**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ISAIAH-082. GOD'S WAYS AND MAN'S by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. 9. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."*

*Isaiah 55:8-9*

Scripture gives us no revelations concerning God merely in order that we may know about Him. These words are grand poetry and noble theology, but they are meant practically and in fiery earnestness. The for at the beginning of each clause points us back to the previous statement, and both of the verses of our text are in different ways its foundation. And what has preceded is this: Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, for He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. That is why the prophet dilates upon the difference between the thoughts and the ways of God and of men.

If we look at these two verses a little more closely we shall perceive that they by no means cover the same ground nor suggest the same idea as to the relationship between God's ways and thoughts and ours. The former of them speaks of unlikeness and opposition, the latter of elevation and superiority; the former of them is the basis of an indictment and an exhortation, the latter is the basis of an encouragement and a promise. The former of them is the reason why the wicked and unrighteous man ought to and must turn from his ways and thoughts, the latter of them is the reason why, turning, he may be sure that the Lord will abundantly pardon.

And so we have here two things to consider in reference to the relation between the divine purposes and acts and man's purposes and acts. First, the antagonism, and the indictment and exhortation that are based upon that; second, the analogy but superiority, and the exhortation and hope that are built upon that. Let me deal, then, with these separately.

**I. We have here an unlikeness declared, and upon that is rested an appeal.**

Notice the remarkable order and alternation of pronouns in the first verse. My thoughts are not your thoughts, saith the Lord. The things that God thinks and purposes are not the things that man thinks and purposes, and therefore, because the thoughts are different, the outcomes of them in deeds are divergent. God's ways are His acts, the manner and course of His working considered as a path on which He moves, and on which, in some sense, we can also journey. Our ways--our manner of life--are not parallel with His, as they should be.

But that opposition is expressed with a remarkable variation. Observe the change of pronouns in the two clauses. First, My thoughts are not your thoughts--you have not taken My truth into your minds, nor My purposes into your wills; you do riot think God's thoughts. Therefore--your ways (instead of My, as we should have expected, to keep the regularity of the parallelism) are not My ways--I repudiate and abjure your conduct and condemn it utterly.

Now, of course, in this charge of man's unlikeness to God, there is no contradiction of, nor reference to, man's natural constitution, in which there are, at one and the same time, the likeness of the child with the parent and the unlikeness between the creature and the Creator. If our thoughts were not in a measure like God's thoughts, we should know nothing about Him. If our thoughts were not like God's thoughts, we should have no standard for life or thinking. Righteousness and beauty and truth and goodness are the same things in heaven and earth, and alike in God and man. We are made after His image, poor creatures though we be; and though there must ever be a gulf of unlikeness, which we cannot bridge, between the thoughts of Him whose knowledge has no growth nor uncertainty, whose wisdom is infinite and all whose nature is boundless light, and our knowledge, and must ever be a gulf between the workings and ways of Him who works without effort, and knows neither weariness nor limitation, and our work, so often foiled, so always toilsome, yet in all the unlikeness there is (and no man can denude himself of it) a likeness to the Father. For the image in which God made man at the beginning is not an image that it is in the power of men to cast away, and in the worst of his corruptions and the widest of his departures he still bears upon him the signs of likeness to Him that created him. The coin is rusty, battered, defaced; but still legible are the head and the writing. Whose image and superscription hath it? Render unto God the things that are declared to be God's, because they bear His likeness and are stamped with His signature.

But that very necessary and natural likeness between God and man makes more solemnly sinful the voluntary unlikeness which we have brought upon ourselves. If there were no analogy, there could be no contrast. If God and man were utterly unlike, then there would be no evil in our unlikeness and no need for our repentance.

The true state for each of us is that we should, as the great astronomer said he had done in regard to his own science, think God's thoughts after Him, and have our minds filled with His truth and our wills all harmonised with His purposes, and that we should thus make our ways to run parallel with the ways of God. The blessedness, the peace, the true manhood of a man, are that his ways and thoughts should be like God's. And so my text comes with its indictment--You who by nature were formed in His image, you to whom it is open to sympathise with His designs, to harmonise your wills with His will, and to bring all the dark and crooked ways in which you walk into full parallelism with His way--you have departed into darkness of unlikeness, and in thought and in ways are the opposites of God.

