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The Eternal Continuum

“As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee.”

JOSHUA 1:5

The unconditioned priority of God in His universe is a truth celebrated both in the Old Testament and in the New. The prophet Habakkuk sang it in ecstatic language, “Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One?” (1:12). The apostle John set it forth in careful words deep with meaning, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (1:1–3).

This truth is so necessary to right thoughts about God and ourselves that it can hardly be too strongly emphasized. It is a truth known to everyone, a kind of common property of all religious persons, but for the very reason that it is so common it now has but little meaning for any

of us. It has suffered the fate of which Coleridge writes:

Truths, of all others the most awful and interesting, are too often considered as *so* true that they lose all the power of truth and lie bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with the most despised and exploded errors.

The divine priority is one of those “bed-ridden” truths. I desire to do what I can to rescue it “from the neglect caused by the very circumstance of its universal admission.” Neglected Christian truths can be revitalized only when by prayer and long meditation we isolate them from the mass of hazy ideas with which our minds are filled and hold them steadily and determinedly in the focus of the mind’s attention.

For all things God is the great Antecedent. Because He is, we are and everything else is. He is that “dread, unbeginning One,” self-caused, self-contained and self-sufficient. Faber saw this when he wrote his great hymn in celebration of God’s eternity.

Thou hast no youth, great God,
An Unbeginning End Thou art;
Thy glory in itself abode,
And still abides in its own tranquil heart:
No age can heap its outward years on Thee:
Dear God! Thou art Thyself Thine own eternity.

Do not skip this as merely another poem. The difference between a great Christian life and any other kind lies in the quality of our religious concepts, and the ideas expressed in these six lines *can* be like rungs on Jacob's ladder leading upward to a sounder and more satisfying idea of God.

We cannot think rightly of God until we begin to think of Him as always being *there*, and *there first*. Joshua had this to learn. He had been so long the servant of God's servant Moses, and had with such assurance received God's word at his mouth, that Moses and the God of Moses had become blended in his thinking, so blended that he could hardly separate the two thoughts; by association they always appeared together in his mind. Now Moses is dead, and lest the young Joshua be struck down with despair God spoke to assure him, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee" (Joshua 1:5; 3:7). Nothing had changed and nothing had been lost. Nothing of God dies when a man of God dies.

"As I was—so I will be." Only God could say this. Only the Eternal One could stand in the timeless I AM and say, "I was" and "I will be."

Here we acknowledge (and there is fear and wonder in the thought) the essential unity of God's nature, the timeless persistence of His changeless being throughout eternity and time. Here we begin to see and feel the eternal continuum. Begin where we will, God is there first. He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end-

ing, which was, and which is and which is to come, the Almighty. If we grope back to the farthest limits of thought where imagination touches the pre-creation void, we shall find God there. In one unified present glance He comprehends all things from everlasting, and the flutter of a seraph's wing a thousand ages hence is seen by Him now without moving His eyes.

Once I should have considered such thoughts to be mere metaphysical bric-a-brac without practical meaning for anyone in a world such as this. Now I recognize them as sound and easy-to-grasp truths with unlimited potential for good. Failure to get a right viewpoint in the beginning of our Christian lives may result in weakness and sterility for the rest of our days. May not the inadequacy of much of our spiritual experience be traced back to our habit of skipping through the corridors of the kingdom like children through the marketplace, chattering about everything, but pausing to learn the true value of nothing?

In my creature impatience I am often caused to wish that there were some way to bring modern Christians into a deeper spiritual life painlessly by short, easy lessons; but such wishes are vain. No shortcut exists. God has not bowed to our nervous haste nor embraced the methods of our machine age. It is well that we accept the hard truth now: *The man who would know God must give time to Him.* He must count no time wasted which is spent in the cultivation of His acquaintance. He must give himself to meditation and prayer hours on end. So

did the saints of old, the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets and the believing members of the holy church in all generations. And so must we if we would follow in their train.

We would think of God, then, as maintaining the unity of His uncreated being throughout all His works and His years, as ever saying not only, "I did," and "I will do," but also "I do" and "I am doing."

