

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE IDOLATRY OF CIVILIZED MEN.¹

“While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.”—2 Cor. iv. 18.

THIS contrast, in what we have to do with here, fills, so to speak, the atmosphere of Ascension Day.. All day long the voice pursues us, “Lift up your hearts”; “He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all heavens,” ascended “that He might fill all things”; “Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth”; “Your life is hid with Christ in God”; “The things that are seen are for the time, the things that are not seen are eternal.”

This great contrast is part of the necessary condition of our human being, if there is any religious truth in the world. The things that are seen, that are now, are indeed of the deepest interest, most precious and most eventful, of far reaching, incalculable influence. Duty, and faith, and love, and goodness, and justice, and mercy have to do with the things that are now, the things that are seen: who can measure their greatness, their value? But when all *that* has been said, realized most amply, felt most keenly, still it remains true that man was made for a life, for a sphere, even greater than the greatest we can know here; that “all that is seen is but for a time; that the things that are not seen are eternal.”

And Christ our Master went up on high out of our sight to draw our hearts after Him, to make us feel that, in spite of all veils and shadows now, in spite of all interests and all duties now, the end and goal for which we live and think and will is beyond all that we can ever know here—to make us *feel* it, to make us *imagine* it. *Know* indeed we do, and we bless His name for what He has shown us:

¹ Delivered in St. Paul's Cathedral on Ascension Day, May 19th, 1887.

but we know, we *can* know, only in part ; we know as those who are encompassed by inscrutable, unfathomable nature, and between whom and the unseen stands the curtain of death—death, silent, final, without answer. We know as those who have known the mystery of the Incarnation, and have seen the dawn of Easter, and who “look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come” : and yet that is little to what we *shall* know when “we know even as we are known.” But this at least is part of our knowledge, that what we are here is but a little fragment of what we were made for ; and that Christ is gone up to the throne of God to warrant us in going up there too, in heart and mind continually, in hope, in rejoicing, in wonder, in adoration ; in the persuasion that though He is *there*, He is yet also here, always with us, even to the end of the world.

And to Him we owe our supreme loyalty and duty and devotion and boundless trust as to our Lord and our God. The love of Him, the union in affection and will with Him—that is what we profess, that, when it is in reality and truth, is Christian religion. The world is full of other religions : I do not mean here of other professions and forms of religion, the varieties of belief and worship and religious custom which divide the world, Christian and non-Christian. I mean religion in the sense of what a man’s heart owns to as most mighty and most irresistible in all things round him ; what he bows down to and sincerely worships in the secret sanctuary of desire and will ; what he holds highest and most precious, most excellent and most Divine in what he knows and thinks of, most worthy his homage, his labour, his interest, the spending his life for. That is truly a man’s religion the object of which fills and holds captive his soul and heart and mind, in which he trusts above all things, which imposes on him reverence and awe, which above all things he longs for and hopes for. It is that

which possesses and fascinates all that is most real in the man's self, that which in his real self he is devoted to, of all things within his range and all the things among which he may choose. "Covetousness," says the apostle, "which is idolatry,"—worship of an idol, which stands between the soul and God, making itself the soul's real god, appropriating all faculties and all movements of thought and will which belong to God. Such religions there are among us, active, energetic, consistent religions, which place something before the soul which is short of our Lord and God, and which in their sincerity and reality put to shame the dullness of Christian faith, and the slackness of Christian devotion. Their objects are things in the world: some of them bad and hateful; some of them the gifts, the creations of God Himself, but which are made to take His place, and are thought of and prized and extolled as if He was not. We sometimes wonder what to us instructed, reasonable Christians, who cannot conceive ourselves, even in imagination, bowing down to a graven image, what can be any longer the meaning and lesson of the Second Commandment, "Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them." What is the use of repeating it? Can we even imagine the temptation to do so? But are there no other things, the idols of refined and civilized men, no other "likenesses" than were known in old time, "of things that are in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth," to which worship is done, subtle, profound, and absorbing,—idols which occupy the place of God, or perhaps profess to represent Him,—idols which meet us at every turn, and which need and justify the reiterated command, "Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them."

For instance, God is all-powerful, almighty, and we worship Him who is the Maker and Ruler of all things. But the world, as we know it and have to do with it, is

full of forces and necessities, whose origin and law is lost in darkness, which we cannot trace beyond a little way back, which seem self-originated and self-acting.¹ They

¹ Am Meer, am wüsten, nächtlichen
Meer

Steht ein Jungling-Mann,
Die Brust voll Wehmuth, das Haupt
voll Zweifel,
Und mit düstern Lippen fragt er die
Wogen.