Mark how wonderfully, in the simple language of my text, deep truths about this sin of ours are conveyed. Notice its growth and order. It begins with a heart and mind that do not take in God's thoughts, truths, purposes, desires, and then the alienated will and the darkened understanding and the conscience which has closed itself against His imperative voice issue afterwards in conduct which He cannot accept as in any way corresponding with His. First comes the thought unreceptive of God's thought, and then follow ways contrary to God's ways.

Notice the profound truth here in regard to the essential and deepest evil of all our evil. Your thoughts; your ways,--self-dependence and self-confidence are the master-evils of humanity. And every sin is at bottom the result of saying--I will not conform myself to God, but I am going to please myself, and take my own way. My own way is never God's way; my own way is always the devil's way. And the root of all sin lies in these two strong, simple words, Your thoughts not Mine; your ways not Mine.

Notice, too, how there are suggested the misery and retribution of this unlikeness. If you will not make My thoughts your thoughts, I shall not take your ways as My ways. I will leave you to them. You will be filled with the fruit of your own devices. I shall not incorporate your actions into My great scheme and purpose. Men

Would not know His ways,

And He has left them to their own.

So here we have the solemn indictment brought by God's own voice against us all. The criminality of our unlikeness to Him rests upon our original likeness.

The unlikeness roots itself in thought, and blossoms in the poisonous flower of God-displeasing acts. It brings down upon our heads the solemn retribution of separation from Him, and being filled with the fruit of our own devices. Such is the indictment brought against every soul of man upon the earth, and there is built upon it the call to repentance and change, let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts. The question rises in many a heart, How am I to forsake these paths on which my feet have so longed walked? And if I do, what about all the years behind me, full of wild wanderings and thoughts in all of which God was not?

**II. The second verse of our text meets that despairing question. It proclaims the elevation of God's ways and thoughts above ours, and thereon bases the assurance of pardon.**

The relation is not only one of unlikeness and opposition, but it is also one of analogy and superiority. The former clause began with thoughts which are the parents of ways, and, as befits the all-seeing Judge, laid bare first the hidden discord of man's heart and will, ere it pointed to the manifest antagonism of his doings. This clause begins with God's ways, from which alone men can reach the knowledge of His thoughts. The first follows the order of God's knowledge of man; the second, that of man's knowledge of God.

It is a wonderful and beautiful turn which the prophet here gives to the thought of the transcendent elevation of God. The heavens are the very type of the unattainable; and to say that they are higher than the earth seems, at first sight, to be but to say, No man hath ascended into the heavens, and you sinful men must grovel here down upon your plain, whilst they are far above, out of your reach. But the heavens bend. They are an arch, and not a straight line. They touch the horizon; and there come from them the sweet influences of sunshine and of rain, of dew and of blessing, which bring fertility. So they are not only far and unattainable, but friendly and beneficent, and communicative of good. Like them, in true analogy but yet infinite superiority to the best and noblest in man, is the boundless mercy of our pardoning God:

The glorious sky, embracing all,

Is like its Maker's love,

Wherewith encompassed, great and small

In peace and order move.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways. The special thought and way which is meant here is God's thought and way about sin. There are three points here on which I would touch for a moment. First, God's way of dealing with sin is lifted up above all human example. There is such a thing as pardoning mercy amongst men. It is a faint analogy of, as it is an offshoot from, the divine pardon, but all the forgivingness of the most placable and long-suffering and gladly pardoning of men is but as earth to heaven compared with the greatness of His. Our forgiveness has its limitations. We sometimes cannot pardon as freely as we thought, because there blends with our indignation against evil a passionate personal sense of wrong done to us which we cannot get rid of, and that disturbs the freeness and the joyfulness of many a human pardon. But God's pardon is undisturbed and hindered by any sense of personal resentment, though sin is an offense against Him, and in its freeness, its fulness, its frequency, and its sovereign power to melt away that which it forgives, it towers above the loftiest of earth's beauties of forgiveness, as the starry heavens do above the flat plain.

