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The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

THE TABERNACLE OF GOD

Part 6

“This shall be the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation, about the most holy things: And when the camp setteth forward, Aaron shall come, and his sons, and they shall take down the covering vail, and cover the ark of testimony with it: And shall put thereon the covering of badgers’ skins, and shall spread over it a cloth wholly of blue, and shall put in the staves thereof...” (Numbers 4:4-6)

“And they departed from the mount of the Lord three days’ journey: and the ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them in the three days’ journey, to search out a resting place for them. And the cloud of the Lord was upon them by day, when they went out of the camp. And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee. And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel.” (Numbers 10:33-36)

Having described the portability of the Ark, and the rings and staves by which its transportation was effected, Scripture calls attention to the coverings which belonged to it. For when the Ark was to be moved from place to place, it was protected and covered with drapings which God Himself had specified.

The first article to be laid over the Ark was the **Covering Veil** – the most precious of all the curtains within the Tabernacle. This particular item will be addressed separately in a future article; but as it comes within the present terms of reference, let it be said that this veil typifies and prefigures the human body of Christ. The Hebrew epistle speaks of: *“a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh”* (Hebrews 10:20). The veil corresponds to

“His flesh”. When the Ark was conveyed through the desert in the Israelites’ wilderness wanderings it was enshrouded in the veil. As such it was typical of Christ, who, though the Son of God, yet when in this world hid His Divine glory from men in His human form. Christ Jesus, *“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men...”* (Philippians 2:6-7); or, covered. As Wesley describes it:

“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the Incarnate Deity.”

And in another hymn:

“Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made Man.
He laid His glory by,
He wrapped Him in our clay;
Unmarked by human eye,
The latent Godhead lay;”

The second covering described in Numbers 4:6 was *“badgers’ skins”*. The skins of some animals are very attractive. One might think of the skin of a tiger, a leopard or a bear, which have historically been used for decorative purposes and are considered exclusive and luxuriant. A badger’s skin by contrast is a thing most ordinary and commonplace. Elsewhere in Scripture it is spoken of as a material suitable for making footwear (cf Ezekiel 16:10), reserved for the humblest of applications. It thus signifies lowliness and humility. Within the context of the coverings of the Ark, that coffer which so fitly represents Christ as He dwelt in the wilderness of this world, the suitability of these attributes is clear. It is recorded of Him: *“He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is*

despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:2-3). His own testimony was *“I am meek and lowly in heart”* (Matthew 11:29), and He was in every sense *“clothed with humility”* (1 Peter 5:5). In this sense, the badgers’ skins are a fitting type.

This is not all, however; for the third covering which enveloped and concealed the others, was: *“a cloth wholly of blue”* (Numbers 4:6). As the Ark was borne through the desert, the predominant appearance displayed to any who saw it was this blue-coloured fabric. The exact significance of this covering is less evident. Though it is a fact that in the limited palette of colours afforded by the waterless wilderness setting, ‘blue’ would have been uniquely associated with the sky, which stretched above the journeying people: the colour of the heavens.

Christ was the God-Man; God manifest in flesh. Although seen by men only in a humble servant’s form, yet did He come to speak of celestial things, and reveal the eternal counsels of Heaven. Indeed, in every word and action, He set forth God. The Lord Jesus said: *“He that sent me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I have heard of Him”* (John 8:26); *“His commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto Me, so I speak”* (John 12:50); *“the works which the Father hath given Me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father hath sent Me”* (John 5:36); *“He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father”* (John 14:9). All His humanity and humility was enwrapped in the ethereal blue of Deity.

The Ark itself is referenced many times in the Word of God, with a diversity of names and terminology being used. Concerning the Saviour, the prophet said that: *“His name shall be called Wonderful”* (Isaiah 9:6). In a similar way, the numerous titles given to the Ark foreshadow the wonder of Christ’s person. There are a total of seven different designations afforded to it in the Bible, and all are wonderful in their variety, dignity and glory.

