

THE WORKS OF JOHN WITHERSPOON

VOLUME II

Sermons and Christian Life

John Witherspoon

Annotated Edition



Ligature

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

John Witherspoon (1723–1794) was a Presbyterian minister, educator, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and president of the College of New Jersey. His sermons joined Reformed theology to pastoral care, public duty, and the moral formation of church and society.

This volume follows Volume II of the revised Philadelphia edition of 1802. It contains twenty-eight sermons and *An Inquiry into the Scripture Meaning of Charity*. Its subjects include worship, conduct, family life, ministry, public duty, and charity. The 1802 edition governs the order, titles, and sermon numbers.

Ligature collated every page against the Princeton copy and completed a second visual proof against the Harvard copy. New York Public Library pages resolved missing, repeated, damaged, or cropped readings.

This is a faithful reading edition. It preserves Witherspoon's words, spelling, sentence order, paragraph order, headings, and source notes. It removes running heads, printed page numbers, signatures, and other production matter. It rejoins words divided at page and line endings. It uses modern quotation marks, apostrophes, spacing, Bible-book abbreviations, and Arabic Scripture chapter numbers.

Numbered footnotes reproduce notes from a source edition. Notes introduced by "Editor's note" identify a person, define an obsolete term, or supply needed historical context. They do not recast Witherspoon's doctrine.

The historical conversations identify the main disputes behind the works. The annotated source guide identifies books, writers, and movements named or clearly implied in the volume. The Scripture Index identifies explicit Bible references and their pages in this edition.

—The Editors
Ligature Press

SERMONS XVII-XLIV

SERMON XVII:

THE OBJECT OF A CHRISTIAN'S DESIRE IN RELIGIOUS WORSHIP

EXOD. 33:18.

And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy Glory.

These are the words of an Old Testament Saint; of that Moses, who, as a servant, was faithful over all the house of God. True piety is the same in substance in all ages, and points at one thing as its centre and its rest, the knowledge and enjoyment of God. In the preceding verses, Moses had been employed in earnest prayer and intercession for the people of Israel. He had met with success and acceptance in these requests; for it is said, in the 14th verse, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." And in the 17th, "And the Lord said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken; for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name." The condescension of a gracious God, though it satisfies, does not extinguish the desires of his saints, but rather makes them more ardent and importunate; for he immediately adds, in the words of the text, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. It is highly probable, from what follows, that this desire included more than was proper for the present state; yet such a discovery as was possible, or could be useful to him, is graciously promised, "And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee; and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy."

My dear brethren, it is our distinguished privilege, that we have daily unmolested access to the house and ordinances of God. We ought to rejoice, that we have so many clear and express promises of the divine presence, in New Testament worship. But what cause have we to be ashamed, that we are so exceeding prone to stop short in the threshold, to content ourselves with the mere form, instead of earnestly breathing after real, inward, and sensible communion with God? I have therefore chosen this subject, in the view of that solemn ordinance, The Lord's Supper, where we have a sensible representation of Christ crucified, the great mean of our access to God, that we may serve him on that occasion particularly, and the remaining

part of our lives habitually, in spirit and in truth. And, Oh, that we may have daily more experience of the sweetness and benefit of his service on earth! and may daily long more for that time, when we shall serve him in a manner infinitely more perfect and joyful in his temple above!

In discoursing on this subject, I propose, in dependance on divine strength.

I. To explain what is the object of a saint's desire, when he saith in the words of Moses, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.

II. To improve the subject—particularly by pointing out what is the most proper preparation for such a discovery.

I. Then, I am to explain what is the object of a saint's desire, when he saith, in the words of Moses, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. It is very probable, from the passage following the text, which I have read, that Moses had some regard to the sensible appearance, which, in that dispensation, did often accompany or notify the immediate presence of the angel of the covenant. He desired, probably, to be strengthened for beholding stedfastly the Shechinach, or bright and luminous cloud which sometimes appeared over the tabernacle, and, by its glorious lustre, tended to affect the mind with a sense of the power and sovereignty of the Lord Jehovah. But this, surely, was not all; for this, in itself, was only a subsidiary mean which served to carry their views to the real and spiritual glory of God. To the last therefore, we shall confine our attention, as to what the gospel particularly opens to us, and what believers are enabled, by faith, to apprehend.

