

# GOD'S NEARNESS TO MAN

Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)

*"Not far from every one of us."*

—Acts 17:27

**I**t is to the men of Athens that Paul is preaching. His sermon is about the one living and true God, and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent. He proclaims to them the God whom they knew not. He fills up the inscription on the altar to the unknown God with the name JEHOVAH. Of this God he has much to say; something that they knew not; something that they knew; something of which their philosophers and prophets knew a little; something of which they knew nothing; something of which they had faint glimpses; something of which they were in total darkness. He preaches God to Athens. He tells them more in a few minutes than Plato had done in all his life. On Mars' hill he proclaims the sacred name Jehovah, and Jesus. But he brings the matter closely home to them, and makes them feel as if in contact with God; not with an idea, but with God. These idols, these altars, these statues, these temples—what are they all? It is Him who is a Spirit that Athens needs to know; Him who with all her fancied religion, she knows not.

Let us then look (1) at the fact; (2) at the lessons from it.

1. The fact. Not far from every one of us. That means, VERY NEAR. I call this a fact, or a state of things in actual existence; not a truth merely; not a proposition, nor a doctrine; but something more, something deeper. It is a truth that I am a sinner; but it is more, it is a fact. It is a truth that God sees me; but it is more, it is a fact. For God is not an abstraction, but a personality. God is not far from every one of us. He is nigh. He is as near as I am to myself; nearer than the outward world; nearer than friends; nearer than the sky which covers me, or the ground I tread upon, or the raiment I wear. He is around me, above me, underneath me. Not in the materialistic, pantheistic sense of all things being God; but as a living, personal God. The two personalities are distinct; that of man, and that of God. In Him I live, and move, and have my being. We see Him not, hear Him not, feel Him not; but He is near for all that, just as if we saw Him, heard Him, felt Him. His works are near, but He is nearer. So near as to hear me, see me, touch me, fill me, and compass me about. It is not merely said, He is our life, our motion, our existence—as if He were simply the fountainhead or mainspring of these; the apostle's words imply something far deeper and more intimate—"In Him we live, and move, and have our being." He is more necessary to our being than head or heart, or organs, or limbs. All this has been intensified by the incarnation of the eternal Word.

2. The lessons. These are very many. We take up but a few. They are all solemn, some of them blessed, some fearful.

(1.) How close the relationship between God and us. I speak of that natural relationship which results from His being what He is, and our being what we are; a relationship not affected by sin or rebellion on our part, nor by banishment and condemnation on His. Between the created and the uncreated, God and man, there subsists a necessary bond which cannot be broken; a bond to which the apostle calls the attention of these Athenians. All their idolatry and wickedness had not weakened this connection. They could not cease to be His property. They were still His offspring. In Him, they still lived, and moved, and had their being. What ties can be compared to this for closeness and indissoluble firmness? All earthly relationships in comparison with it are a mere thread; this is a chain of iron; and though invisible and impalpable, it is

immeasurably the strongest of all bands. God is not only nearest to us, but He is most closely related. Not that this relationship is saving. No. In the case of lost men and angels it will be awfully condemning.

(2.) More, important that that relationship be one of friendship. One so nearly related to us as God is must be more to us, either for good or evil, than all the universe. He is the source of all blessing; He is infinitely able to bless us; He desires to bless us; how momentous, then, that there should be friendship between Him and us; yes, friendship between us and the great Father of spirits; friendship between us and Him in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Friendship with others is nothing; friendship with Him is everything; seeing He is so near to us, and possessed of such power over us and in us, how needful that God and we should be at one. How essential to our well-being that this indissoluble tie should be one of happy friendship; we loving God, and God loving us. Yes; how important both for body and for soul; both for time and for eternity.

(3.) How sad if there be estrangement. If God, as it were, retires from us, leaves us alone, to our own resources—even without any positive infliction, how sad our case. What loneliness, what solitude, what utter, endless dreariness without God! We often hear the complaint of being lonely, and having no society; but how far short does anything of this sort experienced among ourselves come of that dismal solitude of the soul, when God is away. Even granting that He does not go from us, yet if He does not smile, how lonely! Even if He does not speak words of anger, if He merely keeps silence, how sad for us! The silence of God! The absence of God! The distance of God! What infinite and unutterable solitude would that make for the soul? At present we can drown the sense of solitude in pleasure, gaiety, and business. Soon this will be impossible. And then the sadness! The profound and eternal melancholy! Will not that be hell?

(4.) How terrible if there be wrath. The anger of a far distant enemy is nothing; but that of one as near as He is mighty, is a fearful thing. The wrath of Him whose offspring we are, in whom we live and move! How terrible. The nearness and authority over us which He has in virtue of our connection, makes that connection infinitely terrible, if God be turned to be our enemy. Instead of eternal friendship, nothing but eternal enmity between us and the God who made us! No hiding from Him in whom we live and move! No screen, either of distance, or rocks, or mountains between us and Him! What an eternal terror will He be to us! So near, so awfully near, and our enemy! Our enemy forevermore!

(5.) How blessed to enter into friendship with Him now. He is ready to do this. He makes proposals to this effect. Acquaint thyself now with God. He has no pleasure in estrangement or anger. He seeks for reconciliation. He urges it, urges it now, on each of you. Father, Son, and Spirit join in this urgency. Be reconciled they say. Why refuse the friendship, and the love, and the blessedness?

That connection with God which you cannot shake off would thus become the most blessed of all blessed relationships. The feeling that you are so near Him would be one of the most blessed of all feelings. And then, being one with the incarnate Son would draw this union closer. You would be doubly near, and thus doubly blessed! Oh what an immeasurable source of gladness would this double relationship, this double nearness, become to you! Make sure of it now!

