

## Lecture VIII.

# The Eternity And Unchangeableness Of God.

Exod. iii. 14.—“I AM THAT I AM.”—Psal. xc. 2.—“Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.”—Job xi. 7-9.—“Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.”

This is the chief point of saving knowledge, to know God; and this is the first point or degree of the true knowledge of God, to discern how ignorant we are of him, and to find him beyond all knowledge. The Lord gives a definition of himself, but such an one as is no more clear than himself to our capacities; a short one indeed, and you may think it says not much—“I am.” What is it that may not say so, “I am that I am?” The least and most inconsiderable creature hath its own being. Man's wisdom would have learned him to call himself by some high styles, as the manner and custom of kings and princes is, and such as the flattery of men attributes unto them. You would think the superlatives of wise, good, strong, excellent, glorious, and such like, were more beseeming his majesty; and yet there is more majesty in this simple style than in all others; but a “natural man” cannot behold it, for it is “spiritually discerned.” “Let the potsherd,” saith he, “strive with the potsherds of the earth,” [Isa. xlv. 9,] but let them not strive with their Maker. So I say, let creatures compare with creatures; let them take superlative

styles, in regard of others. Let some of them be called good, and some better, in the comparison among themselves; but God must not enter in the comparison. Paul thinks it an odious comparison, to compare present crosses to eternal glory: "I think them not worthy to be compared," saith Paul, Rom. viii. 18. But how much more odious is it, to compare God with creatures? Call him highest, call him most powerful, call him most excellent, almighty, most glorious in respect of creatures, you do but abase his majesty, to bring it down to any terms of comparison with them which is beyond all the bounds of understanding. All these do but express him to be in some degree eminently seated above the creatures, as some creatures are above all others! so you do no more but make him the head of all as some one creature is the head of one line or kind under it; but what is that to his majesty? He speaks otherwise of himself, Isa. xl. 17. "All nations before him are as nothing, and they are counted to him less than nothing." Then, certainly, you have not taken up the true notion of God when you have conceived him the most eminent of all beings, as long as any being appears as a being in his sight before whom all beings conjoined are as nothing. While you conceive God to be the best, you still attribute something to the creature; for all comparatives include the positive in both extremes: so then, you take up only some different degrees between them who differ so infinitely, so incomprehensibly. The distance betwixt heaven and earth is but a poor similitude to express the distance between God and creatures. What is the distance betwixt a being and nothing? Can you measure it? Can you imagine it? Suppose you take the most high, and the most low, and measure the distance betwixt them, you do but consider the difference betwixt two beings, but you do not express how far nothing is distant from any of them. Now, if any thing could be imagined less than nothing, could you at all guess at the vast distance between it and a being? so it is here. Thus saith the Lord, "all nations," their glory, perfection, and number, all of them, and all

their excellencies united,—do not amount to the value of an unit in regard of my Majesty; all of them like ciphers, join never so many of them together, they can never make up a number, they are nothing in this regard, and less than nothing. So then, we ought thus to conceive of God, and thus to attribute a being and life to him, as in his sight and in the consideration of it all created beings might vanish out of our sight; even as the glorious light of the sun, though it do not annihilate the stars, and make them nothing, yet it annihilates their appearance to our senses, and makes them disappear as if they were not. Although there be a great difference and inequality of the stars in the night,—some lighter, some darker, some of the first magnitude, and some of the second and third, &c. some of greater glory, and some of less,—but in the day-time all are alike, all are darkened by the sun's glory, even so it is here,—though we may compare one creature with another, and find different degrees of perfection and excellency, while we are only comparing them among themselves; but let once the glorious brightness of God shine upon the soul, and in that light all these lights shall be obscured, all their differences unobserved. An angel and a man, a man and a worm, differ much in glory and perfection of being: but oh! in his presence there is no such reckoning. Upon this account all things are alike, God infinitely distant from all, and so not more or less. Infiniteness is not capable of such terms of comparison. This is the reason why Christ says, “There is none good but one, even God.” Why, because in respect of his goodness, nothing deserves that name. Lesser light, in the view of the greater, is a darkness, as less good in comparison of a greater appears evil; how much more then shall created light and created goodness lose that name and notion, in the presence of that “uncreated Light, and self-sufficient Goodness.” And therefore it is, that the Lord calls himself after this manner, “I am as if nothing else were. I will not say,” saith he, “that I am the highest, the best and most glorious that is—that supposeth other things to have some