1. The Ark of the Testimony

This first is found in Exodus 25:22, and the name is given because there were deposited in the Ark the two stones upon which the Law was inscribed: “*And He gave unto Moses, when He had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God*” (Exodus 31:18). The Ark which safeguarded the Law of God also **testified** to the holiness of God (as revealed in the Decalogue); and to His grace (in that the Law was taken ‘out of the way’, and held within it). Likewise Christ, being made under the Law (cf Galatians 4:4) kept it perfectly, on behalf and in the stead of all His people. He fulfilled the Law entirely: performing its every precept, and enduring its every penalty, that grace might be extended to sinners. He is the true Ark who covers every claim of the Law; He is the ever-living testimony to grace and truth.

2. The Ark of the Covenant

“*The ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them in the... journey, to search out a resting place for them*” (Numbers 10:33). This title opens up a subject that is little understood in these days. In the Old Testament, God entered into a covenantal agreement with the people of Israel, that His presence would be with them. The Ark was both their assurance of that promise, and also the channel by which the promise was enjoyed – where the Ark was, there God was present. In a fuller, deeper way, Christ is the Head of the Covenant of Grace. He came to be the Surety and Mediator of that Covenant for all His people (that is – all those whom God has given Him; whose names were enrolled in the Book of Life from before the foundation of the world). His life, work and death are the great evidences for the eternal plan of Redemption, whereby God will be united to His people still.

“*By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament [or, covenant]” (Hebrews 7:22); “But now hath He obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also He is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established*

upon better promises” (Hebrews 8:6). This New Covenant is vastly superior to the former contract which God had with national Israel. Theirs was only temporary, subject to their obedience and forfeited upon failure. By contrast, the New is described as an **everlasting** covenant (cf Hebrews 13:20), which is “*ordered in all things, and sure*” (2 Samuel 23:5). It owes its certainty and perpetuity to Christ. The glorious truth is that **He** entered into Covenant with the Father in His peoples’ stead; agreeing to discharge all obligations and responsibilities which fell upon them; fully clearing them from all guilt at the bar of Divine Justice. He is thus become both the assurance of far better promises – and the channel by which they are enjoyed.

3. The Ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the Earth

“Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into Jordan... And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of Jordan, that the waters of Jordan shall be cut off from the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand upon an heap” (Joshua 3:11, 13). This title was coined when Israel finally came to the banks of Jordan, and stood on the threshold of the unconquered promised land – a territory filled with enemies which they had to face. At this juncture, a word of strong consolation and encouragement is given. The vessel which went before them was the ‘Ark of the Lord of all the Earth’.

The Lord’s People continue to face numerous foes. The world around is no friend to the child of God (cf John 15:18). The flesh within is constantly warring against the Spirit (cf Galatians 5:17). The Devil is ever standing in the way, either opposing as a roaring lion (cf 1 Peter 5:8), or deceiving with the appearance of an angel of light (cf 2 Corinthians 11:14). Unseen principalities and powers are set upon the saints’ downfall (cf Ephesians 6:12); and at the end of the journey of life stands the last great enemy, death. But there is One who is Lord

over all these earthly things – and He is leading the way. He is gone on before; He the omnipotent ‘Lord of all the Earth’ is with us; immediately in front clearing the path so His people may proceed, causing the most impossible, impassable of flood waters to stand back. *“The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge”* (Psalm 46:7).

4. The Ark of God

“Ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was...” (1 Samuel 3:3). This term is particularly striking, because this is the only article of the tabernacle furniture with which God identified Himself in this personal way. How appropriate that He should do so with this vessel in so definite a manner. Christ, who is the anti-type of the Ark, is absolute Deity, and ‘of God’ in every sense. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God”* (John 1:1-2); and Christ is with His people, uniting them to God through Himself.

5. The Ark of the Lord God

“And unto Abiathar the priest said the king, Get thee to Anathoth, unto thine own fields; for thou art worthy of death: but I will not at this time put thee to death, because thou barest the ark of the Lord God before David my father, and because thou hast been afflicted in all wherein my father was afflicted” (1 Kings 2:26). If read superficially, this next title might appear essentially the same as the foregoing one; but the underlying Hebrew words are different. Here, the name ascribed to God is ‘Adonai Jehovah’. Within Scripture the term ‘Adonai’ refers to authority and headship, and to God’s purposes of blessing. ‘Jehovah’ is frequently used of God in connection with His covenants.

