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## GOD'S EXHAUSTIVE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN.

BY REV. WM. G. T. SHEDD, D.D.

*"O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my down-sitting and mine up-rising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compasses my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it."*—PSALM cxxxix. 1—6.

ONE of the most remarkable characteristics of a rational being is the power of self-inspection. The brute creation possesses many attributes that are common to human nature, but it has no faculty that bears even the remotest resemblance to that of self-examination. Instinctive action, undoubtedly, approaches the nearest of any to human action. That wonderful power by which the bee builds up a structure that is not exceeded in accuracy, and regularity, and economy of space, by the best geometry of Athens or of Rome; by which the beaver, after having chosen the very best possible location for itself on the stream, constructs a dam that outlasts the work of the human engineer; by which the faithful dog contrives to perform many acts of affection, in spite of obstacles, and in the face of unexpected discouragements—the instinct, we say, of the brute creation, as exhibited in a remarkably wide range of action and contrivance, and in a very varied and oftentimes perplexing conjuncture of circumstances, seems to bring man and beast very near to each other, and to furnish some ground for the theory of the materialist, that there is no essential difference between the two species of existences. But when we pass beyond the mere

power of acting, to the additional power of surveying or inspecting an act, and of forming an estimate of its relations to moral law, we find a faculty in man that makes him differ in kind from the brute. No brute animal, however high up the scale, however ingenious and sagacious he may be, can ever look back and think of what he has done, "his thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing him."

But this characteristic of a rational being, though thus distinctive and common to every man that lives, is exceedingly marvellous. Like the air we breathe, like the light we see, it involves a mystery that no man has ever solved. Self-consciousness has been the problem and the thorn of the philosophic mind in all ages; and the mystery is not yet unravelled. Is not that a wonderful process by which a man knows, not some other thing, but himself? Is not that a strange act by which he, for a time, duplicates his own unity, and sets himself to look at himself? All other acts of consciousness are comparatively plain and explicable. When we look at an object other than ourselves—when we behold a tree or the sky—the act of knowledge is much more simple and easy to be explained. For then there is something outside of us and in front of us, and another thing than we are, at which we look, and which we behold. But in this act of self-inspection there is no second thing, external and extant to us, which we contemplate. That which is seen is one and the same identical object with that which sees. The act of knowledge which in all other instances requires the existence of two things—a thing to be known and a thing to know—in this instance is performed with only one. It is the individual soul that sees, and it is that very same individual soul that is seen. It is the individual man that knows, and it is that very identical man that is known. The eyeball looks at the eyeball.

And when this power of self-inspection is connected with the power of memory the mystery of human existence becomes yet more complicated, and its explanation still more baffling. Is it not exceedingly wonderful that we are able to re-exhibit our

own thoughts and feelings; that we can call back what has gone clear by in our experience, and steadily look at it once more? Is it not a mystery that we can summon before our mind's eye feelings, purposes, desires, and thoughts which occurred in the soul long years ago, and which, perhaps, until this moment we have not thought of for years? Is it not a marvel that they come up with all the vividness with which they first took origin in our experience, and that the lapse of time has deprived them of none of their first outlines or colours? Is it not strange that we can recall that one particular feeling of hatred toward a fellow-man which rankled in the heart twenty years ago; that we can now eye it, and see it as plainly as if it were still throbbing within us; that we can feel guilty for it once more, as if we were still cherishing it? If it were not so common, would it not be surprising that we can reflect upon acts of disobedience toward God which we committed in the days of childhood, and far back in the dim twilights of moral agency; that we can re-act them, as it were, in our memory, and fill ourselves again with the shame and distress that attended their original commission? Is it not one of those mysteries which overhang human existence, and from which that of the brute is wholly free, that man can live his life, and act his agency over, and over, and over again, indefinitely and for ever, in his self-consciousness; that he can cause all his deeds to pass and re-pass before his self-reflection, and be filled through and through with the agony of self-knowledge? Truly such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from my own spirit, and whither shall I flee from my own presence? If I ascend up into heaven, it is there looking at me. If I make my bed in hell, behold it is there torturing me. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there must I know myself, and acquit or condemn myself.

But if that knowledge whereby man knows himself is mysterious, then certainly that whereby God knows him is far more so. That act whereby another being knows my secret thoughts

and inmost feelings is most certainly inexplicable. That cognition whereby another person understands what takes place in the corners of my heart, and sees the minutest movements of my spirit, is surely high ; most surely I cannot attain unto it.