O lös't mir das Rathsel des Lebens,
Das qualvoll uralte Rathsel. . . .

Sagt mir, was bedeutet der Mensch?
Woher ist er kommen? Wo geht er
hin?
Wer wohnt dort oben auf goldenen
Sternen?

Es murmeln die Wogen ihr ewiges
Gemurmel,
Es wehet der Wind, es fliehen die
Wolken,
Es blinken die Sterne, gleichgültig und
kalt,
Und ein Narr wartet auf Antwort.

Heine: *Die Nord-see.*

How summer bright are yonder skies,
And earth as fair in hue;
And yet what sign of aught that lies
Behind the green and blue?

For man to-day is Fancy's fool,
As man hath ever been;
The nameless Power, or Powers, that
rule
Were never heard or seen.

The years that made the stripling wise,
Undo their work again;
And leave him, blind of heart and eyes,
The last and least of men.

But vain the tears for darkened years,
As laughter over wine,

And vain the laughter as the tears,
O brother, mine or thine.

For all that laugh, and all that weep,
And all that breathe are one
Slight ripple on the boundless deep
That moves, and all is gone.

"The Song," in Tennyson's
Ancient Sage.

Pur tu, solinga, eterna peregrina,
Che si pensosa sei, Tu forse intendi,
Questo viver terreno:
Il patir nostro, il sospirar, che sia;
Che sia questo morir, questo supremo
Scolorar del sembiante,
E perir dalla terra, e venir meno
Ad ogni usata, amante compagnia.
E tu certo comprendi
Il perchè delle cose, e vedi il frutto,
Del mattin, della sera,
Del tacito, infinito andar del tempo.

A che tante facelle?
Che fa l'aria infinita e quel profondo
Infinito seren? che vuol dir questo
Solitudine immensa? ed io che sono.

Leopardi, *Canto d' un pastore
dell' Asia alla Luna.*

"Ma da natura
Altro negli atti suoi
Che nostro male onostro ben si cura."

"Misterio eterno
Dell'esser nostro! oggi d'eccelsi, im-
mensi
Pensieri e sensi inenarrabil fonte,
Beltà grandeggia, e pare,
Quale splendor vibrato
Da natura immortal su queste arene,
Di sovrumani fati,
Di fortunati regni e d' aurei mondi
Segno e sicura speme

are awful, tremendous, irresistible, irreversible. They seem blind and aimless. We are powerless in their grasp if we oppose them; if we can use and direct them, it is still as blind and deaf and unchangeable and senseless forces. They bind us fast in their chain; they cut across the field of human will and feeling and purpose, reckless of the havoc they make, of the hopes they disappoint. In the onward roll and tide of what seems a boundless ocean, comprehending all things, from the hypothetic atom or the microscopic cell and germ to the farthest sun, the moral world, as we know it, seems swamped and lost. They care neither for good nor bad. They bind us with bonds which oppress and crush us.¹ This tremendous side of nature is

Dare al mortale stato.	E dalle mente insieme
Diman, per lieve forza,	Quel che da lui movea
Sozzo a vedere, abominoso, abbieto,	Ammirabil concetto, si dilegea."
Divien quel che fu dianzi	Leopardi, <i>Canti</i> (Firenze,
Quasi angelico aspetto,	1876, pp. 155, 158).

¹ TO NATURE

(*In her ascribed character of unmeaning and all-performing force*).

O Nature! thou whom I have thought to love,
 Seeing in thee the reflex of God's face,
 A loathed abstraction would usurp thy place,—
 While Him they not dethrone, they but disprove.
 Weird Nature! can it be that joy is fled,
 And bald unmeaning lurks beneath thy smile,
 That beauty haunts the dust but to beguile,
 And that with Order, Love and Hope are dead?

Pitiless Force, all-moving, all-unmoved,
 Dread mother of unfathered worlds, assuage
 Thy wrath on us,—be this wild life reproved,
 And trampled into nothing in thy rage!

Vain prayer, although the last of human kind—
 Force is not wrath, but only deaf and blind.

Sonnets by Emily Pfeiffer (p. 29).

On which the late Mr. Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln, wrote to the authoress (*ib.*, p. iii.): "I think the most striking and original of your sonnets are those which are inspired by the evolutionary idea—an idea or form of universal apprehension, which, like a boa, has enfolded all mind in this generation in its inexorable coil. Try as we may, we cannot extricate our thought from

an idea which enlarging knowledge has brought home to our generation with a sharpness and definiteness never recognised before. It fills and occupies minds, till even the consciousness of will becomes overshadowed and cast into the background, a phenomenon, or a doubt. And with this dread image before men's minds there grows up a terrible religion of despair, a religion which men accept and believe in and assert. Nature in its garb of fate and necessity has shut out God; and men with hearts and consciences and affections bow their heads before it, and resign themselves, sometimes with a light heart, sometimes with piercing agonies which they cannot suppress, to a world in which they can see nothing but pitiless *fact*.

