

God's Ways Above Man's

by Edward Payson

God's ways and thoughts are far above ours, and we must learn to trust in his goodness and wisdom.

Scripture: Job 38:4, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 55:8, Romans 3:28, Romans 11:33, 1 Corinthians 1:25, 1 Corinthians 1:27, Ephesians 2:8, Hebrews 12:6, James 2:5

Topics: "God's Sovereignty", "Divine Wisdom"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the incomprehensible ways and thoughts of God, emphasizing that His ways are higher than ours as the heavens are above the earth. Payson delves into the reasons why God's thoughts and ways surpass ours, highlighting God's exalted position, nature, wisdom, knowledge, power, eternity, holiness, and benevolence. He explores various instances where God's ways differ from human expectations, such as in permitting evil, providing salvation through Christ, choosing instruments for spreading the Gospel, and dealing with His people's sanctification. Payson concludes by urging faith in God's wisdom and submission to His will, acknowledging that our understanding is limited compared to the infinite wisdom of God.

Transcript

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.-Isa. 55:8,9

IN the preceding verses God commands and invites sinners to repent and embrace his offers of mercy. "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. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." He was however aware, that the natural unbelief, the guilty fears and narrow views of sinners, would lead them to distrust these promises, and to turn the unspeakable good which they offer into an argument against their truth. He therefore proceeds in our text, to caution them against judging of him by themselves, and measuring his thoughts and ways by their own dark, confused and limited conceptions. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." To illustrate the truth of this declaration, and to notice some particular instances in which it is strikingly manifest, is my present design.

1. God's ways and thoughts must be far above ours, because in situation and office he is exalted far above us. God is in heaven; and we upon earth. We occupy the footstool, and he the throne. As the Creator and Preserver, he is of course, the rightful Governor of the universe. All worlds, creatures and events are subject to his control, and he is under a blessed necessity of overruling and conducting all things in such a manner, as to promote, in the highest possible degree, his own glory and the universal good. In forming and executing his purposes therefore, he must take into view not only the present, but past and future circumstances and events; not the concerns of a single individual only, but those of the whole race of beings in heaven, earth, and all the worlds around us. Now consider a moment, the extent and duration of Jehovah's kingdom. Think of the innumerable armies of heaven; the perhaps scarcely less numerous hosts of hell; the multitudes of the human race, who have existed, who now exist; and will hereafter exist on earth before the end of time. Then raise your eyes to the numerous suns and worlds around us. Borrow the telescope of the astronomer, and penetrating far into unfathomable recesses of the ethereal regions, see new suns, new worlds still rising into view. Consider that all we can discover is perhaps but a speck, a single sand on the shore, in comparison with what remains undiscovered; that all these innumerable worlds are probably inhabited by immortal beings, and that God's plan of government for this boundless empire must embrace eternity;-consider these things, and then say whether God's purposes, thoughts, and ways, must not necessarily be high above ours, as the heavens are above the earth, or as his sphere of action exceeds ours. Must not the thoughts and ways of a powerful earthly monarch be far above those of one of his subjects, who is employed in manufacturing a pin, or cultivating a few acres of ground? Can such a subject be competent to judge of his sovereign's designs, or even to comprehend them? How far then must the thoughts and ways of the eternal monarch of heaven, the King of kings, and Lord of lords, exceed ours; and how little able are we to judge of them, farther than the revelation which he has been pleased to give, enables us.

2. God's thoughts and ways must be infinitely above ours, because his nature and perfections raise him infinitely above us. He is a self-existent, independent, all-sufficient, infinite, eternal, pure, and perfect intelligence. We are dependent, finite, imperfect, frail, dying creatures, fettered by gross, heavy bodies, and exposed to the influence of innumerable infirmities, temptations and prejudices, which bias and blind our reason. But more particularly, God is infinitely superior to us in wisdom. He is the all-wise God. Even the foolishness of God, says the apostle, is wiser than men; and the angels, who are far above us in wisdom, are in comparison with him, chargeable with folly. He must therefore, be able to devise a thousand plans and expedients, and to bring good out of evil in numberless ways, of which we never could have conceived, and of which we are by no means competent to judge, even after they are revealed to us. If the ways and thoughts of a wise man are above those of a fool, how much more must the ways and thoughts of the all-wise God exceed ours.

