

# God and Modern Men: Four Sermons

Herbert H. Farmer

1934

## About this version

This book was originally published as:

Herbert H. Farmer, *God and Modern Men: Four Sermons*, King's Chapel Publications: New Series 25 (Julia Lyman Fund, 1934).

This version has been typeset using L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X. The scanned original is available on the Internet Archive. Original page numbers are indicated in the margins and linked to the original scanned pages.

Please report any typos or errors by leaving a comment on this version's Internet Archive page.

## Contents

I. Godlessness.	4
II. How God comes to a man today.	15
III. God and personal relationships.	26
IV. Jesus today.	36

## I. Godlessness.

Some years ago in the Lake District in England I lay in the heather high up on the mountain side overlooking a deep, broad valley. Near by, and jutting out from amongst a tangle of bushes, was a rock one side of which dropped steeply into the valley. I watched a large spider on the edge of this rock. He was letting out filaments from his body in order to construct his web, and as he let them forth they floated out over the vast deep spaces of the valley, waving hither and thither, catching on nothing, pathetic, futile. Then he gave it up. He turned his back on the infinite spaces of the valley and went into a narrow crevice of the rock, dark and overhung by the bushes, and began again. Here the filaments soon caught on something, and swiftly he spun his web. It was not long before a fly was entangled in it, its life being sucked away by its triumphant enemy.

That little incident from nature has come back to my mind many times since I saw it; it comes back whenever I am stung into thinking with less than our usual casualness about this strange and awful fact, usually taken for granted, of being alive, being a man, chucked into existence, along with millions of others, God alone knows whence. What is it all about? Walk through a great city such as this, and observe man. Better still, observe him as he hurries about in your own shoes. What a tumult of activ-

ity and busy-ness from day to day, month to month, year to swiftly vanishing year. Who then are these creatures, who am I, rushing up to town in automobiles and swaying railway trains, selling this, buying that, tapping out letters and invoices on writing machines, 'phoning hither and thither, eating, drinking, love-making, money-making, having children and training them to do exactly the same, filling picture halls, concert halls, dance halls, reading newspapers in the morning and newspapers again at night, and then sinking in sleep for a few hours, being subject to the same crude physical weaknesses and necessities as the dog, who also has been doing his canine business all day and is now curled up on the mat. Then the next day it begins all over again.

4

Who then are these creatures? They are men, you say, and I note a touch of dignity in the voice. Yes, but what is a man, and why be so pleased about it? Suppose I say that they are only highly organized, intelligent, two-legged spiders, wherein should I be wrong? That spider spun his web in the crevice of the rock and caught his fly. What are these creatures doing, as they move around hither and thither, if they are not merely spinning a highly elaborate web, in accordance with their different powers, to catch a fly, fix and hold and enjoy some swiftly passing and always precariously held nourishment and satisfaction? And are they not all, like the spider, under sentence of ultimate death? One hundred years or so and not one of them will be here, any more than my spider is still up there on that Lakeland hill-

side. Ah, but you say, look at man's achievements, his great buildings, his wireless communications, his aeroplanes, his science and art. I'm sorry, but I cannot see, when I sit down and think about it, that that makes the least difference. The spider after all has his points, for such a tiny frail creature. His web is a masterpiece of structure and beauty.

Ah, but you say again, there is something else. This creature man has something which no other creature has: he has thoughts and aspirations after something transcending this life and outlasting it; he dreams of beauty and truth and goodness; he has a sense of kinship with the eternal. There are churches and temples as well as factories and offices. Yes, my friend, you are right. There is something in the soul of a man that makes him feel not quite satisfied with this whole business of spreading webs and catching flies, even highly cultured and refined flies like music and art; makes him feel not quite sure that, when all is said and done, there is not a hollow meaninglessness at the heart of it. And there stirs in him the yearning for something else more permanent, something that shall escape the universal sentence of death. Yes, but does he find it? Did not the spider also stand for a moment on the edge of the rock and let forth a few filaments of his life into the infinite vastness of the valley, waving pathetically about, touching nothing but emptiness? Then gave it up and turned him about and went into the narrow crevice which he had always known, and built his little familiar web there, and went on

catching flies?

Now I do not want this image of the spider pressed too far, so that it begins to suggest falsehood rather than truth; yet to me, as I hope it may now do for some of you, it has always served to throw up with a pungent sharpness of definition a quite ultimate fact and issue of our lives which, whether we think about it or not none of us can escape. And since we cannot in any case escape it, we may as well think about it and not run away from it. The spider on that mountain side has dramatized for me what may be called the modern man's dilemma, and it is no less his dilemma even when he does not, could not, put it to himself in explicit terms.

On the one hand, there is just this business of keeping ordinary human life going from the ordinary human motives of food, sex, money-making, desire for comfort and pleasure and security, and all the rest. It has a certain inherent zest in it, especially if you are young, provided you can win some success in it. But it has this fatal flaw in it, namely, not merely that you may not win success in it, as millions today are not, but also that, even if you do win success in it, it doesn't bear thinking about as a whole. For directly you begin to think about it as a whole, in and for it itself with no reference to anything beyond itself, then it seems to have no meaning. It all suddenly begins to dwindle and shrink to something chillingly like that spider spinning his web for flies in a crevice of the rock. Or it becomes like the back-cloth of the stage which

gives an illusion of reality for an hour or two of excitement, but which subconsciously you know is so thin and flat that you could put your boot through it. And this is true, even if you happen to be amongst those who find their delight in refined and cultured things, things that are usually counted among the higher dignities of human life. What does it matter whether I spin a highly artistic web and catch butterflies rather than horseflies, if in the end nothing has any significance beyond itself and death annuls everything, even, as the scientists tell us it will, the whole human race itself? One of our modern authors, having descanted eloquently on man's achievements in science, art, architecture and all the rest, ends with the statement, that none the less we must accept the fact that it will all be swept away as a spider's web is swept down by the maid's broom in the cellar. Curious he should have used the same image of a spider's web. But there you have one side of the modern man's dilemma. Confine your thought and interest and activity to this present scene and you dare not sit down and think about it as a whole. If you do, a man's dignity begins to vanish away. He becomes simply a rather pathetic animal, carried along by instincts and desires whose objects have no more permanence and significance than the honey after which the ants run in accordance with *their* instincts and desires.