Again, it may be said that there is a religion of literature. Literature, the record and image of the thoughts, impressions, and feelings of men, in the most diversified conditions and in the most diversified expression, is one of the gifts which have been made to our time: a gift, a real and inestimable gift it is; a strange and new one, distributing without stint to the many what used to be the prerogative and treasure of the few; opening more and more the inexhaustible wonders of the intellect and the character of man;

this serpent's fold. Its pressure upon the soul forces our spirit to cry out with a Laocoon shriek; but though the inspiration of despair, it is inspiration, and poetry is its natural vent. You seem to give it vent with great power. Perhaps I could have wished for a more profound agony in the feeling at times, But the calm contemplation of our fate as helpless victims is perhaps the most just mental attitude. I select especially the three first sonnets to 'Nature,' which seem to me noble and powerful expressions of the sentiment. . . . The last line in the second sonnet * is wonderful, and still haunts my memory—

'And darkly blundered on man's suffering soul.' "

- * "Thou art not calm, but restless as the ocean,
 Filling with aimless toil the endless years—
 Stumbling on thought, and throwing off the spheres,
 Churning the universe into mindless motion.
 Dull fount of joy, unhallowed source of tears,
 Cold motor of our fervid faith and song,
 Dead, but engendering life, love, pangs, and fears,
 Thou crownedst thy wild work with foulest wrong,
 When first thou lightedst on a seeming goal,
 And darkly blundered on man's suffering soul."

placing within increasing range access to all that is loftiest and wisest, most perfect and noblest in what men now and before us have thought and said ; leaving us utterly without excuse if, with the very highest placed within our reach, we choose the refuse and the vile. But it is a dazzling gift, a gift which makes men think that there can be nothing to match it, nothing beyond it. To know what great minds have spoken ; to feel elevated by being in their presence and in sympathy with them ; to put our footsteps into their tracks of thought ; to see true and deep things said in the most perfect and most living words ; to feel the mind awakening, expanding, glowing, gathering light and enthusiasm and strength from contact with the power and insight of minds greater than itself ; to understand the opening of the eyes and the unlocking of the heart and its dim secrets as new ideas rise above the horizon and open before them ; and still more, not merely to receive, but to *create*, not merely to be a listener and disciple, but to be conscious of being a master and a teacher ;—this carries with it a charm which, as we know, has often been able to make other pursuits seem tame and other glories pale. It seems so pure and noble ; it seems so full of good ; it seems so to exalt and refine ; and under its influence nothing else seems equally capable of exalting and refining, nothing else seems to bring with it good, so to inspire and fortify, so to calm and sober and enlighten. Why should men look beyond it ? Where would they be likely to find deeper and more abundant and more various truth ? Where would they find truth expressed in more adequate, in less limited or less repellent forms ? Where will they learn to think in more dignified or consoling fashion of even the hard portions of our lot, pain and disease and death ? Is not this enough for the heart and soul of man, of man at least, cultivated, civilized, instructed, enlightened ? Is it not enough for his meditations, his aspirations, his secret acts of devout

homage, and devout uplifting of the spirit? Will not the religion of great books and great thinkers, the religion of genius and poetic truth, be a sufficient religion?

Once more. There is a mysterious power in the world, a mysterious endowment given to man, one of the most wonderful and lofty of all his prerogatives—the sense of beauty. The world, we know, is full of things which, when they address themselves to eye or ear, or, without the intervention of eye or ear, to the inward mind and soul, produce on us the effect which we speak of as *beautiful*. Endlessly various, in form and light and colour, in feature and expression, in voice and tone and ordered sound, in word and suggestion, and in all that is called into invisible existence by the powers of feeling and imagination and thought, it comes before the human soul as one of the chief sources of its brightness and joy, one of the chief things which exalt and gladden life, the spring within us which never dries up of admiration, delight, rapture. Where does it come from, this strange, irresistible sense of what is beautiful; so different according to our measure with all of us, yet with all of us confessed to be so certain and so clear,—this perception, which seems to be the crown and glory of the gifts which set man at the head of all that lives: where does it come from? and what is it? Who can define or analyse it, in its infinite shapes, which agree in nothing else but that we call them all—sunrise and sunset, storm and peace, mountain and river, picture, and sculpture, and music, and building, and poem, visible features and invisible character,—all we agree to call *beautiful*? Is it anything *real*, this thing that we call beauty? or is it a mere spell cast over us, a glamour, a delusion of eye and brain, imposing on us a show without substance? It is something which appeals to us, in what is highest and purest and noblest in us; again, may be, it is something which captivates and fascinates what is meanest and lowest in our nature: yet still

