

Standing Before God

Augustus Toplady

Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778), was educated at Westminster School and Trinity College, Dublin, he was converted through a Methodist lay preacher, took Anglican orders in 1762, and later became vicar of Broadhembury, Devon. In 1775 he assumed the pastorate of the French Calvinist chapel in London. He was a powerful preacher and a vigorous Calvinist, bitterly opposed to John Wesley. He wrote the *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England* (2 vols., 1774) and *The Church of England Vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism* (1769). His fame rests, however, on his hymns, e.g., "A debtor to mercy alone"; "A sovereign Protector I have"; "From whence this fear and unbelief?"; and especially "Rock of Ages" (appended to an article calculating the "National Debt" in terms of sin). This article is taken from Toplady's *Contemplations*.

"Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" 1 Sam. vi. 20.

And yet, before this holy Lord God, every soul *must* one day stand. "We shall all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ," says the apostle, "that every one may receive according to the things he hath done in the body." In some sense, we may be said to stand before Him now: "for He is not far from every one of us;" nay, "in Him we live, and move, and have our being." The consequence of this is, that there is no creature which is not manifest to His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes "of Him with whom we have to do." With regard therefore to His own Omniscience and Omnipresence, we already stand before this holy Lord God. He is about our bed, and about our paths, and is acquainted with all our ways; nor is there a word in our tongues, or a thought in our hearts, but He knows it altogether. "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good."

I shall not detain the reader with considering on what occasion the men of Bethshemesh spoke the words of the text; but only observe, that the miraculous judgment inflicted on them for looking into the ark, was that which gave rise to the above question, and made them cry out, with trembling and astonishment, "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" But in whatever sense these words were meant by the speakers, they certainly contain a most momentous enquiry; — an enquiry in which every soul of man is deeply concerned.

If the Lord God, before whom each individual will shortly stand, is a holy God, a God of truth, and without iniquity, and of purer eyes than to behold sin with impunity; we may well ask, "Who is able to stand before Him? — who can abide the day of His coming, or stand when He appears?" Appear He certainly *will*; and stand before Him we inevitably *must*. God only knows who shall first be summoned to do this; but, first or last, the citation will be sent to all. *Health* is a tender, precarious flower; *life* is a brittle, slender thread; how soon the one may wither, and the other break, He alone can tell who lent us both. This only we know, from Scripture and from daily observation, that all below is of uncertain tenure; that we are no more than tenants at will, removable at the pleasure of God, the great Proprietor of all.

Some are dismissed from life in the dawn of infancy; some in the morning of childhood; others in the noon of youth. The sands of some are continued longer; and a very few are permitted to see the night of what we generally term old age. Not a day, nor an hour; no, not a minute passes, wherein multitudes of all ages are not called away to stand before the holy Lord God. Death, that promiscuous reaper, pays no regard to years or station. The infant of a day, and the man of a century, are alike to *him*; he mows the shooting blade and the maturer stem: the growing and the grown unite to swell his harvest and augment his spoils. But is that which we term Death, the offspring of chance, or the result of accident? Surely, no. Death is a scythe! but if I may so speak, it is a scythe in the hand of God. Affliction, sickness, and dissolution, are messengers of His; which come not but at His command. As King William used to say, with regard to those that died in battle, that "every bullet has its billet", or is directed by special Providence; so it may truly be said, that every event has its commission from God, and is the effect of at least His permissive will. And therefore, though with regard to the act of dying itself, "all things come alike to all, and there is, in this respect, one event to the righteous and the wicked, and as the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath;" — though good and bad must die, the grave being the house appointed for all living; yet we must beware of thinking, because the holy and the wicked, the useful and the useless, seem to be taken away promiscuously, and without distinction, that therefore death is the effect of that unmeaning thing called chance; for both holy scripture and sound reason join in supporting the assertion of the celebrated Mr. Pope: — "All nature is but art unknown to thee; All chance, direction, which thou canst not see." So far is anything from being fortuitous or accidental, with regard to God, (however contingent and unexpected some things may be to *us*) that not a sparrow falls to the ground, but in consequence of His will; and the very hairs of our head are everyone numbered. Nor does the absolute and necessary dependence of all things on God, the first cause, at all interfere with, much less does it supercede, the liberty of second, or subordinate causes. Difficulties, indeed, may attend the reconciliation of human freedom, with the purposes and prescience of God from eternity, and with the efficacious influence of actual Providence in time; but yet it is plain, from experience, that man is *free*, that is, that he acts without any inward force or violent compulsion. What he does in a moral way, he does with the concurrence of his will. If unregenerate, his will inclines him to the works of darkness, and these accordingly he commits; if renewed by the Spirit of God, his will, from the new bias which grace has given, naturally and spontaneously inclines him to what is good, and he acts agreeably to this

