

The Secret of the Lord



John Kennedy

The Secret of the Lord

John Kennedy

*“The secret of the Lord is with them
that fear Him” Psalm 25:14.*

All true Christians are peculiar. Their singular character and their exclusive privileges make them so. The Lord causes them to differ from all others by what He does in them, and by what He does for them. He creates a new heart in them, and they fear Him. He puts His spirit within them, and makes known to them His mind. Into their soul He infuses life, and into their ear He speaks His secrets. Fearers of God are thus favourites of God; and both as His fearers and His favourites they are a peculiar people.

I. True Christians differ from all others because they only fear the Lord. “I will put my fear within them” is a promise fulfilled to them all, and to them only. Covenant grace was put within them ere covenant secrets were made known to them.

Those who fear the Lord are, and must be, quickened souls. They were once dead in sins, but they are now alive to God; and they live because they were “quickened together with Christ.” The fear of God is just the life of God in them suitably responding to the manifestation of “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” These realise God as others do not. They know Him as none else do know Him. They alone approve of His character and appreciate His greatness. There are Godward movements in their hearts as in no hearts besides. Of them only does the Lord say, “they shall not depart from Me.”

A soul, spiritually dead, may be moved by an enslaving dread of God; but there can be no Godward advances in such a case. Farther and farther from God will that soul depart, who, left unrenewed, feels the terrors of His wrath. What causes his fear inflames his enmity. The more helpless he feels before the fire of God’s anger, the more active is his enmity before the brightness of God’s purity. Fearing and hating Him at once, the unquickened soul departeth from the living God.

Those who fear, must be near to God. They were once “far off,” but they have been brought nigh by the blood of Jesus. In the covenant right of Jesus the quickening spirit came to them when they were far off and dead. He caused them to live, and He united them to Christ. Being clothed in the righteousness of Christ they were justified by God; the criminals were pardoned and made heirs of life; and they received power to become the sons of God. Having a right to communion with God, the Spirit guides them to the throne of grace. Their homage at the footstool of that throne is fear. It is neither the rebel, who dreads the king’s approach, as he skulks on the outskirts of the kingdom, not the stranger, who has never visited the sovereign, who can do him homage in loyal, friendly deference to his rank and rule; but the courtier or the child, who is in the palace and in the presence of the king. So only those who are His loving children and His loyal servants, can honour the Lord as a father, and as a master fear Him.

In their approaches to God on His throne of grace, they mingle reverence of His glory with hope in His mercy. This is a combination only found where the true fear of God is. Others may have either a slavish fear without hope, or a presumptuous hope without fear; but the view of God which inspires hope in the heart of a Christian produces also reverential fear. The glory of God, as seen in the cross, commands his admiration as well as his trust. It is at once solemnising and encouraging. It bears him down while it draws him near. It breaks his heart as surely as it cheers it. And the more it has of the one effect the more it has of the other. The more clearly he discerns the rigour of divine righteousness and the steadfastness of divine truth, the more he is constrained to reverence and encouraged to hope. It is to the mercy that is accompanied with truth he humbly ventures to appeal, and he can claim peace, only when he sees it in the embrace of righteousness. His confidence increases with his admiration of God’s character and his awe of His majesty. His fear is not now in conflict with his hope. Solemn awe only gives

zest to his enjoyment of liberty in the presence of God. The more I am persuaded that it is the sovereign with whom I commune, the more I prize the tokens of that sovereign's favour. I may, perhaps, have met him on a journey divested of the insignia of royalty. I may then have received some token of favour, but it cheered me not as it would if I had gotten it from the king, when wearing his crown and seated on his throne amidst the splendour of his court. What proved him king and glorious would make me all the more prize his favour. I might have feared that it was not as king that he was my friend before, and that he would not acknowledge in open court the poor man to whom he then happened to be kind. But when from the very throne he helps me, how precious is his kindness and how cheering to my heart! I cared not so much for his kindness, nor would I so depend upon it, when I could stand up before him as he showed me favour. But how invaluable do I reckon his condescension when I can only receive the token of it lying prostrate at His footstool!

