

SERMON XVII.

BY THE REV. THOMAS MALLERY, D.D.*

HOW MAY WE HAVE SUITABLE CONCEPTIONS OF GOD IN DUTY ?

And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes.—Gen. xviii. 27.

THIS text presents to us Abraham's standing before the Lord, pleading for the preservation of the righteous, in the destruction of Sodom, and for the preservation of Sodom, if possible, from destruction, for the righteous' sake.

That which we have in it more especially to take notice of, in reference to this present exercise, is, with what apprehensions or conceptions of God Abraham did speak to God, did deport himself towards God, did manage this great undertaking with God : concerning which, four things present themselves for our observation :—

1. That those apprehensions or conceptions [which] Abraham had of God, did highly exalt and magnify the greatness and excellency of God in his heart : "Behold, now I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord ;" One who hath excellency, and sovereignty, and majesty, and dominion, and power, and glory.

2. That they were such conceptions of God as did humble, vilify, and abase Abraham in himself in comparison of God : "I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes ;" a sinful, weak, worthless, frail piece of vanity and mortality.

3. That they were such conceptions of God as did represent him gracious, propitious, benevolous to the creature, notwithstanding the greatness and excellency of God, and the meanness and unworthiness of the creature : thus much seems to be comprehended in the note of admiration, "behold !" O what admirable condescension is this in the great God ! O what wonderful mercy and grace is this, that such a poor vile creature should have liberty to speak to him, to parley with him !

4. That they were such apprehensions of God as did beget in Abraham a faith of acceptance with God in the performance of that duty, without which it had been dangerous presumption in him, "who was but dust and ashes, to take upon him to speak unto the Lord."

This example of Abraham I shall endeavour to draw forth for our practice and imitation. He who is made to us a pattern of faith may be to us a pattern of true worship ; and such apprehensions or conceptions

* It is highly probable that this is the person who proceeded to the highest degree in Divinity, December 1st, 1660 ; and who, in the second edition of the "Catalogue of all Graduates in Divinity, Law, and Physick," &c., Oxford, 1772, (p. 229,) is described as being a member of New College. Dr. Thomas Mallery, Dean of Chester, who is supposed to have been one of his kindred, died in 1644.—EDIT.

[as] Abraham had of God in speaking to him, such conceptions of God we are to have in our prayers and performances to him.

For which end I shall lay down this general proposition :

DOCTRINE.

That such as speak to God or speak of God, such as draw near to God or have to do with God in any part of divine worship, must manage all their performances with right apprehensions and due conceptions of God.

The truth of this general proposition I shall endeavour to manifest and make clear, by laying down four particular propositions, which must give evidence to it.

1. The **FIRST** proposition is this : *That we cannot have any true, right apprehensions or conceptions of God, except we have a true knowledge of him.*—Such as have not known God, have slighted him : “Who is the Lord,” saith Pharaoh, “that I should obey his voice? I know not the Lord.” (Exod. v. 2.) Such as know not God, nor desire to know him, are so far from drawing near to God, that they drive him as far from them as they can; they say unto the Almighty, “Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways.” (Job xxi. 14.)

What counsel Eliphaz gave Job, (whom he supposed to be a greater stranger to God than indeed he was,) may be an useful instruction to us : “Acquaint now thyself with God.” (Job xxii. 21.) To know God, and to be known of God, is our highest privilege : “Acquaint thyself now with Him, and be at peace.” The reason why any are real enemies to God, is, because they know not God; and the reason why many think God is an enemy to them, is, because they are not acquainted with God so intimately as they should. “Acquaint thyself now with God,” saith he; and “thereby good shall come unto thee.” But what good? and how shall this good come? It is partly expressed in verses 22—25; but more fully in verses 26, 27 : “For then shalt thou have thy delight in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy face unto God. Thou shalt make thy prayer unto him, and he shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows.” So that, except we know God aright, and have some acquaintance with him, we cannot delight ourselves in God, we cannot make our prayer to him, nor lift up our face unto him.

2. The **SECOND** proposition is : *That we cannot know any thing savingly of God, further than he is pleased to manifest and make known himself to us.*—No man can make known God but God himself. Moses, who had seen as much of God’s glory as any man, when he desired a further manifestation of God’s glory, in a higher measure or degree than formerly he had seen, he goes to God himself for it : “I beseech thee, show me thy glory.” (Exod. xxxiii. 18.)

