

God the Best Portion of the Christian

by

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"Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee." -- Psalm 73:25

Subject: 'Tis the spirit of a truly godly man to prefer God before all other things either in heaven or earth.

In this psalm, the psalmist (Asaph) relates the great difficulty which existed in his own mind, from the consideration of the wicked. He observes, verses 2 and 3, "As for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." In the 4th and following verses, he informs us, what in the wicked was his temptation. In the first place, he observed, that they were *prosperous*, and all things went well with them. He then observed their *behavior* in their prosperity, and the use which they made of it; and that God, notwithstanding such abuse, *continued* their prosperity. Then he tells us by what means he was helped out of this difficulty, *viz.* by going into the *sanctuary*, verses 16, 17. And [he] proceeds to inform us what considerations they were which helped him, *viz.* — (1.) The consideration of the *miserable end* of wicked men. However they prosper for the present, yet they come to a woeful end at last, verses 18-20. — (2.) The consideration of the *blessed end* of the saints. Although the saints, while they live, may be afflicted, yet they come to a happy end at last, verses 21-24. — (3.) The consideration, that the godly have much *better portion* than the wicked, even though they have no other portion but God; as in the text and following verse. Though the wicked are in prosperity, [they] are not in trouble as other men. Yet the godly, though in affliction, are in a state infinitely better, because they have God for their portion. They need desire nothing else. He that hath God, hath all. Thus the psalmist professes the sense and apprehension which he had of things: *Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee.*

In the verse immediately preceding, the psalmist takes notice how the saints are happy in God, both when they are in this world, and also when they are taken to another. They are blessed in God in this world, in that he *guides them by his counsel*. And when he takes them out of it, they are still happy, in that then he *receives them to glory*. This probably led him, in the text, to declare that he desired *no other portion*, either in this world or in that to come, either in heaven or upon earth. — Whence we learn, *That it is the spirit of a truly godly man, to prefer God before all other things, either in heaven or on earth.*

I. A godly man prefers God before anything else *in heaven*.

First, he prefers God before anything else that *actually is* in heaven. Every godly man hath his heart in heaven; his affections are mainly set on what is to be had there. Heaven is his chosen country and inheritance. He hath respect to heaven, as a traveler, who is in a distant land, hath to his own country. The traveler can content himself to be in a strange land for a while, but his own native land is preferred by him to all others: Heb. 11:13, etc. "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly." — The respect which a godly person hath to heaven may be compared to the respect which a child, when he is abroad, hath to his father's house. He can be contented abroad for a little while; but the place to which he desires to return, and in which to dwell, is his own home. Heaven is the true saint's Father's house: John 14:2, "In my Father's house are many mansions." John 20:17, "I ascend to my Father and your Father."

Now, the main reason why the godly man hath his heart thus to heaven is because God is there; that is the palace of the Most High. It is the place where God is gloriously present, where his love is gloriously manifested, where the godly may be with him, see him as he is, and love, serve, praise, and enjoy him perfectly. If God and Christ were not in heaven, he would not be so earnest in seeking it, nor would he take so much pains in a laborious travel through this wilderness, nor would the consideration that he is going to heaven when he dies, be such a comfort to him under toils and afflictions. The martyrs would not undergo cruel sufferings, from their persecutors, with a cheerful prospect of going to heaven, did they not expect to be with Christ, and to enjoy God there. They would not with that cheerfulness forsake all their earthly possessions, and all their earthly friends, as many thousands of them have done, and wander about in poverty and banishment, being destitute, afflicted, tormented, in hopes of exchanging their earthly for a heavenly inheritance, were it not that they hope to be with their glorious Redeemer and heavenly Father. — The believer's heart is in heaven, because his treasure is there.