And yet it is a truth of revelation that God searches the heart of man ; that he knows his downsitting and uprising, and understands his thought afar off ; that he compasses his path and his lying down, and is acquainted with all his ways. And yet it is a deduction of reason, also, that because God is the creator of the human mind, he must perfectly understand its secret agencies ; that he in whose essence man lives and moves and has his being, must behold every motion, and feel every stirring of the human spirit. "He that planted the ear, shall he not hear ? He that formed the eye, shall he not see ?" Let us, then, ponder the fact of God's exhaustive knowledge of man's soul, that we may realize it, and thereby come under its solemn power and impression. For all religion, all holy and reverential fear of God, rises and sets, as in an atmosphere, in the thought : "Thou, God, seest me."

1. In analyzing and estimating the Divine knowledge of the human soul, we find, in the first place, that God accurately and exhaustively knows *all that man knows of himself*.

Every man in a Christian land who is in the habit of frequenting the house of God possesses more or less of that self-knowledge of which we have spoken. He thinks of the moral character of some of his own thoughts. He reflects upon the moral quality of some of his own feelings. He considers the ultimate tendency of some of his own actions. In other words, there is a part of his inward and his outward life with which he is uncommonly well acquainted—of which he has a distinct perception. There are some thoughts of his mind at which he blushes at the very time of their origin, because he is vividly aware what they are and what they mean. There are some emotions of his heart at which he trembles and recoils at the very moment of their uprising, because he perceives clearly that they involve a very malignant depravity. There are some act-

ings of his will of whose wickedness he is painfully conscious at the very instant of their rush and movement. We are not called upon, here, to say how many of a man's thoughts, feelings, and determinations, are thus subjected to his self-inspection at the very time of their origin, and are known in the clear light of self-knowledge. We are not concerned, at this point, with the amount of this man's self-inspection and self-knowledge. We are only saying that there is some experience such as this in his personal history, and that he does know something of himself, at the very time of action, with a clearness and a distinctness that makes him start, or blush, or fear.

Now we say, that in reference to all this intimate self-knowledge, all this best part of a man's information respecting himself, he is not superior to God. He may be certain that in no particular does he know more of himself than the Searcher of hearts knows. He may be an uncommonly thoughtful person, and little of what is done within his soul may escape his notice—nay, we will make the extreme supposition that he arrests every thought as it rises, and looks at it; that he analyzes every sentiment as it swells his heart; that he scrutinizes every purpose as it determines his will—even if he should have such a thorough and profound self-knowledge as this, God knows him equally profoundly, and equally thoroughly. Nay, more, this process of self-inspection may go on indefinitely, and the man may grow more and more thoughtful, and obtain an everlasting augmenting knowledge of what he is and what he does, so that it shall seem to him that he is going down so far along that path which the vulture's eye hath not seen, is penetrating so deeply into those dim and shadowy regions of consciousness where the external life takes its very first start, as to be beyond the reach of any eye, and the ken of any intelligence but his own, and then he may be sure that God understands the thought that is afar off and deep down, and that at this lowest range and plane in his experience he besets him behind and before.

Or, this man, like the most of mankind, may be an unreflecting person. Then, in this case, thoughts, feelings, and purposes are continually rising up within his soul like the

clouds and exhalations of an evaporating deluge, and at the time of their rise he subjects them to no scrutiny of conscience, and is not pained in the least by their moral character and significance. He lacks self-knowledge altogether at these points in his history. But, notice that the fact that he is not self-inspecting at these points cannot destroy the fact that he is acting at them. The fact that he is not a spectator of his own transgression does not alter the fact that he is the author of it. If this man, for instance, thinks over his worldly affairs on God's holy day, and, perhaps, in God's holy house, with such an absorption and such a pleasure that he entirely drowns the voice of conscience while he is so doing, and self-inspection is banished for the time, it will not do for him to plead this absence of a distinct and painful consciousness of what his mind was actually doing in the house of God, and upon the Lord's day, as the palliative and excuse of his wrong thoughts. If this man, again, indulges in an envious or a sensual emotion with such an energy and entireness as for the time being to preclude all action of the higher powers of reason and self-reflection, so that for the time being he is not in the least troubled by a sense of his wickedness, it will be no excuse for him at the eternal bar that he was not thinking of his envy or his lust at the time when he felt it. And therefore it is that accountableness covers the whole field of human agency, and God holds us responsible for our thoughtless sin, as well as for our deliberate transgression.

