

## I.

*“How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts!”*

When the Patriarch arose from his dreamy slumbers in the field of Luz, he exclaimed, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not!” How many thus enter into the sanctuary of God, without any realizing sense of the divine presence! How many, alas, from that sleep of error never waken! Yet the Lord is in his holy temple, and will there reveal himself to his people; even to the seed of Israel, his servant—the children of Jacob, his chosen.

How fitting that we should enter into his gates in thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise! How proper that we should here repress each worldly thought, and yield our hearts up to those sacred communings in which Faith lifts a ladder to the skies, that angels may descend to earth, and God himself confirm his promises of grace! “Communion sweet! Communion large and high!”

Surely, with the lonely wanderer of Bethel, we may exclaim: How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!

Here, indeed, we have no earthly holy place, framed and adorned by human hands; no inner temple veiled in mysterious sanctity; no golden emblems of the regalia of heaven; no Shechinah beaming forth from between the cherubim; but we have the assembly of saints; the congregation of the Lord; the body of Christ animated by his Spirit; the ordinances of divine service revealing, publishing, commemorating the love of God to men;

the holy privilege of drawing near to God in concert with those who have obtained like precious faith with us; the unveiled spiritual glories of the reign of heaven; the light of life; the joys of love divine. Return, then, unto thy rest, O my soul! for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee.

In the deep stillness of the heart let every anxious care be hushed, and cheerful Hope diffuse her grateful balm. Let the sorrows of the mind be banished from this place, for the Being in whose presence we appear is the God of consolation and of hope. To him we bring no bleeding victim from the flock, and present no ineffectual oblations upon a blazing altar, but we offer the incense of praise; the grateful homage of the affections; the deep devotion of the soul; the living sacrifice of the body, acceptable through the precious blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, and emancipates us from the bondage of fear and sorrow.

With what heart-felt assurance, then, we should make his sheltering wings our refuge! With what reverential joy we should approach the sacred memorials of his grace here presented before us, and “banquet on his love’s repast.” Behold these emblems! They speak to the heart. They tell of God’s love—the love of Him from whom all love proceeds. They tell of sorrows borne for us—of humiliation, pain, and death. Let us consider them. We come to Jesus, and he meets us here—

*“The King himself draws near to feast his saints to-day.”*

In the awful mysteries of life and death we hold communion. With the spiritual unseen we live and move. Into the dwelling of the Most-High we enter to take the cup of salvation—to pay our vows in the presence of his people. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer!

## II.

*“I was glad when they said unto me: Let us go into the house of the Lord.”—Psalm cxxii: 1.*

It is indeed in the assembly of the saints that gladness and rejoicing should fill the heart. It is here that we are, in an especial manner, permitted to draw near to Him that is the source of every pure and blissful emotion. In his presence there can be no sorrow, for there all tears are wiped away, and there are “pleasures forevermore.” In the contemplation of his glory, which also he permits us to enjoy; in the ever-opening mysteries of redeeming love; in the radiance of that divine illumination which penetrates the moral and intellectual powers, and reveals the past, the present, and the future, what unfailing sources of happiness are found!

And how delightful the reflection that this happiness can never end; that Infinity itself is our treasury of joy, in which are stored “the unsearchable riches of Christ;” that new discoveries await us, which Fancy’s bright imaginings but dimly sketch, and that these shall give place to hopes more radiant, and a fruition still more glorious! It is thus that the unknown may forever continue to gratify our love of knowledge, and the untold mysteries of the universe augment that blissful experience which serves but to enlarge the capacity for enjoyment.

How strangely attractive indeed, to us, are the mysteries by which we are encompassed! How wisely arranged is our progress, that new scenes continually open to our view and lead us onward to a better future! How appropriate here the reflections of

Chateaubriand, that all “the beauty, sweetness, and grandeur of life reside in its mysteries; and that no condition can be more deplorable than that of a man who can learn no more! What delight continually fills the heart of youth which knows as yet so little! What satiety depresses the feelings of age to which life’s changes have been all revealed! How fortunate for the latter, when the secrets of life are ending, those of eternity commence!

“The feelings of love and modesty, of friendship and gratitude, are involved in obscurity; yet how strongly do they move the heart! The angelic virtue of charity loves to withdraw itself from all regards, as though to conceal its celestial origin. The pleasures of thought, also, are in those sciences which always leave something to be discovered, and fix our regards upon a perspective which is never to terminate.

