One Hundred Revival Sermons and Outlines

A. J. GORDON, DD. THE ALTERNATE ATTRIBUTES. NAHUM 1:2

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into the sky an ideal of life that commands your power, that taxes every energy of your hand and heart and conscience, then the grandeur of human life will begin. God commands us through the ideals he sets before us.

I love to think of Nelson, as he was buried yonder in St. Paul’s with his coffin made out of the mast shivered in the storm of war, the mast of Le Orient. Every true soldier of God is buried with some sort of recognition of the victories which he has won. The last, last thing that many a saint of God wants to see, is the mast of the flagship which he took from the enemy of his soul.

May God help us to live heroic lives, to be ready, to be educated, to take difficulties, and sorrows, and trials, and misunderstandings, as if they were the Divine opportunities for our power, and thus to become godlike through the strength of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

THE ALTERNATE ATTRIBUTES.

A. J. GORDON, D.D.

The Lord is slow to anger and great in power and will not acquit the wicked. The Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.—Nahum i:2.

It is a constant habit of the prophets to alternate between judgment and mercy in their utterance of revelation. As though the prolonged dwelling upon God’s sterner attributes would put too great a strain upon the heart, they change the tone after a little and so relieve the tension. “God is jealous, and the Lord revengeth,” says the prophet in the opening of his prophecy, and in the next section we read, “The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble.” Thus, like a revolving light-house which throws forth a flash of brightness and then a blank of darkness, prophecy manifests to us alternately the love, and the justice, and the tenderness and severity of God that we may not forget the one while contemplating the other.

I. Consider the slowness and strength of God’s anger. “He is slow to anger, but of great power.” This is grandly characteristic of God. A quick temper is a mark of smallness of nature. A misstep on the side of an Indian’s canoe will capsise and swamp it, but it will not affect a great ocean steamer in the slightest, and if you tread on the dignity of small and selfish people they immediately get angry and lose their temper, but a calm, self-poised person is not disturbed by any such affront. And so I think it a very sublime saying concerning Jehovah that he is slow to anger. The majesty of omnipotent restraint holds him in calmness and self-possession while sinners insult and provoke him to wrath. Why does not God blast and consume the infidel blasphemer with the lightning of his indignation? we ask.

When a noted atheist once, lecturing before a Boston audience, took out his watch and holding it in his hand said, “If there be a God, let him prove it by striking me dead in five minutes,” some Christians wondered why the Lord did not do it. As well wonder why Queen Victoria does not halt the royal procession in which she
is riding to cuff the ears of some rude boy, who because he has imbibed anarchistic notions has come out to mock and make faces at his sovereign. There is a sublime fitness in the Divine delay to punish sin. And when unbelievers taunt you with the word of scripture—"God is angry with the wicked every day"—saying, "Then your God is a quick tempered deity, is he?" you may reply, "Though our God is sometimes angry, he is neither hot headed nor passionate." And so far from divine wrath being something out of harmony with the character of a righteous God it is absolutely necessary to our conception of such a being, for in the first place every attribute must have its counterpart. As there can be no light without darkness, so there can be no mercy without judgment. God is not a hemisphere with a single pole—love, on which all his being revolves. If he were, then he would be imperfect. Nay, there are two poles to his nature—justice and mercy, and because of these a zone exists in which warmth of love is modified by the severity of justice, so making a climate that is bracing as well as balmy.

Therefore what does God who requires us to be like himself enjoin upon us? "Love your enemies?" Yes, and also, "Be ye angry and sin not." And what is the high commendation which he puts upon his Son as he returns victorious from the redemption battle? "Thou hast loved righteousness and hated iniquity, therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows." This combination of opposite attributes is absolutely necessary so long as good and evil are found side by side in the world, for anger is the repulsion of holiness, of truth from error, of light from darkness, of right from wrong. The peril is always upon us that in our weak toleration we allow these antagonistic elements to become reconciled. Therefore God is very emphatic, saying, "Ye that love the Lord hate evil."

But I must remind you that the righteous hatred enjoined, discriminates between sin and the sinner. God may punish a sin with his right hand while he offers pardon to the sinner who did it with his left. Indeed, I conceive that this is exactly what he does in the work of redemption. On the cross Christ extends a nail-pierced hand toward God, bearing in it full satisfaction for a broken law, while he reaches down a nail-pierced hand to us, proffering a full forgiveness for our sin. It is just this which gives such strength and security to the believer in Christ. Such a one is not simply forgiven, but he is justified—that is to say, judgment and mercy concur in his release from punishment, and both unite in pronouncing him free from condemnation.

II. The slowness and sureness of God's judgments. "He is slow to anger and will not acquit the wicked." God does not pay at the end of the week, but he pays at last. "Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death," says the scripture. We may be sure, therefore, that when the work of sin is done the wages of sin will be paid. And yet because God does not declare a dividend every year on investments of wrongdoing, men conclude that there is nothing likely to accrue. The truth is very graphically set forth in the Book of Ecclesiastes, "I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone, in the place of the holy, and he was forgotten in the place where he had done so." Because sentence against an evil work is not speedily executed, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

That is to say, men reason thus: "Here was my neighbor who was selfish, penurious and self-indulgent. He went to church every Sunday, but instead of hearing the cross and enduring hardness, as good soldiers of Christ are commanded to do, he had both hands full of the world and was dissatisfied that he could not get more. And this man lived happily and died easily. I am sure, if that is the way things go, it does not pay to practice self-denial and to forsake all to follow Christ." Thou fool! Have not you read the scripture enough to know that this present time is
not God’s paydai? And are you so shortsighted as not to understand that because you cannot immediately cut the coupons of blessing from the bonds of self-denial, therefore there is no interest to come to you? O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have written! “Ye shall be recompensed at the resurrection of the just,” says Jesus. “Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me to give to every man according as his work shall be,” he says again. The time of our Lord’s return is the day of our reaping and recompense—not now.

