

On Living Without God

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Sermon Title On Living Without God

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition) Rotherham, July 6, 1790

Sermon Scripture "Without God in the world." Eph. 2:12.

I 1. Perhaps these words might be more properly translated, Atheists in the world. This seems to be a little stronger expression than "without God in the world," which sounds nearly negative, and does not necessarily imply any more than the having no fellowship or intercourse with God. On the contrary, the word Atheist is commonly understood to mean something positive, -- the not only disclaiming any intercourse with him, but denying his very being.

2. The case of these unhappy men may be much illustrated by a late incident, the truth of which cannot reasonably be doubted, there having been so large a number of eye-witnesses. An ancient oak being cut down, and split through the midst, out of the very heart of the tree crept a large toad, and walked away with all the speed he could. Now how long, may we probably imagine, had this creature continued there? It is not unlikely it might have remained in its nest above a hundred years. It is not improbable it was nearly, if not altogether, coeval with the oak; having been some way or other enclosed therein at the time that it was planted. It is not therefore unreasonable to suppose that it had lived that strange kind of life at least a century. We say, it had lived; But what manner of life! How desirable! How enviable! As Cowley says: O life, most precious and most dear! O life, that Epicures would long to share! Let us spend a few thoughts upon so uncommon a case, and make some improvement of it.

3. This poor animal had organs of sense; yet it had not any sensation. It

had eyes, yet no ray of light ever entered its black abode. From the very first instant of its existence there, it was shut up in impenetrable darkness. It was shut up from the sun, moon and stars, and from the beautiful face of nature; indeed, from the whole visible world, as much as if it had no being.

4. As no air could penetrate its sable recess, it consequently could have no hearing. Whatever organs it was provided with, they could be of no use; seeing no undulating air could find a way through the walls that surrounded it. And there is no reason to believe that it had any sense analogous to those either of smelling or tasting. In a creature which did not need any food these could have been of no possible use. Neither was there any way whereby the objects of smell or taste could make their approach to it. It must be very little, if at all, that it could be acquainted even with the general sense, -- that of feeling: As it always continued in one unvaried posture amidst the parts that surrounded it, all of these being immovably fixed could make no new impression upon it. So that it had only one feeling from hour to hour, and from day to day, during its whole duration.

5. And as this poor animal was destitute of sensation, it must have equally been destitute of reflection. Its head (of whatever sort it was,) having no materials to work upon, no ideas of sensation of any kind, could not produce any degree of reflection. It scarce, therefore could have any memory, or any imagination. Nor could it have any locative power, while it was so closely bound in on every side. If it had in itself some springs of motion, yet it was impossible that power should be exerted, because the narrowness of its cavern could not allow of any change of place.

6. How exact a parallel may be drawn between this creature (hardly to be called an animal) and a man that is "without God in the world!" Such as are a vast majority of even those that are called Christians! I do not mean that they are Atheists, in the common sense of the word. I do not believe that these are so numerous as many have imagined. Making all the inquiry and observation I could for upwards of fifty years, I could not find twenty who seriously disbelieved the being of a God; nay, I have found only two of these (to the best of my judgment) in the British

Islands: Both of these then lived in London, and had been of this persuasion many years. But several years before they were called to appear before God, both John S--- and John B--- were fully convinced that there is a God; and, what is more remarkable, they were first convinced that he is a terrible, and then that he is a merciful God. I mention these two accounts to show not only that there are real literal Atheists in the world; but also, that even then, if they will condescend to ask it, they may find "grace to help in time of need."

7. But I do not mean such as these when I speak of those who are Atheists or "without God in the world;" but of such as are only practical Atheists; as have not God in all their thoughts; such as have not acquainted themselves with him, neither have any fellowship with him; such as have no more intercourse with God, or the invisible world, than this animal had with the visible. I will endeavour to draw the parallel between these. And may God apply it to their hearts!

8. Every one of these is in exactly such a situation with regard to the invisible as the toad was in respect to the visible world. That creature had undoubtedly a sort of life, such as it was. It certainly had all the internal and external parts that are essential to animal life; and, without question, it had suitable juices, which kept up a kind of circulation. This was a life indeed! And exactly such a life is that of the Atheist, the man "without God in the world." What a thick veil is between him and the invisible world, which, with regard to him, is as though it had no being! He has not the least perception of it; not the most distant idea. He has not the least sight of God, the intellectual Sun; nor any the least attraction toward him, or desire to have any knowledge of his ways. Although His light be gone forth into all lands, and His sound unto the end of the world, yet he heareth no more thereof than of the fabled music of the spheres. He tastes nothing of the goodness of God or the powers of the world to come. He does not feel (as our Church speaks) the working of the Holy Spirit in his heart. In a word, he has no more intercourse with a knowledge of the spiritual world, than this poor creature had of the natural, while shut up in its dark enclosure.

