

## Lecture X.

### What God Is

John iv. 24.—“God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

We have here something of the nature of God pointed out to us, and something of our duty towards him. “God is a Spirit,” that is his nature, and “man must worship him,” that is his duty, and that “in spirit and in truth,” that is the right manner of the duty. If these three were well pondered till they did sink into the bottom of our spirits, they would make us indeed Christians, not in the letter, but in the spirit. That is presupposed to all Christian worship and walking, to know what God is, it is indeed the *primo cognitum* of Christianity, the first principle of true religion, the very root out of which springs and grows up walking suitably with, and worshipping answerably of, a known God. I fear much of our religion is like the Athenians, they built an altar to the unknown God, and like the Samaritans, who worshipped they knew not what. Such a worship, I know not what it is, when the God worshipped is not known. The two parents of true religion are the knowledge of God and of ourselves. This, indeed, is the beginning of the fear of God, which the wise preacher calls “the beginning of true wisdom.” And these two, as they beget true religion, so they cannot truly be one without the other. It is not many notions and speculations about the divine nature,—it is not high and strained conceptions of God,—that comprise the true knowledge of him. Many think they know something when they can speak of those mysteries in some singular way, and in some terms removed from common understandings, while neither themselves nor others know what they mean. And thus

they are presumptuous, self conceited, knowing nothing as they ought to know. There is a knowledge that puffs up and there is a knowledge that casts down, a knowledge in many that doth but swell them, not grow them. It is but a rumour full of wind, a vain and empty, frothy knowledge that is neither good for edifying other, nor saving a man's self, a knowledge that a man knows and reflects upon so as to ascend upon the height of it, and measure himself by the degrees of it. This is not the true knowledge of God, which knows not itself, looks not back upon itself, but straight towards God, his holiness and glory and our baseness and misery, and therefore it constrains the soul to be ashamed of itself in such a glorious presence, and to make haste to worship, as Moses, Job, and Isaiah did.

This definition of God—if we did truly understand it, we could not but worship him in another manner. “God is a Spirit.” Many ignorant people form in their own mind some likeness and image of God, who is invisible. Ye know how ye fancy to yourselves some bodily shape. When you conceive of him, you think he is some reverend and majestic person sitting on a throne in heaven. But, I beseech you, correct your mistakes of him. There is outward idolatry and there is inward, there is idolatry in action, when men paint or engrave some similitude of God, and there is idolatry in imagination, when the fancy and apprehension run upon some image or likeness of God. The first is among Papists, but I fear the latter is too common among us, and it is indeed all one, to form such a similitude in our mind and to engrave or paint it without. So that the God whom many of us worship is not the living and true God, but a painted or graven idol. When God appeared most visible to the world, as at the giving out of the law, yet no man did see any likeness at all. He did not come under the perception of the most subtle sense, he could not be perceived but by the refined understanding going aside from all things visible. And therefore you do but fancy an idol to yourselves, instead of God, when you apprehend him under the

likeness of any visible or sensible thing, and so whatever love or fear or reverence you have, it is all but misspent superstition, the love and fear of an idol.

I. Know then, “that God is a Spirit,” and therefore he is like none of all those things you see, or hear, or smell, or taste, or touch. The heavens are glorious indeed, the light is full of glory, but he is not like that. If all your senses should make an inquiry, and search for him throughout the world, you should not find him. Though he be near at hand to every one of us yet our eyes and ears and all our senses, might travel the length of the earth and breadth of the sea, and should not find him even as you might search all the corners of heaven ere you could hear or see an angel. If you would saw a man asunder and resolve him into atoms of dust, yet you could not perceive a soul within him. Why? Because these are spirits, and so without the reach of your senses.

II. If God be a Spirit, then he is invisible, and dwells in light inaccessible, “which no man hath seen or can see.” Then our poor narrow minds, that are drowned, as it were, and immersed in bodies of clay, and in this state of mortality, receive all knowledge by the senses, cannot frame any notion of his spiritual and abstracted nature. We cannot conceive what our own soul is, but by some sensible operation flowing from it, and the height that our knowledge of that noble part of ourselves amounts to, is but this dark and confused conception that the soul is some inward principle of life and sense and reason. How then is it possible for us to conceive aright of the divine nature, as it is in itself, but only in a dark and general way? We guess at his majesty, by the glorious emanations of his power and wisdom, and the ways thereof, which he displays abroad in all the work of his hands, and from all these concurring testimonies, and evidences of his majesty, we gather this confused notion of him, that he is the fountain, self independent Being, the original of these things, and more absolute in the world than the soul is in the body, the