7 This then on the one side. What then on the other? Many, many modern people feel, dimly or clearly, this hollowness and futility which underlies



human activity, however immediately zestful it may be, when it is closed up in itself. One of the most competent minds in Europe once said in my hearing these words: "the most disquieting thing in this modern age is the growing sense of futility which is spreading through all classes." He was right. Why then do not men break through this enclosedness of their life, which is the source of its apparent meaninglessness and futility, into a faith in something above and beyond life which alone can give it meaning? Why do they not link it up to the thought of God and find in Him that which will fill the hollowness, and lift life above the level of the irrational brutes?

I will tell you why they do not. It is because the thought of God has no reality to them, and they cannot release themselves sufficiently from preoccupation with all their merely secular business to give themselves wholeheartedly to seeking to know His reality. That is peculiarly the modern man's situation. If for only a few moments he stands petrified before the apparent meaninglessness of his own existence and beings to yearn after the eternal, after God, behold there is an inhibition resting on his soul. He yearns in a dim sort of way, but he cannot make the object of his yearning real. God seems a mere idea, a void. He is like that spider again. He lets out a few filaments into the vast spaces, perhaps at some crisis of life when he is suddenly brought up short and made to think; and they wave about in the emptiness and catch on nothing. What then? Again

like the spider, he turns from it, back into the narrow enclosed crevice, and beings building his web again there, perhaps with redoubled energy.

8 Well, says someone, why not? Why not be content to live a life with no meaning beyond itself, not thinking too much about it, and salving from it some satisfactions as we can, so long as it lasts? Why not be content to be Godless? Alas,—and here you get the essential tragedy, the essential dilemma we are all in,—the matter is not so simple as that. The dilemma is that it is in fact a frightfully difficult thing to make anything of our lives satisfactory to ourselves, still less satisfactory to others with whom we have to live. Here the analogy of the spider completely breaks down. It was a simple thing for the spider having failed to make anything of the open spaces of the valley, to settle into the crevice and catch flies. But it is not simple for man. Life for man has a terrible way of tangling itself up into really horrible troubles. Look at human life today. There was a war a few years ago in which eleven millions of young men were slain by their fellows, millions of children bereaved, women's hearts well-nigh broken, babies starved, minds sent insane,—the asylums in Europe are still full of war-wrecks. And the clouds of another and worse horror gathering, as the nations arm again and compete ruthlessly like animals with one another for food and wealth. Look at this country alone. Millions unemployed and half-starving in a world of plenty, employers and employed in many sections in a state of veiled war-

fare with one another, a vast underworld of crime which ever and anon flares up in some horror of ruthless killing, hideous slums with rotten, festering tumble-down houses on the east side of New York, princely palaces on Long Island, and so on. We are all aware of these things. What do they reveal about human life? Or, coming to things more individual and personal,—for, after all, these social evils are but the magnifications of what goes on in private lives,—since when has it been easy for a man to manage his own life in a way that will give him or other people any deep and abiding satisfaction? Since when has it been easy to rise above the fears and worries and insecurities of life so that yours is an inward peace of mind which no nervous breakdown,—that peculiarly modern trouble,—ever threatens, which has no frayed, irritable edges needed to be continually smoothed down with mental sedatives and diversions of various sorts? Since when has it been easy to make a tolerable success of married life and all the intimate elbow-rubbing relationships of home life? The problem of living together, the failure of almost everybody to make anything very satisfactory of that problem, runs through every level and aspect of life from the difficulties parents have with their children and the difficulties children have with their parents, right up to the insane confusion and resultant vast misery of the national and international situation today. What an enormous wastage of peace and happiness, what a widespread harvest of malaise and frustration

there is, through wrong personal relationships in home and street and office and college, wherever in fact men's purposes impinge on one another. You do not need to be a very idealistic or even reflective soul to realize that human satisfaction is on the one hand very largely a function of personal relations, and on the other hand that those personal relations are most infernally quick to go wrong.

Now do not please be saying to yourself, what a gloomy pessimistic fellow this is; things aren't so bad as all that. There are other things in life, things of beauty and goodness and truth and joy. Of course there are; if there were not, it would be absolutely unendurable. But they only serve to point to the contrast, to throw up into sharper relief the things that are all confused and wrong. And for all the beauty, there are people for whom life is well nigh unendurable as for that wretched man who recently could see no way out of his difficulties but to suffocate his children and shoot himself. There are both sides, but that only makes the question more insistent, what then has gone wrong with human life?

10 This then is the modern dilemma. On the one hand man finds it enormously difficult to believe in the reality of God, to believe that there is anything above and beyond this present world; on the other hand he finds it enormously difficult to make anything very satisfactory of this present world if he shuts himself up in it. Shut up from anything above and beyond itself, enclosed in upon itself, it begins, like a light in a closed space, to suffocate itself in its

own vapours. I believe that a great many people are woefully conscious of this dilemma. They feel that human life, for all the man delightful things in it, is fundamentally a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing, unless it can be lifted into relationship with something above and beyond itself, with God, with the Eternal. Yet, as I have said, somehow the thought of God has lost its reality. It has not grip, no pungency; it does not stir feeling, it does not engage our will. It is a mere idea which they feel is outmoded and not quite intellectually respectable.