In the instance, then, of the thoughtless man, in the case where there is little or no self-examination, God unquestionably knows the man as well as the man knows himself. The Omniscient One is certainly possessed of an amount of knowledge equal to that small modicum which is all that a rational and immortal soul can boast of in reference to itself. But the vast majority of mankind fall into this class. The self-examiners are very few in comparison with the millions who possess the power to look into their hearts, but who rarely or never do so. The great God our Judge, then, surely knows the mass of men, in their down-sitting and uprising, with a know-



ledge that is equal to their own. And thus do we establish our first position, that God knows all that the man knows; God's knowledge is equal to the very best part of man's knowledge.

2. We come, now, to the second position: that *God accurately and exhaustively knows all that man might, but does not, know of himself.*

Although the Creator designed that every man should thoroughly understand his own heart, and gave him the power of self-inspection that he might use it faithfully, and apply it constantly, yet man is extremely ignorant of himself. Mankind, says an old writer, are nowhere less at home than at home. Very few persons practise serious self-examination at all; and none employ the power of self-inspection with that carefulness and sedulity with which they ought. Hence men generally, and unrenewed men always, are unacquainted with much that goes on within their own minds and hearts. Though it is sin and self-will, though it is thought and feeling, and purpose and desire, that is going on and taking place during all these years of religious indifference, yet the agent himself, so far as a sober reflection upon the moral character of the process, and a distinct perception of the dreadful issue of it, are concerned, is much of the time as destitute of self-knowledge as an irrational brute itself. For were sinful men constantly self-examining, they would be constantly in torment. Men can be happy in sin only so long as they can sin without thinking of it. The instant they begin to perceive and understand what they are doing, they begin to feel the fang of the worm. If the frivolous, wicked world which now takes so much pleasure in its wickedness could be forced to do here what it will be forced to do hereafter—namely, to eye its sin while it commits it, to think of what it is doing while it does it—the billows of the lake of fire would roll in upon time, and from gay Paris and luxurious Vienna there would instantaneously ascend the wailing cry of Pandemonium.

But it is not so at present. Men here upon earth are continually thinking sinful thoughts and cherishing sinful feelings, and yet

they are not continually in hell. On the contrary, "they are not in trouble as other men are, neither are they plagued like other men. Their eyes stand out with fatness; they have more than heart could wish." This proves that they are self-ignorant; that they know neither their sin nor its bitter end. They sin without the consciousness of sin, and hence are happy in it. Is it not so in our own personal experience? Have there not been in the past ten years of our own mental history long trains of thought—sinful thought—and vast processions of feelings and imaginings—sinful feelings and imaginings—that have trailed over the spaces of the soul, but which have been as unwatched and unseen by the self-inspecting eye of conscience, as the caravans of the African desert have been, during the same period, by the eye of our sense? We have not felt a pang of guilt every single time that we have thought a wrong thought; yet we should have felt one inevitably had we scrutinized every such single thought. Our face has not flushed with crimson in every particular instance in which we have exercised a lustful emotion; yet it would have done so had we carefully noted every such emotion. A distinct self-knowledge has by no means run parallel with all our sinful activity; has by no means been co-extensive with it. We perform vastly more than we inspect. We have sinned vastly more than we have been aware of at the time.

Even the Christian in whom this unreflecting species of life and conduct has given way, somewhat, to a thoughtful and vigilant life, knows and acknowledges that perfection is not yet come. As he casts his eye over even his regenerate and illuminated life, and sees what a small amount of sin has been distinctly detected, keenly felt, and heartily confessed, in comparison with that large amount of sin which he knows he must have committed during this long period of incessant action of mind, heart, and limbs, he finds no repose for his misgivings with respect to the final examination and account, except by enveloping himself yet more entirely in the ample folds of his Redeemer's righteousness; except by hiding himself yet more profoundly in the cleft of that Rock of Ages which protects the

chief of sinners from the insufferable splendours and terrors of the Divine glory and holiness as it passes by. Even the Christian knows that he must have committed many sins in thoughtless moments and hours—many sins of which he was not deliberately thinking at the time of their commission—and must pray with David, “Cleanse thou me from secret faults.” The functions and operations of memory evince that such is the case. Are we not sometimes, in our serious hours when memory is busy, convinced of sins which at the time of their commission were wholly unaccompanied with a sense of their sinfulness? The act in this instance was performed blindly, without self-inspection, and therefore without self-conviction. Ten years, we will say, have intervened—years of new activity, and immensely varied experiences. And now the magic power of recollection sets us back, once more, at that point of responsible action, and bids us do what we did not do at the time—analyze our performance and feel consciously guilty, experience the first sensation of remorse for what we did ten years ago. Have we not been vividly reminded that upon such an occasion, and at such time, we were angry, or proud, but, at the time when the emotion was swelling our veins, were not filled with that clear and painful sense of its turpitude which now attends the recollection of it? The re-exhibition of an action in memory, as in a mirror, is often accompanied with a distinct apprehension of its moral character that formed no part of the experience of the agent while absorbed in the hot and hasty original action itself. And when we remember how immense are the stores of memory, and what an amount of sin has been committed in hours of thoughtlessness and moral indifference, what prayer is more natural and warm than the supplication: “Search me, O God, and try me, and see what evil ways there are within me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