The account in which this title arises is interesting and informative. The First Book of Kings opens with the account of a conspiracy perpetrated by Adonijah, Joab and Abiathar to prevent Solomon from acceding to the throne of his father, David. The second chapter tells

how, despite nearly succeeding, their plots were thwarted and the conspirators variously slain and exiled. However great the opposition, while God reigns, and has His covenant to fulfil, ‘Adonai Jehovah’ will prevail, and His purposes be accomplished. From such examples, let the Christian take encouragement. Though it be a dark and evil generation; a day of small things, and great opposition; nevertheless, the purposes of God continue unperturbed.

“God’s word, for all their craft and force,
One moment will not linger,
But, ‘spite of hell, shall have its course;
‘Tis written by His finger.” (Luther)

In Christ, the Ark of the Lord God – ‘Adonai Jehovah’ – is with us.

6. The Holy Ark

“[Josiah] *said unto the Levites that taught all Israel, which were holy unto the Lord, Put the holy ark in the house which Solomon the son of David king of Israel did build; it shall not be a burden upon your shoulders: serve now the Lord your God, and His people Israel*” (2 Chronicles 35:3). These were the days of King Josiah. Preceding his reign there had been a long period of terrible declension and apostasy. The temple was in disrepair and the Ark had long been out of its place; but under this godly man, reformation took place. The temple was restored, the Law reinstated, the Passover celebrated, the Word of God publicly read to the people and the Ark returned to its rightful place. During such wonderful days of spiritual awakening is the sacred vessel termed ‘the Holy Ark’.

In this current age, when equal degeneration and departure are observed, the same fundamental principle needs to be recovered, namely: a realisation of the **holiness of God**. It is ever the foundation of reformation and spiritual redress. Never was it more lacking, and consequently, so needed, than it is at this present time.

7. The Ark of Thy Strength

“*Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest; Thou, and the ark of Thy strength*” (Psalm 132:8). What a lovely title this is. It portrays Christ as the strength of God, as the all-powerful one, and is a reminder of God’s word elsewhere in the Psalms: “*I have laid help upon one that is mighty*” (Psalm 89:19). When God appointed His only begotten Son to accomplish the salvation of His people, He assigned for their help one who was of power to save ‘to the uttermost’. The prophet confidently asserted: “*He shall not fail*” (Isaiah 42:4), and again: “*He shall save His people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). His determination is foretold: “*I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting... therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed*” (Isaiah 50:5-7). He would die, the just for the unjust; He would bring each one to God, and lose none. In due time He went into Death and Hell, faced the Great Adversary, and destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the Devil, and delivered them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (cf Hebrews 2:14-15).

Blessed be His name, there is no deficiency in the Redeemer: He is invincible. He has vanquished all His foes, and one day ‘ere long all things will be put under His feet (cf 1 Corinthians 15:25). Rightly is He styled ‘Christ, the power of God’ (cf 1 Corinthians 1:24). He is the victorious Lamb of God, seated in the midst of the throne, supreme in the Universe. The titles which He is prophetically afforded include these: “*His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, **The Mighty God**, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace*” (Isaiah 9:6). All power is given unto Him in heaven and in earth (cf Matthew 28:18); He is the ‘Ark of God’s Strength’ in very truth. Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

W. H. Molland
(transcribed by R. J. Steward)

DIVINE SECRETS

“It is the glory of God to conceal a thing” (Proverbs 25:2)

There are certain things in the universe which are hidden from man, [just as] the vessels of the sanctuary were concealed from the Levites. To the priests themselves the Holy of Holies was a secret place, into which they dare not enter. And even the High Priest might enter therein only once a year, and that after careful and significant preparation. In these arrangements we have an illustration of the truth that there are certain realms in the universe which are accessible only to God, and certain things which are concealed from man. This is the case:

1. In the material universe. Nature has secrets, the existence of which is not even conjectured by her most enthusiastic students, and mysterious providences into which neither the most daring nor the most reverent enquirer can enter.

2. In the arrangements of Providence. In the dealings of God with nations and with the race as a whole, there are inscrutable mysteries to us. In His dealings with us as families and as individuals, there are things the wisdom and love and righteousness of which we cannot discover – things which perplex, and sometimes confound and distress us. *“Clouds and darkness are round about Him”* (Psalm 97:2); *“Thy way is in the sea, and Thy path in the great waters, and Thy footsteps are not known”* (Psalm 77:19); *“how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!”* (Romans 11:33).