The great promise [which] Christ maketh to them that love him and keep his commandments, is the manifestation of himself to them by himself : “I will manifest myself to them,” for none else can. A disciple puts a question to him about it : “Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world?” (John xiv. 21, 22.) We have a clear answer to this, in Luke x. 21. This very doctrine which is so much matter of indignation to the wise and prudent of the world, is matter of

rejoicing and exaltation to the Spirit of Christ. And he said, "I thank thee, O Father, that thou hast hid and hast revealed; for so it seemed good in thy sight:" hence is that of our Saviour, "O righteous Father, the world hath not known thee; but these have known." (John xvii. 25.)

3. The **THIRD** proposition is: *That the clearest manifestations of God to us, and such as can beget in us right apprehensions and due conceptions of him, are made out to us in and by Jesus Christ.*—"No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." (John i. 18.) Therefore no man ever did or can apprehend any thing of God truly, that is, upon a saving account, but in and by Jesus Christ.

The divine essence or Godhead "no man hath seen, nor can see" in itself. (1 Tim. vi. 16.)

Something of this eternal Godhead is manifested in *the works of creation*: "The invisible things of God, even his eternal power and Godhead," are "clearly seen," in "the things that are made." (Rom. i. 20.) But yet this knowledge of God in the creature could not bear down the vain imaginations, or idolatrous conception of God, in men's hearts; as appears in verses 21, 23.

Much of the eternal Godhead is manifested in *the works of providence*: God "doeth great things past finding out; yea, and wonders without number. Lo, he goeth by us, and we see him not: he passeth on also, but we perceive him not." (Job ix. 10, 11.) God is invisible in himself, and incomprehensible in his works; Job made it his work to trace God in his works. (Job xxiii. 8, 9.) Sometimes God was working forward, or before him; sometimes backward, or behind him; sometimes on his right hand, sometimes at his left hand. Job follows him up and down, if he might apprehend him, and the reason and design of God in all his works. But he could not perceive him; God hid himself from him.

Much more of the eternal Godhead was manifested in *his most righteous and holy law*; but the manifestations of God here affrighted them that saw it; the people cry out, "Let not the Lord speak any more to us, lest we die;" and Moses himself said, "I exceedingly fear; so terrible was the sight" of God there. (Heb. xii. 21.)

Hence it will follow, that the clearest, sweetest, most comfortable, manifestations of God to us, and such as can beget in us right apprehensions and conceptions of God, are made out to us only in Jesus Christ, "who is the image of the invisible God;" (Col. i. 15;) in whom God hath made such discoveries of himself, as can no where be seen but in Christ: he is the "express image" or character of his Father's "person;" (Heb. i. 3;) the exact resemblance of all his Father's excellences in their utmost perfections; therefore, when Philip desired him to show them of the Father, to give them a sight to satisfaction; "He that hath seen me," saith Christ to him, "hath seen the Father; believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me." (John xiv. 9, 11.)

In the works of creation, God is a God *above* us; in his works of providence, a God *without* us; in the law, a God *against* us; in himself, a God *invisible* to us. Only in Christ he is *Emmanuel*, "God manifested in our flesh," God *in* us, "God *with* us," God *for* us.

4. Hence follows the **FOURTH** proposition: *That the manifestations of God to us in Christ are those which alone can beget those due apprehensions and right conceptions of God, with which we must draw near to him, and perform all our worship to him.*

As Abraham is held forth to us a pattern of faith; so he may be to us a pattern of worship, inasmuch as all true worship to God is performed by faith, by faith in Christ. Such apprehensions, therefore, [as] Abraham had of God in his worship, such apprehensions of God we are to have in our worship; and as Abraham had those conceptions of God by faith in Christ, so can we have the like conceptions of God by faith in Christ only.

(1.) *Those apprehensions Abraham had of God did beget, as we have shown, high thoughts of God.*—With such apprehensions of God we must perform all our worship. See what high thoughts of God his people have always had in worshipping him: Nch. ix. 5, 6; 1 Tim. i. 17; vi. 16.

Low thoughts of God will ever perform but low, base, contemptible service and worship. They brought God the blind, the lame, the sick for sacrifice: Go, saith God, “offer them to your governor,” and see if he do not scorn your present, as undervalued by it! And “should I accept this at your hand,” which a petty lord will reject with indignation? “For I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts.” (Mal. i. 8, 13, 14.)