But the careless unenlightened man, as we have before remarked, leads a life almost entirely destitute of self-inspection and self-knowledge. He sins constantly. He does only evil, and that continually, as did man before the deluge; for he is constantly

acting. A living self-moving soul like his cannot cease action if it would. And yet the current is all one way. Day after day sends up its clouds of sensual, worldly, selfish thoughts. Week after week pours onward its stream of low-born, corrupt, unspiritual feelings. Year after year accumulates that hardening mass of carnal-mindedness and distaste for religion which is sometimes a more insuperable obstacle to the truth than positive faults and vices which startle and shock the conscience. And yet the man thinks nothing about all this action of his mind and heart. He does not subject it to any self-inspection. If he should, for but one single hour, be lifted up to the eminence from which all this current of self-will and moral agency may be seen and surveyed in its real character and significance, he would start back as if brought to the brink of hell. But he is not thus lifted up. He continues to use and abuse his mental and his moral faculties, but, for most of his probation, with all the blindness and heedlessness of a mere animal instinct.

There is, then, a vast amount of sin committed without self-inspection, and, consequently, without any distinct perception at the time that it is sin. The Christian will find himself feeling guilty for the first time for a transgression that occurred far back in the past, and will need a fresh application of atoning blood. The sinner will find, at some period or other, that remorse is fastening its tooth in his conscience for a vast amount of sinful thought, feeling, desire, and motive, that took origin in the unembarrassed days of religious thoughtlessness and worldly enjoyment.

For, think you, that the insensible sinner is always to be thus insensible that this power of self-inspection is eternally to "rust unused"? What a tremendous revelation will one day be made to an unreflecting transgressor, simply because he is a man and not a brute, has lived a human life, and is endowed with the power of self-knowledge, whether he has used it or not! What a terrific vision it will be for him when the limitless line of his sins which he has not yet distinctly examined, and

thought of, and repented of, shall be made to pass in slow procession before that inward eye which he has wickedly kept shut so long ! Tell us not of the disclosures that shall be made when the sea shall give up the dead that are in it, and the graves shall open and surrender their dead. What are these material disclosures when compared with the revelations of self-knowledge ! What is all this external display, sombre and terrible as it will be to the outward eye, when compared with all that internal revealing that will be made to a hitherto thoughtless soul when, of a sudden, in the day of judgment, its deepest caverns shall heave in unison with the material convulsions of the day, and shall send forth to judgment their long slumbering and hidden iniquity ; when the sepulchres of its own memory shall burst open, and give up the sin that has long laid buried there, in heedless and guilty forgetfulness, awaiting this second resurrection !

For (to come back to the unfolding of the subject and the movement of the argument) God perfectly knows all that man might, but does not, know of himself. Though the transgressor is ignorant of much of his sin, because at the time of its commission he sins blindly as well as wilfully, and unreflectingly as well as freely ; and though the transgressor has forgotten much of that small amount of sin of which he was conscious, and by which he was pained, at the the time of its perpetration ; though on the side of man the powers of self-inspection and memory have accomplished so little towards the preservation of man's sin, yet God knows it all and remembers it all. He compasseth man's path and his lying-down, and is acquainted with all his ways. " There is nothing covered, therefore, that shall not be revealed, neither hid that shall not be known. Whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light ; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the house-tops." The Creator of the human mind has control ever its powers of self-inspection and of memory ; and when the proper time comes he will compel these endowments to perform their legitimate functions, and

do their appointed work. The torturing self-survey will begin, never more to end. The awful recollection will commence, endlessly to go on.

