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*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. 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.*

These words refer to God's ways and thoughts in redemption. The proposition is true indeed in the widest sense: all God's ways and thoughts are infinitely higher than ours; but it is here especially applied to the matter of pardon. The preceding verse (verse 7) contained that gracious command, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon". But this assurance of mercy and pardon as ready to greet the penitent, being in itself so wondrous and so contrary to all that the consciousness of guilt leads the awakened sinner to expect, the Lord, to encourage him to receive the truth, follows up His invitation with the words, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."

Some persons may think that there is nothing in this that is very difficult to compass, and that there is no truth easier of reception than that the Lord is gracious. They have always believed the mercy of God; they hope in it also, and they find it pleasant to do so. But what is the secret of the ease with which they believe this great truth? It is that they have never felt the wound or sting of sin; they have never been brought as justly condemned criminals to God's bar. And what must be thought of their faith in the divine forgiveness? That it is all a dream. They trust in a mercy which has no existence - a mercy which brings them no true sweetness now, and which will leave them in the end the helpless and naked victims of insulted justice. If we would discover a true believer in the divine mercy, we must go, not to the whole-hearted who can speak of it unfeelingly, and therefore without knowing what it is, but to the poor publican who cries out, "God be merciful to me, a sinner". He who has felt the wound of sin hears the law declare, "The soul that sinneth it shall die", and conscience sets its seal to his condemnation. He hears his sins cry aloud for vengeance. He sees all the attributes of God - His holiness, justice and truth - demanding his punishment. Then mountains rise between him and the mercy he once found it so easy to believe. He looks within, and sees no cause why vengeance should be delayed; he looks above him, and sees but one dark thunder cloud of wrath. What remains but that he say, "Righteous art thou, O Lord, even shouldst thou consume me". While in this helpless and, to his own apprehension, all but hopeless condition, the still small voice from Mount Zion says, "Return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon thee". No wonder though he should be unable to receive so blessed a truth. "Mercy, mercy for me!" he cries; "no, that cannot be". And it is a solemn and melancholy truth that it is very possible thus to converse with God's justice, and to tremble before it, without arriving at a soul-humbling and tranquillising view of His mercy. Indeed without the Holy Spirit's agency in giving him the eyes of faith, he could never see it. Nay, even with this spiritual sight, the truth must be brought close to him by the Word to enable poor trembling faith to apprehend it; and this is why God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways". It is as if He had said, "If my thoughts were as your thoughts, vain indeed would be all expectation of forgiveness; but my thoughts are infinitely higher than yours; therefore return unto me, and I will have mercy."

But the words seem intended not only to help the convinced and consciously self-destroyed sinner to see that there is mercy in God, but that there is mercy enough and pardon enough even for him. There are two obstacles that hinder his resting in God's mercy, even when he may have begun dimly to discern this shining star in the constellation of the divine perfections.

The first is the view which he entertains of the magnitude of his sins; and the second the unworthy views which he entertains of God. He thinks of his sins as being too great even for mercy to pardon, and he thinks of God's mercy as not being great enough to cover his sins. He can never indeed see his sins in all their magnitude; so that it is evident that the true root of his fears lies in his inadequate views of the divine mercy. His eyes have been opened to see in some measure the magnitude of the one, but he sees not the magnitude of the other. The Lord condescends here to give the poor trembling sinner a glass through which the real character of His mercy can be discovered, and to bring him to the proper point of view from which to contemplate it. It is as if He had said, "What wonder should your sense of sin and your fear of wrath overpower you, when you think of my mercy as of something you can measure, when you think you see its length and breadth, and that you have sounded and reached its bottom? You think of me as of yourself; and is this to honour me? But drop your measuring line, and think of me as God. For hear this, O sinner! as the heavens are higher than the earth, so is my mercy above all your thoughts of it." Then the sinner sees mercy beaming through the cloud even for him. When he has once discovered that God's mercy has no bottom, that it is an ocean without a shore, a depth not to be fathomed, he enjoys a rest and a delight that pass expression. He brings his own boundless and fathomless sins side by side with God's infinite and fathomless mercy, turning his gaze from the one to the other; and while sweetly reposing on the bosom of mercy, he yields the God of grace the glory of this attribute in the deep humiliation, the heart-contrition, the ingenuous repentance, the holy hatred of sin, and the ardent breathings after conformity to the divine image that necessarily accompany this blessed posture of soul. But this is an eminence which many seem to view only at a distance; they are still a "little flock" who with David truly "hope in God's mercy".

Such is the general meaning of the text. To illustrate it further, we will now consider what the mercy of God has done for sinners in overcoming the obstacles that stood in the way of it, and in securing the bestowal of pardon.

If we have been taught in any measure to regard sin as God regards it, let us endeavour to fix our minds upon it in connection with His character as a holy Sovereign and righteous moral Governor. He regards sin with hatred and abhorrence. It is an arraignment of His excellence, a contempt of His authority, a direct insult to His majesty, a conspiracy against His being. Let us remember also that as the Sovereign of the universe He is clothed with power, not only to take vengeance on His enemies, but to reflect new lustre on His throne and government by their destruction. When we bear this in mind, and then consider that notwithstanding all this, mercy toward sinners of Adam's race found a place in the heart of God, we may see how truly infinite that mercy is; that His ways are not as our ways, nor His thoughts as our thoughts.