being, and some glory that is worthy the accounting of—but I am, and there is none else; I am alone; I lift up my hand to heaven, and swear I live for ever.” There is nothing else can say, I am, I live, and there is nothing else; for there is nothing hath it of itself. Can any boast of that which they have borrowed, and is not their own? As if the bird that had stolen from other birds its fair feathers should come forth and contend with them about beauty; would not they presently every one pluck out their own, and leave her naked, to be an object of mockery to all! Even so, since our breath and being is in our nostrils, and that depends upon his Majesty's breathing upon us, if he should but keep in his breath, as it were, we should vanish into nothing; he looketh upon man and he is not, Job vii. 8. That is a strange look, that looks man not only out of countenance, but out of life and being. He looks him into his first nothing; and then can he say, “I live, I am”? No, he must always say of himself in respect of God, as Paul of himself in respect of Christ, “I live, yet not I, but Christ in me.” I am, yet not I, but God in me. I live, I am, yet not I, but in God, in whom I live and have my being. So that there is no other thing, besides God, can say, “I am;” because all things are but borrowed drops of this self-sufficient fountain, and sparkles of this primitive light. Let any thing intervene between the stream and the fountain, and it is cut off and dried up; let any thing be interposed between the sun and the beam, and it evanishes. Therefore, this fountain-being, this original light, this self-being, *αυτο ον*, as Plato called him, deserves only the name of being; other things that we call after that name are nearer nothing than God, and so, in regard of his majesty, may more fitly be called nothing than something. You see then how profound a mystery of God's absolute self-sufficient perfection, is infolded in these three letters, I AM, or in these four, *Jehovah*. If you ask what is God? There is nothing occurs better than this, “I am,” or, he that is. If I should say he is the almighty, the only wise, the most perfect, the most glorious, it is all contained in that word,

“I am that I am,” *Nempe hoc est ei esse, hæc omnia esse*; for that is to be, indeed, to be all those perfections simply, absolutely, and, as it were, solely. If I say all that, and should reckon out all the scripture-epithets, I add nothing; if I say no more, I diminish nothing.

As this holds out God's absolute perfection, so we told you that it imports his eternity and unchangeableness. You know Pilate's speech, “What I have written I have written;” wherein he meant that he would not change it; it should stand so. So this properly belongs to God's eternity, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God,” Psal. xc. 2. Now this is properly to be; and this only deserves the name of being, which never was nothing, and never shall be nothing; which may always say, “I am.” You know it is so with nothing else but God. The heavens and earth, with the things therein, could not say, six thousand years ago, “I am.” Adam could once have said, “I am,” but now he cannot say it; for that self-being and fountain-being hath said to him, return to dust. And so it is with all the generations past; where are they now? They were, but they are not. And we then were not, and now are; for we are come in their place, but within a little time, Who of us can say, “I am.” No, “we flee away; and are like a dream, as when one awaketh!” We “are like a tale that is told,” that makes a present noise, and it is past. Within few years this generation will pass, and none will make mention of us; our place will not know us, no more than we do now remember those who have been before. Christ said of John, “he was a burning and shining light;” “he was,” saith he, but now he is not. But Christ may always say, “I am the light and life of men.” Man is; but look a little backward, and he was not; you shall find his original. And step a little forward and he shall not be, you shall find his end. But God is “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.” But oh! who can retire so far backward as to apprehend a beginning; or go