Now, such high thoughts and conceptions of God with which all our worship must be performed to him, can spring only from the manifestations of God in Christ, who is the highest revelation of the glory of God, (Isai. xl. 5,) the brightness, the effulgency of his glory. (Heb. i. 3.) When God had yielded to give Moses a sight of his glory, he put him into the cleft of the rock, (which was a resemblance of Christ,* as a learned divine hath observed,) and so made his glory to pass before him. (Exod. xxxiii. 22.) Certainly, Moses had here a sight of God’s glory beyond all that ever he had seen before. Compare with this that text: “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ:” (2 Cor. iv. 6 :) all the other manifestations of God’s glory were but dark and dim, in comparison of those which appear in the face of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we can attain no where such high, so great, so glorious conceptions of God as in Jesus Christ.

(2.) *Abraham had such conceptions of God as humbled, emptied, and abased him in himself in comparison of God.*—And with such apprehensions of God must we perform all our worship to him. We are exhorted to “come and worship, and bow down, and kneel.” (Psalm xcv. 6.) In all worship we are to testify, as our absolute subjection to God, so our humblest submission to him. Observe what self-abasing thoughts the apprehensions of God’s goodness wrought in David when he went to worship before the Lord. (2 Sam. vii. 18—20.)

Now, such conceptions of God, which, above all others, humble, and lessen, and abase the creature before God,—they spring principally from the manifestation of God in Christ.

It is the general opinion of the Schoolmen, that the angels, in the first instant of their creation, did not enjoy that sight of God [which] we call

* DR. RAINOLDS on Psalm cx. p. 166.

“beatifical vision,” and that the angels that fell never had sight of it at all; for if they had, they could not have fallen.* But what they talk of the good angels’ meriting that beatifical vision of God, in the second or third instant of their creation, is popish foppery: divines unanimously attribute their station and stability in holiness to Jesus Christ. We may upon good grounds also attribute to Jesus Christ their first admission into the presence, sight, enjoyment of God, their state of supernatural blessedness. Pardon this digression; it is to make the way clear for the demonstration in hand, namely, that the angels, before they had a sight of God, or of themselves in Christ,—many of them waxed proud and fell; the same pride that ruined some might have ruined all; but after they had a sight of God in Christ, how humble were they! That vision spoken of, Isai. vi. 1, 2, was manifestly an appearance of the glory of God in Jesus Christ: “I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.” What the carriage of the seraphims was towards God in this his appearance is expressed: “Each one had six wings; with twain they did fly;” noting their ready execution of God’s commands; “with twain they did cover their face;” noting their natural impotency in themselves to behold the surpassing brightness of divine glory; “with twain they covered their feet,” as humbled in the sense and shame of their own creature-imperfection in comparison of the infinite purity and holiness of God.

Thus, when Moses had had a sight of the glory of God in Christ, he “made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped.” (Exod. xxxiv. 8.) Quickly is the soul humbled at the manifestations of God in Christ. In Christ we have seen God humbling, emptying, lessening, dishonouring, himself for us. (Phil. ii. 5—7.) Who can be proud, that hath had a true sight of God humbled for him?

By the manifestations of God in Christ are begotten the deepest soul-humiliations for sin: “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, and shall be in bitterness for him.” (Zech. xii. 10.) This great sorrow was not for the piercing of the humanity of Christ, barely considered; but for piercing God in Christ, though the Godhead was not in the least passive; therefore that blood which was shed is called the blood of God; (Acts xx. 28;) and that person who was pierced [is] called, “the Lord of glory.” (1 Cor. ii. 8.) Sins against the manifestations of the love, mercy, grace, compassions, goodness, and glory of God in Christ, beget the deepest humiliation of soul in all our confessions.

(3.) *Abraham had such conceptions of God as did represent him gracious, propitious, benevolous to the creature, a bountiful rewarder of him that serveth him, notwithstanding the greatness of God, or the unworthiness of the creature.*

Such apprehensions we must have of God in all our approaches to him, in all our performances of duty and worship.

When Cain could not apprehend so much favour and grace in God as could pardon his sin and remove his punishment, he then “went out from the presence of the Lord;” (Gen. iv. 13—16;) that is, as interpreters of

* See SALKELD *de Angelis*, c. 34, 35; AQUINAS, pars i. quæst. 62, art. 1.

good note render it, he left the church of God in his father's family, the worship of God, the ordinances of God, the service of God, the profession of God, and all. Such as cannot have apprehensions of God as gracious, propitious, will not come into the presence of God.

Nor such as cannot apprehend him a bountiful rewarder of them that come to him. They bid God depart from them who question whether God can do any thing for them, or whether there be any profit in his service. (Job xxi. 14, 15 ; xxii. 17.) When those mercenary hypocrites had lost their worldly profits and preferments which they had gained by the profession of religion, when the tide was turned, and profaneness only countenanced, they cast off all, and said, "It is vain to serve God : and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinances ?" (Mal. iii. 14, 15.)