Men and women, my desire in the remaining talks of this week is to try to make God real to you, in such wise that it will lift your life, and through you those of the men and women with whom you have to deal, on to a different level. I have tried to indicate that there is no more urgent question, whether you are young or old. It is the choice between being only a gifted spider catching flies and for all your gifts always on the point of making a horrible mess of it, or being a personality with something of the eternal in his mind and heart. I find it difficult to be patient with, to avoid having something approaching contempt for young students, and still more for young lecturers and professors, and old ones, too, for that matter, who dismiss the idea of God and of religion as though it were only at best a matter for children and old women. As though, things being as they are, there could be any question more profoundly significant, more worthy of the most earnest wrestling with all a

man's best powers, than the question whether there is at the heart of this awful universe, this life so strangely mixed of things lovely and things evil, a high and holy purpose whom we may know and to whom we may give ourselves utterly in an eternal service. Reject the thought of God, if you will, give up the idea of ever feeling His living touch on your spirit, but do it, I beseech you, not jauntingly and flippantly, but with something of solemnity and sadness that a word which has come down history soaked in the deepest yearnings and aspirations of men, their finest heroisms, their martyrdoms, their very life's blood, should prove after all a mirage and a dream. To do it with that attitude may perhaps make you pause again and wonder whether after all you can be right.

## II. How God comes to a man today.

12

The subject we are not to think about is, how God comes to modern people like ourselves. It is clearly impossible even to begin to answer that question without first saying in a preliminary way what I mean when I say God. When I say that I believe in God, and when I say that I very much want you to believe in God, I mean at least this, that I believe and want you to believe that there is at the heart of this universe in which we find ourselves alive, the ultimate reality in it, sustaining it, giving it the actual character which it has, an unseen eternal purpose of good with which I, and you also, can enter into fellowship, with which we must enter into fellowship if we are to fulfil the true meaning and purpose of our lives. I do not mean by God simply some great first cause of some sort or other, or some inscrutable life force, or some vague philosophical principle or unity underlying the phenomena of the created world, but definitely a high and holy personal purpose which is addressing itself to me and is seeking my co-operation and fellowship with itself.

I want you to see the importance of this preliminary description. It is important because it determines our whole approach to this very serious question we are asking ourselves, the question, namely, how we may become livingly aware of God in this

modern world. The answer to that question obviously depends on the kind of reality God is. It is obvious when you come to think of it, though I am afraid not very many ever come to think of it, that the sort of evidence required to establish any suggested truth or fact depends on the sphere of experience to which the said truth or fact belongs. The mode of experiencing, becoming aware, of one sort of truth or fact is not appropriate to another. Thus, if you wish to know the truth of a proposition in mathematics, you must direct your thoughts along the channels marked out by symbolic logic. That is the only way in which the vast, austere world of mathematics can impinge upon your mind, can get through to you. Or if you wish to know the beauty of a picture it is no use measuring it with a ruler, or analysing its ingredients in a test tube, or tracing its history, or in any way fussing round it in probing, scientific enquiry. You have to sit still and contemplate it, and let it make that sort of impression upon you that beautiful objects do. Or if you wish to know for yourself the character of a man, it is no use examining his bank-balance, or the cut of his clothes or testing the alkalinity of his body; it is no use even arguing from purely circumstantial evidence which is always deceptive; you have got to enter into direct personal rapport with him in a variety of circumstances over many months. Similarly in respect of our awareness of God: if He is one sort of reality rather than another, then He will become livingly known to us in one way rather than another.



We may put it another way by saying that many people find it difficult in these modern days to believe in God not because the evidence is inadequate and unconvincing, but because their minds, through wrong presuppositions and expectancies, are out of focus with the only evidence which in the nature of the case is appropriate and available. Thus there lurks in many people's minds in these days, when we are all unconsciously dominated in our thinking by the laboratory methods of science and industry, the feeling that it ought to be possible to prove God by irresistible logical and scientific proof. Yet how absurd, how self-blinding, if God happens to be *not* the sort of reality which *is* amenable to that sort of enquiry and approach. If God be indeed a high and holy purpose addressing Himself personally to men and woman as persons, then it is emphatically once and for all not possible to prove his reality by abstract reasoning. In the realm of personal relationships, logic and science can after all tell you very little. I should find it extremely difficult to prove by logic, and beyond the reach of any intellectual cavil, that my wife really is a living personality and not merely a highly elaborate automaton; and even more difficult to prove that she is what I know her to be, namely a truly good personality. These things lie outside the realm of strict logic. I have come to know the reality and goodness of the personal purpose I call my wife simply by having personal relations with her, and living in fellowship with her. The man who wants a strictly logical demonstration

of God before he will make a serious start with the business of religion is as irrational as the man who would insist on using a private enquiry agent before he would marry his wife, or before he would trust a single living soul as a friend. Life cannot be lived on a high personal level on such principles, and the Christian faith is nothing if not the living of life on a high personal level with the highest personal reality there is in the universe, namely God.

How then does this high and holy divine purpose manifest itself to us?

The first and most fundamental thing is this, and of it, and it alone, I want to speak. I want to declare to you that if God is to be brought down out of the realm of merely dead ideas and is to become known to you as a living reality, *it will be primarily and centrally through something which happens in the sphere of your will*. I want to make as clear as I can why I say this and what I mean by it. And in order to do so, will you turn your minds away from the thought of God for a moment to something more immediate and familiar, I mean our personal relations with one another?

How livingly and indubitably aware of one another as living personalities we are! When I talk to a neighbour I am never under the least temptation to think of him as a thing or an animal. As I gaze into his eyes, observe the play of his features, hear him say things with which I disagree, say things with which he disagrees, sense the swift passage of feeling, whether of accord or antagonism, from the

one to the other, I just know that I am dealing with that particular sort of entity I call personal. On what is such clear, indubitable awareness based? How, for example, does a young child become so swiftly able to distinguish between persons and things, so keenly conscious of living not merely in a physical world of dead things, but also in a social world of human purposes, to which it must adjust itself. Well, doubtless many things help in the building up of this profound certainty of one another's existence as persons which we all have, and which no amount of clever reasoning could ever really shake, but one thing is quite central and indispensable, and that is the interplay and clash of other people's wills and purposes and values with our own, especially the clash. It is in the collision of purpose, the tension and clash of will and value, that our awareness of what we call living personality in the other man becomes most sharp and irresistible. With the young child, it is when the mother begins to resist, to thwart, to check, to thrust her values resistantly into the child's values that she is thrown, as it were, into sharpest relief as personal on the background of dead, inert things; and all through our life the supreme personal problem, as distinct from any other sort of problem, lies in the tension into which wills enter with one another. It is so, is it not? In all departments of life we become most vividly aware of a reality other than ourselves at the point where it offers resistance. In physical things the resistance is to muscular pressure. You know the table is real