3. In the economy of Redemption. There are deepest, closest secrets here. We ask question after question, to which, at present, we receive no reply. *“Great is the mystery of godliness”* (1 Timothy 3:16); *“Which things the angels desire to look into”* (1 Peter 1:12).

4. In the character and content of the future. *“Thou knowest not what a day may bring forth”* (Proverbs 27:1); *“Ye know not what shall be on the morrow”* (James 4:14).

Let us notice concerning these secrets that, **first: they are inevitable.** *“We are but of yesterday and know nothing, because our days upon earth are as a shadow”* (Job 8:9). It is utterly unreasonable to suppose that we, with our limited faculties and brief existence, should comprehend the works and ways, the thoughts and utterances of the Infinite and Eternal. *“Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?”* (Job 11:7).

Second: they are merciful. The intense light of a fuller and clearer revelation might, were it given, smite us with spiritual blindness. As cloud and shadow and darkness in nature are sometimes good for us, so the Divine reserve is good for us spiritually. What man is there of us who could bear the revelation of the scenes and events that await him and his dear friends in the future?

Third: they are educational. Mysteries provoke enquiry; and reverent enquiry conduces to intellectual and spiritual growth. Wonderful are the discoveries of wisdom, and power, and righteousness, and love which God will make to His children in the endless hereafter. Let us be thankful for the Divine concealment, *“We do amiss”*, [says one commentator], *“to stand before these sublime mysteries as we would stand before a vizored army of bloodthirsty foes. We should stand before them as before the veiled images of Love. They are Wisdom in disguise. They are Affection in shadow. They are Royalty in its royalest pomp”*.

Men are prone to irreverently pry into hidden things. This is clearly implied in the careful and minute directions for covering the sacred furniture of the Sanctuary, in the prohibition of the text, and in the

stern penalty annexed to any breach of this prohibition: “*They shall not go in to see when the holy things are covered, lest they die*” (Numbers 4:20).

The curiosity of Eve concerning the fruit of ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ led to the spiritual death of our first parents and their countless posterity. All curious enquiries as to sacred things, and irreverent prying into Divine mysteries, tend to utterly destroy spirituality of mind and faith in the Christian verities. “Curiosity”, says Fuller, “is a kernel of the forbidden fruit, which still sticketh in the throat of the natural man, sometime to the danger of his choking”. Nor is it less perilous to the spiritually renewed man, leading, as it does, to the death of some of the highest and divinest things of the spirit.

In conclusion: guard against idly speculating upon Divine secrets. It may be that some of these secrets are part of that ineffable glory into which no man can enter and live.

Be humble, seeing that we are surrounded by mysteries, countless and deep. Humility becometh the ignorant.

Be reverent in all our enquiries into Divine things. “*The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him*” (Psalm 25:14); “*The meek will He guide in judgment: and the meek will He teach His way*” (Psalm 25:9); “*Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes*” (Luke 10:21).

Let us **be diligent** in the performance of our manifest duty. “*The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law*” (Deuteronomy 29:29); “*If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God*” (John 7:17).

William Jones (1836 – 1909)

THE PATIENCE OF JOB

I am come to the end of Job, and to the end of the Book of Job; yet before I end, let me leave these five words, as to the many uses of the whole of the Book of Job.

First, while you live in this world, live in the expectation of, and preparation for changes. Job met with them, and who may not?

Secondly, be patient under all the troublesome changes which you meet with in this world. Job is your pattern.

Thirdly, never measure the heart of God towards you, by His hand upon you. Judge not of your spiritual estate, by what appears in your temporal estate. This was the grand mistake of Job's friends, and it was his honour to withstand them in it, and to stand fast in his integrity, in the lowest fall of his estate in this world.

Fourthly, whatever God doth to you, or with you, submit freely to Him. So did Job at first.

Fifthly, and lastly, how low soever you are brought, yet hope for a good issue, possibly in this life, assuredly in that life which is to come. Job found both at last.