They who fear the Lord seek to do His will. He who does homage to the Lord at the footstool of His throne comes forth to serve Him. In earthly families there are children who make a show of affection in their manner towards their father, but quite forget to do his will when he is out of sight. There are no such children in the heavenly family. Men have children who cannot refrain from expressing a reverent love to their fathers when they are near them, and who act according to their directions when they send them on an errand. Such as these do all God's children seek to be. But in human families are sometimes found children who have not courage to use filial liberty with their father when they are near him, but who prove themselves to be children indeed by their endeavours to please him. They cannot claim the child's privilege, but they do the child's work. They do not commune as children, but they obey as children. There are some such in the family of God.

They have respect to all their Father's commandments. They do not, like the Pharisees, pick out those to which they find it

most convenient to have respect, and leave the rest. Their righteousness exceedeth in *breadth* “the righteousness of Scribes and Pharisees.” Nor do they rest contented unless their obedience arises from the heart; they seek to obey out of genuine love. Their righteousness thus exceeds in *depth* “the righteousness of Scribes and Pharisees.” The aim of their service is higher; they seek not their own, but the things which are Jesus Christ’s. That the Lord may be pleased and glorified is the end to which they aspire. Their righteousness thus exceeds in height “the righteousness of Scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20).

Their right to privileges depends not at all, but their enjoyment of privileges depends greatly, on their obedience. They cannot be happy without having respect to all God’s commandments (Psalm 119:6). They must first seek grace to fear the Lord in order that His secret may be with them. When they wander from His way, He will either frown upon them and be silent, or He will frown upon them and chasten them with His rod. They shall not be cast out of their father’s house because they sin; but when they regard iniquity in their heart, the Lord will not hear them. (Psalm 66:18) When they have departed from the Lord they shall not again enjoy the light of His face till their backslidings have been healed. (Isaiah 57:18) An offended father may thrust out his child from his presence, and that child may for a time be outside with the dogs, but he is a child there as surely as when he lay on his father’s bosom. He has not been thrust out of the Father’s house. Till the Lord shall utterly take His lovingkindness from him who is the Elder Brother, He will not disown the adopted sons whom “the Only Begotten” has made free. He abideth in the house forever, and so shall they (Psalm 89:30-34, John 8:35-36).

It is just, then, as the life of God in their souls is exercised in seeking their Father’s face and strength, and they through grace endeavour to do His will, that those who fear the Lord may expect His secret to be with them.

II. True Christians differ from all others because with them only is “the secret of the Lord.” “The secret” which is within

them is hidden in the mind of God from all to whom He does not reveal it.

“Thou hast hid these things,” saith Jesus to the Father, “from the wise and prudent, and has revealed them unto babes” (Matthew 11:25).

This surely means more than that they have the Bible in their hands. True, in it, there is a complete revelation of the will of God. It is by it, too, that God communicates all the knowledge of His mind to which men shall attain on earth. But many have the Bible in whom the fear of the Lord is not found, and to whom the secret of the Lord is not given. They who fear the Lord have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God, that they might know the things that are freely given to them of God. It is thus that they are made to differ.

“He will manifest to them His covenant.” This covenant - the covenant of grace - was once known only to God Himself. It was then written only in the volume of the book which contained a record of the eternal counsels of the Godhead, and on which no eye looked but that of God Himself. But He gradually revealed the plan and provision of that covenant, when the earth was formed, and men were, and then were sinners, on it. The revelation of that covenant, intended for men on earth, is now complete. A clearer light from heaven shall never shine on earth than that which now illumines these last Gospel days. The word of the Lord, as it now is, abideth for ever. But not only does the Lord shine with Gospel light on them that fear Him, as He does on all around them; He hath also shined into their hearts, giving them the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). He has taught them their need of the grace of the everlasting covenant. He has made known to them its plan and its provision. They, and they only, have tasted that the Lord is gracious. But they know only a very little. They need that He would still continue to manifest His covenant to them. And He will do so. Into all truth the Spirit of God shall guide them.

All the lessons appointed by their Father shall be learned by them; and all their darkness and folly shall, at the last, be utterly removed (John 16:13).

