

Mortification Of Sin: By John Owen

CHAPTER 12

‘Direction 8: Think much upon the excellency and majesty of God’

This chapter is a useful and edifying chapter in its own terms as a study in a number of aspects of the being and nature of our great God, never mind as Owen uses it in this discourse as a means to assist us in mortifying sin. His basic understanding is that on one hand a deeper familiarity with God is a great aid to a holy life, whereas a degree, be it greater or lessor of ignorance concerning him and a distance or lack of acquaintance with him lessons not only our ability to mortify sin, but permits us to give less attention to the need of mortification. Not only can we not, but in fact we will not even desire mortification to the extent we are unacquainted with God.

EIGHTHLY, Use and exercise thyself to such meditations as may serve to fill thee at all times with self-abasement and thoughts of thine own vileness; as,--

1. Be much in thoughtfulness of the excellency of the majesty of God and thine infinite, inconceivable distance from him. Many thoughts of it cannot but fill thee with a sense of thine own vileness, which strikes deep at the root of any indwelling sin..... Be much in thoughts of this nature, to abase the pride of thy heart, and to keep thy soul humble within thee. **There is nothing will render thee a greater indisposition to be imposed on by the deceits of sin than such a frame of heart. Think greatly of the greatness of God.**

2. Think much of thine *unacquaintedness* with him. Though thou knowest enough to keep thee low and humble, yet how little a portion is it that thou knowest of him!**Labour with this also to take down the pride of thy heart.** What dost thou know of God? How little a portion is it! How immense is he in his nature! Canst thou look without terror into the abyss of eternity? Thou canst not bear the rays of his glorious being

Consider, then, I say, to keep thy heart in continual awe of the majesty of God, that persons of the most high and eminent attainment, of the nearest and most familiar communion with God, do yet in this life know but a very little of him and his glory.

Owen considers a possible objection or question someone may raise — “Surely in this Gospel age we do not have such a lack of acquaintance as you suppose Dr. Owen, Moses or Abraham may have lack this acquaintance but surely not us in the clear light of the Gospel?”

Owen gives three responses:

Ans. 1. I acknowledge a vast and almost inconceivable difference between the acquaintance we now have with God, after his speaking to us by his own Son, and that which the generality of the saints had under the law; for although their eyes were as good, sharp, and clear as ours, their faith and spiritual understanding not behind ours, the object as glorious unto them as unto us, yet our day is more clear than theirs was, the clouds are blown away and scattered, the shadows of the night are gone and fled away, the sun is risen, and the means of sight is made more eminent and clear than formerly. Yet, --

2. That peculiar sight which Moses had of God, Exod. 34, was a *gospel-sight*, a sight of God as "gracious," etc., and yet it is called but his "back parts;" that is, but low and mean, in comparison of his excellencies and perfections.

3. The apostle, exalting to the utmost this glory of light above that of the law, manifesting that now the "veil" causing darkness is taken away, so that with "open" or uncovered "face we behold the glory of the Lord," tells us how: "As in a glass," 2 Cor. 3:18. "In a glass," how is that? Clearly, perfectly? Alas, no! He tells you how that is, 1 Cor. 13:12, "We see through a glass, darkly,"

Owen states it plainly - we don't know God as we will, and indeed might in this world

The apostle tells us, 1 John 3:2, that we know not what we ourselves shall be, -- what we shall find ourselves in the issue; much less will it enter into our hearts to conceive what God is, and what we shall find him to be. Consider either him who is to be known, or the way whereby we know him, and this will farther appear:--

Why? Why do we not know God as we might? Two answers;

(1.) We know so little of *God*, because it is *God* who is thus to be known, -- that is, he who hath described himself to us very much by this, that we *cannot* know him. What else doth he intend where he calls himself invisible, incomprehensible, and the like? -- that is, he whom we do not, cannot know as he is. And our farther progress consists more in knowing what he is not, than what he is.

[1.] For the *being* of God; we are so far from a knowledge of it, so as to be able to instruct one another therein by words and expressions of it, as that to frame any conceptions in our mind, with such species and impressions of things as we receive the knowledge of all other things by, is to make an idol to ourselves, and so to worship a god of our own making, and not the God that made us.

