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## THE INFINITE MAJESTY OF THE PERSONAL GOD

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The mind of man, unenlightened by the biblical revelation, has always found it impossible to relieve the tension between the concept of a transcendent, omnipotent Deity and that of a God who has personal dealings with men and nations. An example of this failure in the ancient world was the contrast between the popular beliefs about the pagan gods and goddesses, expressed in crudely anthropomorphic terms, and the philosophic yearning towards an infinite, impassible Deity. The idea that the infinite God could also be personal would seem a contradiction, for to many personality and personal relationships have implied a limitation. The influence of this feeling of tension on early Christian thought is seen in the frequent use of the concept of a 'Logos', distinct from the transcendent Supreme Being, to explain the 'limitations' involved in the Old Testament theophanies. This attempt to draw such a sharp distinction was of course due to the apologetic motive of appealing to the philosophy of the time, but it was a failure to show the true richness of the biblical revelation, and gradually gave way to the more scriptural thought of the unity and equality of the Persons in the Trinity.

The aim of this article is to bring out this richness of the biblical revelation that the infinite, omnipotent God is He who has personal dealings with men, and to see how the realization of this affects the various spheres of our Christian life and service. We find that the Bible knows nothing of the pagan feeling of inconsistency between the two concepts; on the contrary, it is where the majesty, the glory and omnipotence of God the Creator are most stressed that we find His love towards individuals expressed in the most tender and personal terms. This is seen most strikingly in the Psalms and Isaiah; one very well-known quotation from Isaiah will show what is meant: 'Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard? the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary; there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to him that hath no might he increaseth strength' (Is. xl, 28, 29). The infinite glory of God passes into His care for the lowly. One of the reasons why the Bible finds no tension in the two aspects is that the biblical doctrine of the divine transcendence has a strongly moral note; God's separation from the world is a separation from sin. (Of course this is not the only difference, and attempts to base a doctrine of man or of the Person of Christ on the idea that the only difference between God and man is that man is sinful have led to disaster). This moral note in the divine transcendence is illustrated by Psalm xxiv, which begins and ends with the glorious majesty of the Creator, but says in the middle that the one who shall approach God is the person who has 'clean hands and a pure heart'.

This association of the glory of God with His personal care is reflected in the theme of redemption: it is because God is all-powerful that He can deliver His people; it is because He is all-loving that He will do so. This is seen in several of the Psalms which start with an outburst of praise to God and then pass on to His deliverance of His people (e.g. Ps. cv). Moreover God's redemption is not only concerned with the nation; His loving care extends to individuals. A well-known passage of Isaiah shows the glory of God passing on to His deliverance of the oppressed and suffering: 'Thus

said God the Lord, he that created the heavens, and stretched them forth; he that spread abroad the earth and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein: I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thee hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house. I am the Lord; that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise unto graven images' (Is. xlii. 5-8).

The quotation of this passage naturally leads us on to the great act of divine redemption wrought in the incarnation and death of the Lord Jesus. Here, we find the culmination of this association of the divine glory with personal care; this is reflected in the miracles of the Saviour. The miracles are part of the impact of the Kingdom of God, the absolute divine sovereignty over the world He created: 'If I by the finger of God cast out devils, then is the kingdom of God come upon you.' But this infinite rule of God shows itself in the concern that even the lowliest of men might be made whole. It is the completion of the principle mentioned earlier: because He is all-powerful He can deliver; because He is all-loving He will. But because of the primacy of the deliverance motive, it is impossible to treat the miracles apart from the whole redemptive work of Jesus; they must be taken up into the whole, which, since it is from sin and the powers of evil that man must be delivered, has the Cross at its centre. Thus the application in Mt. viii. 17 of Isaiah's words, 'Himself took our infirmities, and bare our diseases' to the healing and exorcisms of Jesus, is in no way to lessen the place of the Cross, to which Isaiah liii is usually referred. It shows that the miracles can only be understood as part of the whole redemptive work of Jesus. Accordingly we find that often in the healing miracles there are references to sin, repentance and forgiveness; the works should lead to repentance, and Jesus 'began to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not'. The impact of the Kingdom of God in these deeds is a call to repentance because of the moral note in the divine transcendence. Once we have grasped this, we shall be better able to come to a decision and to guide others in the modern concern over 'spiritual healing'; in our day there is an increasing interest in miracles and divine healing; many are curious, as they were in our Lord's day; many, too, long for healing. The way in which we may judge any particular 'miracle' healing, to see whether it is of God, is to see whether it truly reflects the nature of the healing works of Jesus. And this depends on whether it forms part of a whole ministry of redemption, and is associated with the preaching of sin, repentance and the Cross.