When Christians, then, desire to see the glory of God, it seems chiefly to imply the following things: 1. They desire to see the glory of an eternal independent God; they desire to see the only living and true God in his own inherent excellence and infinite perfection. God is the source and sum of all excellence; or, in the language of the Psalmist, "the perfection of beauty." Every thing noble or beautiful in the creature, is only a faint ray from the fulness of the Creator's glory. Therefore he is the proper object of the highest esteem, and most profound veneration, of every reasonable creature. The vision and fruition of God constitute the employment and happiness of heaven: and even here, while they are in preparation for the higher house, the saints desire such a discovery of the divine glory as their condition will admit of, and take pleasure in contemplating his nature, as revealed to them both in his word and in his works. They dwell with adoring wonder, on all his attributes, which are boundless and unsearchable: the immensity of his being, who fills heaven and earth with his presence, who seeth in secret, and from whom the

thickest darkness cannot cover us; his irresistible power, “who spake, and it was done, who commanded, and it stood fast;”—who called this great universe out of nothing into being, “who doth in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth whatever seems good unto him:” his infinite holiness and purity, “with whom evil cannot dwell, nor sinners stand in his presence; who looketh to the moon, and it shineth not, to the stars, and they are not pure in his sight:” his infinite wisdom, “who worketh all things according to his will, who bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought, and makes the devices of the people of none effect:” his boundless goodness, which fills the earth, and flows in plenteous streams to all the creatures of his power.

But, perhaps, some are saying, what is there extraordinary or peculiar in all this? is it not clearly revealed in the word of God? can any Christian be ignorant of it? If Moses, in that early dispensation, desired a discovery of the divine perfections, nothing of that kind is wanting to us, who, since the fulness of time, have so complete a revelation in the New Testament. But, my brethren, I must beg of you to observe these two things:

1. That there is in the fulness of the Godhead an infinite and endless variety even for the employment of our intellectual powers. Well might Zophar, in the book of Job, say, Job 11:7, 8, 9, “Canst thou, by searching, find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven, what canst thou do? deeper than hell, what canst thou know? the measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.”
2. That the real and proper knowledge of the glory of God is by inward and spiritual illumination. The holy Scriptures themselves, however clear a discovery they contain of the nature of God, are no better than a sealed book to many even of the greatest comprehension of mind. It is one thing to think, and speak, and reason on the perfections of God, as an object of science, and another to glorify him as God, or to have a deep and awful impression of him upon our hearts. Real believers will know this by experience. A discovery of the glory of God, is not to inform them of a truth which they never heard before, but to give lively penetrating views of the meaning and importance of those truths of which they had, perhaps, heard and spoken times without number. Sometimes one word spoken of the Eternal, the Almighty, the Holy One, will be carried home upon the conscience and heart with such irresistible force, as to shew them more of God than ever they had seen before, O what a difference is there between the way in which we use the same words in prayer or praise, at one

time, and at another! None but downright atheists will deny the omniscience and omnipresence of God; but how far is this general acknowledgment from that overwhelming sense of his presence which believers have sometimes in his worship in public or in secret. What a new sense of God's presence had Jacob at Bethel, when he said, Gen. 28:16, 17, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not: and he was afraid, and said, how dreadful is this place? this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" What a sense of God's presence had Hagar, Gen. 16:13, when "she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, thou, God seest me; for, she said, have I also here looked after him that seeth me?" or Job when he expresses himself thus, Job 42:5, 6, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes?"