9. But the moment the Spirit of the Almighty strikes the heart of him that was till then without God in the world, it breaks the hardness of his

heart, and creates all things new. The Sun of Righteousness appears, and shines upon his soul, showing him the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He is in a new world. All things round him are become new, such as it never before entered into his heart to conceive. He sees, so far as his newly-opened eyes can bear the sight, The opening heavens around him shine, With beams of sacred bliss. He sees that he has "an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;" and that he has "redemption in his blood, the remission of his sins." He sees "a new way that is opened into the holiest by the blood of Jesus;" and his "light shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

10. By the same gracious stroke, he that before had ears but heard not is now made capable of hearing. He hears the voice that raiseth the dead, -- the voice of Him that is "the resurrection and the life." He is no longer deaf to his invitations or commands, to his promises or threatenings; but gladly hears every word that proceeds out of his mouth, and governs thereby all his thoughts, words, and actions.

11. At the same time, he receives other spiritual senses, capable of discerning spiritual good and evil. He is enabled to taste, as well as to see, how gracious the Lord is. He enters into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, and tastes of the powers of the world to come. He finds Jesus' love far better than wine; yea, sweeter than honey or the honey-comb. He knows what that meaneth: "All thy garments smell of myrrh, aloes, and cassia." He feels the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him; or, as our Church expresses it, "feels the workings of the Spirit of God in his heart." Meantime, it may easily be observed, that the substance of all these figurative expressions is comprised in that one word faith, taken in its widest sense; being enjoyed, more or less, by everyone that believes in the name of the Son of God. This change, from spiritual death to spiritual life, is properly the new birth; all the particulars whereof are admirably well expressed by Dr. Watts in one verse: Renew my eyes, open my ears, And form my soul afresh; Give me new passions, joys and fears, And turn the stone to flesh!

12. But before this universal change there may be many partial changes in a natural man, which are frequently mistaken for it, whereby many

say, "Peace, peace!" to their souls, when there is no peace. There may be not only a considerable change in the life, so as to refrain from open sin, yea, the easily besetting sin; but also a considerable change of tempers, conviction of sin, strong desires, and good resolutions. And here we have need to take great care, not, on the one hand, to despise the day of small things; nor, on the other, to mistake any of these partial changes for that entire, general change, the new birth; that total change from the image of the earthly Adam into the image of the heavenly, from an earthly, sensual, devilish mind, into the mind that was in Christ.

13. Settle it therefore in your hearts, that however you may be changed in many other respects, yet in Christ Jesus, that is, according to the Christian institution, nothing will avail without the whole mind that was in Christ, enabling you to walk as Christ walked. Nothing is more sure than this: "If any man be in Christ," a true believer in him, "he is a new creature: Old things," in him, "are passed away; all things are become new."

14. From hence we may clearly perceive the wide difference there is between Christianity and morality. Indeed nothing can be more sure than that true Christianity cannot exist without both the inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy, and truth; and this alone is given in morality. But it is equally certain that all morality, all the justice, mercy, and truth which can possibly exist without Christianity, profiteth nothing at all, is of no value in the sight of God, to those that are under the Christian dispensation. Let it be observed, I purposely add, "to those that are under the Christian dispensation," because I have no authority from the Word of God "to judge those that are without." Nor do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation. It is far better to leave them to him that made them, and who is "the Father of the spirits of all flesh;" who is the God of the Heathens as well as the Christians, and who hateth nothing that he hath made. But meantime this is nothing to those that name the name of Christ: -- all those, being under the law, the Christian law, shall undoubtedly be judged thereby; and, of consequence, unless those be so changed as was the animal above mentioned, unless they have new senses, ideas, passions,

tempers, they are no Christians. However just, true, or merciful they may be, they are but Atheists still!

15. Perhaps there may be some well-meaning persons who carry this farther still; who aver, that whatever change is wrought in men, whether in their hearts or lives, yet if they have not clear views of those capital doctrines, the fall of man, justification by faith, and of the atonement made by the death of Christ, and of his righteousness transferred to them, they can have no benefit from his death. I dare in no wise affirm this. Indeed I do not believe it. I believe the merciful God regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas. I believe he respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head; and that if the heart of a man be filled (by the grace of God, and the power of his Spirit) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, God will not cast him into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused. Without holiness, I own, "no man shall see the Lord;" but I dare not add, "or clear ideas."

16. But to return to the text. Let me entreat all of you who are still "without God in the world," to consider with all your humanity, benevolence, virtue, you are still *Inclusi tenebris, et carcere caeco*: Inclosed in darkness and infernal shade. My dear friends! you do not see God. You do not see the Sun of righteousness. You have no fellowship with the Father, or with his Son, Jesus Christ. You never heard the voice that raiseth the dead. Ye know not the voice of your Shepherd. Ye have not received the Holy Ghost. Ye have no spiritual senses. You have your old, natural ideas, passions, joys, and fears; you are not new creatures. O cry to God, that he may rend the veil which is still upon your hearts; and which gives you occasion to complain, -- O dark, dark, dark, I still must say, Amidst the blaze of gospel-day! O that you may this day hear his voice, who speaketh as never man spake, saying, "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee!" Is it not his voice that crieth aloud, "Look unto me, and be thou saved?" He saith, "Lo! I come!" Even so, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!

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