renewed will. So that in every view, man is *free* in what he does; though totally dependent on God, from moment to moment, he yet is free as to the actings of his will; which, according to its bias, naturally excites him to this or that. If therefore man himself may be, and is, subject to the efficacy and energy of divine influence, without any prejudice to his natural freedom; much more may other creatures be so.

Hence we see how prodigiously wide of the mark their reasoning is, who, under pretence of guarding natural liberty, exclude the Providence of God from having any influence on the creatures He made, and represent the Deity as no more than an idle spectator, and scarce that, of what is done below. As if it was either *beneath* the dignity of Him to superintend and direct the world, who did not think it beneath Him to make it; or as if, having made it, He would suffer the affairs of it to take their chance, and go on at random, without His taking any care or notice. Into such blasphemies and absurdities do those run, who forsake the Scriptures.

How much more exalted views, worthy of God, and comfortable to man, do the treasures of inspiration give us, respecting the Deity and His ever-acting Providence? There we are told, that He worketh all things according to the counsel of His own will; that whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did He in heaven and in earth, and in the sea, and in all deep places; and that His effectual agency begun in creation, is carried on by Providence. "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work," said He who is in the form of God. Hence it follows, that if the Almighty is thus operative, that declaration of the apostle is true, which tells us, that "God hath determined the times before appointed;" and that He even "fixes the bounds of our habitation." — "To everything," says another inspired writer, "there is a season; and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die." — "Is there not an appointed time to man upon earth," says Job; "Are not his days also like the days of a hireling," which consist of just so many hours and no more. And elsewhere, speaking of man, he says, "His days are determined; the number of his months are with thee; thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass." Conformably to which, he adds, "All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come."

It remains then, that God is the sovereign Disposer, as of all things else, so of life and death; and consequently, that the awful period is fixed, wherein we must each stand before this holy Lord God. But are we not *sinner*s? and is not sin that which this holy Lord God hateth? All this is true. God abhors sin; we are sinful, and we must stand before Him. How then shall we be able to do this? What, O what will be the result of standing at *such* a bar, and before *such* a judge? To be *tried* by the holy law of God, which we have broken; to be *witnessed against* by our conscience, and by angels who invisibly throng our most retired concealments; above all, to be *heard* by Him who is the searcher of hearts, and whose sentence is decisive either for heaven or hell. If the Holy Spirit should alarm the conscience by this consideration, it will stir up the individual to pray, that he may be found of Him in peace, and be enabled to stand with joy before this Holy God? But what can *qualify* us thus to stand? Is *our own* goodness sufficient to cover our guilty souls, and ward off the blow of justice? Alas! it is insufficient; as the prophet says, "Our gold is dim, and our wine is mixed with water." Our purest obedience

is sinful, and how can that which is sinful, save a sinner? Can a smaller sin atone for a greater; nay, do not both stand in need of an atonement from some other quarter? "All our righteousnesses," says the church, in Isaiah, "are as filthy rags."