The Spirit, who makes known and applies the provision of the covenant, and who, in doing so, first quickeneth the dead, hath given unto these the peculiar knowledge which they have. Their knowledge, therefore, is spiritual; not merely because the Spirit gave it, but because they were made spiritual in order to receive it. It is the spirit born of the Spirit that takes knowledge of the things of God. It is the life of God in their understanding that perceives the mind of God in His Word. That same life in the heart seeks the enjoyment of what is known. This desire accords with God's gracious design; for His people have been enlightened to know, just in order to partake of the things of God. They are, therefore, helped to receive them by faith. And their faith is not exercised in vain. The fullness of covenant grace in Christ is reached and communicated, and out of that fullness they receive, "and grace for grace" (John 1:16). As the High Priest in heaven pleads, "Sanctify them through thy truth," so, under His government and by His Spirit, they on earth receive; and "beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord," they "are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 4:18).

But is there nothing more intimate than this in God's intercourse with His people? Is this all that is implied in the secret of the Lord being with them that fear Him? Is this peculiar privilege exhausted in their receiving a saving knowledge of the covenant of grace as revealed in the gospel? Is this all the proof given of their being the favourites of heaven? Is it what is barely necessary for their salvation alone God gives to His beloved people? Giveth He no assurance to them of His love to themselves individually? Do they remain ignorant of His mind in reference to the cases which they carry to His footstool, and there spread out before Him? Is God silent when they plead for others? Does He altogether hide from them, as He does from the world,

the bearings and coming issues of His providence? Surely they are deceived who think that these things are so. And yet how many there are who would evacuate the communion of the Lord with His people of all special proofs of how near and dear to Him they are, and who regard the privilege, referred to in the text, as enjoyed merely in attainment of what is essential to salvation.

It is one extreme statement that God reveals ought to His people apart from the Bible, but it is another that He makes known to them only what is there directly revealed. We must not expect to know the mind of God but by means of the written word. "The law and the testimony" must be our only guide in knowing, our only standard in judging of the things of God. To that light must we repair to examine what is of God, and to that rule to try what professes to be of Him (Isaiah 8:19, 20). But surely God does not make known to His people what is not directly revealed in His Word; although He does not do so except by means of what is written.

He often maketh known their election to them who fear Him. He acquaints them with His everlasting purpose to save them; yet this is not directly revealed. The fact of the election of any particular is not found written in the Bible; and yet by means of the word in connection with His work of grace, He, by His Spirit, maketh it known to believers. The secret of His everlasting purpose of mercy is thus with them that fear Him. Of His special covenant love to themselves individually they are made assured, but in a manner very different from that in which they are persuaded of His good will to men. Tokens of that love the Lord giveth to His people; but His way of doing so is a secret hid from all who do not receive them.

Thus, too, by means of the written word, does God often reveal to them who fear Him the issues to which He will bring their cases when they deal with Him by prayer. Applying to their case a word in season, He excites an expectation of such a result as that word doth indicate, and thus His purpose of dealing with them in a particular way is made known. They are thus enabled to

anticipate an event in their own spiritual history, without receiving any revelation of God's unfulfilled purposes apart from the light of Scripture.

A mere outside Christian is an utter stranger to any such intimations of the Lord's will by the special application of the statements or promises of the Bible. He judges that communion with the Lord is a one-sided matter. He thinks that in dealing with the Hearer of prayer the speaking is all on his side. He is so enamoured of his own utterances that he cares not whether God speaks or not. But it is far otherwise with those who truly fear the Lord. It is when they hear the Lord's voice speaking words of truth and mercy that they can venture to utter words of faith and hope. "Take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth; for I have hoped in thy judgements." "Cause me to hear thy loving-kindness in the morning; for in thee do I trust." "Be not silent to me." "The companions hearken unto thy voice; cause me to hear it." There are times when, in the face of His silence, as surely as in the face of His frown, they who fear Him cannot advance nor speak to the Lord. And when they have presented their suit, they look up for an answer in peace. This, in the meantime, the Lord often gives them by a word in season spoken to their heart. It may, sometimes, please Him not to give any intimation of His acceptance of their prayer till the time for granting their request has come. But it is not always so. Many seem to think that all that is allowed to petitioners at the footstool of mercy, at any time, is liberty to hope because of God's character and His general promises of grace; and that they must wait, without any more special encouragement, till the course of providence has borne to them an answer to their cry.