A robust faith requires that we grasp this truth firmly, yet we know how seldom such a thought enters our minds. We habitually stand in our *now* and look back by faith to see the past filled with God. We look forward and see Him inhabiting our future; but our *now* is uninhabited except for ourselves. Thus we are guilty of a kind of temporary atheism which leaves us alone in the universe while, for the time, God is not. We talk of Him much and loudly, but we secretly think of Him as being absent, and we think of ourselves as inhabiting a parenthetical interval between the God who was and the God who will be. And we are lonely with an ancient and cosmic loneliness. We are each like a little child lost in a crowded market, who has strayed but a few feet from its mother, yet because she cannot be seen the child is inconsolable. So we try by every method devised by religion to relieve our fears and heal our hidden sadness; but with all our efforts we remain unhappy still, with the settled despair of men alone in a vast and deserted universe.

But for all our fears we are not alone. Our trouble is

that we *think* of ourselves as being alone. Let us correct the error by thinking of ourselves as standing by the bank of a full flowing river; then let us think of that river as being none else but God Himself. We glance to our left and see the river coming full out of our past; we look to the right and see it flowing on into our future. *But we see also that it is flowing through our present.* And in our today it is the same as it was in our yesterday, not less than, nor different from, but the very same river, one unbroken continuum, undiminished, active and strong as it moves sovereignly on into our tomorrow.

Wherever faith has been original, wherever it has proved itself to be real, it has invariably had upon it a sense of the *present God*. The holy Scriptures possess in marked degree this feeling of actual encounter with a real Person. The men and women of the Bible talked with God. They spoke to Him and heard Him speak in words they could understand. With Him they held person-to-person interaction, and a sense of shining reality is upon their words and deeds.

The world's own prophets, the unbelieving psychologists (those eyeless seekers who seek for a light which is not God's light) have been forced to recognize at the bottom of religious experience this sense of *something there*. But better far is the sense of *Someone there*. It was this that filled with abiding wonder the first members of the church of Christ. The solemn delight which those early disciples knew sprang straight from the conviction that

there was One in the midst of them. They knew that the Majesty in the heavens was confronting them on earth: They were in the very Presence of God. And the power of that conviction to arrest attention and hold it for a lifetime, to elevate, to transform, to fill with uncontrollable moral happiness, to send men singing to prison and to death, has been one of the wonders of history and a marvel of the world.

Our fathers have told us and our own hearts confirm how wonderful is this sense of Someone there. It makes religion invulnerable to critical attack. It secures the mind against collapse under the battering of the enemy. They who worship the God who is present may ignore the objections of unbelieving men. Their experience is self-verifying and needs neither defense nor proof. What they see and hear overwhelms their doubts and confirms their assurance beyond the power of argument to destroy.

Some who desire to be teachers of the Word, but who understand neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm, insist upon “naked” faith as the only way to know spiritual things. By this they mean a conviction of the trustworthiness of the Word of God (a conviction, it may be noted, which the devils share with them).

But the man who has been taught even slightly by the Spirit of Truth will rebel at this perversion. His language will be, “I have heard Him and observed Him. What have I to do any more with idols?” For he cannot love a God who is no more than a deduction from a text.

He will crave to know God with a vital awareness that goes beyond words and to live in the intimacy of personal communion. To seek our divinity merely in books and writings is *to seek the living among the dead*; we do but in vain many times seek God in these, where His truth too often is not so much enshrined as entombed. He is best discerned by an intellectual touch of Him. We must see with our eyes, and hear with our ears, and our hands must handle of the Word of Life.

Nothing can take the place of the *touch* of God in the soul and the sense of Someone there. Real faith, indeed, brings such realization, for real faith is never the operation of reason upon texts. Where true faith is, the knowledge of God will be given as a fact of consciousness altogether apart from the conclusions of logic.

Were a man to awaken in the pitch dark at midnight and hear someone moving about in his room and know that the unseen presence was a loved member of his family who had every right to be there, his heart might be filled with a sense of quiet pleasure; but should he have reason to believe that an intruder had entered, perhaps to rob or to kill, he would lie in terror and stare at the darkness not knowing from which direction the expected blow might come. But *the difference between experience and no experience would be that acute sense of someone there*. Is it not true that for most of us who call ourselves Christians there is no real experience? We have substituted theological ideas for an arresting encounter; we are

full of religious notions, but our great weakness is that for our hearts there is no one there.

Whatever else it embraces, true Christian experience must always include a genuine encounter with God. Without this, religion is but a shadow, a reflection of reality, a cheap copy of an original once enjoyed by someone else of whom we have heard. It cannot but be a major tragedy in the life of any man to live in a church from childhood to old age and know nothing more real than some synthetic god compounded of theology and logic, but having no eyes to see, no ears to hear and no heart to love.

