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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE AWFULNESS OF ERROR.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 3RD FEBRUARY, 1867, BY

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AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET.

“For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God.”—1 Corinthians i. 21.

You must read our last Sunday morning sermon upon this text in order to ascertain the kinds of wisdom, or that kind of wisdom, by which the world knoweth not God. It doth not, as I then said, mean that wisdom, discretion, and prudence—let the wisdom relate to what it may,—by which the affairs of this world and business are managed and carried on; but it means that wisdom that interferes with God's truth; it means that wisdom wherein a man is wiser in his own eyes than the glorious gospel of the blessed God. And in addition to the four kinds of wisdom we then pointed out which the Lord had made foolishness, we have in our text three more things to attend to. It saith, “For after that”—it is after God had made foolish the wisdom of this world,—“after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God.”

I have first to notice *the wisdom of God in making it impossible for any one to know him but by his truth*. I secondly have to point out *what it is to know him in his own wisdom*. I thirdly have to point out *what it is to know him in his own wisdom in that order of things to which Christ belongs*.

Now first we have to notice *the wisdom of God in making it impossible for any one to know him but by his truth; that is, his own wisdom*. And this part I enter upon with a great deal of diffidence; not that I have any doubt in my mind as to what I am going to advance being scriptural, but from a consciousness of my inability to do justice to such a department as this. First, then, God has so ordered it in his wisdom that no man shall savingly know him but in and by his own wisdom. Let us see if we can get at the wisdom of God in this; to see the wisdom and goodness of God in excluding men from a saving knowledge of himself by any means but that of his own truth. The Saviour saw a wisdom in this, and he thanked

God for this department, for this exercise of his wisdom, and even rejoiced in spirit and said, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight." Now the wise and prudent there mean the same character; for it is a quotation from Isaiah, 5th chapter, 21st verse, where it is said, "Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!" Now the two words there, "wise and prudent," must be the key to that text.

"In vain they do worship me." Now mark, they are worshippers, sincere as was Saul of Tarsus, zealous; perhaps you can find no fault with them in their lives worth speaking of, everything that may seem desirable; yet the solemn declaration that a man may be a moral, a zealous, an earnest worshipper of God; he may even give his very goods to feed the poor, and his body to be burned;—"In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

I will assign three reasons that appear to me to demonstrate the wisdom of God in making it impossible for men to know him savingly, or serve him, or be accepted of him, except by his own truth. First, if the Lord suffered men to know him, to have access to him, and come to heaven at last by any false doctrine, see what a distortion that would be of his love. False doctrine would misrepresent his love; it would not represent it in its freeness, greatness, sovereignty, and stability. False doctrines would misrepresent electing grace, and many doctrines of men, as you know, not only misrepresent that, but deny it altogether. False doctrine would distort the Saviour most awfully. Here is one doctrine declaring the Saviour to be only man, and not at the same time truly and personally God. Here is another doctrine, Irvingism, declaring that he had the same corrupt nature that we have. Here is another doctrine declaring that the Saviour shed his infinitely precious blood for thousands that are now in hell; that he tried by an exercise of omnipotency to deliver them, but failed to do so. See what a distortion it would be of God's love, of God's electing grace, and the work of grace; and see what a distortion it would be of the work of the Holy Spirit. Why, it would substitute, as you know, the gospels of men, it would substitute the ceremonies of men. Only think of it; in the Church of England here is an infant sprinkled: for the priest to have the boldness, the arrogance, the audacity, the daring, the Satanic blindness and blasphemy, to attribute to that purely human invention saving grace, and that infant is hereby made a partaker, an inheritor of the kingdom of God! Why, Satan himself could not invent a greater lie or a greater delusion. And then their system of godfathers and godmothers; and then their transubstantiation, for that is what they are driving to, and various other ceremonies;—see how all this would distort and set aside the work of the eternal Spirit, and put something else into the place thereof. It would distort and misrepresent everything. Why, how could God be worshipped in heaven if you can get to heaven by a Christ that is not God? if you may get to heaven by a Christ that himself was not holy, and another could get to heaven by ceremony without regeneration—one in one way, and another in another? Why, when we got there we should be a complete Babel. We should say, Well, we read in the Bible that they were all to know him, and that there was to be the unity of the faith, and the unity of the Spirit, and that it was good to eternity for the brethren to dwell together in unity; but where is the unity? See the wisdom of God, then, in not suffering his great and essential plan to be distorted. He will not allow himself to be misrepresented to his own children. There is a soul—that soul shall know how I have loved it. There is a soul—that soul shall know how I have chosen it. There is a soul—that soul shall know how I have