most keenly when you stub your toe against it. In the realm of personality the resistance which "hits" us with a sense of reality is the resistance of values, the other man's will as against yours. The man who is entirely subservient to another's will becomes a curiously flat, unreal, negligible being. We say of him, he has no personality, he is a rubber-stamp, he is a nonentity. A person becomes an entity to us by having a purpose of his own, and we recognize such a purpose by its value-resistance, and by the fact that it is beyond merely physical manipulation and control. Here indeed the difference between our awareness of things and our awareness of persons becomes most apparent. The pressure resistance of things you overcome by manipulation; the value resistance of persons you can overcome only by something quite different, by something of the order of persuasion, agreement, trust, reconciliation, love. Directly you try merely to manipulate a value resistance you reduce the man with whom you are dealing from the status of a person to the status of a thing, and that is a very deadly and disastrous thing.

Now, in the light of this, let us return to the question of livingly meeting God. If there is any continuity between the personal world in which we live with our fellows and the personal world in which we are called to live with God, as I shall say in the next talk there is, this simple, yet profound, truth emerges, which I stated a few minutes ago, namely that there can only be a living awareness of God as

high and holy eternal purpose in and through something which happens, and must continue to happen again and again, in the sphere of our values and our wills. It can only be through some sort of value resistance thrust into the midst of our own values and intentions and preferences, of such a kind that we know it to be, by its essential impact upon us, the challenge of another and higher will than our own, an eternal will, God. And we can only grow in the living knowledge of God by rightly responding to this resistance of His will against ours, this pressure and demand of His purpose upon ours.

Of what sort then is this value resistance which thus carries the accent of the eternal to the human spirit? It is always a value resistance that impresses us as being absolute and unconditional in its demands upon us, so that the only right response is to obey it absolutely, yea even at the cost of life itself, if need be. Whosoever says God, says, for the normal human heart, demand for the absolute unconditional obedience; whosoever says demand for unconditional obedience, says, for the normal human heart, God. Why, even popular speech shows that. If a man follows some pursuit with more than usual persistency and obstinacy, it is said of him, he makes a God of it, he does it religiously. Whenever a man contemplates a completed dedication of himself even unto death he begins to talk the language of eternity and the thought of God is not far from his mind. He raises his hand to heaven and vows before God. Leonidas at Thermopylae,

as Chesterton has suggest somewhere, did not say to his fellow Greeks, I think on the whole Greek civilization is preferable to Persian, therefore I beg to move that we stay here and perish before the superior might of Persia. That would have seemed silly, irrational; for what is the advantage of one civilization over another if you are dead? No; he cried rather: Athens and Sparta forever! And when men see some great act of obedience even unto death, a Father Damien going to tend the loathsome lepers, a Christ going to the Cross, they do not merely admire it as they might admire the dexterity of a pianist or a baseball player; no, a new note enters in, an attitude of reverence, a readiness to bow the head; they say this is *sacred*, they sense the presence of a Divine Will higher than life asking the surrender of life.

18 These things are surely deeply, deeply significant of the ultimate issues of our life as beings who are persons, not animals. But do not interpret their significance in the wrong way. I do not mean that God only comes to us in situations where the final sacrifices has in fact to be made. But I do mean that the living awareness of God begins in the sense of a pressure on the will which in principle is recognized to be just as absolute as that. Wheresoever, whensoever, you feel a disquiet in your soul about some way of thinking and feeling and doing in which you are getting entangled; whensoever you discern, or even only begin to suspect, that in this your personal situation, for which your will is responsible, this way

is better than that, this is right as against that wrong, this beautiful as against that ugly, this true as against that falsity, then I say, the beginning, the only beginning, of living awareness of God, is not to trifle with these things, not to attempt to get over them, or get around them, or explain them away, or find excuses why you cannot be expected to do anything about it, but to stop and bow the head and say: whence comes this pressure on my soul and conscience?—this is none other than the voice of the eternal in my soul, this is the resistance of a higher will, the demand of God; I dare not trifle with it.

The older I get, and the more I observe men and women, the more I observe myself, the more convinced I am that we are here at the heart of this whole business of life. The central thing about us, that which makes us personalities and not things, is that we have wills. The central thing about God as He enters into relationship with us is that He is will, and the He brings His will to bear upon ours with a certain kind of resistance, a kind that asks us in principle to defy even death, rather than not give complete obedience to it. If we seek to make that response of obedience, then the way is opened to our own highest life in increasing fellowship with Him; if we refuse even to seek to make that obedience, then our awareness of the reality of God begins to fade away, so that all that is left is an aching sense of the futility and emptiness and confusion of life. He that seeketh to save his life, that is by refusing to make surrender of it to the pressures of God even

unto death, loses it; he that loseth his life shall keep it unto life eternal. He that willeth to do the will shall know the truth. For him and him alone, do all the riches of God and the peace of God and the solemn joy of the service of God, begin to open. I do not say that other things may not contribute to the awareness of the eternal,—the loveliness of nature, the simple joys of human relationships and human love, the zest of doing creative work,—but this fundamental attitude of obedience and loyalty to God's value resistances on the heart is central and fundamental and indispensable. Without that even these other things begin to fade out into a general sense of emptiness and futility. After all, things are what they are and not something else. There is no reason in the nature of things why God should not be high and holy personal purpose in dealing with us as persons. If He is, how else could we enter into fellowship with Him, get to know His reality save by rightly responding to His will as it impinges upon ours? You can only get to know any reality by rightly responding to it. And how could His will impinge upon ours in a personal way save through some pressure of invitation and challenge and rebuke on our customary ways of living, on the customary direction of our will? And what right response to it could there be, if it be the will of God, but a solemn and serious endeavor, absolutely, without any trifling and postponement and arguing it away, to obey. It is because we refuse to do that, that God becomes desolatingly unreal to



us. We treat the divine purpose as though it were non-existent, or as though it could be compromised with like a human purpose. Then we ask someone to come and prove His reality to us. Yet all the time the unreality is in ourselves.