Again. God is infinitely superior to us in knowledge. We are of yesterday and know nothing; our foundation is in the dust. We have little real knowledge of present objects and events; and of the future we are entirely ignorant, except so far as God has been pleased to reveal it. But God perfectly knows all things. He has a perfect knowledge of the properties and qualities of all creatures; for he made them what they are, and upholds them. He knows everything that is now taking place in the universe; for he is everywhere present. He knows every thing that ever has occurred, or that ever will occur; for we are told that he sees the end from the beginning; that he calls things that are not as though they were; and that known unto God are all his works from the beginning. At a single glance he looks through eternity and immensity, and takes into view at once, the whole circle of existence. That this perfect knowledge must cause his thoughts and ways to be infinitely above ours, it is needless to remark. Are not the thoughts and ways of man above those of

the brute? Are not the thoughts and ways of the parent above the comprehension of his new born infant? Do not our own change, as we increase in wisdom and knowledge? How far then, must the thoughts and ways of the omniscient, infallible God, exceed those of ignorant, short-sighted and fallible men.

Farther. God is infinitely above us in power. We are weak and frail to a proverb; and our plans, ways, enterprises, must conform to the weakness of our powers. But God is all-powerful; with him nothing is impossible. He can do numberless things, of which we can form no conception; and he can do what he does in an inconceivable variety of ways. This consideration alone, were there nothing else, would prove that his thoughts and ways are far above ours.

Again. God is eternal and unchangeable, while we are but of yesterday, and die perhaps tomorrow, and are continually changing, as our situation and circumstances change. Surely the thoughts and ways of such creatures cannot be suitable or proper for a being, who had no beginning, who cannot change, but is yesterday, today, and forever, the same.

Once more. God is perfectly benevolent and holy; but, we are entirely selfish and sinful. We love sin, that abominable thing which his soul hates. We care for nothing but our own private interest; while his concern is for the interest of the universe. Hence his thoughts, his 'affections, his maxims and pursuits, must be entirely different from ours. Do not the thoughts and ways of angels differ from those of devils? Do not even the thoughts and ways of good men differ widely from those of the 'wicked? How infinitely then must a perfectly holy God differ from us, polluted worms, who are dead in trespasses and sins! If man at his best estate, and even angels themselves, are incompetent to comprehend God's thoughts and ways, because he is infinitely superior to them in wisdom, and knowledge, and power; how unable must we be, since sin has blinded our understanding, hardened our hearts, defiled the whole man, debased all our faculties, and exposed us to innumerable temptations, prejudices and mistakes, which lead us to hate and shun the pure light of divine truth; to delude and deceive ourselves, and to form erroneous opinions respecting almost every thing around us; to call evil good, and good evil; to put sweet for bitter, and bitter for sweet; shadows for realities, and realities for shadows; darkness for light, and light for darkness. The pleasures, ways and pursuits of an oyster, enclosed in its shell, at the bottom of the sea, do not by any means differ so. widely from those of the eagle that soars to the clouds and basks in the beams of the sun, as do the thoughts and ways-of sinners from those of the infinitely benevolent and holy Monarch of the universe.

Having thus shown that the thoughts and ways of God must far surpass ours, I proceed, as was proposed,

II. To exhibit particularly, some instances in which this difference most strikingly appears.

1. In permitting the introduction and continued existence of natural and moral evil, God's ways and thoughts are very different from ours. Why he should permit angels or men to fall, we cannot tell. That he did permit them to fall, is certain; because had he thought proper, he could doubtless have prevented their apostasy. It is also certain that he still permits the existence of natural and moral evil; because if he chose, all things considered, to banish it from the universe, he could easily do it. But if we had been consulted, we should have decided that it was best that sin and its consequences should never enter the world; or if they must enter, that they should be immediately banished. In this particular therefore, God's thoughts and ways are evidently not like ours.