redeemed it, called it, and justified it. That soul shall know how I preserve it, on what principles I preserve it; and that soul shall know the purity of the source of its salvation; that soul shall know how that salvation is maintained; that soul shall know me in my thoughts of love, and in my counsels. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him." Again, think of the solemn words, for to my mind they are deeply solemn, "In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." And remember that every distortion of a Bible doctrine makes that doctrine, though taken from the Bible, yet if it be a perversion of the Bible, that is the commandment of men. Those that came to Galatia did not bring another gospel, yet they did in reality; they distorted the true gospel, brought in circumcision, and that so distorted the true gospel that the apostle called it another gospel. But it would not only distort everything, but also it would destroy all confidence in God, if you admit false doctrine. Why, if the world can escape the flood by some contrivance of theirs as well as Noah can escape the flood by a divine ordinance, then I might as well have my confidence in the wisdom of man as in the Creator. If Pharaoh and his host, though he rushes into trouble, can there and then contrive a plan by which he can roll the sea back, and escape with as much safety as did the Israelites, why, then I might as well have confidence in the inventions and wisdom of men as in God. I should have no confidence in God then. Satan himself would say then, Do you not see that those who hated God contrived plans by which they escaped the flood, and by which they escaped the sea? And so I might go on and trace out the history of the church, and show that in all cases where those who were the objects of God's judgment contrived a plan by which they thought to escape, we see, as in the case of the Amalekites and the Canaanites, that the very plans they adopted for their escape subjected them to the destruction to which they came. And Moses, when speaking of the king of the Amorites, shows how he erred in spirit, and to save himself and his kingdom came against the Israelites, and in doing so he came against God. The very plan he took for his safety proved to be his destruction, as must be the case. So then it would destroy all confidence in God. And the Lord knows that the confidences of his people are safe nowhere but in himself, and that their life is safe nowhere but in his own hand; their destiny is safe nowhere but in his own counsels. Do you not, then, brethren, notwithstanding my feeble, obscure way of stating it, see here the wisdom of God in excluding false doctrine? so that the world by wisdom shall not savingly know him; for if so; it would distort the plan of eternal mercy. Second, it would destroy the confidence of his people in God.

But I will go farther than this. I have no hesitation in saying (and even with my short-sightedness I can see the wisdom of God in this point) that if the Lord allowed false doctrine to come in, not a soul could be saved—not one—every one would be lost. I am as satisfied as I am of my existence, that nothing but that absolute order of things, that "whom he did foreknow,"—he followed up that foreknowledge which he took of his people with an absolute decree,—“he did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son;” that he followed up that decree by his quickening power,—“them he also called;” that he follows up that vocation with justification, that he follows up that justification with glorification. I am as satisfied as I am of my existence, that not a soul could be saved in any other way. So, then, admit false doctrine to set this order of things aside, and not a soul could be saved. God would be disappointed, Christ would lose his bride, his sheep, his people; the Holy Spirit would lose his temple—the hearts of believers;—yea, in a word, all would be lost. God suffered false doctrine to come in and take up its abode for ever and ever in the minds of angels. What is the result? They are lost, lost, lost for ever. The seal of distinction put upon Satan

is, that he was a liar from the beginning, that he is the father of lies, and that all men being under his influence are, in things pertaining to God, liars. "Let God be true, and every man a liar."