God's pardon is above all human example, even though, having once been received by us, it ought to become for us the pattern by which we shape and regulate our own lives. Nothing of which we have any experience in ourselves or in others is more than as a drop to the ocean compared with the absolute fulness and perfect freeness and unwearied frequency of His forgiveness. He will abundantly pardon. He will multiply pardon. With Him there is plenteous redemption. We think we have stretched the elasticity of long suffering and forgiveness further than we might have been reasonably expected to do if seven times we forgive the erring brother, but God's measure of pardon is seventy times seven, two perfectnesses multiplied into themselves perfectly; for the measure of His forgiveness is boundless, and there is no searching of the depths of His pardoning mercy. You cannot weary Him out, you cannot exhaust it. It is full at the end as at the beginning; and after all its gifts still it remains true, With Him is the multiplying of redemption.

Again, God's way of dealing with sin surpasses all our thought. All religion has been pressed with this problem, how to harmonise the perfect rectitude of the divine nature and the solemn claims of law with forgiveness. All religions have borne witness to the fact that men are dimly aware of the discord and dissonance between themselves and the divine thoughts and ways; and a thousand altars proclaim to us how they have felt that something must be done in order that forgiveness might be possible to an all-righteous and Sovereign Judge. The Jew knew that God was a pardoning God, but to him that fact stood as needing much explanation and much light to be thrown upon its relations with the solemn law under which he lived. We have Jesus Christ. The mystery of forgiveness is solved, in so far as it is capable of solution, in Him and in Him alone. His death somewhat explains how God is just and the Justifier of him that believeth. High above man's thoughts this great central mystery of the Gospel rises, that with God there is forgiveness and with God there is perfect righteousness. The Cross as the basis of pardon is the central mystery of revelation; and it is not to be expected that our theories shall be able to sound the depths of that great act of the divine love. Perhaps our plummets do not go to the bottom of the bottomless after all; but is it needful that we should have gone to the rim of the heavens, and round about it on the outside, before we rejoice in the sunshine? Is it needful that we should have traversed the abysses of the heavens, and passed from star to star and told their numbers, before we can say that they are bright, or before we can walk in their light? We do not need to understand the how in order to be sure of the fact that Christ's death is our forgiveness. Do not be in such a hurry as some people are nowadays, to declare that the doctrine of the Cross is contrary to man's conceptions. It surpasses them, and the very fact that it surpasses ought to stop us from pronouncing that it contradicts. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My thoughts higher than your thoughts.

Lastly, we are taught here that God's way of dealing with sin is the very highest point of His self-revelation. There are many glories of the divine nature set forth in all His ways, but the loftiest of them all is this, that He can neutralise and destroy the fact of man's transgressing, wiping it out by pardon; and in the very act of pardon reconstituting in purity, and with a heart for all holiness, the sinful men whom He forgives. This is the shining apex of all that He has done, rising above creation and every other way of His, as high as the loftiest heavens are above the earth.

Therefore, have a care of all forms of Christianity which do not put God's pardoning mercy in the foreground. They are maimed, and in them mist and cloud have covered with a roof of doleful grey the low-lying earth, and separated it from the highest heavens. The true glory of the revelation of God gathers round that central Cross; and there, in that Man dying upon it in the dark--the sacrifice for a world's sin--is the loftiest, most heavenly revelation of the all-revealing God. Strike out the Cross from Christianity, or weaken its aspect as a message of forgiveness and redemption, and you have quenched its brightest light, and dragged it down to be but a little higher, if any, than many another scheme of other moralists, philosophers, poets, and religious teachers. The distinctive glory of Christianity is this--it tells us how God sweeps away sin.

And so my last thought is that, if we desire to see up on the highest heavens of God's character, we must go down into the depths of the consciousness of our own sin, and learn first, how unlike our ways and thoughts are to God, ere we can understand how high above us, and yet beneficently arching over us, are His ways and thoughts to us. We lie beneath the heavens like some foul bog full of black ooze, rotten earth and putrid water, where there is nothing green or fair. But the promise of the bending heavens, with their sweet influences, declares the possibility of reclaiming even that waste, and making it rejoice and blossom as the rose. Spread yourselves out, dear friends, in lowly submission and penitent acknowledgment beneath the all-vivifying mercy of that shining heaven of God's pardon; and then the old promise will be fulfilled in you: Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven; yea, the Lord shall give that which is good, and our land--barren and poisoned as it has been-- responding to the skyey influences, shall yield her increase.