2. In appointing Adam to be the covenant head and representative of the human race, so that if he stood his posterity should stand, and if he fell, his posterity should fall, God did not act as we probably should

have done. That he has done this, is evident from fact for we find that sin and its consequences do descend to every individual of the species; and we are told, that in Adam all die. But we should have thought it best to have no such constitution; but to have had the condition of every individual independent of that of every other. This method God did adopt with angels; and why he thought fit to adopt a different method with respect to us, he has not seen fit to inform us, and we cannot tell. It is however evident that in this particular, God's thoughts and ways are above ours. The same may be said,

3. Of the difference he has made between our race and the fallen angels. For them no way of salvation was provided. To them no space for repentance, no day of grace, no offers of mercy were given; but their punishment immediately followed their offence. We, on the contrary, have space for repentance. and are favored with the offers of salvation, and the means of grace. Christ took not hold of angels, says the apostle; but he took hold of the seed of Abraham. But we should have thought no difference ought to be made; or, if either angels or men were to be left, that they should be saved rather than we; because they are of a higher rank in the scale of being. But God thought otherwise; and the only reason we can assign is. that so it seemed good in his sight.

4. In devising a way of salvation, and in providing a Savior, God's thoughts and ways are very different from ours, and far, very far, above them. We should have thought, that if God intended to save sinners, he would bring them to repentance and save them at once; or at least, after suffering them to endure for a season, the bitter consequences of their own folly and disobedience. We never should have thought of providing for them a Redeemer; still less should we have thought of proposing, that God's only Son, the Creator and Preserver of all things, should undertake this office; and least of all should we have expected, that he would for this purpose think it necessary to become man. If we had been informed that this was necessary, and it had been left for us to fix the time and manner of his appearing, we should have concluded that he ought to come soon after the fall; to be born of illustrious parents; to make his appearance on earth in all the splendor, pomp and glory imaginable; to overcome all opposition by a display of irresistible power; to ride through the world in triumph, conquering and to conquer. Such were the expectations of the Jews; and such most probably would have been ours. But never should we have thought of his being born of a virgin in abject circumstances; born in a stable, cradled in a manger, living for many years as a humble artificer; wandering, despised and rejected of men, without a place to lay his head, and finally arraigned, tried, condemned and crucified as a vile malefactor,. that he might thus expiate our sins, and by his death, give life to the world. Had we been forewarned of these things, we should have considered them as too foolish, incredible and absurd to obtain the smallest credit and instead of thinking them cunningly devised, should have thought them very clumsily contrived fables, unworthy of the least notice or regard. And thus in fact they have appeared, and do still appear, to the wise men of this world; for says the apostle, the cross of Christ is foolishness to them that perish. When the self-righteous Jews and vain-glorious Gentiles were told that one who had been crucified as a malefactor, was the Son of God, the Creator of the world, the only Savior of men, that his blood cleanses from all sin, and that without an interest in his merits they must perish forever-they could find no language sufficiently strong to express their contempt and indignation; and the aid of the stake, the rack, and the cross, was called in to express what language could not. Yet this was the way which God thought proper to choose, and all things which appear in the view of men so ridiculous, irrational and absurd, are in his view, infinitely proper, wise and amiable; and display far more wisdom than all the works of creation, wonderful as they are. Surely then, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are his ways and thoughts higher than ours.

5. God's thoughts and ways differ widely from ours in his choice of means and instruments for propagating the religion of Christ. We should have thought that a religion, whose author had been crucified as a malefactor; a religion, which instead of favoring and flattering the ruling passions, prejudices and propensities of men, directly opposed them all, and which was therefore exceedingly hateful to them, -would have needed the assistance of angels, or at least, of the most powerful monarchs, the most enlightened sages, the most splendid natural and acquired abilities, to procure it success. But instead of such instruments, which we should have chosen, God saw fit to employ a handful of ignorant fishermen to effect this purpose, and even forbade them to use any human artifices to procure them success; but charged them to rely entirely on the effect of a faithful, simple, unadorned statement of the great truths of Christianity. Hence the language of the apostle, "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and the weak things of the world to confound the mighty; and base things of the world, and things that are despised hath God chosen; yea, and things that are not to bring to nought things which are, that no flesh should glory in his presence. For when, in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."