This then is the answer to our question. God comes to us modern people as he came to the Hebrew prophets, as he came to Jesus, to Paul, to the Christian martyrs, to all souls down the ages great and small,—as a haunting pressure within their own souls, a pressure in the most intimate places of their will, too pure, too piercing, to searching, to be a mere figment of their own minds. And the crisis in which we all stand is the crisis of what we are going to do with that pressure. Obey, as the sense of the reality of God grows and deepens, until it is proof against all the darkest challenges of life, all the clever scepticisms of the unbelieving scientists and philosophers. You begin then to know that it is they who are in the unreal world, not you.

20

I ask you to take time to consider again whether, in the words of George Macdonald, before your own door stands not a gate, lies not a path to walk in. Enter by that gate, walk in that path, and you shall arrive at the conviction, which no man can give you and none take away, that there is a living Love and Truth at the heart of your being and pervading all that surrounds you. There is no other way.

### III. God and personal relationships.

I said that the most fundamental and indispensable thing in any living awareness of God as a high and holy purpose dealing with us in life is something that happens in the sphere of the will. We begin to be aware of God in a way that is not merely theoretical directly we feel in our own immediate personal situation, for which we have a responsibility of action, the call of something higher over against something lower, so that our will must of necessity choose the one or the other and bear the responsibility for the choice. We become still more aware of God when we feel that this call of the higher way over against the lower has an accent of the unconditional in it, so that we are aware of being under obligation to obey it absolutely whatever may be the consequences; it is not a matter of liking or not liking, as a man may like or not like to go to a concert or take another cup of tea, but a matter of feeling yourself under a challenge to do this thing rather than that, whether you like it or not. Only at the point where a man feels this thrusting into his soul of an unconditional demand to walk this way rather than that, no matter what his natural instincts may say, no matter what his friends may say, no matter if it should mean all kinds of worldly loss, can he be livingly conscious of a higher divine purpose in life challenging his own. If a man says

that he is not conscious anywhere in his being, in any of his relationships, of such absolute demands addressed to his soul, then there is nothing more to be said. No amount of argument will ever make God a living pungent reality to him. All that can be done is to wait until something happens which shall stab his spirit awake again into some awareness, however dim and confused, of these high and austere challenges of God. But as a matter of fact it is more often than not the case that when a man says that he is not aware of these imperatives in his soul, he is not being quite sincere; they are there all the time, but they involve such a criticism of his customary ways of living that directly he begins to feel their pressure he runs away from them and says they are not there, or otherwise explains them away.

22

There is then no way to a deepening awareness of God, and an increasing sense of the true meaning and use of this our otherwise so meaningless existence, save through taking seriously these high imperatives and girding our loins to their obedience. Yet some of you may be thinking that this way of putting it, this way of rooting everything in God's high challenge to our will and the necessity of a response of surrender and obedience from our will, is to make the whole business of religion bleak and grey and repellent from the beginning. I can understand how that feeling should arise in your mind as it does in mine. For it is precisely part of our whole modern temper and approach that it should arise. Anything that smacks of austere living, of self-

discipline, of surrender of immediate satisfactions and securities, throws the modern man, brought up as he is to believe that the one standard of life is comfort, the one supreme right of a man the opportunity to fulfil his imperious demands for self satisfaction, at once into a suspicious attitude. Yet how wrong, how fatally wrong, it all is. Let me say one or two things on this point.

23 First, when I sit down and think about it, I see at once and very clearly, that there is, and there can be, no sense in speaking about God without the accent of austerity entering in, if we are using the term God with any serious meaning at all. For whatever else the term God means, it means the highest, holiest reality with which we men have to deal, and whatever else religion means it means entering into the highest and holiest and most enriching relationship into which we can enter. Why then should we expect to have and to enter into this highest destiny of life on cheap terms? Why should we ask and expect to have God on cheaper terms than almost anything else in life? Whether we like it or not, nothing in this world that is worth the having can be had for the asking. Always it is for those who can summon their best powers, keep their lamp lit and their loins girt in some austerity of dedication and endeavor. How could it be otherwise with the richest of all the things that this universe offers to living souls, which is fellowship with God? Yet, I declare, many folk seem to think that if they link their lives to God the first thing He ought to do is to take them out of the bat-

tle and make things easy for them. People think of God as a sort of celestial money lender to whom they can run and take a loan when things go wrong; or as a plumber whom they never see, and of whose existence they are hardly aware, until the pipes burst. Then they run to him. Thank God, He does not make Himself cheap to us like that. Thank God, He never does approach our souls, even when we need His strength and comfort, without this accent of austere challenge and call. A God on less terms is no God; He is just a figment of egocentric, frightened minds.

Second, I do see, and I want you to see, that it is precisely through this addressing to our will of an absolute demand which we are called upon to obey at any cost that God is seeking to bestow upon us the highest of all blessings which is to have the dignity of being truly a personality. Let me explain.