Second, a godly man prefers God before anything else that *might be* in heaven. Not only is there nothing *actually* in heaven, which is in his esteem equal with God; but neither is there any of which he can conceive as *possible to be there*, which by him is esteemed and desired equally with God. Some suppose quite different enjoyments to be in heaven, from those which the Scriptures teach us. The Mahometans, for instance, suppose that in heaven are to be enjoyed all manner of sensual delights and pleasures. Many things which Mahomet has feigned are to the lusts and carnal appetites of men the most agreeable that he could devise, and with them he flattered his followers. — But the true saint could not contrive one more agreeable to his inclination and desires, than such as is revealed in the Word of God; a heaven of enjoying the glorious God, and the Lord Jesus Christ. There he shall have all sin taken away, and shall be perfectly conformed to God, and shall spend an eternity in exalted exercises of love to him, and in the enjoyment of his love. If God were not to be enjoyed in heaven, but only vast wealth, immense treasures of silver, and gold, great honor of such kind as men obtain in this world, and a fullness of the greatest sensual delights and pleasures; all these things would not make up for the want of God and Christ, and the enjoyment of them there. If it were empty of God, it would indeed be an empty melancholy place. — The godly have been made sensible, as to all creature-enjoyments, that they cannot satisfy the soul; and

therefore nothing will content them but God. Offer a saint what you will, [but] if you deny him God, he will esteem himself miserable. God is the center of his desires; and as long as you keep his soul from its proper center, it will not be at rest.

II. It is the temper of a godly man to prefer God before all other things *on the earth*.

First, the saint prefers that enjoyment of God, for which he *hopes* hereafter, to anything in this world. He looketh not so much at the things which are seen and temporal, as at those which are unseen and eternal, 2 Cor. 4:18. It is but a little of God that the saint enjoys in this world. He hath but a little acquaintance with God, and enjoys but a little of the manifestations of the divine glory and love. But God hath promised to give him Himself hereafter in a full enjoyment. And these promises are more precious to the saint, than the most precious earthly jewels. The gospel contains greater treasures, in his esteem, than the cabinets of princes, or the mines of the Indies.

Second, the saints prefer what of God may be *obtained* in this life before all things in the world. There is a great difference in the present spiritual attainments of the saints. Some attain to much greater acquaintance and communion with God, and conformity to him, than others. But the highest attainments are very small in comparison with what is future. The saints are capable of making progress in spiritual attainments, and they earnestly desire such further attainments. Not contented with those degrees to which they have already attained, they hunger and thirst after righteousness, and, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that they may grow thereby. It is their desire, to know more of God, to have more of his image, and to be enabled more to imitate God and Christ in their walk and conversation. Psa. 27:4, "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple." Psa. 42:1, 2, "As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" Psa. 63:1, 2, "O God, thou art my God, early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary." See also Psa. 84:1, 2, 3 and Psa. 130:6, "My soul waiteth for the Lord, more than they that watch for the morning; I say, more than they that watch for the morning."

Though every saint has not this longing desire after God to the same degree that the psalmist had, yet they are all of the same spirit. They earnestly desire to have more of his presence in their hearts. That this is the temper of the godly in general, and not of some particular saints only, appears from Isa. 26:8, 9, where not any particular saint, but the church in general speaks thus: "Yea, in the way of thy judgments, O Lord, have we waited for thee; the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee. With my soul have I desired thee in the night, and with my spirit within me will I seek thee early." See also Song 3:1, 2, 6, 8.

The saints are not always in the lively exercise of grace, but such a spirit they have, and sometimes they have the sensible exercise of it. They desire God and divine attainments, more than all earthly things; and seek to be rich in grace, more than they do to get earthly riches. They desire the honor which is of God, more than that which is of men, John 5:44, and communion with him, more than any earthly pleasures. They are of the same spirit which the apostle expresses, Phil. 3:8, "Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss, for the excellency

of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, and do count them but dung that I may win Christ.”

Third, the saint prefers *what he hath already of God* before anything in this world. That which was infused into his heart at his conversion, it more precious to him than anything which the world can afford. The views which are sometimes given him of the beauty and excellency of God, are more precious to him than all the treasures of the wicked. The relation of a child in which he stands to God, the union which there is between his soul and Jesus Christ, he values more than the greatest earthly dignity. That image of God which is enstamped on his soul, he values more than any earthly ornaments. It is, in his esteem, better to be adorned with the graces of God’s Holy Spirit, than to be made to shine in jewels of gold, and the most costly pearls, or to be admired for the greatest external beauty. He values the robe of Christ’s righteousness, which he hath on his soul, more than the robes of princes. The spiritual pleasures and delights which he sometimes has in God, he prefers far before all the pleasures of sin. Psa. 84:10, “A day in thy courts is better than a thousand: I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.”