But all this is as nothing when compared with the cost (if we may so speak) of forgiveness, with God's overcoming the view of the humiliation and death of His Son! "He spared not his own son." The full meaning of these words the redeemed through eternity will be ever pressing forward to know. So high were the claims of justice, so extensive the demands of the law, that no other than God's own Son could answer or satisfy them so as to make way for the exercise of mercy, and He too in no other manner than by submitting to humiliation and sufferings, the very imagination of which, unless revealed by God Himself, could never have been entertained by any of His creatures. Before a door of mercy could be opened, it behoved God the Father to give up His only begotten Son, who dwelt in His bosom from eternity, to appear in our rebellious world in the form of a servant. It behoved the Son to make Himself of no reputation, to tabernacle in a world that lay under the curse, to submit to the contradiction of sinners whom He came to save, and of devils whom He held in subjection, to be reviled, persecuted, buffeted, crucified by those whom in a moment the fires of His wrath could have consumed. But it behoved the Father Himself to stretch out His hand against Him. He put Him to grief in whom His soul delighted. He spared Him not; and though in agony and desertion His cries pierced the Father's ear, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" yet the sword continued to smite until the Sufferer said, "It is finished!" Oh, who can tell the yearnings of the Father's heart over His beloved Son? His overleaping the vileness of the sinner was nothing

compared with His overleaping the view of the humiliation of His divine Son. And this obstacle stood right across the only way of mercy. But the mercy of God, like an impetuous, resistless stream, broke through every obstacle that it might overflow our world.

Let us, with all these things before our minds, say whether we have not here shown to us the reality of the divine mercy. If after all this we question it or fail to fall prostrate before its exhibition, we slander and malign God in that of which He is most jealous; we rob Him of His choicest jewel - His grace; and nothing remains but that insulted mercy should give a keener edge and a swifter descent to the stroke of justice. But oh! were we blessed with but a faint perception of our own inexpressible vileness - for a full view of it we never can obtain - and with a faint perception of the immeasurable preciousness of Him who is "the brightness of the father's glory, and the express image of his person", the thought that Christ should have died for us would so humble, so dissolve, and so astonish us that we could find no vent nor refuge for our feelings but in God's own words: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nether are your ways my ways".

Here further we may learn to see that the mercy of God is such that no sinner can perish for want of a sufficiency of mercy. Unless we can say that we have looked into the heart of God and see the yearnings of the Father's heart over His Son, and unless we can measure Christ's worth and the worth of His sufferings, we cannot limit the divine mercy. It is infinite. And if it is infinite, is it not enough for you, however great your sins? It is infinite, and what more can you want? None ever perished for want of mercy. Many have perished for despising mercy, many for rejecting mercy; many have perished for sinning because mercy abounds; but none ever perished because there was not enough of mercy. If there is any one whose mouth is shut before a holy God, to him we bring the good news that there is mercy for him in the outstretched hand of God Himself, who delights to have it received, and who is glorified in bestowing it.

The great duty and business then of the minister of the gospel is to proclaim the mercy of God, the wondrous truth that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"; to proclaim it that sinners may believe and be saved; may repent and bring forth fruits meet for repentance; may believe and be moved by the belief to glorify God in their body and in their spirits, which are God's. Oh how joyfully would we proclaim this gospel were we only enabled to apprehend the love and the grace wrapped up in it; did we apprehend our own personal interest in it, and the secure basis provided by it for the hopes of the chief of sinners! How admiringly would we proclaim it, did we but perceive the infinitude of the mercy displayed in it, and of the love which passeth knowledge! And how earnestly and tenderly and faithfully would we press its reception upon you, did we realise the preciousness of your souls, and the fearfulness of the wrath that abides upon the sinner; did we but travail in birth for you till Christ be formed in you; were we but constrained and pressed by the love of Christ and by a sense of the inevitable and inconceivable anguish that impends on those who neglect so great salvation! And oh! how would your hearts leap to receive it, did you but know and feel your own condition as sinners, and did you but apprehend this gospel as coming not from a poor brother worm, but from the great Majesty of heaven, whose avenging law has been hot in pursuit of you!

But alas! how possible is it for us to preach this gospel coldly. And, oh, with what a miserable welcome does it often meet from the perishing, forlorn souls to whom it is proclaimed!

If that which gave comfort to one of the holiest saints on earth in the near approach of death - "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" - touches no sympathetic chord in your breast; if these blessed words are words of indifference to you - if you feel no personal interest in them - we know why it is so, and we are called to declare it unto you. It is because you are still dead in trespasses and sins, so that the very sense of your condition has yet to be discovered to you. We know too what is the necessary tendency, what

the fearful issue of such security. It is death eternal.

Oh then awake to a sense of your condition! "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." Awake, ye that live without God and Christ in the world. Awake, ye that live as if this world were your home. Awake, ye that go about to establish your own righteousness. God's avenging law is in pursuit of you, and if it find you without the covert of the Redeemer's blood, your future misery is sure. Let the world say what it will, unless this blessed book be a fiction, the world "lieth in the wicked one" and is devoted to destruction. Let the world say what it will of the mercy of God and of the uselessness of fear and anxiety in regard to an eternal state, sooner or later the pride of our hearts must be subdued, and we prostrated at God's feet. Better surely to be so when He is on the throne of grace and the royal hand of mercy will raise us up, than to be shivered by the rod of iron.

The song of the redeemed in heaven is "to Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood"; and if you would ever join that blessed throng, you must learn something of the wonders of redemption now.