There are in a general way always two alternatives which lie before us. One is to be carried along, in all our actions and responses to life, by our instinctive wants and desires. We want money, so we go after it; we want fame and influence, so we will do this or that to get it; we want excitement, so we go to theatre or dance; we want sexual satisfaction, so we rush into any relationship that seems to offer it; some one annoys us, we feel angry, and we let "fly" at him; some one flatters us, we feel pleased, and we seek more of it; or on a higher level, we want a book and we buy it; we like the preacher, so we go to church; we do not like him, so we stay away, and so on. Inclination, inclination, inclination! Now I am

not saying that these wants are wrong and should not be satisfied. But I do say that to be merely carried along by them like that, even if they are quite legitimate wants, is not to be a personality at all, or anything approaching one. It is to be a mere function of the environment. It is to have no personal will in the highest sense of that term. Your environment soaks into you in stimulus of various sorts and out again in responses of various sorts. You are a mere vehicle, a mere transmitter of forces, just as the plant is, or the moth which flutters, it knows not why, except that at that moment it wants to, into the flame. You are in fact, as I said in the first talk, only a highly complex and gifted spider, a lively and mobile vegetable!

What then is the other alternative? The other alternative is to be a genuine personality. How? Not by escaping from these instinctive wants—we can't do that, of course,—but by being able in principle to say No! to them all, yea, even if need be, to that most passionate of all instincts which is the instinct to preserve our lives. Only when we have learnt to do that, do we cease to be a mere function of our world, do we begin to have a genuine will, do we begin to be personalities and to have the dignity of personalities worthy of fellowship with God. God's challenge to man in these absolute demands, asking obedience whatever his natural instincts may say, is in fact not so austere and bleak as it sounds. It is an invitation to us to rise out of a state of subservience to our world, to achieve the dignity of personalities.

There is no more tragic spectacle than merely instinctive human beings, human beings whose wills have never been released. And God's call to the soul to absolute surrender at any cost is His first step to save it from that tragedy. And the wonderful thing is that when a man does thus win his freedom through surrender to God, he begins to realize the true riches and joys of his instinctive life. The whole thing is purified and lifted on to a new level, as for example in the relationship of marriage. Seek ye first the rule of God and all things else are added unto you.

25

I am the more anxious to insist on this because, as I have hinted, it is precisely part of our modern outlook to minimize this matter of the will and to rebel against the thought of God as one who austere challenges men to stand on their feet, and rule their instinctive life, and achieve the dignity of true freedom. You see this coming out in much that passes as religion today. A great many people have grown tired of the merely secular life; they yearn for something more, they are minded to be religious. But note the sort of religion they run to. It is a religion of feelings, and satisfactions of feelings; not one which challenges and searches the will. They talk about worshipping God in nature. They talk about mystical feelings of unity with the cosmos. They go out under the stars, or watch the sunset sky; they grow lyrical about the beauty of the flowers; as Mr. Irving Babbitt, that fierce critic of all that sort of emotional romanticism, once put it,—they mix themselves up with the landscapes and call it

religion. Or they insist that unless the church is beautiful and the curtains just the right shade and the music perfect, they cannot feel, yes, that's the word, *feel* God. When they have all these things, they feel soothed and call that 'meeting God.' I sometimes wonder whether aspirin would not have worked just as well. They do not see that they are still only functions of their environment, a reed with a cosmic wind blowing through them playing a pretty tune. Not until wind is challenged can they be anything but functions of their environment. Did anybody ever have his conscience cleansed, feel himself searchingly rebuked and humbled and brought to his knees in shame for his crudely selfish, instinctive treatment of his wife or his neighbor, by the song of a lark trilling in the sky? Do not misunderstand me. I believe there is a ministry of nature to the sensitive spirit, but the ministry is entirely different according as you bring to it the awareness of the righteous will of God meeting yours always in absolute challenge and demand.

26

Which leads me to the quite definite and particular thing which I want to say. If it is not in vague cosmic transports of feeling that God lays His austere will alongside of ours and makes Himself pungently felt in absolute demand, where then is it? It is primarily and centrally in the sphere of our personal relationships with one another. Just because God is seeking to challenge and win us into true personality it must be that His high and austere demands should have their primary reference to our



relations with other personalities, for personality has no meaning except in and through its relations with other personalities. All the highest, most demanding exercises of will are just there, namely, where wills meet one another. All this is summed up in the great Christian affirmation that God is love, and that the highest obedience to God is in the mastery of ourselves in the service of the high ends of love to one another. We have to identify ourselves with God's purposes in others. Only in so far as we do that, can we win our true freedom as children of God. That doubtless sounds a truism, but like all truisms its real import and challenge are too often overlooked. It is precisely in our relations with others that our natural instincts are most fiercely aroused, and it is precisely there that God challenges our wills first. Really to lay it unto your soul and live in the light of it, that the one supreme and unconditional value of life is to be in right relations, as the one supreme failure and sin is to be in wrong relations, with those who daily cross our path, is the most difficult thing conceivable, as the whole state of the world today amply witnesses. Yet on no other basis can the reality of God be livingly known.

27

It is because so many folk fail entirely to realize this, that God remains so unreal and impersonal to them. They try to work up a feeling of the nearness and reality of God by some feverish technique of private devotion, or at some religious meeting, or by the contemplation of beauty, whilst their relations with the people with whom they have to deal are all

shot through with wrong attitudes and repudiated responsibilities of various sorts. And they fail, of course; for God's purpose, being personal and seeking to deal with them as persons, must cut the plane of their lives primarily in their personal world, in their relations with other persons. Jesus himself put this point with the utmost insistency and power. "If thou art offering thy gift upon the altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift upon the altar and go thy way. First be reconciled to thy brother." And He would have said the same to some of our moderns who would make a garden the temple and a birdbath the altar. "You are nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." That is false; that is that sloppy unethical romanticism which is so common today. The people who are nearest God's heart are those who are seeking at some cost to themselves to set right some broken human relationship, wheresoever it lies within their power to do so. The same point comes out in Jesus' picture of the final judgment which is passed upon men's lives. You may not know it, you may be surprised when you are told it, but in the giving or withholding of a cup of cold water you are directly involved with God, so directly, so inescapably, that the first thing and the only thing God will want to speak to you about at the end will be just that.