I shall only further observe, that it plainly appears that this discovery of the glory of God, belongs only to his own people. Wicked men are said, in scripture, to be such as know not God. They are also described a little differently, as not having God in all their thoughts; not but that wicked men may have a general or customary belief in the being and perfections of God, but because they have not that intimate sense of his presence, that discovery of the glory and amiableness of his perfections, which is

peculiar to his own children. Even the natural perfections of God, his power and wisdom, cannot be beheld with such veneration by any, as by those who are sensible of their obligations to serve him. But above all, the glory of his infinite holiness and justice can never be seen, but by those who desire to submit to it; nor the glory of his infinite mercy, but by those who see themselves indebted to it. This leads me to observe,

2. That the believer desires to see the glory of a gracious and reconciled God, not only infinitely glorious in himself, but infinitely merciful to him. This view ought never to be separated from the former. Take away the divine mercy, and the lustre of his other perfections is too strong for us to behold. The power, wisdom, holiness and justice of God, separated from his mercy, speak nothing but unmixed terror to the guilty. It is very probable, that there was something in the desire of Moses, in the text, according to his own view, ignorant and unadvised; but God granted his request only in such a way as could be useful to him. When he says, I beseech thee shew me thy glory, the answer is in the following terms, "I will make all my goodness pass before thee; and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee. And I will be gracious to whom I

will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy." And again, it is said in the following chapter, 6, 7, verses, "And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth. Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin: and that will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the childrens children, unto the third and fourth generation."

We may also see, that in the whole dispensation of divine grace to men, God is represented as coming under a peculiar relation to them; and they are called not only to serve him as God, but to trust in him as their God. Every hearer must be sensible, how essential this is to a believer's desire, of seeing the glory of God. He cannot consider him as God over-all, without, at the same time, remembering, that he is one with whom he hath to do. There is also a necessity here peculiar to ourselves. The holy angels consider him as their Maker and their happiness: but the children of Adam must consider, not only his goodness to the innocent, but his mercy to the guilty. This glory of God shines brightly, and shines only in the face of Jesus Christ. God we are told, "dwelleth in light which no man can approach unto. No man hath seen God at any time; but the only begotten of the Father he hath declared him." In this wonderful dispensation, indeed, all the perfections of God are found united; but above all, "Grace and mercy shine and reign through righteousness, by Jesus Christ our Lord."

Here I must add, that the believer not only desires to see the glory of God's mercy, in general, as displayed in the gospel, in which he may have a share, but to take an appropriating view of it, as what he hath a clear right and title to call his own. Doubtless the mercy of God is published, offering salvation to the chief of sinners. It is their duty to accept of it; it is their interest to cleave to it. But they are many times deterred by what they see in God, they are many times discouraged by what they feel in themselves, and are afraid to assert their title to so great a blessing. But when, by the Holy Spirit, they are enabled to see the infinite price paid for their redemption, in the cross of Christ; when they see the riches of divine grace, in the cross of Christ; when they hear the urgent invitations to them to believe in the cross of Christ; when they are enabled freely to renounce and quit hold of every other claim; when their hearts are sweetly constrained by the bonds of their Redeemer's love; they can then look upon God as their reconciled Father, through him who hath made peace, by the blood of his cross, and say unto him, My Lord! and my God! What an endearing view is this of the divine glory, and what ineffable

satisfaction springs from it, to the soul? What an unspeakable consolation to those who have been wounded in their spirits, and grieved in their minds, when they are enabled to apply the encouraging promises of the holy scriptures? Isa. 1:18. “Come, now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. Isa. 43:25. I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions, for mine own sake; and will not remember thy sins, xlv. 22. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins. Return unto me, for I have redeemed thee.”

3. The believer desires to see the glory of God, as an all-sufficient God. This is a necessary view of God, as the support and happiness of the creature, as well as the strength and consolation of the sinner.

My brethren, man was made for living upon God; forgetting this, he first went astray from him. Self-sufficiency, and a delusive sense of independence, is inseparable from a sinful state. Conviction levels a blow at the foundation of this mistake. Serious consideration shews us how insufficient we are for our own happiness. Daily experience discovers the inherent vanity of all created comforts in themselves, and as separated from God. When the penitent returns to God, he not only returns from the service of other masters, to him, as his rightful Lord; but forsakes all forbidden joys, and cleaves to God as his happiness, and rests in him as his portion. Does not this appear from the uniform language of scripture, with regard to both parts of the covenant? what belongs to God, and what belongs to man. See the tenor of an early promise to the father of the faithful, Gen. 15:1. “Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.” Multitudes of others are of the same import.