"The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him," *as to the cases of others, for whom they plead.* The Spirit of prayer may suggest, and often does, the case of a particular individual, to the mind of one who is pleading at the footstool of mercy. With the suggested case may come a suggested portion of Scripture. In the light of the latter, the former is considered; and, as thus seen, is

laid before the Lord. To the case thus presented, the Lord may apply a passage of Scripture to indicate His mind regarding it, and to give to the pleader a favourable or unfavourable anticipation of the result. That premonition may be more or less distinct; but, even when assuring, it is something very different from the inspiration of the prophet. It results entirely from an adaptation by God Himself of His written word.

They who fear the Lord are not blind, as others are, to the indications of His mind in the dealing of His providence. They are acquainted, as others are not, with the principles of His moral government. They have the sensitiveness of spiritual life under the workings of His great hand, while others lie unaffected in death. They watch and walk with God, while others live without Him in the world. They speak to Him about His doings, and He speaks to them, while others are dumb and deaf before Him. Shall they not, therefore, know the bearings of God's providence as others cannot? May not one, who fears the Lord, who is much given unto prayer, whose heart is charged with care about the interests of the cause of Christ, who watches over the movements of providence with a feeling of intense interest, who looks on God's works in the light of His word, and of His recorded antecedents, and who has acquired the blessed habit of speaking about His doings to the Lord Himself, seem to penetrate a future, all dark to others, as with a seer's eye, while, with all truth and honesty, he may disclaim being either a prophet or the son of one? "They are little acquainted with the ways of God," says the godly and judicious Dr. Love, "who imagine God has ceased to give His people assurance as to future events. God has not bound Himself in this manner; and there have been many things intimated to, and known by the most eminent saints, before such things came to pass."

It is well to mark the difference between the knowledge derived from the direct teaching of the Bible, and that which is only indirectly obtained by means of it. It were a great mistake to attribute equal certainty to the information received in each of

these ways. In the former case, the intelligence comes to me directly, and lies before me plainly written in the Word of God. And is it not well that it is the knowledge which is life eternal that is thus obtained? In order to believe to the saving of the soul, I must know Him in whom salvation is to be found, the terms on which His salvation is bestowed, and the warrant given me by God for casting my lost soul into the hands of His anointed. And all this is clearly and directly revealed. In times of doubting, the Christian can repair to the Bible, and find, plainly written there, what he requires to know regarding the object and warrant of his faith.

But his own personal interest in Christ is not matter of direct revelation. In acquiring information regarding this, much depends upon the mode of God's dealing with his soul. The fruit of God's secret work, as well as the matter of His open revelation, must be taken into account in seeking information of his being a child of God. He is sometimes so assured of this as to be free from all doubting regarding it; but never is his hope of this so fixed and unvarying as his persuasion of God's goodwill to him as a sinner.

More uncertain is his knowledge of God's mind regarding the cases which he brings to the mercy-seat. All depends here on the special application of the truth being verily by God. What is plainly written in the Bible I know to be of God. But I have not the same ground for saying that the suggestion to my mind, and the application to my case, of what is written, is of God; and on these depends the goodness of the information, which, in this instance, I think I possess regarding the mind of the Lord. Verily the Lord can give an assurance of this. He can so impress a soul with His authority. He may so disclose the treasures of His grace, and may so help one to appropriate what the word conveys to him, that there is no room left for doubting. But the man cannot fall back on this again, when misgivings arise, as he can on the direct teaching of Scripture regarding the way of salvation. So much depends, in the former case, on his own discernment, on his spirituality of mind, on his nearness to God, and on his

sensitiveness to God's dealings with his soul, that he feels a vast difference between the hope of everlasting salvation, founded on the call of the Gospel, and hope of a particular result in this life, founded on a word of promise, which seemed to have come from the Lord.

Still greater is the uncertainty of the information which he thinks the Lord has given him, regarding the prospects of others for whom he was pleading in prayer. He cannot, in this case, claim, as a promise given to himself in Christ, the word which has been suggested to his mind. He cannot now, when afraid to receive the word as from God, fall back on his warrant to receive Christ, and embracing Him anew in Gospel offer, approach, on the ground of His right, to the grace of the promise suggested to his mind. His information depending, as it is, on his own spiritual sensitiveness and discernment, partakes of the comparative uncertainty that attaches to all that is subjective.