Now, should a man attempt to go to court, clothed in filthy rags, and endeavour to gain admission to the royal presence in such raiment as that, would not he be refused entrance, and driven with indignation from the palace gate? — certainly he would; and can we expect to stand in the hour of death and day of judgment, undaunted before the holy Lord God, arrayed in no better robe, and defended with no better armour than that imperfect righteousness of ours, which the Scripture calls filthy rags? We must appear in a better dress, if we mean to appear at God's right hand; a dress superior even to that which angels wear; a dress which God was manifest in the flesh on purpose to supply us with; and which, through grace, is to all, and upon *all* them that believe in Him. I need not say, that I mean the merits of Jesus Christ, consisting of His active righteousness and His atoning death; of all He did, and of all He endured, in obedience and submission to the law. *This* is that righteousness, that garment of salvation, in which St. Paul desired to be found; and in which we too must be interested and arrayed, would we reign in life through Him, and stand, at the latter day, in the congregation of the righteous.

The important doctrine of justification by the transfer of Christ's merit to us, which doctrine is founded, on the perfection of His obedience, as our representative, and the reality of His substitution to death in our stead; I say, this supplies us with a satisfactory answer to the question offered, "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" *Who!* — the soul unto whom Christ is made wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption: *wisdom*, to discover its native guilt and inability; *righteousness*, to cover its moral deformity, and render the whole man legally acceptable in the sight of the infinitely holy God; *sanctification*, to master and subdue the body of sin, to give the will and affections a divine tendency, to fire the heart with holy love, and adorn the outward conversation with all the beauties of practical godliness; and lastly, to whom Christ is made *redemption*, by the efficacy of His atonement, blotting out our sins and the handwriting that was against us, giving us to see that both one and the other were nailed to His cross, and that therefore there now remains no condemnation to them that are in Christ, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

Now, if *wisdom* must be given to us to see our absolute need of an interest in Christ; if His *righteousness* must be imputed to us for our justification; if we must be *sanctified* by His grace; weaned from sin and devoted to God; and if the merits of His *redemption* likewise must be made over to us, in order to our obtaining the forgiveness of our evil works, and the acceptance of our good ones; I say, if these things are necessary for our salvation, and without them, we shall never be able so to stand before the holy Lord God, as to enjoy His favour, and be admitted to His kingdom; then, it behoves us to lay our hand upon our heart, and solemnly to ask ourselves, whether we have a hope that Christ is thus made of God wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption to *us*. — Soon we shall be called to stand, where self-examination will do us no service; when we appear before God, He will be the examiner alone. Judge therefore yourself, my

Christian brother, now, that ye be not then judged of the Lord. Remember, that the night of death is coming on, and the shadows of the evening are stretching out; and as sure as *natural* night is succeeded by day, so sure will death be followed by the immediate scrutiny of that holy Lord God, who will bring all things to light; and upon your leaving the body will soon put it beyond all doubt, whether you belong to Christ or not.

Death, as I observed, respects not persons, neither taketh reward. Old and young, rich and poor, the serious and gay, the learned and the illiterate, the holy and the profane, one with another, must appear before the judge of quick and dead. When the call is issued forth, when the warrant is made out, it will neither admit of denial or delay. "O that men were wise, that they understood this, and would consider their latter end!" "Look not on what I say as words of course, but know, that if they are unheeded now, a dying bed will convince you of their importance.

Ask yourself, What am I building on, so as to be able to stand before this holy Lord God? If you are ignorant of this, I pray the blessed Spirit to convince you, that there is no "other foundation for any man to lay, but that laid, which is Christ Jesus." May He give you faith and repentance, so as you may be led to have a total reliance on the righteousness, blood, and intercession of Christ for the pardon of sins, which will give a conformity to His image, and to the mind which was in Christ Jesus. These are the fruits of real grace, the evidences of an interest in Him, and the marks by which His sheep are distinguished from those who belong not to His fold. And for an encouragement to wait upon Him in prayer for the communication of these graces, let us bear this in mind, that the holy Lord God before whom you and I are to stand in judgment, is, at the same time that He sustains this exalted title, *that* person of the Trinity who assumed our nature, and in it wrought out the salvation of His church and people. The Father hath committed all judgment to the Son. May He be your Advocate as well as Judge!

