of all evils, which God nevertheless deems necessary to our highest good, and which he resolves shall take place, whatever may be our prayers or wishes to the contrary. We have reflected but little upon our own case, or that of our friends, if we have not seen this remark often verified.

Most of our afflictions give us an important lesson on this subject, always indeed when they are of the nature of a gracious moral discipline. They consist in the privation of some apparent good, or in the infliction of some positive evil. But whenever they take place, we have occasion to remark how differently God judges of things from what we do. But if God's ways are different from ours in things which are undesirable to us, and contrary to our wishes, they are certainly not less so,

7. In things that are dark and mysterious. And how often does he pursue a path which we cannot trace! How often, both in his works of creation and providence, does he do things great and wonderful, and past finding out! I do not now speak of things whose hidden causes we can not investigate, or whose principles and relations equally baffle our research; but of things which apparently contradict our reason--which, to say the least, are precisely the reverse of what we should have expected, antecedent to their occurrence. In casting our eyes over the face of this world, how many things do we meet with which astonish and confound us in the formation of the earth, and in the character and condition of its inhabitants? Who would have expected so much water on the surface of the globe, so many inaccessible mountains, the region of eternal frost and barrenness, so many vast and frightful deserts unsuited for the habitation of either man or beast? Who would have expected to find so many noxious plants and animals, whose effect seems to us little else than to mar the other works of God? Why is man an enemy to his Maker? Who could have believed prior to the event, and reasoning only from the holiness and goodness of God, that sin ever could have found its way into the moral kingdom of Jehovah?

But here it is, and here it is likely to be in a greater or less degree to all eternity. How strange is it that so great a portion of the human race, probably more than one-half, are cut off before they are five years of age! How strange that, since a Saviour is provided, so few of the human race have yet been brought to the knowledge of his character and work; that more than four-fifths still remain in a state of heathenish darkness! How passing strange that by far the greater part, where the word of life is dispensed, go down to perdition, age after age, in all the madness of impenitence and the guilt of unbelief!

It is contrary to all our modes of reasoning and judging; and what seems no less dark and mysterious now than it did thousands of years ago, that the young, the wise, the virtuous, the useful and the happy, should often be plucked away from the most interesting stations and relations in society while those of a very different character, whose lives perhaps are a burden to themselves and a heavy trial to others, are suffered to drag out to a surprising length their apparently useless and miserable existence. But there is no end to the mysterious dispensations of divine providence, all of which proclaim his ways not to be as our ways, and his thoughts not as our thoughts.

8. God's ways are not only widely different from ours but infinitely above them. They have an excellence which no finite thought can conceive, and no comparison illustrate. All that he does and all that he purposes is infinitely wise, holy, just and good. Nothing can frustrate his wisdom or disconcert his infinitely glorious designs. He never errs in judgment. His truth is firmer than the everlasting mountains. His benevolence is unwearied and expansive, embracing the highest good of his great kingdom. His righteousness is an everlasting righteousness; and his mercy, infinitely tender, endures to all generations. It was this glorious attribute more especially that he intended to set before us when he said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord; for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

And well, my dear brethren, is it for us that his mercy stretches itself so infinitely above and beyond ours. What could we hope for, vile and polluted as we are, if we had not the mercy of a God to repair to? This David saw and felt, when, under the expectation of being corrected for his sins, he said "Let me fall into the hands of God, and not into the hands of man." And this was all his hope when, smarting under a sense of his amazing guilt, he cried, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness, according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions."

It would be an interesting part of this subject, did our time admit of it, to show wherein God's mercy differs from our mercy, and infinitely transcends it--that in the choice of its objects, in the measures it adopts towards them, and above all in its endurance under the vilest provocations. And in the incalculable blessings it bestows, it is a mercy exceedingly different from that which dwells in the bosoms of men, and is as much above it, as the heavens are high above the earth.

Let us close with some brief reflections.