And greater still is the uncertainty of the information which guides him in anticipating a certain result from a course of providence. Even in the case of those grand results that are indicated in the unfulfilled prophecies of the Bible, and which form the great landmarks of the future, how uncertain is the light in which he tries to forecast them. And when examining providences on which the light of prophecy does not shine, while he is so dependent for any just anticipation of his own spirituality of mind, his nearness to God, and his ability to discern the mind of God in the word which is suggested to explain the doings of His hand, how far removed from the certainty of his knowledge, regarding what is essential to salvation, is any information, regarding the future, which he may think he possesses.

But while this is true, it is quite as true that, in all the ways that have been indicated, the secret of the Lord may be with them that fear Him. And let us not limit the Holy One, as if He were not able, in all these instances, to give infallible direction and much assurance. The comparative uncertainty of the information in some of these is altogether due to the subjectiveness of the mode

in which it is obtained. It is in these cases, therefore, that the truth of the text is most manifestly proved. It is in connection with them the Christian most thoroughly realizes that, in order to know the secret of the Lord, he must be of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord.

It is not difficult to find the reason why those, who are themselves strangers to communion with God, are so ready to denounce as superstition all faith in the reality of information from heaven, besides that which is given in the direct teachings of Scripture. They cannot bear to think that those who fear the Lord have reached any attainment beyond themselves, and to which, by any amount of painstaking, they cannot advance. This wounds their pride, and tends to make them uneasy in their alienation from God. They may allow that unusual knowledge is attained by those who are disciple indeed from the direct teaching of Scripture, for this they can hope to imitate. Their own unsanctified knowledge of what is written they can make to appear, to themselves at least, not unlike to what these have obtained immediately from the pages of Scripture. They could hold up their heads among the godly if this were all their attainment. The most convenient way of getting rid of their uneasiness is to regard as superstitious the attainment that is beyond them. They can make out a case, with a plausible surface, in support of their opinion.

“It is pretending to know,” they say, “what is not revealed in Scripture.” This sounds well. It seems, at first sight, due to the Word of God, as the only complete revelation of His will, that we should at once regard as false all information regarding the mind of God not derived directly from the plain import of Scripture. They have never gone beneath the surface in their thinking on this matter, who have not discovered the extremeness of this view. But, backed by this false assumption, some will quote, with an air of triumph, the pretensions to inspiration, the claims of the gift of prophecy, the faith in dreams and visions, of those whom all acknowledge to have been deceivers and deceived. To minds

that have always kept far off from the realities of a life of godliness, that look from a distance on the communion of His people with the Lord, the difference between the baseless pretensions of deceivers and the God-given privilege of the righteous is utterly impalpable. All kinds of intercourse with the Invisible are classed by these together, and to them all who claim the privilege of communion with the Lord appear as deluded fanatics. More triumphant still is their air, when they can quote, in support of their position, the mistakes of those who were truly godly. But, surely, it is not difficult to discover a very good reason why the Lord should allow even these to be sometimes deceived in their anticipations, and in their readings of the page of Providence. Such mistakes only prove that they are always prone to error, when the correctness of their information specially depends upon their own spirituality. They need to learn this, and their falls will teach them. And their painful experience of the proneness to wander here, will help to make all the more precious to them the certainty attaching to what is the standing ground of their hope - a plain "thus saith the Lord," on some page of Scripture.

1. Let none forget that the secret of the Lord is only with them that fear Him. Let no one dare to claim the privilege of having the secret of the Lord who seeks not to walk in His fear. Of all pretensions this is the vilest. While disregarding the Lord's claims to our homage it is impious to claim His secret. It is sacrilege to lay a dishonest hand on the peculiar privileges of His people; and it is daring hypocrisy to deck oneself with a counterfeit of these before the eyes of men, and to walk in pride under this disguise, beneath the gaze of the Omniscient, who, looking down from heaven, sees within a heart that is an utter stranger to His fear.