There is yet another sense wherein men will stand before this holy Lord God; and a blessed standing it will be, a standing peculiar to the just. They shall stand — *Where?* In the new Jerusalem, the heaven of heavens, before the throne and before the Lamb. They shall stand — *How?* Clothed in white robes, the robes of justifying merit and sanctifying grace. They shall stand — *With whom?* With angels and archangels, and all the powers of heaven. They shall stand — *Doing what?* Singing the song for ever new, the praises of the great Three-one, Father, Son, and Spirit. They shall stand — *How long?* As long as eternity itself; wrapt in the vision of God for ever and ever.

Do you ask, Who is worthy to stand thus before this "Holy Lord God?" — Who, indeed, abstracted from the merits of Christ? Without *that*, we should not only be unworthy, but absolutely incapable of this exceeding great reward. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. "Understand, therefore," said Moses to the Israelites, "that the Lord thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it, for thy righteousness." And if even the *earthly* Canaan was not the reward of human merit, much less the heavenly. And yet Christ says of the saints at Sardis, and by consequence of all saints whatever, (for a saint is a saint, let him live in what age or country he will) "These shall walk with me in white," that is, they shall be my companions in glory, "for they are *worthy*." — How! *void*

of merit, and yet *worthy*? And worthy too of walking with Christ in white? Yes, unworthy, totally so, in themselves; but worthy, completely so, of an eternity of bliss, through the blood of sprinkling and the imputation of Christ's obedience, styled in Scripture, the righteousness of God, and elsewhere, the righteousness of the saints. The righteousness of *God*, because wrought out by Christ, who, from the time of His incarnation, was God and man in one Person; and the righteousness of the *saints*, because freely imputed to *them*, and graciously made *theirs*, to all the purposes of justification and happiness. "Therefore are they before the throne, and serve God day and night;" that is, without end or intermission, "in His temple," the region of glory. Hence it is, that they shall be able to stand before the holy Lord God; shall stand with joy in His presence, after death; stand at His right hand in the day of universal judgment; and stand before Him in His kingdom to all eternity. Just men made perfect in glory, are elsewhere in Scripture represented as *sitting* with Christ. Both phrases are evidently metaphorical. Their *standing*, therefore, may denote their bliss and alacrity; for *standing* is a posture of gladness and cheerfulness; and when they are described as *sitting* in heavenly places, the expression may signify the unspeakable freedom and intimacy with the Trinity, to which they will then be admitted.

There are some, it is to be feared, who think little about standing before the holy Lord God. Death and judgment, with what will follow, are seldom or never the subjects of their meditation. Indeed, dissipation and banishment of thought, seems to be one of our national vices at present, and is in great measure, the root of all the rest. Hence, concern for salvation is too generally ridiculed as superstition; and seriousness exploded as fanaticism. This is a melancholy but faithful representation of the state of religion, in this our day, nor will matters ever wear a brighter aspect, while gaiety and amusement, in ten thousand different shapes, and succeeding in endless rotation, are permitted to engross our time, and occupy the place of thought.

"A serious mind," says Dr. Young, "is the native soil of every virtue." And, if I mistake not, the same writer, elsewhere, makes this just observation: — that excessive attachment to fashionable pleasures begets levity; levity begets loose morals; loose morals beget infidelity; and infidelity begets death. And I verily believe, for my own part, that if we trace Deism and Libertinism to their fountainhead, we shall find, in most cases, the inordinate pursuit of pleasure to have been the source of both. Recreations are needful at times; but take care of these two things, that your recreations be *innocent* in themselves, and that *you* be *moderate* in your use of them.