Second, false doctrine—"Ye shall be as gods"—came in at the fall of man. What did it do? It ruined man, ruined our paradise, destroyed our holiness, destroyed our righteousness, destroyed our peace, destroyed us from God, destroyed us from all hope; and not a shriek or a groan will be heard through the gloomy regions of the damned to eternity that did not originate in the reception of Satan's lie in the garden of Eden. Man is ruined, the world is ruined; all are under ruin, all are corrupted; all are under sin, under the curse, under wrath, under death. Thirdly, false doctrine was received by the Jews in connection with their pure and beautiful covenant, which in Zechariah is called "beauty"—that beautiful covenant. I will be your God; I will give you fruitful seasons, I will give you plentiful harvests, plentiful vintage; I will make your land fragrant with beautiful flowers, I will make it flow with milk and honey. Only abide by me; go not after other gods; name not other gods, reject all other gods. And though you are poor sinful creatures, I have a mercy-seat for you; I have a great variety of adapted sacrificial service for you; and therefore your sins, of which you will be conscious, shall be rather arguments why you should abide by me, and come to me from day to day. "Your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time: and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely." (Lev. xxvi. 5.) The sword shall not pass through your land, and I will lay no famine upon you, and I will put none of these diseases upon you which I have brought upon the Egyptians; ye shall lend unto many, and shall borrow of none; and ye shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and as special treasures; only keep the commandments of the Lord your God. Moses, when he looked at the Lord's sovereignty in thus choosing them, separating the sons of Adam, and setting the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel, said, "The Lord's portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance." And so Moses traces it out. But ah! Jeshurun, "Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked;" went after other gods, new gods, "lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation." They received false doctrine into connection with that beautiful covenant; and so they went into captivity time after time, and the Lord restored them again and again. By-and-bye this false doctrine, setting aside God's beautiful covenant, throwing down his altars, forsaking his covenant, slaying his prophets; they got at last so far in the perversion of the Scriptures, and false doctrine, false holiness, and false righteousness—for they trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others; they were gone so far that the Saviour called them by virtue of their oneness with Satan's falsehood, "O generation of vipers! how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" Take this threefold view, then. Here were angels ruined through false doctrine; here is the human race ruined; here is the Jewish nation ruined.

And now let us look at the ultimate destiny of professors, mere professors, that have not received God's pure truth; that truth I hope presently simply to state. In the 2nd chapter of Paul's Second Epistle to the Thessalonians you have these awful words:—"For this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be damned who believe not the truth." That is the destiny—error. Oh, my hearer, there must be the love of the truth, there must be the love of new covenant truth, there must be the love of yea and amen truth; there must be an understanding of the truth as it is in Jesus. Well, now, is not the wisdom of God manifested in this? He will not suffer himself in his love and counsels to be misrepresented to his child-

ren, not finally; he will bring them to himself. Secondly, he will not suffer error so to dwell with him that his children may see it is good to have confidence in the wisdom of man as in the power and promises of God. Thirdly, that while error has ruined those four we have named—angels, Adam, the Jews, and mere professors,—God will not suffer his kingdom to be ruined, he will not suffer his inheritance to be ruined, he will not suffer his church to be ruined, he will not suffer his dear Son to break down, he will not suffer him to be ruined; he will not let error come there, he will not let it dwell there—no. They shall know the truth, and the truth shall make them free. I thank thee, O Father, that thou wilt not suffer thyself by the wise and prudent of this world to be misrepresented to thy children; they will not hear that, thy sheep will not hear that. I thank thee, O Father, that thou wilt not suffer these magicians to go so far with their enchantments that the children of Israel when they balance the two shall hardly know in which to put the most confidence—the magicians of Egypt or the man of God; or rather, the God of Moses, that sent him. I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou wilt not suffer my kingdom to be corrupted, thou wilt not suffer my cause to be ruined, thou wilt not suffer my people to be defiled. I have washed them clean in blood divine, and clean they shall remain for ever. I have clothed them entire in righteousness divine, and in that they shall shine for ever. My Spirit hath taken up his abode in their souls, and he shall dwell with them for ever. I have taken them into mine hands, and none shall be able by fraud or force to pluck them out of mine hands. My Father has taken them into his hands, and he is determined none shall pluck them out of his hands. O ye careless professors, that say doctrine is of no importance, tremble for your own souls, and remember that God hates lies with infinite hatred; and where Satan's lies are, there God will never dwell. You cannot form unity between Christ and Belial, between truth and error, between the pure sanctions of heaven and the crafty policy of hell. Satan deceiveth the whole world; his work of deception is awful, and also degrading. Perhaps I have said as much upon this as I need just now. I felt anxious to open up these points, to show to you the reasons why the Saviour thanked God for hiding these things from those who were determined to know God by human invention, or else not at all; "but thou hast revealed them unto babes." What is a babe spiritually? Why, the man that is a fool in his own eyes; the man who is made to feel that he knows nothing; the man who is made to feel that a saving knowledge of God must not only be by the truth of God, but by the Spirit of God, and must not only be by the Spirit of God, but by the Christ of God; and must not only be by the Christ of God, but by the good pleasure of God. "God, who is rich in mercy, and for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when dead in sin." Unto these the Lord opens up the secrets of his heart, because they are willing to receive his truth, his new covenant truth; "as new-born babes desiring the sincere milk of the word." Thus, then, see the wisdom of God in not suffering himself to be misrepresented. Shall I put it in this form for a moment?—perfectly scriptural. The dear Saviour is spoken of as the husband of the church. "Thy maker is thine husband; the Lord of hosts is his name." Shall he suffer himself to be misrepresented to his bride—that her views of him shall be entirely wrong? Shall he suffer his bride to live with him under perfectly wrong impressions, perfectly wrong views—wrong altogether; so that she will never open her mouth without telling some lie or another, that she will never hear any testimony of him without making some terrible mistake or another concerning him? Now literally could a husband and wife live together comfortably under such circumstances? I think not. Doth he not say of his church that "her lips drop as the honey and as the honeycomb"? It would be more like gall if she told lies concerning him.

