

## OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

### THE MYSTERY AND GLORY OF "GOD'S WAYS."

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"For 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."—Isaiah lv. 8-9.

The whole Bible is but the expansion of one sentence, one utterance of the Eternal, "I am the Lord." Hence the revelation must be incomplete, for a god that could fully reveal himself to his creatures would be no god; and it must also be astonishing and amazing, for a professed record of any part of God's thoughts and ways that did not land in mystery, and tend to wonder would be self-condemned, and proved to be neither true nor divine. It is not only here and there that God's thoughts and ways are superhuman, but throughout; just as a circle is everywhere a circle, and nowhere a square or capable at any point of being reduced to the other figure. How man can at all lay hold of God, or frame any conception of Him with his finite and infinitely inferior mental faculties, this is the wonder and has sometimes been the stumbling-block of philosophy; and it is only removed out of the way by devoutly and thankfully accepting the fact that we do know Him (though darkly), and are so far made in his image that there may be and ought to be reverential contact and communion with Him. This opening up of the mind of God to the mind of man, with the very assurance that, worms of the dust though we be, we are reading the thoughts and exploring the ways of the Creator, is at once the starting point and the goal of all human knowledge, is the treasure of history, the consecration of science and philosophy, the inspiration and essence of religion, natural and revealed; so that whosoever cuts off this intercourse between God and man through the manifestation of his very mind and heart to us, involves all things in darkness and covers us with the shadow of death. But while God is not so above us as to be utterly beyond us, rather through his condescension brought down and linked on to our finite existence, or better still, pleased to link us on to Himself so as to be around and within us, the light of our day and the eye of our seeing, we must be constantly reminded that though brought near we are not brought up to Him, though companions we are not equals, and that while our line touches his, it cannot run parallel with it as it sweeps in its own awful circle from eternity to eternity. The lesson is one of humility but also of consolation; for the depths of God's mind are depths of truth, of wisdom, and of love; and therefore we may be not only cast down, but lifted up as we study together in this lofty chapter the great words: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my way, 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." It is with a profound sense of my inability to do justice to this sublime topic, that I now in humble dependence on divine grace direct to it your attention, and in order to give unity to the subject I shall say nothing of the ways of God in creation and natural providence, but limit myself to redemption, shewing how in various departments the ways of God are superhumanly mysterious and yet divinely glorious.

I observe then, *first*, that God's ways are not our ways nor our thoughts his thoughts in regard to the *occasion of redemption*. Take the entrance of sin into our world, and its continuance in it, which occasioned the need of redemption—can anything be less like what man would have anticipated and conceived? Had man been able to make a creature like himself, he would either have made him without any inward liability to fall, or any possible risk from without, and if he could not or would not exclude both, he would have made no creation at all. This is the way in which an earthly philanthropist would act in such a supposed case, and therefore in his hands sin could never enter at all, and hence the extreme difficulty, we may say impossibility, of accounting for the origin of evil on any theory framed in the present state by the human mind. I have read over many such theories and considered them; but to my mind this one verse is far more true and far more philosophical than all of them put together: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the

Lord." We are sure on the one hand that there is a God, we are equally sure also that there is evil in his universe. Hence there must be something yet to be cleared up, something that without alienating from God his moral attributes, and making Him either the author of sin, or the accomplice in it for any fancied exaltation of his character, would, if known, vindicate his ways and shew them to be not only mysterious but right, as far above ours as the heavens are above the earth. Absolute faith might here come in and wait the disclosure of the mystery, why evil entered and wrought its ravages, and why it remains and works them still. But there are in the Gospel some further glimpses, not in the way of full explanation, but of indirect reference to this awful subject, whereby simple and naked faith in God may be assisted. These do not warrant us to say that evil entered *in order that* God might glorify Himself in overcoming it, or that the fall was a necessary stepping-stone to redemption; for language like this aspires to rise to a giddy height where the finite mind cannot support itself and where it mistakes its own reasonings or fancies for the thoughts of God. But the lessons of Scripture, while leaving the entrance of evil in its awful mystery, assist our faith by shewing first that nothing derogatory to God could be implied in its introduction, and then that God dealing with it as a fact has overruled it for his own glory. The shadow which the entrance of evil casts on God redemption rolls away. It was not for want of power in God that sin entered, for in Christ he defeats it. It was not for want of righteousness, for redemption is one continued death-blow to its dominion. It was not for want of wisdom, for the wisdom that cures is higher than the wisdom that was required to prevent. It was not for want of love, for the love that provided the second Adam to humanity could not have been wanting in the trial of the first. There is thus a reply on Calvary to the vexing thoughts that cluster around Eden, and while the mystery remains it loses its terror. And further, the undoubted outburst of the glory of God on the darkened theatre of sin, though we dare not say that the theatre was darkened *for the purpose*, assists our faith in God. It has been conclusively shewn that evil can be overruled for good, that attributes of God are brought out that might otherwise have slumbered, and emotions called forth in his creatures which without danger and deliverance would have been impossible. Where sin abounded grace has much more abounded. God has become more glorious in his dealings with sin for its expulsion; saved sinners more blessed, angels more instructed and confirmed. The thoughts of God all through have been unlike the thoughts of man, and yet there are gleams from a higher heaven sufficient to relieve the darkness and point to the day when it shall be dispelled; and thus is vindicated the assertion that in this matter his ways are as much above our ways as the heavens are above the earth.