If the time is hastening wherein all must, without any exception, stand before the holy Lord God, let the unbeliever tremble. "What!" says a Deist, with a smile, "tremble at that which I do not believe!" Yes, I repeat it again, tremble, lest conscience should be in the right, and what you now profess to disbelieve, should prove true at last. Many a deistical hero has been dismally frightened when death stared him in the face; and some of them much sooner; for I could mention instances of Deists, who, unable to bear the intolerable hauntings of conscience, and their pride disdaining to fly to religion for relief, have, in the madness of despair put an end to their own lives; have plunged into eternity as a horse rushes into the battle, and gone, with all their sins about them to stand

before the holy Lord God. "A proof this," say you, "that they really disbelieved a future state." O! no; a proof rather, that a conscience gashed with sin, and uncured by the remedy of the gospel, flashes horror on the soul too great for it to bear; and therefore the miserable creature, *wishing* that there *may* be no hereafter, chooses rather, in the fury of his pain, to try the dreadful experiment, and run the risk of accumulated misery in the next world, to get rid of his tortures in this.

But I willingly dismiss this dismal part of the subject, on a supposition that the reader of these lines is no professed infidel. I will suppose that you admit the Scriptures to be, as indeed they are, the Word of God; and that you believe every article of the Christian faith. Nay, I will go farther, and put the case, that the historical belief, and assent of your understanding, has some influence on your external conversation. I would take for granted, that you are neither profane nor immoral, but stand in awe of that great and terrible name, the Lord thy God; that the temple of your body, is in purity and sanctification, not walking in any lust of uncleanness, like them that know not God; and to add no more, that you are morally honest in your dealings with all men, and are punctual to the worship of God, in your closets, in your families, and in the temple. All this is excellent; all this is needful; but remember, this is not your justifying righteousness. We are not pardoned and entitled to heaven on account of our holiness and good works; but are made holy, and abound in good works, in consequence of our acceptance in the Beloved, of our pardon and justification through the propitiation and perfect obedience of Jesus Christ the righteous; do you know any thing of this? In all matters, but especially in spiritual affairs, *experience* is the life of knowledge.

Did the Spirit of God ever convince you of sin? Do you see yourself liable to the curse of the law, and the just vengeance of God, for the innate depravity of your nature, and the transgressions of your life? Do you come to Christ humbled and self-condemned; sensible that unless you are clothed with the merits of Him our Elder Brother, you are ruined and undone, and can never stand with joy or safety before the holy Lord God? If so, lift up thy head; redemption is thine; thou art in a state of grace; thou art translated from death to life; thou art an heir of God, and a joint-heir with Christ. But, if you never felt, nor desire to feel, this work of the Holy Ghost upon thy heart, this conviction of sin, this penitential faith, all the supposed righteousness of thine own, wherein thou trusted, is but a broken reed; a painted sepulchre; and the trappings of a Pharisee.

Let believers rejoice. The holy Lord God, to whom they must give account, is their Father, their Saviour, and their Friend. What is death to such, but the accomplishment of their warfare, and the commencement of an endless triumph? I admire an illustration of the death of the righteous, which I lately met with in a discourse on that subject, by an eminent writer: "As a man," says he, "that takes a walk in his garden, and spying a beautiful full-blown flower, he crops it, and puts it into his bosom, so the Lord takes His walks in His gardens, the churches, and gathers His lilies, souls fully ripe for glory, and with delight takes them to Himself."

If it is in the merits of Christ alone that we can stand with safety before God, let us renounce self-dependence in every view, and rely for justification and everlasting life on

Him, making mention of Him and of His righteousness only, in whom all the seed of Israel are justified, and shall glory.

Lastly; Is the Lord God we must appear before infinitely *holy*? then let *us* aim at holiness likewise. There is no true Christianity; that is, there is no dignity nor happiness, without it. He is not a Father, in a spiritual, saving sense, to any on whose souls the Holy Spirit has not impressed His image, and on whose hearts He has not inscribed His law.

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