such a start forward as to conceive an end in such a being as is the beginning and end of all things, but without all beginning and end? Whose understanding would it not confound? There is no way here but to flee to Paul's sanctuary, "O the height and breadth, and length and depth!" We cannot imagine a being, but we must first conceive it nothing, and in some instant receiving its being; and, therefore, "Canst thou by searching find out God?" Therefore what his being is hath not entered into the heart of man to consider. If any man would live out the space but of two generations he would be a world's wonder; but if any had their days prolonged as the patriarchs before the flood, they would be called ancient indeed, but then the heavens and earth are far more ancient. We may go backward the space of near six thousand years in our own minds, and yet be as far from his beginning as we were. When we are come to the beginning of all things, a man's imagination may yet extend itself further, and suppose to itself as many thousands of years before the beginning of time, as all the angels and men of all nations and generations from the beginning, if they had been employed in no other thing but this, could have summed up; and then suppose a product to be made of all the several sums of years, it would be vast and unspeakable; but yet your imagination could reach further, and multiply that great sum into itself as often as there are units in it. Now when you have done all this, you are never a whit nearer the days of "the Ancient of days." Suppose then this should be the only exercise of men and angels throughout all eternity; all this marvellous arithmetic would not amount unto the least shadow of the continuance of him who is "from everlasting." All that huge product of all the multiplications of men and angels, hath no proportion unto that never-beginning and never-ending duration. The greatest sum that is imaginable hath a certain proportion to the least number, that it containeth it so oft and no oftener; so that the least number being multiplied will amount unto the greatest that you can conceive. But O! where shall a

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soul find itself here? It is enclosed between infiniteness before and infiniteness behind,—between two everlastings; which way soever it turns, there is no outgoing; which way soever it looks, it must lose itself in an infiniteness round about it. It can find no beginning and no end, when it hath wearied itself in searching, which, if it find not, it knows not what it is, and cannot tell what it is. Now what are we then? O what are we, who so magnify ourselves! “We are but of yesterday, and know nothing,” Job viii. 9. Suppose that we had endured the space of a thousand years, yet saith Moses, Psal. xc. 4, “A thousand years are but as yesterday in thy sight.” Time hath no succession to thee. Thou beholdest at once what is not at once, but in several times; all that may thus happen hath not the proportion of one day to thy days. We change in our days, and are not that to-day we were yesterday; but “he is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever,” Heb. xiii. 8. Every day we are dying, some part of our life is taken away; we leave still one day more behind us, and what is behind us is gone and cannot be recovered. Though we vainly please ourselves in the number of our years, and the extent of our life, and the vicissitudes of time, yet the truth is, we are but still losing to much of our being and time as passeth. First, we lose our childhood, then we lose our manhood; and then we leave our old age behind us also; and there is no more before us. Even the very present day we divide it with death. But when he moves all things, he remains immoveable. Though days and years be in a continual flux and motion about him, and they carry us down with their force, yet he abides, the same for ever. Even the earth that is established so sure, and the heavens that are supposed to be incorruptible, yet they “wax old as doth a garment;” but he is the same, and “his years have no end,” Psal. cii. 26, 27. *Sine principio principium; absque fine finis; cui præteritum non abit, haud adit futurum; ante omnia post omnia totus unus ipse*,—He is the beginning without any beginning; the end without an end: there is nothing bypast to him, and nothing

to come. *Sed uno mentis cernit in ictu, quæ sunt, quæ erunt, quæ fuerantque.*—he is one that is all, before all, after all, and in all. He beholds out of the exalted and supereminent tower of eternity, all the successions and changes of the creatures; and there is no succession, no mutation in his knowledge, as in ours. “Known to him are all his works from the beginning.” He can declare the end before the beginning; for he knows the end of all things, before he gives them beginning. Therefore he is never driven to any consultation upon any emergence, or incident, as the wisest of men are, who could not foresee all accidents and events; but “he is in one mind,” saith Job; and that one mind and one purpose is one for all, one concerning all. He had it from everlasting, and who can turn him? For he will accomplish what his soul desires. [044]

Now, “canst thou by searching find out God?” Canst thou, a poor mortal creature, either ascend up into the height of heaven, or descend down into the depths of hell? Canst thou travel abroad, and compass all the sea and dry land, by its longitude and latitude? Would any mortal creature undertake such a voyage, to compass the universe? Nay, not only so, but to search into every corner of it, above and below, on the right hand and on the left? No certainly, unless we suppose a man whose head reaches unto the height of heaven, and whose feet is down in the depths of hell, and whose arms, stretched out, can fathom the length of the earth, and breadth of the sea; unless, I say, we suppose such a creature, then it is in vain to imagine, that either the height of the one, or the depth of the other,—the length of the one, and the breadth of the other, can be found out and measured. Now, if mortal creatures cannot attain the measure of that which is finite, O then, what can a creature do? What can a creature know of him that is infinite, and the maker of all these things? You cannot compass the sea and land, how then can a soul comprehend him, “who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?” Isa. xl. 12.