A saint thus prefers God before all other things in this world — 1. As he prefers God before anything else that he *possesses* in the world. Whatever temporal enjoyments he has, he prefers God to them all. Psa. 16:5, 6, “The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance, and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.” If he be rich, he chiefly sets his heart on his heavenly riches. He prefers God before any earthly friend, and the divine favor before any respect shown him by his fellow-creatures. Although inadvertently, these have room in his heart, and too much room; yet he reserves the throne for God; Luke 14:26, “If man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.”

2. He prefers God before any earthly enjoyment of which he *hath a prospect*. The children of men commonly set their hearts more on some earthly happiness for which they *hope*, and after which they are seeking, than on what they *have* in present possession. But a godly man prefers God to anything which he has in prospect in this world. He may, indeed, through the prevalence of corruption, be for a season carried away with some enjoyment. However, he will again come to himself. This is not the temper of the man; he is of another spirit.

3. It is the spirit of a godly man to prefer God to any earthly enjoyments of which he *can conceive*. He not only prefers him to anything which he now possesses, but he sees nothing possessed by any of his fellow-creatures, so estimable. Could he have as much worldly prosperity as he would, could he have earthly things just to his mind, and agreeable to his inclination; he values the portion which he has in God, incomparably more. He prefers Christ to earthly kingdoms.

APPLICATION

First, hence we may learn, that whatever changes a godly man passes through, he is happy; because God, who is unchangeable, is his chosen portion. Though he meet with temporal losses, and be deprived of many, yea, of all his temporal enjoyments; yet God, whom he prefers before all, still remains, and cannot be lost. While he stays in this

changeable, troublesome world, he is happy; because his chosen portion, on which he builds as his main foundation for happiness, is above the world, and above all changes. And when he goes into another world, still he is happy, because that portion yet remains. Whatever he be deprived of, he cannot be deprived of his chief portion; his inheritance remains sure to him. — Could worldly-minded men find out a way to secure to themselves those earthly enjoyments on which they mainly set their hearts, so that they could not be lost nor impaired while they live, how great would they account the privilege, though other things which they esteem in a less degree, were liable to the same uncertainty as they now are! Whereas now, those earthly enjoyments, on which men chiefly set their hearts, are often most fading. But how great is the happiness of those who have chosen the Fountain of all good, who prefer him before all things in heaven or on earth, and who can never be deprived of him to all eternity!

Second, let all by these things examine and try themselves, whether they be saints or not. As this which hath been exhibited is the spirit of the saints, so it is peculiar to them. None can use the language of the text, and say, *Whom have I in heaven but thee? there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee*, but the saints. A man's choice is that which determines his state. He that chooses God for his portion, and prefers him to all other things, is a godly man, for *he* chooses and worships him as God. To respect him as God, is to respect him above all other things. And if any man respect Him as *his* God, *his God he is*. There is an union and covenant relation between that man and the true God. — Every man is as his God is. If you would know what a man is, whether he be a godly man or not, you must inquire what his God is. If the true God be he to whom he hath a supreme respect, whom he regards above all; he is doubtless a servant of the true God. But if the man have something else to which he pays a greater respect than to Jehovah, he is not a godly man.

Inquire, therefore, how it is with you, — whether you prefer God before all other things. It may sometimes be a difficulty for persons to determine this to their satisfaction. The ungodly may be deluded with false affections; the godly in dull frames may be at a loss about it. Therefore you may try yourselves, as to this matter, several ways; if you cannot speak fully to one thing, yet you may perhaps to others.

1. What is it which *chiefly* makes you desire to go to heaven when you die? Indeed some have no great desire to go to heaven. They do not care to go to hell; but if they could be safe from that, they would not much concern themselves about heaven. If it be not so with you, but you find that you have a desire after heaven, then inquire what it is for. Is the main reason, that you may be with God, have communion with him, and be conformed to him? that you may see God, and enjoy him there? Is this the consideration which keeps your hearts, and your desires, and your expectations towards heaven?

2. If you could avoid death, and might have your free choice, would you choose to live *always* in this world, without God, rather than in his time to leave the world, in order to be with him? If you might live here in earthly prosperity to all eternity, but destitute of the presence of God and communion with him — having no spiritual intercourse between him and your souls, God and you being strangers to each other for ever — would you choose this rather than to leave the world, in order to dwell in heaven, as the children of God, there to enjoy the glorious privileges of children, in holy and perfect love to God, and enjoyment of him to all eternity?