we speak of it as *beauty*. Is it indeed surprising that a faculty and endowment so subtle, so charged with varied and mighty power, so full of ministry to the joy and happiness of life, should so fill human souls with its treasures and wealth as to shut out all other interests, and become to them all in all, the standard by which everything is measured, the supreme longing and rule of their lives? Is it surprising that art should almost become a religion—a worship and an enthusiasm in which the wondrous shadows of God's glory take the place of God Himself, in His holiness, His righteousness, His awful love? It is not surprising; but alas for us, if we yield to the temptation! The love of beauty, in work, and speech, and person, was the master-passion of the reviving intelligence of Italy: it attracted, it dominated all who wrote, all who sang, all who painted and moulded form. Out of it arose, austere and magnificent indeed, yet alive with all instincts of beauty, the *Divina Commedia*, the mighty thought of Lionardo and Michelangelo, the pathetic devotion and deep peace of the Lombard, Tuscan, Umbrian schools; but to whole generations of that wonderful people—from the fresh sonnet-writers and story-tellers of the closing middle age, Guido Cavalcanti and Boccaccio, to the completed refinement of the days of the great Venetian masters and Ariosto—the worship of the beautiful, as the noblest, worthiest devotion, stood in the place of truth, of morality, of goodness, of Christian life. And this idolatry of beauty brought its own punishment, the degeneracy and deep degradation both of art and character.

Yes; the world in which we now pass our days is full of great powers. Nature is great in its bounty, in its sternness, in its unbroken uniformity; literature, art, are great in what they have created for us; beauty is great in its infinite expressions: but these are not the powers for man—man, the responsible, man, the sinner and the penitent,

who may be the saint—to fall down and worship. They are to pass with the world in which we have known them, the world of which they are part; but man *remains*, remains what he is in soul and character and affections. *They* at least feel this who are drawing near to the unseen and unknown *beyond*; they to whom, it may be, these great gifts of God, the spell and wonder of art and of literature, the glory and sweet tenderness of nature, have been the brightness and joy of days that are now fast ending—*they* feel that there is *yet* an utter want of what these things cannot give: that soul and heart want something yet deeper, something more lovely, something more Divine, that which will realize man's ideals, that which will complete and fulfil his incompleteness and his helplessness—yes; the real likeness in thought and will and character to the goodness of Jesus Christ. “My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.” Man has that *within* him which tells him in presage and parable of greater and more awful things than anything he can admire and delight in yet: he has that *without* him which certifies him that his hopes and aspirations are justified; that when these precious things of the present must pass with the world to which they belong there is laid up for him what “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, what God hath prepared for them that love Him,”—sinlessness, strength, peace, the vision of God. Cannot we indeed, believers though we are, sympathise with the doubting poet, who realizing his thought, and comparing what is now with such hopes, was overwhelmed by it: “*Are not these things too good to be true?*”¹ Yes, indeed, if any one else had told us except

¹ Robert Burns. “One thing frightens me much—that we are to live for ever seems too good news to be true” (Currie's *Life of Burns*, vol. ii. p. 306). Compare Browning's *Easter Eve*:

“Remembering any moment who
Besides creating thee unto

Him "who loved us and gave Himself for us," "who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man," "who died, and rose, and revived, that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living." "Too good to be true" for mere guesses and hopes; not too good to be true for those for whom God withheld not His only Son; not too good to be true, in all its unimaginable wonder, if the Conqueror of death has been here "to seek and to save that which was lost." "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not, with Him, freely give us all things?"

R. W. CHURCH.

*THE REVISED VERSION OF THE OLD
TESTAMENT.*

THE BOOK OF PSALMS.—II.

MUCH has been said both for and against the marginal renderings of the Revised Version. Those who are familiar with the "poetical books" will beyond doubt agree that the margins are almost always justifiable, and often at least equal in value to the textual renderings. Would that they were more in number! There is a prismatic radiance in Hebrew poetry, and it is often next to impossible to determine with certitude between different forms of a single

These ends, and these for thee, was said
To undergo death in thy stead
In flesh like thine: so ran the tale.
What doubt in thee could countervail
Belief in it? Upon the ground
'That in the story had been found
'Too much love! How could God love so?'