But he that cometh to God must have such apprehensions of him as render him gracious as well as glorious, merciful as well as righteous ; for we come to God sitting on his throne of grace, and we have to deal with mercy for supply to all our needs. (Heb. iv. 16.)

And "he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." (Heb. xi. 6.) Why did David prefer the lowest place or office in the house or church of God, a porter's place, before the highest preferments in the tents of ungodliness ? He gives the reason : "For the Lord God is a sun and shield ;" a sun to confer all good, a shield to preserve from all evil. "He will give grace and glory,"—what can a man desire more ? yet, if there be any "good thing" beside grace and glory, he will not "withhold" it ; such a bountiful master is God in his house, and such an one his servants apprehend him. (Psalm lxxxiv. 10, 11.)

Now, we cannot have right apprehensions and due conceptions of the grace, mercy, good-will, of God to us, but from the manifestations of God in Jesus Christ. It is God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and beseeching us to be reconciled to him. (2 Cor. v. 19, 20.) When God gave Moses a sight of his glory in the cleft of the rock, "I will," saith God, "make all my goodness pass before thee ;" and he proclaimed the name of the Lord : "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin." (Exod. xxxiii. 19 ; xxxiv. 6, 7.) He presents himself in his richest robes of state, and all his attributes arrayed in a livery of grace.

Nor can we have right apprehensions of God as a bountiful rewarder of his servants, but through the manifestations of himself to us in Christ ; for we cannot expect the reward *of debt*, but *of grace*. God in Christ, and upon the account of Christ, is the most bountiful rewarder. So Christ tells his disciples : "If any man serve me, let him follow me ; and where I am, there shall also my servant be : if any man serve me, him will my Father honour." (John xii. 26.) We serve the Father in serving the Son : never was service rewarded with such honour ; "For," saith Christ, "the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God." (John xvi. 27.)

(4.) *Abraham had such apprehensions of God as did beget a comfort-*

able persuasion of faith for his acceptation with God in that his drawing near to him.

It is the mind of God that such as come to him should have such apprehensions of Him as One that will accept them, embrace them ; when he discovers nothing but wrath and displeasure against them that stand in opposition against him : “ Fury is not in me. Let” a man “ take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me ; and he shall make peace with me.” (Isai. xxvii. 4, 5.) That holy man knew that all his happiness consisted in the enjoyment of God ; therefore he said, “ It is good for me to draw near to God ;” but was he sure God would accept him ? “ I have put my trust,” saith he, “ in the Lord God.” (Psalm lxxiii. 28.)

Now, such apprehensions of God as beget a faith of acceptation with God in our approaches to him, can spring only from the manifestations of God to us in Christ. That is supposed, by judicious interpreters, to be spoken of Jesus Christ, who is said to engage his heart to approach unto the Lord ; and God saith, “ I will cause him to draw near, and he shall approach unto me.” (Jer. xxx. 21.) Christ hath boldness and liberty, full security of acceptation with God ; and hereby he hath procured us liberty, boldness, and acceptation with God. “ Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed into the heavens, let us come boldly to the throne of grace.” (Heb. iv. 14, 16.) “ Having boldness to enter into the holiest, and having an High Priest over the house of God ; let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith,” (Heb. x. 19, 21, 22,) for the acceptation of our persons and services : “ In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.” (Eph. iii. 12.)

From what hath been laid down, we may conclude, that such apprehensions or conceptions of God wherewith we are to draw near to God, to perform every duty, and every part of divine worship, must flow from the manifestations of God in Jesus Christ.

USE.

The use I shall make of this point is, to inform Christians how much it concerneth us to acquaint ourselves more intimately with God as he hath manifested himself in Jesus Christ ; in whom alone we can have right apprehensions and due conceptions of God ; without which we cannot perform aright any kind of worship to God.

1. *Without due apprehensions and conceptions of God, we cannot perform any part of that NATURAL worship we owe to God.*—We cannot love him, fear him, trust in him, pray unto him, praise him, &c.

2. *Without the right apprehensions and due conceptions of God in Jesus Christ, we cannot perform aright any part of his INSTITUTED worship.*

(1.) *For all the ordinances of God’s instituted worship (as the sacrifices and sacraments under the law, so the sacraments and other ordinances under the gospel) seem to have immediate relation to, and near dependence on, Christ.*—“ God manifested in the flesh.” You may observe, they consist of two parts, the one natural, the other spiritual ; the one external, the other internal ; the one, as it were, the body, the other, the soul, of

it ; the one representing the humanity, the other the divinity, of Jesus Christ : so that every ordinance of worship is, as it were, a representation of Christ incarnate.