To close all, there are examples of two sorts recorded in the Holy Scriptures. First, for caution, "*to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted*" (1 Corinthians 10:6). Secondly, for imitation, to the intent we should do good things, which they also did; and suffer evil things with the same mind and in the same manner as they likewise suffered. Holy Job may be to us an example of caution in some things, for even he had (and who may not?) his failings. He also may be an example in many things, how both to do good, and suffer evil. And among all imitable examples (except that of our Lord Jesus

Christ, of whom in some respects, Job may be called a type; and the things which happened to him in his sufferings may be called types of what happened to Christ in His...) this of Job is one of the most eminent in doing, and the most eminent of all in suffering. Let him therefore be our pattern to do and to suffer by; our mirror or looking-glass, to observe the discomposures, and compose the features and motions, both of our outward and inward man by; let us admire and follow his unspotted integrity in morals, his fervent zeal about spirituals, his unshaken faith and hope for eternal. Let us admire and follow his moderation in a high estate, his contentment in a low estate, his steadfastness with and for God in every estate.

He that stayeth in the bare speculation of what is written by inspiration of God in the text... *“is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was* (James 1:23-24). That is, he forgets his own spots and defects, and suffers them to increase to more ungodliness. But he that reduceth, or brings down his speculation to action at all times, and to a preparation for suffering, and free submission to the will of God, without any hard thoughts of God in hard times, and so conforming himself to what he seeth in this glass, continueth in it; this man shall be blessed (as Job was, though not in the same manner) both in doing, and suffering. And after He hath suffered a while, shall be perfected and lifted up far above the reach of suffering, and (which is far better), above the fear of sinning any more for ever.

Joseph Caryl (1602 – 1673)

The Book of Job

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MERCY TO THE FEARFUL

“But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him” (Psalm 103:17)

The 103rd Psalm begins and ends with a repeated exhortation to ‘bless the Lord’. That is to say, to ascribe blessedness unto His name; and, so far as it is possible for mortals to render anything unto God, pronounce our humble blessings upon Him in acts of worship and praise. Between these manifold injunctions to bless the Almighty, lies the rest of the Psalm – which consists of a multitude of compelling reasons to provoke such acclamation and adoration. Any reader who was disinclined to praise at the first invitation, will find themselves fully motivated and inspired by the time they reach the last.

Within this wonderful portion of Holy Scripture, one particular type or category of person is referenced more than any other; their case is repeatedly described. Three times in total: *“For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him”* (v.11); *“Like as a father pitieth His children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him”* (v.13); *“But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him”* (v. 17). The repetition cannot be missed: ***“them that fear Him”***. These are the people specifically addressed.

The ‘fear of the Lord’ (which, with related expressions, occurs over 40 times in the Bible) is a subject little taught, or dwelt upon in the present age. Within modern Christian circles, it is generally either ignored, redefined, or else dismissed as an affectation of weak-minded believers in the 19th Century and before. There is a grievous inconsistency in this approach. For it is evident that the knowledge and contemplation of God can inspire a variety of emotional responses, as diverse as: amazement, awe, love, joy, peace, conviction, conversion,

consolation; all these, and more would be admitted and accepted by the average commentator. Why then should the ‘fear of God’ be so singularly maligned and rejected?

If any human can contemplate the being of God, and not feel within their heart a degree of fear and trembling at the prospect – then they have clearly **not** contemplated the being of God aright. For God is ‘other than we think’ – that is to say, so superlatively great, that He is beyond man’s frame of reference to truly comprehend. That in itself should inspire fearfulness: “*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!*” (Romans 11:33). That hymnwriter perhaps put it best who said:

“While Thee, all-infinite, I set
By faith before my ravished eye,
My weakness bends beneath the weight;
O’erpowered I sink, I faint, I die.” (Lange)

The 103rd Psalm itself gives numerous details concerning God which should inspire the reader to the filial (and essentially Biblical) fear of the Lord. For example:

His Works. “*He made known His ways unto Moses, His acts unto the children of Israel*” (v. 7). The Psalmist specifically mentions the experience which Moses and the Israelites had of the physical acts of God. The contrasts which they were privileged to observe are highly instructive. They witnessed destructive hail which fell in Egypt, and life-sustaining manna which descended with the dew in the wilderness; they saw waters turned to blood in Egypt, and bitter waters sweetened in the desert; they saw the Red Sea, made their means of escape, become the means of their pursuers’ overthrow; there was Mount Sinai enshrouded in fire and smoke, and Mount Nebo from which the Land

of Promise might be miraculously viewed. All these things were evidence of the power of God, but to very different ends, and with greatly differing consequences.