And here let us for a moment look upon the bright as well as the dark side of this subject ; for if God's exhaustive knowledge of the human heart wakens dread in one of its aspects, it starts infinite hope in another. If that Being has gone down into these depths of human depravity, and seen it with a more abhorring glance than could ever shoot from a finite eye, and yet has returned with a cordial offer to forgive it all, and a hearty proffer to cleanse it all away, then we can lift up the eye in adoration and in hope. There has been an infinite forbearance and condescension. The worst has been seen, and that, too, by the holiest of beings, and yet eternal glory is offered to us ! God knows, from personal examination, the worthlessness of human character with a thoroughness and intensity of knowledge of which man has no conception ; and yet, in the light of this knowledge, in the very flame of this intuition, he has devised a plan of mercy and redemption. Do not think, then, because of your present ignorance of your guilt and corruption, that the incarnation and death of the Son of God was unnecessary, and that that costly blood of atonement which you are treading under foot wet the rocks of Calvary for a peccadillo. Could you but, for a moment only, know yourself *altogether* and *exhaustively*, as the Author of this redemption knows you, you would cry out, in the words of a far holier man than you are, "I am undone." If you could but see guilt as God sees it, you would also see, with him, that nothing but an infinite Passion can expiate it. If you could but fathom the human heart as God fathoms it, you would know, as he knows, that nothing less than regeneration can purify its fountains of uncleanness, and cleanse it from its ingrain corruption.

Thus have we seen that God knows man altogether ; that he knows all that man knows of himself, and all that man might, but does not yet, know of himself. The Searcher of hearts knows all the thoughts that we have thought upon, all the

reflections that we have reflected upon, all the experience that we have ourselves analysed and inspected. And he also knows that far larger part of our life which we have not yet subjected to the scrutiny of self-examination—all those thoughts, feelings, desires, and motives, innumerable as they are, of which we took no heed at the time of their origin and existence, and which we suppose, perhaps, we shall hear no more of again. Whither, then, shall we go from God's spirit? or whither shall we flee from his presence and his knowledge? If we ascend up into heaven, he is there, and knows us perfectly. If we make our bed in hell, behold he is there, and reads the secret thoughts and feelings of our heart. The darkness hideth not from him; our ignorance does not affect his knowledge; the night shineth as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to him.

This great truth which we have been considering obtains a yet more serious emphasis, and a yet more solemn power over the mind, when we take into view the character of the Being who thus searches our hearts, and is acquainted with all our ways. Who of us would not be filled with uneasiness, if he knew that an imperfect fellow-creature were looking constantly into his soul? Would not the flush of shame often burn upon our cheek, if we knew that a sinful man like ourselves were watching all the feelings and thoughts that are rising within us? Should we not be more circumspect than we are, if men were able mutually to search each other's hearts? How often does a man change his course of conduct, when he discovers, accidentally, that his neighbour knows what he is doing!

But it is not an imperfect fellow-man, it is not a perfect angel, who besets us behind and before, and is acquainted with all our ways. It is the immaculate God himself. It is he before whom archangels veil their faces, and the burning seraphim cry, "Holy!" It is he in whose sight the pure cerulean heavens are not clean, and whose eyes are a flame of fire devouring all iniquity. We are beheld, in all this process of sin, be it blind or be it intelligent, by Infinite Purity. We are not, therefore, to suppose that God contemplates this our life of sin with the dull indifference of an Epicurean deity; that he looks into our souls, all this

while, from mere curiosity, and with no moral emotions towards us. The God who knows us altogether is the Holy One of Israel, whose wrath is both real, and revealed, against all unrighteousness.

If, therefore, we connect the holy nature and pure essence of God with all this unceasing and unerring inspection of the human soul, does not the truth which we have been considering speak with a bolder emphasis, and acquire an additional power to impress and solemnize the mind? When we realize that the Being who is watching us at every instant, and in every act and element of our existence, is the very same Being who revealed himself amidst the lightnings of Sinai as hating sin and not clearing the thoughtless guilty, do not our prospects at the bar of justice look dark and fearful? For who of the race of man is holy enough to stand such an inspection? Who of the sons of men will prove pure in such a furnace?

Are we not, then, brought by this truth close up to the central doctrine of Christianity, and made to see our need of the atonement and righteousness of the Redeemer? How can we endure such a scrutiny as God is instituting into our character and conduct? What can we say, in the day of reckoning, when the Searcher of hearts shall make known to us all that he knows of us? What can we do in that day which shall reveal the thoughts and the estimates of the Holy One respecting us?

Find out your sin, then. God will forgive all that is found. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. The great God delights to forgive, and is waiting to forgive. But sin must be seen by the sinner before it can be pardoned by the Judge. If you refuse at this point; if you hide yourself from yourself; if you preclude all feeling and conviction upon the subject of sin by remaining ignorant of it; if you continue to live an easy, thoughtless life in sin, then you cannot be forgiven, and the measure of God's love with which he would have blessed you had you searched yourself and repented, will be the measure of God's righteous wrath with which he will search you and condemn you because you have not.