Thou canst not measure the circumference of the heaven, how then canst thou find out him, “who metes out heaven with the span,” “and stretcheth them out as a curtain?” Isa. xl. 12, 22. You cannot number the nations, or perceive the magnitude of the earth, and the huge extent of the heavens, what then canst thou know of him, “who sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers before him?” and he spreadeth out the heavens “as a tent to dwell in!” Isa. xl. 22. He made all the pins and stakes of this tabernacle, and he fastened them below but upon nothing, and stretches this curtain about them and above them; and it was not so much difficulty to him, as to you to draw the curtain about your bed; for “he spake, and it was done, he commanded, and it stood fast.” Canst thou by searching find him out? And yet thou must search him; not so much out of curiosity to know what he is, for he dwelleth in “the light which no man can approach unto,” which no man hath seen, and no man can see, 1 Tim. vi. 16; not so much to find him, as to be found of him, or to find what we cannot know when we have found. *Hic est qui nunquam quæri frustra potes, cum tamen inveniri non potest.* You may seek him, but though you never find him, yet ye shall not seek him in vain, for ye shall find blessedness in him. Though you find him, yet can you search him out unto perfection? Then what you have found were not God. How is it possible for such narrow hearts to frame an apprehension, or receive an impression of such an immense greatness, and eternal goodness? Will not a soul lose its power of thinking and speaking, because there is so much to be thought and spoken; and it so transcends all that it can think or speak? Silence then must be the best rhetoric; and the sweetest eloquence, when eloquence itself must become dumb and silent. It is the abundance and excess of that inaccessible light, that hath no proportion to our understandings, that strikes us as blind as, in the darkness, the wont of light. All that we can say of God is, that whatsoever we can think or conceive, he is not that, because

he hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive, and that he is not like any of those things which we know, unto which if he be not like, we cannot frame any similitude or likeness of him in our knowledge. What then shall we do? Seek him and search him indeed: but, if we cannot know him, to reverence and fear and adore what we know. So much of him may be known as may teach us our duty and show unto us our blessedness. Let then all our inquiries of him have a special relation to this end, that, we may out of love and fear of such a glorious and good God, worship and serve him, and compose ourselves according to his will and wholly to his pleasure. Whatever thou knowest of God, or searchest of him, it is but a vain speculation, and a work of curiosity, if it do not lead to this end,—to frame and fashion thy soul to an union and communion with him in love; if it do not discover thyself unto thyself, that in that light of God's glorious majesty thou mayest distinctly behold thy own vileness and wretched misery, thy darkness and deadness and utter impotency. The angels that Isaiah saw attending God in the temple, had wings covering their faces, and wings covering their feet. Those excellent spirits who must cover their feet from us, because we cannot behold their glory, as Moses behoved to be veiled, yet they cannot behold his glory, but must cover their face from the radiant and shining brightness of his majesty. Yet they have other two wings to fly with. And being thus composed in reverence and fear to God, they are ready to execute his commands willingly and swiftly, Isa. vi. 1-3, &c. But what is the use Isaiah makes of all this glorious sight? “Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips,” &c. Oh! all is unclean,—people, and pastor! He had known, doubtless, something of it before, but now he sees it of new, as if he had never seen it. The glory of God shining on him doth not puff him up in arrogancy and conceit of the knowledge of such profound mysteries, but he is more abased in himself by it. It shines into his heart and whole man, and lets him see all unclean within and without. And so