God's deeds and handiwork in the created realm are the ways in which He is revealed to mankind. It is upon this canvas that His unseen, spiritual attributes are made manifest. *"For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead"* (Romans 1:20). Wherever an individual is inclined to look in the world, there they will find examples of immensity and intricacy, power and beauty, greatness of scale and variety – yet by definition, the One who brought these things into being **must** be greater than they. The largest dimension or force that can be perceived in all creation, is less than the Creator who gave it existence. Job concludes his survey of the material world with these apposite words: *"Lo, these are parts of His ways: but how little a portion is heard of Him? but the thunder of His power who can understand?"* (Job 26:14). This is a reason for godly fear.

His Kingdom. *"The Lord hath prepared His throne in the heavens"* (v.19). Lest any should think that God's power and its demonstration are limited to earth only, here is a reminder that His remit is greater still. The 'heaven of heavens' is also the work of His hands. The spiritual realms, though invisible to mortal eye and unperceived by human sense, are nevertheless made and sustained by Him. Timeless, limitless dimensions which are beyond man's mind to imagine have their existence because God has designed and 'prepared' them. This is a reason for godly fear.

His Authority. *"Bless the Lord, ye His angels, that excel in strength, that do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word. Bless ye the Lord, all ye His hosts; ye ministers of His, that do His pleasure"* (v. 20-21).

As well as those ‘heavenly places’ just described, God has also given life to the spirit-beings which occupy them. These heavenly hosts, these spiritual principalities and powers, derive their deathless existence from God. And in their mighty, multitudinous ranks, they serve according to the pleasure of His will; and He says: “*let all the angels of God worship Him. And of the angels He saith, Who maketh His angels spirits, and His ministers a flame of fire*” (Hebrews 1:6-7). The Son of God plainly stated: “*Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels?*” (Matthew 26:53); while sources as diverse as Satan, and the writer of the Psalms could testify: “*He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways*” (Psalm 91:11, cf Luke 4:10). This is a reason for godly fear.

His Dominion. “*Bless the Lord, all His works in all places of His dominion*” (v.22); “*His kingdom ruleth over all*” (v. 19). From Heaven above, to Earth below, and Hell beneath – all these places and their inhabitants owe their genesis and continuance unto God; and as such, they are all subject to His lordship. There is nowhere and no-one that falls outside His Divine rule. One can imagine the trepidation and apprehensiveness that might attend the occasion of meeting a dignitary or person of authority; a governor, monarch or president. Those feelings would necessarily grow in proportion with the rank and authority of the ruler concerned. The wider extent of their reign and influence demands still greater respect. When dealing with the person of God, He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, from whom all other, lesser power proceeds (cf John 19:11, Romans 13:1). He is over all works, and all places – quite simply Ruler of All. This is a reason for godly fear.

His Immortality. “*For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place*

thereof shall know it no more” (v. 14-16). These verses present a stark contrast between God and man – a contrast as great as that between time and eternity. For God is without either beginning or end of days; He only hath immortality; compared to which, the longest span of human years is as ephemeral and brief as the short-lived bloom of a transient flower. It is such comparisons as these that are the most alarming to contemplate: God, in all His unsearchable, unfathomable, immeasurable dimensions – and man, little more than a temporary scraping together of the small dust of the earth. God ‘remembers’ our condition. It behoves us to do likewise; and this too is a reason for godly fear.

His Judgments. “*The Lord executeth righteousness and judgment...*” (v. 6). Perhaps amongst all the verses of the Psalm, this is the one most inclined to inculcate the fear of God. The language used immediately declares that God has a Law (by which righteousness can be defined), to which are appended penalties (in order that judgment might be executed). Here is a daunting prospect: the Almighty Sovereign, previously described in awe-inspiring terms, is not only King, but also Judge. And He brings His Divine Standard to bear upon such fallible, finite, failing creatures as humans. This must be the most compelling reason for godly fear yet!

It is against this background that our text finds its place, commencing with the glorious and hope-inspiring word: ‘But’. “***But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him***” (v. 17). How can ‘mercy’ be defined? In simple terms, to show mercy is to ‘revoke punishment justly deserved’; it is ‘to compassionately spare an individual from the inevitable and detrimental consequences of their actions or condition’. The Word of God describes it more fully: “*He will not always chide: neither will He keep His anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities*” (v.9-10). The proportions of God’s mercy are also given: “*For as the*

heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us" (v. 11-12). That is to say, "it is wide as the horizon and high as the stars" (C. H. Spurgeon).

