

God Transcendent

SERMON

A Sermon by the REV. J. GRESHAM MACHEN, D.D., Litt.D.

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"It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in" (Isa. 40:22).

THE fortieth chapter of Isaiah in the King James Version is one of the noblest pieces of prose in the English language. The simplest means are employed in the production of the effect; common, homely English words are used; and some of the grandest sentences are written in words of one syllable. After the lapse of three centuries there is nothing strange or archaic in the language of this chapter; the words are those that form our common English speech in the twentieth century just as in 1611. But if the materials used are simple, the total effect is sublime. There is in this chapter a rhythm that never degenerates into metre, a combination of simplicity with grandeur, which uplifts the soul. It is quite impossible, the wondering reader will say, for prose style ever to attain heights greater than these.

The marvel is that the truly English beauty of the King James Version is attained without any of that freedom—not to say license—in translation which modern translators pronounce necessary. The original in this version is followed with admirable closeness; paraphrase is eschewed; and yet the result is an English masterpiece. The fortieth chapter of Isaiah in the Authorized Version is a masterpiece not because it is a new work—as some of our recent alleged translations of the Bible really are—but because it has reproduced faithfully both letter and spirit of the majestic original. The author of this chapter was a true poet.

That fact may well cause the devout reader to rejoice. The central worth of the Bible does not indeed depend upon literary form; the Bible is the "best seller" not because it is a collection of inspiring literature but because it records facts. It is valuable primarily because it records the facts about God, about the lost condition of man, and about that mighty divine

act—prepared for in all the long dealings of God with His people in Old Testament times—which took place outside the walls of Jerusalem nineteen hundred years ago when the guilt of sin was washed away and a new face, for believers, was put upon the world. If the Bible does not really record facts, then its literary beauty, though it may save it from utter oblivion, will succeed only in preserving a taste for it among a few select souls; and the love and veneration of the race, which it now possesses, will certainly be destroyed. The Christian religion is no mere form of mysticism, but is founded upon a body of facts; the facts are recorded in the Bible; and if the supposed facts were not facts at all, then Christianity and the Bible would certainly sink into a common ruin.

Nevertheless, though the primary importance of the Bible is found in its recording of facts, the way in which the facts are recorded is by no means a matter of indifference. A bald, dry record of the history of redemption might possibly have convinced the mind—though even that, because of subtle moral factors involved, may be doubtful—but it would at any rate never have touched the heart. As it is, God has been very good; He has spoken to us in gracious fashion; He has condescended to persuade where He might have spoken only in a tone of cold command. He has condescended to win our hearts by the variety and beauty of His Book. In the Bible there is that which meets every need of man, which answers to every mood, which speaks to every heart. No one who comes to this feast need go empty away; and there are times in every life when even the least considered of the things that the Bible contains are just what is needed by the soul. So there is a place in the nurture of the Christian life, among other things, for the majestic poetry of Isaiah.

The fortieth chapter of Isaiah was written by a prophet who revealed the truth; but the prophet was also a poet. And this poet—unlike some poets whose worth lies altogether in the

music of the form and not at all in the matter—this poet had a great theme. The theme is the living God. The prophet celebrates especially the awful transcendence of God, the awful separateness between God and the world. The God of Isaiah is not the rather pathetic finite god of Mr. H. G. Wells—not a god who works merely in and with striving humanity—but the sovereign king. "It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers." "Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding?" And this sovereign Person is Lord not only of mankind but also of all nature. He is very different from what modern men are accustomed to call, by a perversion of a great truth, the "immanent" God. He pervades all, but He also transcends all, and He has never abandoned His freedom in the presence of the things that He has made. "To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth." This is the very pinnacle of natural religion; the heavens here indeed declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth His handiwork. The living God, according to Isaiah, is revealed through the things that He has made.

Natural religion—the revelation of God through nature—is by no means dead. Recently I listened to an interesting lecture by a famous man of science. The lecturer traced the progress of scientific investigation and pointed out, if I remember aright, its material benefits. But then he paused to speak of another product of the scientific spirit; the true scientist, he said, is brought face to face at last with the ultimate mystery and at

that point he becomes a religious man. There is endless diversity in the world; but the progress of investigation has revealed the electron; and the electrons, said he, are all alike—they are machine-made. And their marvelous likeness reveals the existence of a mystery into which man cannot penetrate; in truly religious awe the man of science stands at length before a curtain that is never lifted, a mystery that rebukes all pride.