“If, in the bustling city, we survey a modern monument, whose origin or purpose is known, it excites no attention; but, if we meet upon a desert shore a broken column or mutilated statue, worn by the lapse of ages, its pedestal covered with unknown characters, how interesting a subject of meditation it presents to the mind! Everything is concealed, everything is hidden in the universe. Man himself is the greatest mystery of the whole. Whence comes the spark which we call existence, and in what obscurity is it to be extinguished? Our birth and death are placed by the Eternal, like two veiled phantoms, at the two extremities of our career. The one produces the inconceivable gift of life—mysterious amidst its light; the other quenches that brilliant spark in the obscurity of its own impenetrable darkness.

“It is not surprising that men should have availed themselves of the influence of mystery upon the human mind, to impose upon it the chains of superstition. An affected sanctity, a claim of angelic visions, or of a miraculous power to heal, secure at once the wonder and submission of the throng. The strange accents of the unknown language of the mass; the awful mystery of transub-

stantiation; the solemn ceremonies of a worship imperfectly” understood, and rendered still more imposing by symbolic images, and mysterious scrolls dimly perceived in the empurpled light of stained and Gothic windows, or through the smoke of fragrant incense: these are all calculated to take hold of the imagination and enchain the soul.

Surely, however, it is not incongruous with the real mysteries of religion, to throw around them those pleasing shades and grateful harmonies which so well display their nature and extend their power. The ancient tabernacle was shrouded in curtains; and, while the gorgeous temple shone in all the elegance of architecture, it had its deep recesses, its secret chambers, and its veiled mysterious sanctuary. Even the presence of the Deity was indicated by the cloud that filled these sacred abodes. For He who conceals himself in “light that no man can approach,” “makes darkness also his secret place—his pavilion round about him dark waters and thick clouds of the skies.” And it is but a just conformity to the fitness of things, and an efficient aid to devotional feeling and the solemnity of public worship, to exclude at least the glaring brilliancy of day from the house of prayer. For, however well suited may be the dazzling beams of day to the town-hall or the market, where men transact the business of this world, the painful glare transmitted by uncurtained windows, revealing the naked walls, the rude benches, the rough table, and the clumsy rostrum sometimes met with in our houses of worship, seems illy to comport with the circumstances of the place and the solemnities of religion. Though we may indeed dispense with the “long-drawn aisle and fretted vault,” the clustered pillars, the gorgeous tapestry, the carving and the gilding which merely gratify a love of worldly splendor, surely a decent respect for the service of the house of God should induce a careful attention to every means calculated to favor devotional feeling, and sanctify those rites whose mysterious import claims the undivided attention of the soul!

How often may we justly impute to the absence of such aids, that want of reverence which is so conspicuous! How often are those wandering thoughts, those restless glances, those distracted feelings which are so readily marked, occasioned by those unpropitious arrangements by which the things and thoughts of the world are continually pressed upon the attention! In vain would heaven assist our faith by the sacred symbols of divine love, and allure the heart to dwell upon spiritual joys, when the glare and bustle of everyday life are permitted to intrude themselves into the house of the worshipping assembly.

It is here that everything should promote that solemn stillness and that reverential awe, which prepare the heart for communion with God and a better appreciation of the deep mysteries of his grace. It is in the contemplation of these that the soul reaches forward into an unseen eternity, and anticipates the day when, freed from the trammels of mortality, it shall be free to explore those wonders now so imperfectly perceived and understood. It is in making new discoveries in the depths of divine wisdom, and in gaining clearer insight into his unsearchable judgments, that the Christian realizes the blissful privileges he enjoys. Here, then, may the boldest fancy tempt its most adventurous flight, and the mind expand its noblest powers, and the pious heart experience its purest and holiest emotions. For there are no boundaries to the ocean of divine love! There are no limits to the riches of the divine wisdom! There are no fears that man shall ever find an end, or weep that he can know, and wonder, and enjoy no more. "Praise thou the Lord, O my soul!" "Sing unto the Lord a new song and his praise, in the congregation of saints." "Praise God in his sanctuary, praise him in the firmament of his power! Praise him for his mighty acts; praise him according to his excellent greatness! Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord!"

### III.

*“I will abide in thy tabernacle forever: I will trust in the covert of thy wings”*—Psalm lxi: 4.

How truly incomprehensible and beyond comparison is the love of God for man! Inscrutable as his ways, unsearchable as his judgments, deep as the exhaustless mines of his wisdom and knowledge, his love but partakes of the infinitude of his nature and the ineffable glory of his perfections. How, then, can we hope to fathom its depths, to estimate its value, or to realize its power! Were we to add together all the emotions of love in all human hearts; every feeling of affection; every sentiment of kindness; every form of attachment—parental, filial, fraternal, social, the love of the espoused, the love of lovers—all would fail to express, or even typify, the love of God. Of all these kind and affectionate emotions, these fountains of earth’s joys, without which this world would be a dreary waste, God is himself the author. For God is love in its abstract and unoriginated essence; and, since love can proceed from God alone, these are but the faint emanations, but the scattering rays of that divine love which first created and now redeems. And oh! how weak our noblest effort; how cold our warmest thought; how faint our most vivid conceptions, when contrasted with this love!