Miserable proverb of this world it is that “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” I will let the bird fly out of my hands, though its wings be covered with silver and it is ready to lay me eggs of gold if I can have the bird in the bush—even the bird of Paradise that sings among the branches of the tree of life, which grows by the river of the water of life. In other words, I would rather have a heart that sorrows with the sorrowful now, if I may have a heart that can sing with the blessed hereafter.

Therefore let us remember these two things: First—The slowness of God is not slackness. When we see how judgment is perverted in the world, evil crowned and goodness crucified,

Right forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne,

we cry out in impatience for judgment, saying with the martyrs under the altar, “How long, O Lord, holy and just, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood upon them that dwell upon the earth?” But the calm and reassuring word that breaks upon our ears, as uttered by Peter, “The Lord is not slack concerning his promises as men count slackness, but is long suffering to usward, not willing that any man should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” “At 12 o’clock,” says a father to his disobedient son, “the limit will be reached. If you do not repent and confess your wrong before that hour, the punishment which I have threatened must come upon you.” And yet his heart yearns for his boy, and every instinct of parental affection relents from inflicting chastisement. How he holds his eyes away from the clock that he may not see that the fatal hour has come! How he persuades himself that its time is fast that he may give a few minutes’ grace! He even lets the hand slip by a little, hoping that he may hear the longed-for word of penitence. So, my hearers, God lets the dial hands on the plate of eternity move by and holds back the bell from striking that he may yet give space for repentance. Slackness, do you say in your presumption? Nay, it is the slowness of tender compassion. It is the reluctance of fatherly tenderness. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

And, remember, that silence is not forgetfulness. That youth who stole out at midnight to commit some wanton sin is encouraged because God seemed to take no notice of his wrongdoing. That clerk who has been pilfering from his employer is emboldened because his plan for concealment has prospered. That respectable man congratulates himself because, though practicing secret sins, he is just as greatly respected as ever. But listen to the warning of the Son of God, “There is nothing hid which shall not be manifested; neither is there anything kept secret which shall not come abroad.” Turn on the lights, and all that was unseen in the room becomes instantly visible. And when “the Lord shall descend from heaven in flaming fire, taking vengeance on all them that know not God and obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,” illumination as well as judgment will come, revelation as well as retribution will begin, and next to the terror of punishment will be the terror of having all our sins laid bare and exposed to the gaze of the whole world. Oh, my hearers, are your sins under the blood?
III. The slowness and swiftness of God's vindications. "The Lord is slow to anger; the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind." To this correspond the words of Christ, "And shall not God avenge his own elect which cry day and night unto him?" The whirlwind is not merely a symbol of sudden wrath, but of sudden vindication. Do you not remember how it was with Job? After the miserable prophesings and criticisms of his three friends, in which they added this injury to all his other injuries, that of disparaging his character, and showing how richly he had deserved all that had come to him, suddenly we read, "And the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said." Then followed that sublime dialogue with the patriarch which ended in his complete vindication and the confounding and rebuking of his sanctimonious friends.

Here is a wonderful lesson for our faith. It is the darkest just before day, and so it is calmest just before a storm. They say that there is a strange and unwonted stillness when a whirlwind or a cyclone is about to break upon the earth. Pray on, Christian, who hast asked great things of God, knowing that he is able to do great things, even exceeding abundantly above all that we are able to ask or think. Instead of being swift to hear and mighty to save, it seems as if his ear were closed and the heavens were shut up as brass over your head.

Ofttimes when the trial of our faith has reached its limits, when a dead calm prevails in which the soul is ready to faint and swoon away into utter hopelessness, the Lord breaks forth in vindication and astonishes us by the greatness of his mercies. Therefore, O Christian, interceding with God for father and mother, for son or daughter, pray on. He is near and not afar off. He shall avenge you speedily. But as sure and swift as our vindication is, so sure is our punishment if we are found unprepared for the appearing of our Lord. How swiftly judgment comes at last! "As the lightning cometh out of the east and shineth even unto the west, so shall the coming of the Son of man be." Oh, be admonished, any of you who are living in unrepented sin! This world has been long confederated against God. Sin has become organized and thoroughly compacted, and evil doers congratulate themselves that they can transgress with impunity. Doth God know? Doth the Almighty see, they ask? Because no immediate retribution comes, the evil doer says that there is no judge of all the earth, or if there is that he takes no notice of their conduct. Not so, "for God shall bring every work unto judgment with every secret thing, whether it be good or evil," says the scripture. He has long, indeed, been silent, and no audible voice has been heard from heaven. Tyrants have shed oceans of blood, and he has been silent. The public poisoners have slain thousands through strong drink, and he has been silent; and the Christian nations have brought ruin and death to millions through their opium traffic, and he has been silent. The betrayers of innocence and the destroyers of virtue have ruined other thousands, and he has been silent. But listen to the words of scripture: "Our God shall come and shall not keep silent. A fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous around about him." Be afraid, therefore, to sin and flee from it. Be afraid of God and run to his arms.