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it was with Job, Job xliii. 5, 6. "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear;" but as long as it was hearsay, I thought myself something,—I often reflected upon myself and actions, with a kind of self-complacency and delight; but now, saith he, since I have seen thee by the seeing of the eye, "I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes;" I cannot look upon myself with patience,—without abhorrency and detestation. Self-love made me loathe other men's sins more than mine own, and self-love did cover mine own sins from me; it presented me to myself in a feigned likeness; but now I see myself in my true shape, and all coverings stripped off. Thy light hath pierced into my soul, and behold, I cannot endure to look upon myself. Here now is the true knowledge of God's majesty, which discovers within thee a mystery of iniquity: and here is the knowledge of God indeed, which abases all things besides God, not only in opinion but in affection, that attracts and unites thy soul to God, and draws it from thyself and all created things. This is a right discovery of divine purity and glory, that spots even the cleanness of angels, and stains the pride of all glory; much more will it represent filthiness, as filthiness without a covering. It is knowledge and science, "falsely so called," that puffeth up; for true knowledge emptieth a soul of itself, and humbleth a soul in itself, that it may be full of God. He that thinks he knows any thing, knows nothing as he ought to know.

This then is the first property or mark of the saving knowledge of God. It removes all grounds of vain confidence that a soul cannot trust unto itself. And then the very proper intent of it is, that a soul may trust in God, and depend on him in all things. For this purpose the Lord hath called himself by so many names in scripture, answerable to our several necessities and difficulties, that he might make known to us how all-sufficient he is, that so we may turn our eyes and hearts towards him. This was the intent of this name, *I AM*, that Moses might have a support of his faith; for if he had looked to outward appearance, was it not almost a

ridiculous thing, and like a vain fancy, for a poor inconsiderable man to go to a king with such a message, that he would dismiss so many subjects? And was it not an attempt of some madman to go about to lead so many thousands from a wicked tyrannical king, into another nation? Well, saith the Lord, "I am;" I, who give all things a being, will give a being to my promise. I will make Pharaoh hearken, and the people obey. Well then, what is it that this name of God will not answer? It is a creating name,—a name that can bring all things out of nothing by a word. If he be such as he is, then he can make of us what he pleases. If our souls had this name constantly engraven on our hearts, O what power would divine promises and threatenings have with us! "I, even I, am he that comforteth thee," saith he, Isaiah xli. 12. If we believed that it were he indeed, the Lord Jehovah, how would we be comforted! How would we praise him by his name *JAH!* How would we stoop unto him, and submit unto his blessed will! If we believed this, would we not be as dependent on him as if we had no being in ourselves? Would we not make him our habitation and dwelling-place; and conclude our own stability, and the stability of his church from his unvariable eternity? as the Psalmist, Psal. xcix. 1. Psal. cii. ult. How can we think of such a Fountain-Being, but we must withal acknowledge ourselves to be shadows of his goodness, and that we owe to him what we are, and so consecrate and dedicate ourselves to his glory! How can we consider such a Self-Being, Independent, and Creating Goodness, but we must have some desire to cleave to him, and some confidence to trust in him! Now, this is to know him. [046]

When we think on his unchangeableness, let us consider our own vanity, whose glory and perfection is like a summer flower, or like a vapour ascending for a little time, whose best estate is altogether vanity. Our purposes are soon broken off, and made of none effect, our resolutions change. This is a character of mortality, we are not always alike. *Non sibi constare, nec ubique et semper sibi parem eundemque esse.* To be now one thing,

and then another thing, is a properly of sinful and wretched man. Therefore let us “cease from man whose breath is in his nostrils,” and “trust not in princes” who shall die, far less in ourselves who are less than the least of men, but let us put our trust in God, “who changeth not,” and we shall not be consumed,—our waters shall not fail,—we shall never be ashamed of any hope we have in him. There is nothing else you trust in, but undoubtedly it shall prove your shame and confusion. Whatever you hear or know of God, know that it is vain and empty, unless it descend down into the heart to fashion it to his fear and love, and extend unto the outward man to conform it to obedience, you are but “vain in your imaginations, and your foolish hearts are darkened” while “when you know God” you glorify him not as God. If that be not the fruit and end of knowledge, that knowledge shall be worse to thee than ignorance, for it both brings on judicial hardening here, and will be thy solemn accuser and witness against thee hereafter, Rom. i. 21-24. The knowledge of Jesus Christ truly so called, is neither barren nor unfruitful for out of its root and sap spring humility, self-abasing confidence in God, patience in tribulations, meekness in provocations, temperance and sobriety in lawful things &c. 2 Pet. i. 5-8.