(2.) *The divine essence or Godhead in Jesus Christ seems to be the proper object of all worship.*—The Schoolmen have concluded, (to which I find our learned and pious divines have given their assent,) that “the essence of the Godhead is the primary and proper object of worship.”*

This divine essence is wholly in Christ : “In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” (Col. ii. 9.) In that body or human nature of Christ the fulness of the Godhead dwelt not locally, as *locatum in loco*, or *contentum in continente*,† but by personal union. And the divine essence, as it is in Christ, seems to be the proper object of all gospel-worship : it was so under the law in types and figures ; and such was the tabernacle and temple-worship in its spiritual notion.

The tabernacle or temple was God’s habitation or dwelling-place. (Psalm lxxvi. 2.) There was the only place of public worship. (Psalm xxix. 2.) No sacrifice was to be offered in any other place. There the spiritual worshippers had by faith a sight of God, and communion with God. (Psalm lxiii. 2 ; lxxviii. 24.) Towards God in this place they were to make all their supplications and prayers wherever, or in what country soever, they were. (1 Kings viii. 29, 30. See Dan. vi. 10.) Now the tabernacle and temple were a type of the body or humanity of Christ, as himself explaineth ; (John ii. 19 ;) in which the divine glory of the Godhead dwelt. “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,” (or “tabernacled in us,” as the Greek word signifies,) “and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father.” (John i. 14.) Therefore, what the tabernacle or temple was to them under the law, that is Christ Jesus to us under the gospel. And as God manifested to them in the temple was the proper object of worship to them, so God manifested to us in Christ is the proper object of worship to us.

(3.) *The flesh or humanity of Christ is the medium or mean by which we have access to God in all our worship.*—This is expressed : “Having boldness to enter into the holiest,” where the divine glory appeared between the cherubims on the mercy-seat, “by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh.” (Heb. x. 19, 20.) By the “flesh” of Christ here, I do not understand his natural flesh barely considered as such, but in that notion as it is to be understood in John vi. 53—56 ; where Christ, speaketh of eating his flesh and drinking his blood unto life ; where Christ’s flesh, by a metonymy of the cause for the effect, signifies the righteousness, satisfaction, reconciliation, grace, peace, glory, [which] Christ procured for us by the obedience he performed to God in that flesh. By the flesh of Christ in this sense, we have access to God in all our worship.

Yet is not the consideration of Christ’s natural flesh altogether useless unto this end ; for whereas we are apt to frame images and similitudes of God in our minds, the right apprehensions of God dwelling in the human

* DR. OWEN’S “Communion with the Holy Ghost,” chap. viii.

† “Confined in one place, or contained in a container.”—EDIT.

nature of Christ, who is the true "image of the invisible God,"* may be effectual to remove all other images and likenesses of God out of our minds. But then we must be careful that we do not terminate our conceptions of God in the man Christ, or in the manhood of Christ; for then we shall make the human nature of Christ the image of the Godhead, and that would be an idol. But when we have taken up an apprehension of the humanity of Christ, if our conceptions pass "through the veil into the holiest," if we are led thereby to worship that Godhead that dwells in it, this is a right conception and true worship.

The humanity of Christ was to the Godhead as a back of metal to a crystal glass: look on such a glass in its pure substance, and it is transparent; put a back of metal to it, and it gives a beautiful reflex. So, if we take up conceptions of the Godhead in its pure essence, it is transparent: if we consider God infinite, almighty, immense, eternal, what is this to the creature, or our comfort? If we consider him in his power, justice, wisdom, holiness, goodness, truth, what is this to us? Yea, all these are against us as we are sinners. But if we take up conceptions of God in all these attributes as they appear to us in Christ, as they are backed with the humanity of Christ, so they make a most comfortable reflex upon us. In this glass we behold "the glory of the Lord," and "are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2 Cor. iii. 18.) In this glass we behold that wisdom by which we are instructed, that righteousness by which we are justified, that power by which we are preserved, that grace by which we are chosen and called, that goodness by which we are relieved and supplied, that holiness by which we are transformed, that glory to which we shall be conformed.

The conclusion of all this is, that our right apprehensions and due conceptions of God must spring from the manifestations of God in Jesus Christ.

* MR. BYFIELD'S Comment on 1 Peter ii. 12, p. 410.