Your wife telling lies concerning you all day; some enemy has misled her, and she is telling lies to everybody she speaks to, telling lies about you. I am sure you would throw your hat down, and say, Come, we must have an alteration somewhere; this will not do; I cannot stand this any longer; we must have this set right somehow or another. And you may depend upon it the great Husband of the church will not allow his bride to labour under such dreadful mistakes. See her beautiful testimony of him in Solomon's Song, and in many other parts of the Bible. I thank thee, then, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou dost not suffer me to be distorted, or thyself to be distorted, in the estimation of my people, and that thou dost not suffer the wisdom of men to undermine my wisdom, and destroy the confidences of my people in me, and that thou wilt not suffer my cause to be ruined. Everything else hath been ruined; but there is no ruining this—no. Daniel—what happy moments they must have been!—he looked at the destiny of the image, the silver arms and breast, the brazen thighs, the iron legs, and the feet of iron and clay, and he saw ruin in them all; he saw them all become as the chaff of the summer threshing-floor. But when he comes to the Saviour's kingdom—that stone cut out of the mountain without hands; why, this lasts for ever, stands for ever, prevails for ever, shines for ever, reigns for ever, is glorious for evermore. I felt very anxious you should see the wisdom of God for yourselves in thus excluding error. I have not assigned all the reasons why the Lord is wise in excluding error; a great many other reasons may be assigned, but perhaps those three are as many as you will remember; and may the Lord make us more and more concerned to maintain his blessed truth.

Now the second point is *what it is to know him in his own wisdom in Christ Jesus*. Wherein lies the wisdom of God there? I might say, in one thing, first, in the exact substitutional adaptation of the Saviour to our necessities. Are we under the law? Christ came under the law, to redeem them that were under the law. He has obeyed the law, and has brought in a righteousness that is like himself. I am very glad, I often have been glad, and shall to eternity be glad, that the Saviour's higher nature is identified with his obedient life. "Jehovah our righteousness." Of course his complex person was identified, one with his righteousness. Hence the apostle says, "By one man's obedience many are made righteous." But then this man was God as well as man. Ah, then, the law requires no more, you require no more, justice requires no more, eternity will require no more. Then the adaptation of his atoning death—what has it done? It has ended hell; no more hell to his people. By his death he has ended sin; it is done. We have never done anything, and never shall do anything, that can end sin. We go on receiving him who has ended sin, who is the end of sin, who ever will be the end of sin. And he is the end of death; there is no more death. He is the end of trouble; there is no more trouble. And he is the end of wrath; there is no more wrath. Now this is God's contrivance. He contrived the way in which he could righteously deliver us from all that stood against us; being thus just, and yet the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. Now to know God in his wisdom is to know him in the exact adaptation of the Saviour's substitutional perfection to our necessities. Having this, you have all things. I know not any blessing that ever was, ever is, or ever can be bestowed that is not included in the substitutional adaptation of Jesus Christ. That is the life you are to live, and that is the death you are to die. "Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord." Die where you may, if you do not die there you do not die where the blessing is. Now that is God's wisdom so far. But there is another point here. To know God in his wisdom is thus to know Jesus Christ as the great contrivance of infinite wisdom, by which you are to be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation, not to be ashamed or confounded, world without end.

The next thing to know him in his wisdom is to know Jesus Christ in the infinity of his value. Wisdom contrived to give us something of infinite and eternal value. And if you belong to the Lord, not only will you thus appreciate the adaptation of the Saviour's substitutional perfection, but you will see him as the pearl of great price; you will see him as being of infinite and eternal value. This is so self-evident that I need not dwell upon it. If we look at what he has delivered us from, if we look at the way in which he preserves us, if we look at the way in which he will form us for our high destiny, and look at the height of that destiny, read the scriptures that represent the glory yet to be revealed, we may indeed say he is a gift of infinite and eternal value. And you can never honour God the Father but by appreciating the gift; as it is written, "That every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." As you estimate the value of the gift, you thereby honour the giver; as you cleave unto him—as that includes everything—there is not anything we can name, as we have said, that is not included in this. To know God in the wisdom of God, then, is to know him in Christ Jesus, knowing Christ Jesus as the substitute, in his infinite and eternal value.