The spiritual giants of old were men who at some time became acutely conscious of the real Presence of God and maintained that consciousness for the rest of their lives. The first encounter may have been one of terror, as when a "horror of great darkness" fell upon Abram, or as when Moses at the bush hid his face because he was afraid to look upon God. Usually this fear soon lost its content of terror and changed after a while to delightful awe, to level off finally into a reverent sense of complete nearness to God. The essential point is, *they experienced God*. How otherwise can the saints and prophets be explained? How otherwise can we account for the amazing power for good they have exercised over countless generations? Is it not that they walked in conscious communion with the real Presence and addressed their prayers to God with the artless conviction that they were addressing Someone actually there?

Without doubt we have suffered the loss of many spiritual treasures because we have let slip the simple truth that the miracle of the perpetuation of life is in God. God did not create life and toss it from Him like some petulant artist disappointed with his work. All life is in Him and out of Him, flowing from Him and returning to Him again, a moving indivisible sea of which He is the Fountainhead. That eternal life which was with the Father is now the possession of believing men, and that life is not God's gift only, but His very self.

Redemption is not a strange work which God for a moment turned aside to do; rather it is His same work performed in a new field, the field of human catastrophe. The regeneration of a believing soul is but a recapitulation of all His work done from the moment of creation. It is hard to miss the parallel between generation as described in the Old Testament and regeneration as described in the New. How, for instance, could the condition of a lost soul better be described than by the words, "without form, and void" with darkness "upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2)? And how could the strong yearnings of God's heart over that lost soul be more perfectly expressed than by saying that "the Spirit of God brooded upon the face of the waters" (see 1:2)? And from what source could light come to that sin-shrouded soul had God not said, "Let there be light" (1:3)? At His word the light breaks and the lost man arises to drink of eternal life and follow the Light of the World. As order and fruit-

fulness came next to that ancient creation, so moral order and spiritual fruit follow next in human experience. And we know that God is the same and His years fail not. He will always act like Himself wherever He is found at work and whatever work He is doing.

We need to seek deliverance from our vain and weakening wish to go back and recover the past. We should seek to be cleansed from the childish notion that to have lived in Abram's day, or in Paul's, would have been better than to live today. With God Abram's day and this day are the same. By one single impulse of life He created all days and all times, so that the life of the first day and the life of the remotest future day are united in Him. We may well sing again (and believe) the truth our fathers sang:

Eternity with all its years,
 Stands present in Thy view;
To Thee there's nothing old appears;
 Great God, there's nothing new.

In saving men God is but doing again (or rather continuing to do) the same creative work as at the beginning of the world. To Him each ransomed soul is a world wherein He performs again His pleasant work as of old.

We who experience God in this day may rejoice that we have in Him all that Abraham or David or Paul could have; indeed the very angels before the throne can have no more than we, for they can have no more God and

can want nothing apart from Him. And all that He is and all that He has done is for us and for all who share the common salvation. With full consciousness of our own demerit we may yet take our place in the love of God, and the poorest and weakest of us may without offense claim for ourselves all the riches of the Godhead in mercy given. I have every right to claim all for myself, knowing that an infinite God can give all of Himself to each of His children. He does not distribute Himself that each may have a part, but to each one He gives all of Himself as fully as if there were no others.

What a difference it makes when we cease being general (a dodge, incidentally, for pseudo-humility and unbelief) and become pointed and personal in our approach to God. Then we shall not fear the personal pronoun but shall with the friends of God relate it to the One who gave it and claim each one for himself the Person and work of the Triune God. Then we shall see that all that God did was for each of us. Then we can sing:

For me Thou didst cover Thyself with light as with a garment and stretch out the heavens like a curtain and lay the foundations of the earth. For me Thou didst appoint the moon for seasons and the sun knoweth his going down. For me Thou didst make every beast of the earth after his kind and every herb bearing seed and every tree in which is the fruit of a tree. For me prophet wrote and psalmist sang. For me holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

For me Christ died, and the redemptive benefits of that death are by the miracle of His present life perpetuated forever, as efficacious now as on the day He bowed His head and gave up the ghost. And when He arose the third day it was for me; and when He poured out upon the disciples the promised Holy Spirit it was that He might continue *in me* the work He had been doing *for me* since the morning of the creation.