Yet we are here assembled in presence of these sacred emblems to consider it in the most wonderful of all its manifestations. “In this was love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Earth’s highest evidence of love is, that a man should die for his friends. To heaven belongs the love that brought Christ to die for his ene-

mies. Earth can supply no comparison by which it may be illustrated, and the human soul possesses no powers by which it may be fully appreciated. He forsook those realms of joy where the love of God forever reigns; he abandoned the honors and wealth of heaven to assume our nature; to take the position of a servant; to become a pauper, an outcast, a houseless wanderer! He came to endure fatigue, and hunger, and temptation; to encounter contumely, ridicule, and scorn; to receive hatred for instruction, and ingratitude for kindness; to be “despised and rejected of men;” to be emphatically “a man of sorrows,” and one who was familiar with grief; and finally, in all his innocence and unresisting gentleness, to be made to suffer the ignominious death of the cross—reviled even in his agonies, and not only by the cruel throng, but by the faltering tongues of dying robbers, copartners in shame and suffering; denounced by the vilest of men; and (oh, insupportable anguish!) while thus cut off from life as unfit for earth, forsaken by the Deity as unfit for heaven! Yet he suffered not for himself; he was not “stricken or smitten of God,” or “afflicted” for his own offenses. For surely it was our griefs he bore; it was our sorrows that he carried. He was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities. It was the chastisement of our peace that was upon him; it was by his stripes that we are healed!

Such are the wonderful facts which we are called upon to contemplate as the exemplification of the love of God. And certainly, it is in the life and death of Jesus that we can best consider that love, and make the nighest approach to its apprehension. As Immanuel, he has brought God near to us; as the express image of the Father, he has truly revealed Him; as God manifested in the flesh, he is love impersonated. In all his acts we observe the power of this divine love; we study it in all his words; we recognize it in all the social intercourse, in all the familiar incidents of his life, and in all the affecting associations and fearful agonies of his death.

How proper that the Deity should desire this love to be reciprocated. Every emotion loves to reproduce itself, and to find a kindred sympathy in the bosom of another. It is thus extended, exalted, and perfected in those of corresponding susceptibilities, and attains its legitimate objects. It is from man, who is created in the image of God, that God himself desires reciprocal love!

And if poignant the sting of anguish experienced when earth's weak love is unrequited, what must be the keenness of the sense of ingratitude when the love of heaven is rejected with disdain— A love of whose intensity we can form no adequate conception— A love that pervades the universe; that includes all within its fond embrace, and longs to impart its own ineffable joys to all who will receive them! Oh! may not even the angelic nature here feel a sympathetic pang? May not the Son of God here shed bitter tears of anguish, as erst on Olivet?

But, alas! how shall man return a love of which he cannot even adequately conceive? It is high as heaven; it is vast as the universe! How can he attain to it? how can he compass it? Poor, indeed, must be his offering of a heart debased by the world and Satan, when all its purest and noblest feelings of undivided affection would bear no proportion to the love of God. But it is the nature of love never to be mercenary. It seeks not compensation, it requires not equal measure, it demands not more than can be given. A gentle word may requite a kind act; a smile of affection, the most precious favor. Man may not love as God loves, who is infinite in love as in wisdom and in power; but he may love as man can love, who is so limited and feeble in all his capacities. And when he loves the Lord with all his heart, and mind, and soul, and strength, he renders the least return that may be offered, and the greatest that can be demanded.

Nor is man left to form, by imagination, faint images of the Deity on whom his affections are to rest. Jesus is the living image of the invisible God, and his manifestation in the flesh renders

possible that personality of attachment, that individualization of love so apposite and congenial to our nature. Nay, we are not even left alone with the sweet remembrances of the personal advent of the Lord Messiah, gleaned from sacred and ancient records; but as though to give scope and expression to this love, and quicken it by the active energies of life, he supplies a present, living, coequal, and consentient object, and bids us prove our regard for him by our love for one another. "A new commandment I give unto you, That you love one another: as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." "He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him." Transcendent thought, that man can become a temple for the Deity! That the glorious Being, of whom our unequal powers can form no adequate conception, and whose glory fills both earth and heaven, can yet find a dwelling place in the human heart! Inscrutable and sublime mystery, that "he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him!" "Yet hereby do we know that we dwell in him and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit." And oh! how joyful the reflection, that however weak our powers, however imperfect our efforts, the Divine Comforter can shed abroad the love of God in our hearts, enlarge our capacities, transform all our feeble nature, render us partakers of the divine fullness, and sharers in the everlasting joys and effulgent glory of the divine presence!

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