6. A wide difference between God's thoughts and ways, and our own, appears, when we consider the manner in which he dispenses the benefits which Christ has purchased, and the character and situation of those whom he chooses to make wise unto salvation. We should expect that if such a Savior were provided, all would be saved; and that if for any reasons, this were impossible, the most noble, wise, rich and learned, or at least, the most moral and amiable would always be called. But this we see is not the case. It is evident from scripture, if any thing can be, that all will not be saved, and it is also evident from observation, so far as we can see; for we find that multitudes appear to live and die without any spiritual knowledge of the Savior, or preparation for heaven. We also find, both from scripture and observation, that it is not always the most wealthy, wise, or learned, nor even the most moral and amiable, who are called to embrace the gospel. Christ told the moral, but self-righteous Pharisees, that the publicans and harlots would go into the kingdom of God before them. Hath not God, says St. James, chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom? Ministers and private Christians very often find reason to acknowledge that God's thoughts and ways are not like theirs; for he rarely converts such, as they think the most probable subjects of conversion; and while they are watching such persons, and daily hoping and expecting to see them embrace the truth, others, of whom perhaps they never thought, start up and seize the prize.

7. God's thoughts respecting the way in which men become partakers of the salvation of the Gospel, differ widely from ours. We all naturally suppose, that men are to be saved by their good works; by obeying the law; by subduing their sins; by alms and prayers. But the gospel teaches us, that men are to be saved, not by working, but by believing; that we are saved by grace, through faith; and that to him that worketh not, but believeth on him who justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted to him for righteousness. This truth men neither love nor understand, and even after they are awakened and convinced of sin, it is one of the most difficult things imaginable to convince them that their pretended good works are no better than sins; and that if they ever obtain salvation, it must be by simply believing in the Son of God. In scarcely any thing do God's thoughts and ways differ so widely from ours, as in this great doctrine of salvation through grace-of justification by faith in the righteousness of Christ.

Lastly. God's thoughts and ways are not as ours respecting the best methods of dealing with his people, and carrying on the work of grace in their souls after it is begun. When God delivered his people from Egyptian bondage, if he had led them by the nearest and most direct way to Canaan, they might have

reached it in a very few days; and had they been consulted, they would probably have thought the nearest way the best. But God thought otherwise. So when God converts his people from sin to holiness, he could, if he pleased, render them perfectly holy at once; and they are often ready to imagine, that this would be much the better way, both for his glory and their own good. But instead of adopting this method, he grants them, at first, but small degrees of grace, and increases it in a very slow and gradual manner. He leads them round for many years, through a wilderness beset with temptations, trials and sufferings, with a view to humble them, prove them, and show them all that is in their hearts. By the discoveries which they make of their own weakness, ignorance and propensity to sin, their pride is humbled; their self-confidence destroyed; their patience, meekness and candor are increased; the Savior, and his method of salvation rendered more precious, and all ground for boasting forever excluded.

All these happy effects, however, are produced in a way which they would never have thought of; and it is a long time before they can be made to understand God's method of proceeding, so that they are often ready to say with Jacob, "All these things are against me!" when in fact, every thing is working together for their good. Even when God answers their prayers, he very often does it in ways and by means, which they did not expect; and as often as they attempt to mark out a path for him in their own minds, so often they find themselves disappointed, and are constrained to confess, that his ways are not like theirs. Often too, when they contemplate their own unworthiness, their stupidity, their obstinacy, their inconsistencies, their propensity to backslide, to grieve their Savior and requite him evil for good, notwithstanding the innumerable pardons and mercies they have received, - are they constrained to use the same language, and to cry, Lord, why am I saved? why are such favors heaped on a wretch so unworthy? Surely, this is not the manner of men- to adopt rebels and traitors, as children, and heap such honors and blessings upon them. What manner of love is this that we should be called the sons of God! Who is a God like unto thee, that forgivest iniquity, transgression and sin, and overcomest evil with good? If thy ways were not high above ours, as the heavens are higher than the earth, we must have perished forever!

INFERENCES. -1. If God's ways and thoughts differ thus widely from ours, then it is no reasonable objection against the truth of any doctrine, or the propriety of any dispensation, that it is above our comprehension, and appears strange and mysterious to us. On the contrary we should have reason to doubt the truth of the scriptures, and to suspect that they are not the word of God, if they did not contain many things which appear mysterious, and which we cannot fully comprehend. In this case they would want one great proof of having proceeded from him, whose thoughts and ways must be infinitely above ours. Yet, my friends, all the objections which men make against the truth of revelation, or against any of its doctrines, are founded on the supposition, that God's ways and thoughts must be precisely like ours; and that if any thing appears unreasonable or mysterious to us, it certainly is so, and therefore cannot proceed from God.