[2.] There be *some* things of God which he himself hath taught us to speak of, and to regulate our expressions of them; but when we have so done, we see not the things themselves; we know them not. To *believe* and *admire* is all that we attain to. We

profess, as we are taught, that God is infinite, omnipotent, eternal; and we know what disputes and notions there are about omnipresence, immensity, infiniteness, and eternity.

We know him rather by what he does than by what he is, -- by his doing us good than by his essential goodness; and how little a portion of him, as Job speaks, is hereby discovered!

(2.) We know little of God, because it is *faith* alone whereby here we know him. I shall not now discourse about the remaining impressions on the hearts of all men by nature that there is a God from the works of his creation and providence, which they see and behold. It is confessedly, and that upon the woful experience of all ages, so weak, low, dark, confused, that none ever on that account glorified God as they ought, but, notwithstanding all their knowledge of God, were indeed "without God in the world."

As to its nature, it is an assent upon testimony, not an evidence upon demonstration; and the object of it is, as was said before, above us. Hence our faith, as was formerly observed, is called a "seeing darkly, as in a glass." All that we know this way (and all that we know of God we know this way) is but low, and dark, and obscure.

Owen then handles another possible question, "Surely we who know Christ by faith do know God so far as we can?" This seems a viable proposition after all, 'No man hath seen God at any time,' but 'the only-begotten Son, he hath revealed him,' John 1:18; and 'the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true,' 1 John 5:20.

Here is Owen,

To which I answer, --[He concedes four points]

[1.] The truth is, we all of know *enough* of him to love him more than we do, to delight in him and serve him, believe him, obey him, put our trust in him, above all that we have hitherto attained.

[2.] *Comparatively*, that knowledge which we have of God by the revelation of Jesus Christ in the gospel is exceeding eminent and glorious.

[3.] The difference between believers and unbelievers as to knowledge is not much in the *matter of their knowledge* as in the *manner of knowing*. Unbelievers, some of them, may know more and be able to say more of God, his perfections, and his will, than many believers; but they know nothing as they ought, nothing in a right manner, nothing spiritually and savingly, nothing with a holy, heavenly light.

[4.] Jesus Christ by his word and Spirit reveals to the hearts of all his, God as a Father, as a God in covenant, as a rewarder, every way sufficiently to teach us to obey him here, and to lead us to his bosom, to lie down there in the fruition of him to eternity.

But highlights an important qualification

[5.] Notwithstanding all this, it is but a *little portion* we know of him [NOTE: EVEN THROUGH CHRIST] ; we see but his back parts. For, --

1st. The intendment of all gospel revelation is, not to *unveil God's essential glory*, that we should see him as he is, but merely to declare so much of him as he knows sufficient to be a bottom of our faith, love, obedience, and coming to him, -- that is, of the faith which here he expects from us; such services as besem poor creatures in the midst of temptations.

2dly. We are dull and slow of heart to receive the things that are in the word revealed;

Let us, then, revive the use and intendment of this consideration: Will not a due apprehension of this inconceivable greatness of God, and that infinite distance wherein we stand from him, fill the soul with a holy and awful fear of him, so as to keep it in a frame unsuited to the thriving or flourishing of any lust whatever? Let the soul be continually wonted to reverential thoughts of God's greatness and omnipresence, and it will be much upon its watch as to any undue deportments. Consider him with whom you have to do, -- even "our God is a consuming fire;" and in your greatest abashments at his presence and eye, know that your very nature is too narrow to bear apprehensions suitable to his essential glory.

Questions for thought and discussion.

- How will frequent meditation upon God's character assist us in the process of mortification? Surely we need to take practical steps, not mull over theology?
- What part does pride play in a failure to mortify? How does meditating upon God conquer pride?
- What advantages do we have over Old Testament believers? (Consider 1 Corinthians 10:1-13)
- How is our knowledge of God still limited in spite of the greater Gospel light, and knowledge of God in Christ that we have?
- Owen say we all too easily create a image of God for ourselves? How does this hinder the process of mortification? What kind of God are we most likely to create for ourselves if we are not mortifying sin?
- How, in a way does the limitations of our knowledge God help us in mortification?