The power and providence of God, in behalf of his people, are largely and beautifully described in the ninety-first Psalm. “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust. His truth shall be thy shield and buckler, &c.” 2 Cor. 6:17. “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and will be a father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” On the other hand, the invitation, or exhortation to return, is ordinarily pressed from the profit of the change, Isa. 55:1. “Ho, every one that thirsteth! come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy

and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk, without money, and without price." And, to name no more passages, when God came to establish the faith of Abraham in his promise, he says, Gen. 17:1, "I am the Almighty," or as it ought to be translated, "the all-sufficient God: walk before me, and be thou perfect." Now, believers desire to see the glory of God, as all-sufficient; and all discoveries of this nature are attended with unspeakable complacency and satisfaction. They see the glory of an infinite God as theirs, and rejoice in the richness of their portion. Wearied with repeated disappointments, and deeply convinced of the vanity of the creature, they rest in him, as able to give them complete happiness; happiness that will never change! happiness that will never be exhausted: He that hath chosen God as his portion, hath, as our Saviour beautifully expresseth it, made "choice of that good part, which cannot be taken away from him."

My brethren, we are now come to the very substance of practical religion. The glory of an all-sufficient God, appears as more than a balance to all that pretends to rival him in our affections; to all that we are called to give up for his sake. When the believer sees the fulness of God, then his anxiety, and distressing fears, of every kind, are at an end. Does he want provision? "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof. The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they that seek the Lord, shall not want any good thing." Does he want friends? God is able to make his enemies to be at peace with him. Does he want any outward comfort? God is able to procure it, or make him happy without it. Not to mention particulars; the triumph of faith, in this view, is to attain an absolute and unconditional resignation to the will of God, with a firm persuasion, that he is able to make all things work together for our good, and willing to bestow every thing that is for our real interest. It is to say with the prophet, Hab. 3:17, "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will joy in the God of my salvation."

I shall only add, that the divine all-sufficiency is to be considered, as regarding our sanctification as well as comfort. What distress does not the Christian often suffer from the treachery of his own heart, and from the power of surrounding temptations? Covered with shame for his past unsteadfastness, convinced, by experience, of his own weakness, he hath no other refuge but in God. And what courage does he derive from the fulness of divine perfection, the greatness of divine power, and the faithfulness of the divine promise? "My grace shall be sufficient for thee, and my strength shall be made perfect in weakness." He then says, with

the Psalmist, Ps. 71:16, “I will go in the strength of the Lord God: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only.”

II. I proceed now, in the last place, to make some practical improvement of what hath been said. And,

1st, Let us admire the divine condescension, in admitting his saints to a discovery of his glory. Solomon says, with very great propriety, in the language of astonishment: “But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth?” The same ought to be, nay, the same certainly are, the sentiments of every real believer. But let us remember what has been hinted at above, that our access to God, and our communion with him, is, and only can be, through the Mediator of the new covenant, in whom we have access, by faith, unto God.

2dly, Let me beseech you to try yourselves, whether this ever hath been your attainment, and whether it is your sincere desire? Do you know, in any measure, what it is to see the glory of the true God? Hath he appeared before you in terrible majesty? Have your very souls been made to bow down before him, and to give him the glory that is justly due to his name? Have you seen the glory of a reconciled God? Have you chosen him, in Christ, as your portion? Have you devoted yourselves, without reserve, to his disposal? Again, have you seen the glory of an all-sufficient God? Surely I speak to many who have seen the vanity of the creature. Probably you have tasted a little of the sufferings of a sinful state. Where did you seek your consolation? where do you find your support? Have you learned the holy and happy art of pouring out your souls to God? Have you felt the sweetness of it? And have you said, with the Psalmist, “Return unto thy rest, O my soul! for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee?” Is it your earnest desire to see the glory of God? Can you say with the Psalmist, Ps. 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.”

3dly, I will now proceed to exhort you, in the most earnest manner, to diligence in seeking after real communion with God in his instituted worship. How highly are we favored with light and liberty? how little are many sensible of their privileges? I have often, on such occasions, put you in mind of the fatal effects of a heartless, customary, formal worship: it is provoking to God, pernicious to others, hardening to the heart, and ruining to the soul. Were but a society of those Protestants abroad, who are lying under persecution, to enjoy the season which we now enjoy, what