From this we may naturally pass to the question of evangelism, and see how the evangelistic task is affected by this theme. The association between the divine majesty and the divine care for persons is reflected in evangelism by the contrast between the forceful, dogmatic preaching of sin and repentance, and the attempt to make personal contacts, to lead men to Christ through friendship. Contrast — because unfortunately the two ways often seem incompatible; thus we hear much in various circles about making the gospel relevant to men's needs and outlook. This is of course true and necessary, but if we stop there and neglect to bring in the great themes of God's unutterable holiness, man's sin, the need for a radical change, we shall have been unfaithful to the biblical picture; a good-humoured friendliness is not enough. None were more friendly than Jesus; but when we see Him showing friendliness to Matthew's despised tax-collecting colleagues, there is no veiling of the challenge — 'I came to call . . . sinners'; He made 'friendly contact' with Zacchaeus, but the result was a radically changed life, not a gentle easing into the Kingdom. Again, in our preaching of sin we should remember that it is because God is morally transcendent and yet concerned for individuals that the slightest sin takes on a deep significance.

Then as we see how Jesus moved amongst sinful men, and yet was Himself sinless, we shall see that this theme of the moral 'otherness' of God combined with perfect personal love is to be the pattern of our own Christian

walk in the world. Of course there is a difference between the Saviour and those He has saved, yet we are to walk as He walked, and perhaps if we see how this fits in with the whole of this theme, the Evangelical attempt to be 'in the world, yet not of the world' will become a richer, deeper, more dignified thing.

The realization that the glory and majesty of God is most marked where His personal care is most tender, and that there is so strongly moral a note in the biblical doctrine of the divine transcendence must be one of the guiding principles of our public worship and private devotions. If we stress merely the glory of God in our worship, He will seem remote and unreal; if we stress merely His friendly nearness, our religion will become sickly and sentimental. Of course one cannot really be taken without the other, since the glory of God has been shown in His saving work for those He loves, and it is possible to talk of the continual nearness of Jesus only if we realize that He is the infinite God to whom barriers of time and space mean nothing. The model of hymn-writers must always be the Psalter.

Evangelicals have always been suspicious of attempts to produce a devotional atmosphere by sensuous means, to bring about a sense of the numinous by external ritual. This is a right instinct in so far as it springs from the fact that any 'numinous' feeling, any idea of the transcendence of God, may become mere superstition if it does not include the moral note in the divine transcendence. Of course He is different from us apart from the moral question; He is infinite Creator, we are finite creatures. Yet this moral stress is so important in the Scriptures that it must be reflected in our approach to God by confession, whatever other feelings of awe and wonder we experience.

Similarly, how much richer and more stable would our private devotional life be — and how much more powerful our service! — if we realized more fully that He who is with us always is He who has ascended to the right hand of the Father, that He who so completely sympathizes with us is He through whom the world was made. 'Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God; which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is.' If our minds were more moulded by the Psalter we should go from our Quiet Times to face the majesty of the heavens without allowing our intellect to be stamped by their immensity and our smallness. The relevance of this in our scientific age is obvious.

The theme of this article has a close bearing on the doctrinal problems which we face. This contrast in the Old Testament between the infinite Creator God and the personal God was explained in the early Apologists by the Logos doctrine (although actually they were concerned rather with appealing to the thought of their age than with solving a biblical problem). In modern times it has been associated with the critical theories of the Pentateuch. Thus it is usually said that the priestly writers show a high conception of God, while the J and E narratives are more crudely anthropomorphic. Of course this is not the only ground alleged for the documentary hypothesis, and where other reasons are given, they must be treated along the appropriate lines. Where, however, these two concepts of God are used in Old Testament criticism, our positive answer must lie in the fact that, so far from being contradictory, these two aspects are, throughout the Old Testament, brought into the closest association. The critical theory is denying something that is fundamental to biblical thought. The universally recognized ethical monotheism of Isaiah is linked to very personal language about God.

In another sphere, if we believe that the majestic God does intervene with a sudden impact, we shall not find it so difficult to understand how the Decalogue was given to Moses, instead of gradually evolving.

Similarly in our doctrine of the Person of Christ, we must let this biblical revelation find its true fulfilment; it is a one-sided emphasis which has led so much modern theology to stress the limitations of Jesus, His self-emptying. In Him came the impact of the divine sovereignty in redeeming love, and, however deep the mystery of the Word made flesh, we do not really bring Him nearer to us by believing that He laid aside the divine attributes. Fortunately theology is redressing the balance here.

In all these ways we see how the whole of our Christian life and service can be enriched by this great biblical theme of 'the infinite majesty of the personal God'. It is not just an isolated doctrine about the divine transcendence, but part of the whole atmosphere of the biblical revelation, and we must breathe it in that our devotion and study and work may be moulded by it.