2. If God's thoughts and ways are thus high above ours, it must be abominable pride, impiety, folly and presumption in us to censure them even in thought. Yet how often men do this! How often do they, at least in their hearts, find fault with God's word, murmur at his dispensations, repine under afflictions, feel dissatisfied with his manner of governing the world, quarrel with his sovereignty in the bestowing of favors, and thus in effect say, that God is either unwise, unkind, or unjust, and that they could conduct things in a better manner! My friends, if this is not horribly impious and presumptuous, if it does not discover the most abominable pride, what does? For an illiterate peasant to censure the conduct of his prince, with the reasons of which he is utterly unacquainted; for a child of a week old to condemn the proceedings of his parent, would be nothing to this. We are told¹ that if any man judgeth a matter before he heareth it, it is

folly and shame unto him. What folly and shame is it then to us to attempt to judge of God's conduct, when we know only so small a part of his ways, and know even this part but very imperfectly. An ancient writer tells us of a man, who having a house for sale, carried a brick to market to exhibit as a specimen. You may perhaps smile at his folly in supposing that any purchaser would or could judge of a whole house, which he never saw, by so small a part of it. But are not we guilty of much greater folly in attempting to form an opinion of God's conduct from that little part of it, which we are able to discover? In order to form a correct opinion of it we ought to have a correct view of the whole; we ought to see the whole extent and duration of God's kingdom; to be equal to him in wisdom, knowledge, power, and goodness; in one word, we ought to be God ourselves; for none but God is capable of judging accurately of the conduct of God. Hence, whenever we attempt to judge of it, we do in effect, set ourselves up as Gods, knowing good and evil. Well therefore may God reply to our vain, proud and impious objections, Who is this, that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man, and I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou, when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.. Hast thou an arm like God? or caust thou thunder with a voice like him? Wilt thou disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous? And while God may thus with propriety address each of us, it becomes us to reply with Job, Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay my hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken, but I will not answer; yea, twice, but I will proceed no farther. I have uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not.

3. From this subject we infer the reasonableness of faith. The very essence of faith consists in a humble, docile, childlike temper, which disposes us to embrace without objecting or disputing, every thing which God reveals; and to believe that all his words and dispensations are, even though we cannot see how, perfectly right. Christians are often ridiculed for exercising this implicit faith in God, and believing what they cannot fully comprehend. But we appeal to every one present, whether in so doing, they do not act reasonably.. If God's ways and thoughts are thus high above ours, ought we not implicitly to believe all his declarations; to believe that all he says and does is perfectly right? Is it not reasonable for children thus to believe their parents? for a sick man to trust in a skilful physician? for a passenger unacquainted with navigation, to trust to the master of the vessel? for a blind man to follow his guide? If so, thou it is certainly much more reasonable for such ignorant, short-sighted, fallible creatures, as we are, to submit and trust implicitly to an infinitely wise, good, and infallible Being; and when any of his words or works appear wrong, to ascribe it to our own ignorance, blindness, or prejudice, rather than to suppose that there is any thing wrong in him. Is it not more likely that we should be wrong or mistaken, than that God should be! If so, we ought to praise him, when his conduct appears wise and right, and to impute it to ourselves when it does not, and to believe and to submit to him implicitly in all things. This is not only reasonable, but absolutely necessary to our happiness; for if God's thoughts and ways differ thus widely from ours, we must either believe that he is right and we wrong, or else feel unreconciled and dissatisfied. But if we feel unreconciled and dissatisfied we must be unhappy; for we cannot help ourselves. God will do as he pleases, whether we are pleased or not. On the contrary, if we exercise faith and submission to his will, and believe that all is right; that even when clouds and darkness are round about him, justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne, then we shall be peaceful and happy. He will guide us by his counsel, and afterwards receive us to glory. Then the cloud will be scattered; we shall see all things clearly, and understand the meaning of those truths, and the reason of those dispensations, which have appeared most mysterious and perplexing; for God's language to every sincere believer is, What I do, thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.

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