There is something, in the more peculiar attainments of the righteous, which excites an unholy and dishonest ambition in those who seek the honour that cometh from man. Men have pretended to know, as others knew not, the mind of the Lord,

who exhibited no such difference, between themselves and the world, as there is between him that feareth God and him that feareth Him not. When out of sight they have pretended to be holding converse with God, but their faces did not shine when they came down from the mount. But from him that hath not the true fear of the Lord shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have. The wise course is to seek to have the fear of God within us, to pray for grace to keep that fear in exercise, and to leave in the hands of Him, who divideth to every man severally as He will, to determine to what extent the secret of the Lord shall be with us.

2. Let none of the Lord's people settle down into formality in their intercourse with God on the forgone conclusion, that it is not legitimate to seek, with deference to the Divine sovereignty, the more peculiar attainments to which reference has been made. The time was, when, during a close walk with God, some of His people enjoyed such nearness to Him, that it would have surprised them if they received no token of His favour whenever they bowed themselves in prayer before Him; if they were overtaken by a trial, of which, through the Word, they had no previous intimation; and if a brother or sister were in trouble, and they found not their case on their spirits. But there is now a change. They have backslidden from the Lord. They hear not His voice now, as in other and better days. They are becoming content without any such tokens of His love as once were given them. They are beginning to be satisfied with a peradventure as to their interest in Christ. They are inclining to think that, beyond the vague encouragement derived from the general tenor of the Gospel, and the aspect of God's character as therein revealed, they ought not, as they care not, to seek any more definite and personal intimation of His favour. Or they have learned to handle, in cold easy formality, the precious promises of grace, without caring to taste their sweetness or to feel their power. The liberty and songs of their youth are now no longer theirs; nor will they recover them till their backslidings are healed (Hosea 2:15).

The fear of the Lord must be revived within them ere His secret shall again be with them.

3. Let all beware of an unlawful employment of the Word of God, as well as of entire ignorance of its sweetness and its power. There are those who find it easy to appropriate to themselves without misgiving the precious promises of the Word, not caring to ascertain their right to them in Christ, to be rightly informed of the mind of God as expressed in them, or to be strengthened to take hold of the truth and power and grace of Him who gave them at His footstool. There are others who lay themselves open to the suggestion of “a word” as they crave encouragement or direction; and who, if a Scripture saying which seems seasonable comes abruptly into their mind, conclude, because of its suitableness and suddenness, that it is a message to them from heaven. These care not whether their application of it accords with the scope of the passage in which it occurs; they realise not His authority whose Word it is; and they desiderate no experience of its sanctifying power. It is convenient for them to get it, and it seems to them safe to take it, and this is all about which they care.

There are others still who have settled down in the conviction that a speculative acquaintance with what is written is all that it is wise to seek. Utter strangers to the seasonable suggestion of the truth by the Lord, blind to the wonders of grace which the world unfolds, without any exercise of appropriating faith in Christ whom it reveals, and destitute of all experience of its power to kill or to quicken, to wound or to heal, to cast down or to raise up, to burn as a fire or to break as a hammer - these go on at their ease, without joy in the communion, or profit from the Word of the Lord.

But let it be ours to be dependent on the gracious and effectual teaching of the Spirit of truth, under whose guidance even fools can be kept from wandering, and who can make it impossible that even they can be deceived. Let us not think that, amidst the multiform delusion which prevaieth, there is no genuineness and

no security. They are a people who have an unction from the Holy One, and who know all things. These have genuine wisdom, and they have good security from error. Let us seek to have fellowship with them. Let us not be content with what is barely necessary to salvation in our intercourse with God. From unholy aspirations after being like the Christian in some of his attainments, without being like him in his character, may the Lord deliver us. May we be kept athirst for communion with the Lord, and seeking grace to prepare us to enjoy it. Let His Word be precious to us, and may we be wise to use it for the ends for which it is given. Let us aspire after clearer views of its wonders, a simpler faith in its truth, a more ravishing sense of its sweetness, and a deeper experience of its power. And thus may we be guided by its light, moulded by its form, fed by its manna, and cheered by its comforts, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in our hearts; till perfect likeness to Christ is attained; till the land of promise and of plenty is reached, and the fullness of pleasures enjoyed, at the right hand of God.