First: Since God's ways are not as our ways nor his thoughts as our thoughts, but infinitely above them, how great the criminality and the folly of arraiging his proceedings and judging of them at our tribunal. What is short sighted man, a creature of yesterday, that he

should think of sitting in judgment upon the ways of God? Can a child enter into the concerns of a mighty empire? Can he decide with correctness upon the measures of government necessary to be adopted in managing those concerns? Can he say what would be wise, or what unwise, in a policy embracing interests so vast, so various and so complicated? Could he even understand that policy, should the reasons of it be set forth in language intelligible to others? Equally incompetent is man to judge of the wisdom of him who is infinite, and to scan the proceedings of a government which has the universe for the field of its operations, and an eternity in which to develop the full effect of its designs. Instead of questioning, therefore, either the wisdom or goodness of God in things which we cannot understand, how much more becoming our condition to fall at his feet and adore!

Secondly: Since God's thoughts are not as our thoughts--[being] limited to a narrow sphere--but embrace the whole system of creatures and events, the most minute as well as the most enlarged, we should be careful not to forget God, but humbly acknowledge him in all our ways. As no event is too insignificant to become the subject of his eternal counsels, so none is too small to be followed with amazing consequences of good or evil, as his providence shall direct. This is a sufficient reason for casting our care on the Lord; and even in the most trivial circumstances of our lives, begging for the guidance and protection of his most gracious and powerful hand.

This thought should impress us the more as we have come near to the close of the present, and shall, if God spare us, shortly enter upon the events of a new year. Ah, who can tell what is before us, what scenes of darkness and perplexity, and what need we shall stand in of being guided by his gracious counsels and having our hope firmly fixed in his abounding love.

Thirdly: As God's ways are extremely different from ours, and often marked by the most unsearchable proceedings, we ought to beware of imagining that we are his friends, merely because we are favoured with great outward privileges, and the Lord employs us as the instruments of signal good to others. His thoughts and counsels are very deep. He raised up Jehu and set him upon the throne of the house of Israel to execute his wrath upon the family of Ahab, but he did not admit him to the secret of his covenant. For aught that appears, he was finally abandoned of God and utterly cast away. The Lord raised up Judas, introduced him into the family of Christ, endowed him with miraculous gifts, and sent him forth to preach the gospel; and after all had no pleasure in him but left him to die a horrible death and to go to his own place. Let us then be cautious of inferring our interest in God's favour from any external privileges or blessings which may attend us. The only proof we can have that we are entitled to his friendship is that we love him and keep his commandments.¹

Fourthly: If God's thoughts are not only diverse from our, but infinitely above them, it ought not to surprise us that the wheels of his providence often move high and dreadful, and that his paths are in the deep waters where his footsteps are not known. How can it be otherwise,

¹ Note by KM: I believe the wording of this sentence can be misleading. Recall 1 John 2:3: "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments." Keeping his commandments is not a sign of "entitlement," but a sign or proof that we "know Him," that is, that we are redeemed Christians. The "proof" that we are "entitled to his friendship" or love is that he sent his son to die for us, thus making a "propitiation for our sins," as John mentions in verse 2. Thus, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

since his providence embraces a scheme of government so widely extended in its objects and which is to endure forever?

Fifthly : If God's thoughts and ways are not as ours but infinitely above them, devising and carrying forward a glorious system of operation throughout his immeasurable kingdom, how unspeakably happy are they who are numbered among his friends. Their highest interests are as secure as eternal power and wisdom can make them. Nothing can fall out, aside or beyond his wise and holy counsels; nothing which shall not ultimately advance the happiness of his people and the glory of his name. Here is a strong foundation, my dear brethren, for your hopes. Here is repose and quiet for you amidst the storms and troubles of this adverse world. God is on the throne, and under his direction all things will work together for good to them that love him. You are embraced in the folds of his everlasting covenant.

Finally: Since God has a government wide as the universe and durable as eternity, rich in counsel and unfathomable in design, what new and wonderful scenes are the friends of God destined to witness in the progress of their being. Nay, what a glorious place will Heaven be when God shall unveil to his children, in a succession which shall know no end, the high and glorious purposes concealed in his bosom from eternity, purposes which have been gradually unfolding in the creation and government of the world. Christian, surely it does not yet appear what you shall be, but this know--that it shall be your everlasting employment to explore the works, to admire the perfections, to celebrate the praises of a covenant keeping God.

Sermon II, "God's Thoughts and Ways Above Ours," by James Richards in William B. Sprague, *Sermons by the Late Rev. James Richards* (Albany: Erastus H. Pease & Co., 1849). Note: The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.