*Secondly*, I observe that God's ways are not our ways nor his thoughts our thoughts in regard to the *purpose of redemption*. Man is not the only being who has fallen, and yet man is the only being who is redeemed. When we inquire as to the reason of this arrangement we find none. It is one of the deep things which belong to God. It is an impressive display of sovereignty, where all that is left for us is to bow and to adore. We might have supposed that the higher race would have been selected, and that God would have glorified his mercy on the still more conspicuous theatre from which they had sought to cast themselves down. And altogether independently of the example of their rejection, we might have anticipated that man's ruin would have been final and hopeless. Man does not forgive where he has been insulted as God was in man's rebellion. Nations do not tolerate blows aimed at their independence and their very existence, and therefore man's revolt might have been expected to draw down swift and remediless destruction, for it was a blow aimed at God's throne and being. That God's thoughts should in such a crisis have been thoughts of peace is the wonder of unfallen beings and of those who are redeemed. They cannot rise in thought to that awful council wherein, though every foreseen trespass demanded vengeance, mercy yet rejoiced against judgment, without exclaiming, "This is not the manner of man, O Lord God." "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out."

I observe, *thirdly*, that God's ways are not our ways nor his thoughts our thoughts in regard to the *plan of*

redemption. How utterly unlike to any means of man's devising are those which God has chosen for the recovery of his lost creation to his favour and image! That God's Son should become incarnate, and die on the cross for the world's redemption, and that God's Spirit should descend into the guilty and polluted hearts of sinners, and work out there a blessed transformation, and that all this should be effected by the free and sovereign grace of God Himself, and laid open to the very chief of sinners as the unconditional gift of God's love, this as universal experience attests is something so far from having entered into the heart of man, that it needs incessant effort to keep it before him even when it has been revealed. The world had four thousand years to learn the lesson. God had made the outline of it known to his Church from the beginning. He had raised up a special people to be the depositary of the revelation; and he had taught them by priests and prophets, by types and signs without number, and yet when redemption came how few received it, how few understood it, so that when the Saviour was actually hanging on the cross and finishing the work given Him to do, it is questionable if so much as one, even of his disciples, comprehended the design or saw the glory of his sacrifice. Man sees so little of the evil of sin, that he cannot understand why an infinite satisfaction is needed. His own heart is so narrow that he cannot embrace the love of God in the gift of an infinite sacrifice. His own benevolence is so contracted that he distrusts the offer of an unlimited pardon, and his moral perceptions are so blunted that he is affronted rather than consoled by the promise of an Almighty Spirit to work out his deliverance from the bondage of evil. Hence when man is left to work his will upon the plan of redemption, he strikes out all its characteristic features, away goes the incarnation, and Christ is no more the co-equal Son of his Father, but the son of Joseph and Mary. Away goes the atonement; and the cross is no longer the means of reconciling God and sinners, but the testimony to a God from the first reconciled. Away goes the offer of pardon through a Saviour's blood; and back comes the voice of the law "Do and live," and as there is now no call for a Divine Spirit to renew and sanctify, the last pillar of redemption falls amidst its other broken columns, and man's own effort and struggle return as the source of his repentance and reformation. What is Socinianism, what is Mahomedanism, what is Judaism, sinking from the level of Isaiah to the Talmud, but so many testimonies that God's ways in redemption are too high for man's fallen reason, and that it is easier to bring down heaven to earth than to lift up earth to heaven? All the opposition to evangelical religion wherewith we are surrounded, and that incessantly repeats "Give us a Christianity that is rational, give us a Christianity that we can believe, give us a Christianity that meets the advancement of the age," what does it amount to but this: "Give us a Christianity without God; give us a Christianity without that element of grandeur, of mystery, of overwhelming superiority to man's thoughts and ways which compels awe and humbles pride." We accept the demand, come from what quarter it may, as an involuntary homage to the superhuman glory of the faith we stand by, as a tribute to the Christianity which still moves in her own orbit, and though surrounded by cloud and darkness, refuses to leave her native heaven. Nor do we lose anything, but gain everything by retaining the Gospel at its original elevation. Pointing to Him who is the Son of the Highest, we can say to the wandering children of men, "Here is God Himself come to seek and to save you!" Appealing to the matchless virtue of his sacrifice we can turn, not to the whole who need no physician, but to the sick and sore-wounded, and testify, "He is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him." Taking our stand upon the completeness of his work and the freeness of his salvation, we can ply the most distrustful and desponding with the overtures of his love; "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord for He will have mercy upon him, and to our God for He will abundantly pardon." And when the pardoned sinner feels his utter weakness, blindness, worthlessness and helplessness, then can we, standing by the fountain of spiritual influence which Christ has opened, invite all to be washed and sanctified as well as justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. The grandeur of these provisions comes home with a consoling and peace-giving as well as purifying power