Moreover, it is specifically promised to those who **fear the Lord**. This wondrous and Divine quality of mercy is not offered in general, or at random, but is particularly vouchsafed to those who have come to a knowledge of God, and have trembled in the knowing of Him. He has said: "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion*" (Romans 9:15); in this Psalm, their identity is more fully revealed. Thus it is the case that those who fear the most, have least need to fear. Those who most keenly feel their sin, are the most assured of forgiveness; those who have the greatest sense of unworthiness have the greatest hope of reception, those who have feared God's sin-hating holiness have the promise of His sin-conquering grace. Or, to quote the hymnwriter:

"Fear Him ye saints, and you will then
Have nothing else to fear..." (Tate)

The remarkable duration of God's mercy is also told: it is "*from everlasting to everlasting*" (v. 17) – an amazing truth. The mercy of the Lord existed before ever His people had being, or were guilty of any sin. Before they had need, the provision was already made. Nor is this all. For although a time will come when, brought safely to Heaven, God's people will be forever free from iniquity – yet His mercy still goes on in perpetuity. It will be the unending testimony to 'transgressions removed' and 'heaven secured'. God's mercy, is as eternal as Himself, without beginning, and without end. "*O give thanks unto the Lord: for He is good: for His mercy **endureth for ever***" (Psalm 136:1).

R. J. Steward

EDITORIAL

Whenever the media publicise the latest excesses of criminal behaviour, or broadcast tales of human nature plumbing new depths of depravation, there inevitably follows a whirl of enquiry and speculation as to what the underlying causes might be; or in what directions the blame should be apportioned. Fingers are variously pointed at societal breakdown, loss of family values, failures within the education system, and so on – but an ultimate conclusion is rarely arrived at.

In Psalm 36, before listing a very contemporary-sounding catalogue of worldly iniquities, the inspired writer immediately identifies the basic problem: “*The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes*” (Psalm 36:1). The divinely-enlightened observer could come to no other more heartfelt conclusion than this: a sinner commits sin because he does not fear God.

This troubling description applies ever more widely in the present day. The average man or woman, regardless of age, class or education, no longer has any regard – let alone fear – for God. They are not concerned about His judgments; they do not care for His Law; they are largely ignorant of His Word; they know nothing of His divine nature; and they generally deny His very existence. Within this mindset, sin is natural, easy and almost inconsequential. ‘Morality’, in the absence of God and His absolute standard, loses its meaning and foundation. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ become subjective terms, to be determined by expediency, pragmatism, social acceptability, tradition or personal choice. The dire consequences of which are to be seen on every hand.

But if the world is so completely losing its ‘fear of God’ – or if there is a reduction in this virtue relative to former generations – what is the cause? There has been no fundamental alteration in the nature of

humanity, or the earth upon which we live. Let the question then be asked: from whence is the world supposed to learn the fear of God? The answer is clear. This knowledge must come from **the Church**, and its witness. The Church is the custodian of the Word of God, her members are the Trustees of Truth. It is only from God's people that the worldling can hope to glean anything about godly fear.

And **this** is where the change has occurred. If the fear of God has been lost from society in general, this is because it was first lost from the Church. For several generations, the professing Church has superseded reverence with levity, sobriety with flippancy, holiness with worldliness, and fear with familiarity. This degradation is widely evident: in Christians' behaviour and appearance in worship, their language in prayer, their reading of the Scriptures, and even the arrangement of their services.

Under the guise of being more 'appealing' and 'accessible', the present-day Church has grievously misrepresented Almighty God; emphasising 'love' and 'grace' to the exclusion of all His other attributes; actively encouraging a casual, careless attitude in His worship. But alas, the benevolent, distant, indulgent being whom they so continually present is **not** the God as revealed in Creation, nor the God declared in the Word, nor the God manifested in Christ Jesus – it is a false god, graven in the wood and stone of their own inadequate imagination, after their own likeness.

The solemn indictment of God against certain men in the Old Testament was: "*My wrath is kindled against thee... for ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right*" (Job 42:7). It is to be feared that many modern Churchmen fall under the same condemnation. Dispensing with the fear of God, they have 'sown the wind' in their Churches, and even now begin to 'reap the whirlwind' in the world at large.