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true *Anima mundi*, the very life and the light of men, and the soul that quickens, moves, and forms all this visible world, that makes all things visible, and himself is invisible. Therefore it is that the Lord speaks to us in Scripture of himself, according to our capacities,—of his face, his right hand, and arm, his throne, his sceptre, his back parts his anger, his fury, his repentance, his grief, and sorrow,—none of which are properly in his spiritual, immortal, and unchangeable nature. But because our dulness and slowness is such in apprehending things spiritual, it being almost without the sphere and comprehension of the soul while in the body, which is almost addicted unto the senses in the body, therefore the Lord accommodates himself unto our terms and notions, *balbutit nobiscum*,—he, like a kind father, stammers with his stammering children, speaks to them in their own dialect, but withal, would have us conceive he is not really such an one, but infinitely removed in his own being from all these imperfections. So when you hear of these terms in scripture, O beware of conceiving God to be such a one as yourselves! But, in these expressions not beseeming his Majesty, because below him, learn your own ignorance of his glorious Majesty, your dulness and incapacity to be such as the holy One must come down as it were in some bodily appearance, ere you can understand any thing of him.

III. If God be a Spirit, then he is most perfect and most powerful. All imperfection, all infirmity, and weakness in the creature, is founded in the gross and material part of it. You see the more matter and bodily substance is in any thing, it is the more lumpish, heavy, and void of all action. It is the more spiritual, pure, and refined part of the creation that hath most activity in it, and is the principle of all motions and actions. You see a little fly hath more action in it than a great mountain, because there are spirits in it which move it. The bottom of the world contains the dregs of the creation, as it were,—a mass and lump of heavy earth, but the higher and more distant bodies be

from that, the more pure and subtile they are, and the more pure and subtile they be, the more action, virtue, and efficacy they have. The earth stands like a dead lump but the sea moves, and the air being thinner and purer than both, moves more easily and swiftly. But go up higher and still the motion is swifter, and the virtue and influence is the more powerful. What is a dead body when the soul and spirit is out of it? It hath no more virtue and efficacy than so much clay, although by the presence of the spirit of it, it was active, agile, swift, strong and nimble. So much then as any thing hath of spirit in it, so much the more perfect and powerful it is. Then I beseech you consider what a One the God of the spirits of all flesh must be,—the very Fountain spirit,—the Self being spirit,—*αυτο πνευμα*. When the soul of a man, or the spirit of a horse, hath so much virtue, to stir up a lump of earth, and to quicken it to so many diverse operations, even though that soul and spirit did not, nay could not make that piece of earth they dwell in, then, what must his power and virtue be that made all those things? Who gave power and virtue even to the spirits of all flesh? “Their horses” saith God, are “flesh and not spirit,” (Isa. xxxi. 3) because, in comparison of his majesty, the very spirits in them are but like a dead lump of flesh. If he should draw in his breath, as it were, they would have no more virtue to save the Israelites, than so many lumps of flesh or clay. For he is the Spirit of all spirits, that quickens, actuates and moves them to their several operations and influences. *Anima mundi, et Anima animarum mundi*. An angel hath more power than all men united in one body. Satan is called the prince of the air, and the god of this world, for he hath more efficacy and virtue to commove the air, and raise tempests than all the swarms of multiplied mankind, though gathered into one army. If the Lord did not restrain and limit his power, he were able to destroy whole nations at once. An angel killed many thousands of Sennacherib's army in one night, what would many angels do then, if the Lord pleased to apply them to that work? O what is man that he should magnify

himself, or glory in strength, or skill? Beasts are stronger than men, but man's weaker strength being strengthened with more skill, proves stronger than they. But in respect of angels he hath neither strength nor wisdom.