There is a story told of Aggrey, the black Christian saint. He came of a line of proud chieftains, and still had to wrestle with an imperiousness of temper

derived from that lineage. Once at breakfast he said something which hurt his wife's feelings in the presence of her sister. That night it came upon him that he had been all wrong in that relationship and that he must set it right; he must apologize. It was the pressure of God on his conscience and will. Yet, was it to be expected,—he, born of a line of chiefs, "eating humble pie" to a couple of women? Well, he would slip into his wife's room in the quietness and darkness of the night and apologize. No, that would not do. The sister had been involved in the wrong relationship, for she also had been present. He must apologize to her also. All night long he wrestles with himself, or rather with God. Next morning at breakfast, he apologized unconditionally, with no self-excusing, and the two women, knowing something of him, were almost in tears at so complete a giving of himself to them; and all were conscious, as they had seldom been at any other time, of the presence and the overshadowing of God.

## IV. Jesus today.

What I want to say now is a necessary supplement to what has already been said. I said that God comes to us primarily and centrally in the sphere of our will; we become aware of a resistance there, a demand addressed to us to follow this way rather than that at any cost and whatever our inclinations may be. This is the touch of the eternal on our spirits, and the only way to get to know God in a living way is to make the right sort of response to it, which is to rein in our inclinations and obey. I said further that God comes to us primarily and centrally on the plane of our personal relationships to one another. Except we are meeting and rightly responding to Him there, in the dimension of the personal, we are not likely to meet Him to much profit anywhere else. All of which is summed up in the great Christian affirmation that God is love and that we enter into fellowship with God by loving one another, the word love being used in the highest, purest, austerest sense of that term.

Now all this, true as it is, important as it is, urgent as it is that we should remind ourselves of it again and again, is none the less in the realm of more or less abstract generalisation. I am afraid of generalisations. It is so easy to assent to them sitting in a quiet place like this, and then when we get out into the workaday world to find them curiously devoid

of leading and light and power. Let us then try to get down to the concrete, human, individual, personal John Smith, Tom Brown, Jane Robinson. Directly we do that, we run up against a problem concern which I want now to speak.

Here am I then, a concrete, particular individual. I have a definite sort of mental make-up and character, the result of all my past history—my heredity, environment, education; my sins, disloyalties, failures; my experiences of other people and their sins and disloyalties and failures towards me,—and so on. I am what I am because I have been what I have been, and because other people in my life have been what they have been. I cannot change the past, and because I cannot change the past I cannot in the twinkling of an eye change myself, for I carry my past in me. Very well, then, I, who am that sort of concrete person go forth from this place having registered the resolve to obey the high imperatives of God in my soul, to stop living the merely instinctive life, to seek the highest and austere relationships of love with all whom I come into contact. That is a right resolve; without some such resolve, some such setting of the soul to a more sincere and loyal response to God, nothing can be achieved. Yet when I actually get into the workaday world, what do I find? I find that the thing is not so simple. Why? Because I find that after upwards of forty years of living, I am just what I am, and no mere waving of a wand of resolution is suddenly and miraculously going to make me otherwise. Can I, who have in

countless ways, often without knowing it, let my instinctive desires rule me, suddenly improvise the power to leash them in and say them nay? Almost before I am aware of it, I am in the pressing practical situation which sets moving the old, take-the-line-of-least-resistance ways. Can I who, more often than not, have run away from the high demands of God, explained them away, smothered them in insincere thinking, suddenly by an act of will cut myself clean clear of my past and now always listen and obey? Almost without knowing it, when I am away from the quiet, exalted atmosphere of this place, and the pressure of the real, concrete world is upon me, I am doing the same thing again. Can I with a mind which has continually acquiesced in and helped to create wrong personal relationships, a mind darkened and confused by all kinds of subtle egotisms and acquisitive desires, even begin to see clearly what love really demands in the tangles of personal relationships, all shot through as they are by the egotisms and acquisitive desires of other people in addition to my own? What a complex, chaotic, tangled thing life is when you get away from generalisations down to the concrete; what a chaotic, complex, tangled self-binding thing my own soul is when I get away from exalted aspirations to the attempt to fulfil them in the real world; and yet here am I proposing to walk out into it from this place and henceforth fulfil the demands of God, as a man might put on his hat and go forth to register to vote.

It is perfectly obvious, is it not? Whilst *nothing* can be done without the continual renewed resolve to live in the light of the high imperatives of God, little can be done *on that basis alone*. Something else is necessary. What is necessary is that our nature and character should be set in some new relationship, given some new principle within it, which shall progressively cleanse, illumine, redirect, reorientate, recreate it,—call it what you like,—from within. I repeat it is no use my going out intending to wave the airy wand of a resolution over my nature and my situations. That is not realistic. That is the old futile attempt to life ourselves by our own boot straps. It never has been done, and never will be done. A new recreative, educative, continuously cleansing process needs to be set moving in the soul, if it to grow out of, and away from, its past into its true stature, if it is to become what Paul called a *freedman of God*. If such a process is not possible, then for most of us I fear all that we have thought of in this place, all that we may have resolved, will not carry us very far.

Well, I for one believe that such a refashioning and cleansing of our inner life is possible. Indeed, if I did not believe it, I would not have dared hold up the high and searching principles of which we have spoken. How then is it possible?

I believe God has made it possible by setting in the midst of our human life the perfect personal life of Jesus Christ, one in whose spirit were not our weaknesses and blindness and egotisms, one who

was always perfectly surrendered and obedient to the high imperatives of God in his soul, one who in all his relationships with men saw clearly the requirements of love at its highest and austere and best and was loyal to them; one in whom there was fully realised in this actual human scene that way, that truth, that life, which it is God's will that all men should follow and know and live.