3. Do you prefer Christ to all others as the *way* to heaven? He who truly chooses God, prefers him in each person of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: the Father, as his Father; the Son as his Savior; the Holy Ghost, as his Sanctifier. Inquire, therefore, not only whether you choose the enjoyment of God in heaven as your highest portion and happiness, but also whether you choose Jesus Christ before all others, as your way to heaven. And that in a sense of the excellency of Christ, and of the way of salvation by him, as being that which is to the glory of Christ, and of sovereign grace. Is the way of free grace, by the blood and righteousness of the blessed and glorious Redeemer, the most excellent way to life in your esteem? Doth it add a value to the heavenly inheritance, that it is conferred in this way? Is this far better to you than to be saved by your own righteousness, by any of your own performances, or by any other mediator?

4. If you might go to heaven in what course you please, would you prefer to all others the way of a *strict walk* with God? They who prefer God as hath been represented, choose him, not only in the end, but in the way. They had rather be with God than with any other, not only when they come to the end of their journey, but also while they are in their pilgrimage. They choose the way of walking with God, though it be a way of labor, and care, and self-denial, rather than a way of sin, though it be a way of sloth, and of gratifying their lusts.

5. Were you to spend your eternity in this world, would you choose rather to live in mean and low circumstances with the gracious presence of God, than to live for ever in earthly prosperity without him? Would you rather spend it in holy living, and serving and walking with God, and in the enjoyment of the privileges of his children? God often manifesting himself to you as your Father, discovering to you his glory, and manifesting his love, lifting the light of his countenance upon you! Would you rather choose these things, though in poverty, than to abound in worldly things, and to live in ease and prosperity, at the same time being an alien from the common wealth of Israel? Could you be content to stand in no child-like relation to God, enjoying no gracious intercourse with him, having no right to be acknowledged by him as his children? Or would such a life as this, though in ever so great earthly prosperity, be esteemed by you a miserable life?

If, after all, there remain with you doubts, and a difficulty to determine concerning yourselves whether you do truly and sincerely prefer God to all other things, I would mention two things which are the surest ways to be determined in this matter, and which seem to be the best grounds of satisfaction in it.

(1) The feeling of some particular, strong, and lively *exercise* of such a spirit. A person may have such a spirit as is spoken of in the doctrine, and may have the exercise of it in a low degree, and yet remain in doubt whether he have it or not, and be unable to come to a satisfying determination. But God is pleased sometimes to give such discoveries of his glory, and of the excellency of Christ, as do so draw forth the heart, that they know beyond all doubt, that they feel such a spirit as Paul spoke of, when he said, "he counted all things but loss for the excellency of Christ Jesus his Lord;" and they can boldly say, as in the text, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee." At such times the people of God do not need any help of ministers to satisfy them whether they have the true love of God. They plainly see and feel it; and the Spirit of God then witnesseth with their spirits, that they are the children of God. — Therefore, if you would be satisfied upon this point, earnestly seek such attainments; seek that you may have such clear and lively exercises of this spirit. To this end, you must labor to grow in grace. Though you have had such experiences in times past, and they satisfied you then, yet you may again doubt. You

should therefore seek that you may have them more frequently; and the way to that is, earnestly to press forward, that you may have more acquaintance with God, and have the principles of grace strengthened. This is the way to have the exercises of grace stronger, more lively, and more frequent, and so to be satisfied that you have a spirit of supreme love to God.

(2) The other way is to inquire whether you prefer God to all other things in *practice*, *i.e.* when you have occasion to manifest by your practice which you prefer — when you must either cleave to one or the other, and must either forsake other things, or forsake God — whether then it be your manner practically to prefer God to all other things whatever, even to those earthly things to which your hearts are most wedded. Are your lives those of adherence to God, and of serving him in this manner?

He who sincerely prefers God to all other things in his heart, will do it in his practice. For when God and all other things come to stand in competition, that is the proper trial what a man chooses; and the manner of acting in such cases must certainly determine what the choice is in all free agents, or those who act on choice. Therefore there is no sign of sincerity so much insisted on in the Bible as this, that we deny ourselves, sell all, forsake the world, take up the cross, and follow Christ whithersoever he goeth. — Therefore, so run, not as uncertainly; so fight, not as those that beat the air; but keep under your bodies, and bring them into subjection. Act not as though you counted yourselves to have apprehended; but this one thing do, “forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” 2 Pet. 1:5, etc. “And besides this, giving diligence, add to your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”