But there is another point yet, and with that I close; and I am sorry I had not two hours this morning instead of one upon such a subject. The third point is, *what it is to know the Lord in his own wisdom in that order of things to which Christ belongs.* You must not only know God in Christ Jesus as the Mediator, but you must know God in his own wisdom as shown in a covenant that is ordered in all things and sure. There is not anything which God from all eternity more delighted in than this covenant. The language of this covenant unto man is, "O ye simple, understand wisdom; and, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart." That is the language of the covenant, called in the 8th of Proverbs "wisdom." Just hear what it saith. It takes us up as simpletons. Now "the simple pass on, and are punished." The gospel arrests us, foreshows the punishment, and maketh us wise and prudent to hide ourselves in Christ. And we are fools, but the gospel cometh, and teacheth us so to number our days as to apply our hearts unto salvation wisdom. Now hear what this wisdom saith: "Receive my instruction, and not silver"—ah, something better than silver;—"and knowledge rather than choice gold. For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it." Yea, it goes on to say, "My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold; and my revenue than choice silver." Ah, what is it that silver and gold cannot do? They cannot do that which this covenant doth; rubies cannot do what this covenant doth. Therefore to be instructed into this covenant, to have the knowledge of this covenant, to be made wise in this covenant, is to be just where the apostle represents Abraham when he saith that "God could swear by no greater, he sware by himself, saying, In blessing I will bless thee." What is this covenant but that immutability of God's counsel established by the wondrous work of the dear Saviour? Why, this covenant was set up from everlasting, "while as yet the Lord had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world;" then was this covenant by him, "as one brought up with him; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth;" and so it goes on to show that its "delights" (for it is there personified) "were with the sons of men." Then when you come to the 9th chapter of the Proverbs, you find the provision and kindly dealings of this covenant. "Wisdom hath builded her house"—the church;—"she hath hewn out her seven pillars"—ministerial and attractive pillars. "She hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table. She hath sent forth her maidens"—the little

churches;—"she crieth"—by her ministers—"upon the highest places of the city, Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither; as for him that wanteth understanding"—who says, I should like to understand what it is to belong to Jesus Christ; I should like to understand this wisdom of God in this covenant ordered in all things and sure,—“she saith to him, Come, eat of my bread,” Christ the bread of life, “and drink of the wine which I have mingled,” the blood of the everlasting covenant. “Forsake the foolish, and live.” Forsake the foolish adviser, that saith to you, Anathematize the Lord, and die; forsake the foolish traveller, that knoweth not the road to the city, going there by his own doings instead of by the faith of Jesus Christ. Forsake the foolish builder, that would build upon the sand of human wisdom, instead of building upon the Rock of Ages. Forsake the foolish virgins, that make a profession, but have not the love of the truth; and therefore, when the midnight cry comes, their lamps go out. Be with the wise, that have the love of the truth; then when the midnight cry shall come, their lamps shall burn the brighter, and they shall not seek to go in without Christ, but with him; “they that were ready,” mark the language, “went in with him.” “Forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding.” This is the kind way in which this covenant speaks.

I cannot close now without just observing how suitable this gospel is to all. Is it the lot of some to be poor; as soon as they get a little, sure to lose it? Ah, says one, I am a poor, stupid, miserable creature. As soon as I get a little, there is sure to be a hole in the bag, and I lose it. Then when I get pretty right again, another hole, and away it goes. That is the lot of some. Well, here is something better than silver, something better than gold, something better than rubies. We shall not want the temporal things much longer; but eternal things—we shall need them for ever, possess them for ever, enjoy them for ever.

It is essential that we should know the Saviour as the mediator and surety of the new covenant. Hence every one who is thirsting for and seeking for eternal life, in the right way and in the right spirit, is thus met and directed, and brought into a bond of peace with God; that secures everything and defies every foe, overcomes every danger, and gives a sure anchorage to living and lively hope. “Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.” The word David here does not mean David at all; but as David means *beloved*, so Jesus Christ is the beloved; and just so sure as he dieth no more, just so sure as death has no more dominion over him, just so sure are these mercies; and just so sure as he hath perfected for ever them that God hath electively consecrated, just so sure is this covenant,—not a thorn or a briar shall be left to the house of Israel.”