But you say, how could a perfect personal life lived so many years ago, of which we have only a few scanty records enter so significantly into my life? My answer is that that is a mystery which I cannot explain; but it is not the less a fact for being a mystery. It is the mystery of the personality of Jesus, the mystery of his significance in the counsels of God for the soul of man. Of any *ordinary* historical figure the fact that he lived so many years ago, the fact that the records we have are so meagre, would make him irrelevant, and increasingly irrelevant as the years pass, to our modern life. But it is precisely the proof that there is something not ordinary about Jesus, that, all down the ages and just as much in our own age as in any earlier, he has been able to lay hold of those who seek to center their inner life in him, and gradually lift them to something which, the more it is realised, the more it is seen to be what we cannot call any other thing but just Christlike. It must be that somehow there is realised and expressed in him the underlying Divine purpose in human history which never changes from age to age; it must be that there is realised and expressed



in him that permanent standard and ideal of human nature which is assuredly in every one of us seeking to realise itself, but which is dammed back and frustrated by all our blindness and disloyalty and sin. Hence he is never really out of date, never remote from the deepest issues of our hearts, never irrelevant. Hence also we never need a full length biography of him, and the scanty records do not matter; 33 so long as there is enough for the tremendous purity and power of his personality to shine through, then the hidden and frustrated Christ within us can begin to do the rest; to break through all our inner darkness and weakness and seize on Christ and say, Yes! That is perfect spirit, that is the living completion and fulfilment of every dim vision of, and motion towards, God my soul has ever known. So the personality, to use John's image, feeds on Christ, is cleansed through him, grows through him.

But however we may care to figure it out to ourselves, I am convinced the fact remains as I have stated it. You are to centre your inner life in Jesus. You are to read the gospels and the New Testament. You are to watch him dealing with men and women. You are to think about him. You are to try to catch his spirit, that which makes him so uniquely Jesus. You are to test your own inner attitudes day by day by his. You are to try to take what you can grasp of his spirit into your relationships with men and women. You will fail, and then you must begin again with perhaps deeper humility and a deeper understanding of how much you need the patience and pardon

he showed to erring men, and how much you need to show it to others. Above all you are to ponder those last dreadful days of His Cross, contemplating all that the lovelessness of men did to perfect love when it challenged them in its piercing austerity and purity and power. Do this, I say, day by day, and you will surely begin to be a different man and woman and grow ever more conscious of the overshadowing love of God. You will not know that you are being refashioned. But your friends will know it. They will take note of you that you have been with Jesus.

34 Now I wish to say one quite special thing in conclusion. It concerns the Cross of Jesus Christ and the awareness of God's forgiveness. To those who seek to open their inner life to God in Christ, the need for divine forgiveness and the power of Christ to show us that forgiveness particularly through his Cross, becomes increasingly evident. Perhaps the best illustration I can give is to read you some words from a letter I once received from a friend. "Without the forgiveness of God, life, to one who is being cleansed and sensitised by Christ and his eyes opened to the true values of life, becomes even more a burden than it would otherwise be. Thus when I look back and see how much of evil I have put into human relations and how now it is beyond recall, utterly beyond recall, I feel pretty bad. Some years ago a half-blind woman with thick lensed glasses, selling cottons, and led by a thin pasty-faced little lad, came to the door. I can make many excuses for myself. I was tired, and it was late, and there had been a stream of

such people. I cut short a tale of domestic woe with a very sharp no. The lad said, Come away, Mum, and led her away, and I saw her thin round back and the wisps of lank grey hair hanging untidily over her faded threadbare coat. At the gate she paused while the little boy opened it, and gave a deep sigh, and the boy turned and gave me a look which was a near hatred as anything I have ever seen. And then they went away and I have never seen them since. I have often thought of that woman and whenever I think of her and her weary sigh, and venom being distilled into that lad's soul through wrong and loveless relationships to which I had thus contributed my part; when I recall that I can do nothing to amend what I did, I feel I can only cry, "Undo what I have done, O God, God in his manifold wisdom and love forgive and be merciful to us all, to me, to that woman, and the boy whom I shall never see again, and to whom I can never make amends, to all men tied up in this jangled bundle of life." Yes, I think I understand why Christianity talks so much about forgiveness. Once Christ beings to make sensitive the soul most of the things we thought were quite tolerable begin to be intolerable and shocking.

Or to look out across the wider scene of human life how can anyone whose soul has ever even begun to be sensitised by the mind of Christ not feel it an agony too great to be endured? The horror of the things men do to one another. Slums for example, and nothing being done about it; unemployment and children undernourished in a world of plenty;

persecution of Jews and decapitation of half-witted communists in Germany; exploitation of helpless natives in Portuguese Africa; Japanese bombing Shanghai and turning little children into muttering imbeciles among the ruins; mobs lynching negroes; society shooting down, strangling, electrocuting criminals which by its own rottenness it has helped to create; armament firms working day and night to devise and create machines to turn the fair bodies of men and women into shapeless pulp. These things are our world. There are others things, but there are those things. We can if we like avert our eyes from them, but that is dishonest. Certainly if you begin to live close to Christ you cannot avert your eyes, for it is precisely his influence that makes you increasingly sensitive to the heartbreak of it all. Yet I would say that Christ has no business to make us sensitive to these things if that is all he does. But he does something more, and he does it through that awful consummation of his life on the Cross. Through that, I know not how, God speaks; as the Cross of his perfect love stands in the midst of human hatred and cruelty and stupidity, so you see in the midst there is the eternal love, the bearing, suffering forgiveness of God. The burden of it is only on you because it is first on the eternal wisdom and love and forgiveness, which will not let men go. In all the affliction of men there is a deeper underlying affliction, the affliction of God. To see that in the Cross of Christ, and to find yourself at peace about human life, yet under the

call of God yourself to begin to redeem it, that is forgiveness. That is the peace of God which passes understanding. It is this paradox of peace in the mist of poignant repentance for sin,—your own and others,—which is forgiveness. But to hear the word of forgiveness to the soul through the cross of Christ, it is necessary to feel something of the burden of the world's lovelessness and sin, and to feel how insupportable it is. And to feel that you must walk with Christ day by day in your own personal relations, until the hard anaesthetic places of the spirit become sensitive, and a woman's sigh and a boy's wince will suddenly open up to you the very heart of the eternal, and bring you to your knees before the cross that is there.