IV. If God be a Spirit, then he is not circumscribed by any place, and if an infinite Spirit, then he is everywhere, no place can include him, and no body can exclude him. He is within all things, yet not included nor bounded within them, and he is without all things, yet not excluded from them. *Intra omnia, non tamen inclusus in illis, extra omnia, nec tamen exclusus ab illis.* You know every body hath its own bounds and limits circumscribed to it, and shuts out all other bodily things out of the same space, so that before the least body want some space, it will put all the universe in motion, and make every thing about it to change its place, and possess another. But a spirit can pass through all of them and never disturb them, a legion may be in one man, and have room enough. If there were a wall of brass or tower, having no opening, neither above nor beneath, no body could enter but by breaking through, and making a breach into it, but an angel or spirit could storm it without a breach, and pierce through it without any division of it. How much more doth the Maker of all spirits fill all in all! The thickness of the earth doth not keep him out, nor the largeness of the heavens contain him. How then do we circumscribe and limit him within the bounds of a public house, or the heavens? O! how narrow thoughts have we of his immense greatness, who, without division or multiplication of himself, fills all the corners of the world,—whose indivisible unity is equivalent to an infinite extension and divisibility! How often, I pray you, do you reflect upon this? God is near to every one of us. Who of us thinks of a divine Majesty nearer us than our very souls and consciences, “in whom we live and move, and have our being”? How is it we move, and think not with wonder of that first Mover in whom we move? How is it we live and persevere in being and do not always consider this

fountain-Being in whom we live and have our being? O, the atheism of many souls professing God! We do speak, walk, eat, and drink, and go about all our businesses, as if we were self being, and independent of any, never thinking of that all present quickening Spirit, that acts us, moves us, speaks in us, makes us to walk and eat and drink, as the barbarous people who see, hear, speak and reason, and never once reflect upon the principle of all these, to discern a soul within. This is brutish, and in this, man who was made of a straight countenance to look upward to God, and to know himself and his Maker, till he might be differenced from all creatures below, is degenerated, and become like the beasts that perish. Who of us believes this all present God? We imagine that he is shut up in heaven, and takes no such notice of affairs below, but certainly, he is not so far from us, though he show more of his glory above, yet he is as present and observant below.

V. If he be a Spirit, then as he is incomprehensible and immense in being, so also there is no comprehension of his knowledge. The nearer any creature comes to the nature of a spirit, the more knowing and understanding it is. Life is the most excellent being, and understanding is the most excellent life. *Materia est iners et mortua*. The nearer any thing is to the earthly matter, as it hath less action, so less life and feeling. Man is nearer an angel than beasts, and therefore he hath a knowing understanding spirit in him. There is a spirit in man, and the more or less this spirit of man is abstracted from sensual and material things, it lives the more excellent and pure life, and is, as it were, more or less delivered from the chains of the body. These souls that have never risen above, and retired from sensible things, O, how narrow are they,—how captivated within the prison of the flesh! But when the Lord Jesus comes to set free he delivers a soul from this bondage, he makes these chains fall off and leads the soul apart to converse with God himself, and to meditate on things not seen—sin, wrath, hell, and heaven.

And the farther it goes from itself, and the more abstracted it is from the consideration of present things, the more it lives a life like angels. And therefore, when the soul is separated from the body, it is then perfectly free, and hath the largest extent of knowledge. A man's soul must be almost like Paul's "whether out of the body, or in the body, I know not,"—if he would understand aright spiritual things. Now then, this infinite Spirit is an all knowing Spirit, all seeing Spirit, as well as all-present, "there is no searching of his understanding," Isa. xl. 28, Psalm. cxlvii. 5. "Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor, hath taught him?" Isa. xl. 13, Rom. xi. 34. He calls the generations from the beginning, and known to him are all his works from the beginning. O that you would always set this God before you, or rather set yourselves always in his presence, in whose sight you are always! How would it compose our hearts to reverence and fear in all our actions, if we did indeed believe that the Judge of all the world is an eye witness to our most retired and secret thoughts and doings! If any man were as privy to thy thoughts, as thy own spirit and conscience, thou wouldst blush and be ashamed before him. If every one of us could open a window into one another's spirits, I think this assembly should dismiss as quickly as that of Christ's, when he bade them that were without sin cast a stone at the woman. We could not look one upon another. O then, why are we so little apprehensive of the all-searching eye of God, who can even declare to us our thought, before it be? How much atheism is rooted in the heart of the most holy! We do not always meditate, with David, Psal. cxxxix., on that all searching and all knowing Spirit who knows our down sitting and uprising, and understands our thoughts afar off, and who is acquainted with all our ways. O how would we ponder our path, and examine our words, and consider our thoughts beforehand if we set ourselves in the view of such a Spirit, that is within us and without us, before us and behind us! He may spare sinners as long as he pleases, for there is no

escaping from him. You cannot go out of his dominions, nay, you cannot run out of his presence, Psal. cxxxix. 7-10. He can reach you when he pleases, therefore he may delay as long as he pleases.