Many questions, naturally, remained as I listened in my utterly ignorant mind. I might have asked, had I been so bold, how the lecturer knew that the electrons are all alike, and if they are all alike how from them has come the endless diversity of the world. But I was sure at least that the conclusion was right. There is an ultimate mystery before which the knowledge of the wisest men is dumb. The presence of that mystery is revealed to different men in different ways. Certainly it is not obscured one whit by modern achievements, for the widening of the circle of human knowledge only increases the periphery of dreadful contact with the unknown. And even within the little circle of knowledge, mystery touches us at a thousand points. There is an aspect ever of the simplest things that is just as mysterious as those problems of electrons or quanta with which contemporary science is bold enough to deal. The modern scientist is humble and aghast in the presence of the electrons, and that is well. But Isaiah had really just as much scientific right to be humble as he contemplated in his way the starry spheres. There is nothing in modern science that has invalidated but everything that has confirmed his words: "Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number; he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth." Now as then the man who really thinks will stand in awe before God. We can never get away from natural religion. It is confirmed by modern science; it is confirmed and enriched by the Bible; and it is confirmed by

the example of our Lord.

But is that all? The mighty prophet who wrote the words that we have read did not think that it was all. He did not content himself with standing in awe before God; but he claimed this mighty God as his. He added to the realm of nature the realm of grace. "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?" There is the God of mystery before whom men might well stand forever in silent fear. But that mighty ruler of the world to the prophet was also the covenant God of Israel; He was a God who had loved, His people and whom His people could love. Hear what is said of this terrible God (can it be the same?): "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." This goes far beyond all natural religion; in all the realm of nature there is little hint of this; this is revelation and revelation alone.

And can we do without it? Can we really be content with the awful mystery that nature presupposes if it does not reveal? Natural religion is indeed not to be despised. Well may lesser men emulate the example of the scientist who stands in humble awe before the dreadful curtain that veils the being of God. The awe of the true man of science is an emotion not to be despised. But can we bear to stand even before that curtain? Are we worthy even to contemplate afar that mystery that explains the world? We have offended even against nature's laws; we are unclean. Not for us the uplifting emotion of awe that is man's highest glory! We are unworthy to lift our eyes unto God; we can only grovel in the filthy sty which our baseness is making of the world.

But as we shrink in guilty fear from these high things, God has put forth His hand to draw us near. He has not concealed from us the uncleanness of our sin; He has confirmed in letters

of flame the condemnation of our hearts.

But He has conquered sin and guilt by an act of love. He has come in the person of the Son and borne our guilt; God's love has cast out fear. Isaiah had not seen the Saviour with the bodily eye; but being true prophet he saw Him with the eye of faith. There is in the Bible a grand continuity in the economy of grace. God's gracious dealings with His people of old were an anticipation of the coming of the Lord. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people; saith your God"—these words with which our chapter begins are fulfilled and completed in Christ.

So the dreadful curtain has been lifted. It has been lifted by a revelation which is the explanation of an act. Only a look has been granted beyond, but the look is sufficient to give life. And what is revealed in those mysterious depths beyond the veil? Something that nature could never tell. The heart of the Eternal, it is found, is most wonderfully kind. "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." The gracious revelation can never destroy our sense of mystery in the presence of God; the Lord who is our shepherd is also the dreadful ruler of all nature whose counsel none can tell. But the curtain has been drawn gently aside. But to whom has a look been granted beyond? Here is the wonder of our religion; here is the strange condescension of God. Not only to the wise and the mighty has a look been granted, not only as a reward for those who by the greatness of their knowledge and their diligence in research can lift themselves above details to philosophic contemplation of the mystery of the whole, but to plain people whom wise men despise. It is not man's way but God's way. "I thank thee, O Father," the Saviour said, "Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight."



"One cannot address the world in the name of Jesus by preaching what the world already knows by itself or by the Readers' Digest."—LÖWITZ