

Catechetical Lecture IX

Cyril of Jerusalem

Early Church (pre-Nicene) · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Catechesis

STROMATA 45

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INTRODUCTION

Delivered to catechumens preparing for baptism in fourth-century Jerusalem, the ninth of Cyril's lectures takes up a single clause of the creed, that God is maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, and uses it to school new Christians in the proper limits of theological speech. Cyril, who would later be exiled three times over Arian controversies, here teaches the *via negativa* with pastoral directness: God cannot be seen, cannot be comprehended, and yet may be glimpsed proportionally through the creation His hand has wrought. The lecture became foundational for later Eastern catechesis and stands behind much of what Greek Christianity would say about divine incomprehensibility. Expect instruction, not speculation, the voice of a bishop walking the unbaptized carefully past the precipice of presumption.

On the Words, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of All Things Visible and Invisible.

Job 38:2-3

Who is this that hides counsel from Me, and keeps words in his heart, and thinks to hide them from Me?_

To look upon God with eyes of flesh is impossible: for the incorporeal cannot be subject to bodily sight: and the Only begotten Son of God Himself has testified, saying, _No man has seen God at any time_. John 1:18 For if according to that which is written in Ezekiel any one should understand that Ezekiel saw Him, yet what says the Scripture? _He saw the likeness of the glory of the Lord_ Ezekiel 1:28; not the Lord Himself, but _the likeness of His glory_, not the glory itself, as it really is. And when he saw merely _the likeness of the glory_, and not the glory itself, he fell to the earth from fear. Now if the sight of the likeness of the glory brought fear and distress upon the prophets, any one who should attempt to behold God Himself would to a certainty lose his life, according to the saying, _No man shall see My face and live_. Exodus 33:20 For this cause God of His great loving-kindness spread out the heaven as a veil of His proper Godhead, that we should not perish. The word is not mine, but the Prophet's. _If You shall rend the heavens, trembling will take hold of the mountains at sight of You, and they will flow down_. And why do you wonder that Ezekiel fell down on seeing _the likeness of the glory?_ when Daniel at the sight of Gabriel, though but a servant of God, straightway shuddered and

fell on his face, and, prophet as he was, dared not answer him, until the Angel transformed himself into the likeness of a son of man. Now if the appearing of Gabriel wrought trembling in the Prophets, had God Himself been seen as He is, would not all have perished?

The Divine Nature then it is impossible to see with eyes of flesh: but from the works, which are Divine, it is possible to attain to some conception of His power, according to Solomon, who says, _For by the greatness and beauty of the creatures proportionably the Maker of them is seen_. He said not that from the creatures the Maker is seen, but added _proportionably_. For God appears the greater to every man in proportion as he has grasped a larger survey of the creatures: and when his heart is uplifted by that larger survey, he gains withal a greater conception of God.

Would you learn that to comprehend the nature of God is impossible? The Three Children in the furnace of fire, as they hymn the praises of God, say _Blessed are you that beholds the depths, and sits upon the Cherubim_. Tell me what is the nature of the Cherubim, and then look upon Him who sits upon them. And yet Ezekiel the Prophet even made a description of them, as far as was possible, saying that _every one has four faces_, one of a man, another of a lion, another of an eagle, and another of a calf; and that each one had six wings, and they had eyes on all sides; and that under each one was a wheel of four sides. Nevertheless though the Prophet makes the explanation, we cannot yet understand it even as we read. But if we cannot understand the throne, which he has described, how shall we be able to comprehend Him who sits thereon, the Invisible and Ineffable God? To scrutinise then the nature of God is impossible: but it is in our power to send up praises of His glory for His works that are seen.

These things I say to you because of the following context of the Creed, and because we say, We Believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of All Things Visible and Invisible; in order that we may remember that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same as He that made the heaven and the earth, and that we may make ourselves safe against the wrong paths of the godless heretics, who have dared to speak evil of the All wise Artificer of all this world, men who see with eyes of flesh, but have the eyes of their understanding blinded.

For what fault have they to find with the vast creation of God?— they, who ought to have been struck with amazement on beholding the vaultings of the heavens: they, who ought to have worshipped Him who reared the sky as a dome, who out of the fluid nature of the waters formed the stable substance of the heaven. For God said, _Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water_. Genesis 1:6 God spoke once for all, and it stands fast, and falls not. The heaven is water, and the orbs therein, sun, moon, and stars are of fire: and how do the orbs of fire run their course in the water? But if any one disputes this because of the opposite natures of fire and water, let him remember the fire which in the time of Moses in Egypt flamed amid the hail, and observe the all-wise workmanship of God. For since there was need of water, because the earth was to be tilled, He made the heaven above of water that when the region of the earth should need watering by showers, the heaven might from its nature be ready for this purpose.

But what? Is there not cause to wonder when one looks at the constitution of the sun? For being to the sight as it were a small body he contains a mighty power; appearing from the East, and sending forth his light unto the West: whose rising at dawn the Psalmist described, saying: _And he comes forth out of his chamber as a bridegroom_. He was describing the brightness and moderation of his state on first

becoming visible unto men: for when he rides at high noon, we often flee from his blaze: but at his rising he is welcome to all as a bridegroom to look on.

Observe also his arrangement (or rather not his, but the arrangement of Him who by an ordinance determined his course), how in summer he rises higher and makes the days longer, giving men good time for their works: but in winter contracts his course, that the period of cold may be increased, and that the nights becoming longer may contribute to men's rest, and contribute also to the fruitfulness of the products of the earth. See also how the days alternately respond each to other in due order, in summer increasing, and in winter diminishing; but in spring and autumn granting equal intervals one to another. And the nights again complete the like courses; so that the Psalmist also says of them, *Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night proclaims knowledge*. For to the heretics who have no ears, they all but cry aloud, and by their good order say, that there is none other God save the Creator who has set them their bounds, and laid out the order of the Universe.

But let no one tolerate any who say that one is the Creator of the light, and another of darkness : for let him remember how Isaiah says, *I am the God who made the light, and created darkness*. Why, O man, are you vexed thereat? Why are you offended at the time that is given you for rest ? A servant would have had no rest from his masters, had not the darkness necessarily brought a respite. And often after wearying ourselves in the day, how are we refreshed in the night, and he who was yesterday worn with toils, rises vigorous in the morning because of the night's rest ? And what more helpful to wisdom than the night ? For herein oftentimes we set before our minds the things of God; and herein we read and contemplate the Divine Oracles. And when is our mind most attuned to Psalmody and Prayer? Is it not at night? And when have we often called our own sins to remembrance? Is not at night ? Let us not then admit the evil thought, that another is the maker of darkness: for experience shows that this also is good and useful.

They ought to have felt astonishment and admiration not only at the arrangement of sun and moon, but also at the well-ordered choirs of the stars, their unimpeded courses, and their risings in the seasons due to each: and how some are signs of summer, and others of winter; and how some mark the season for sowing, and others show the commencement of navigation. And a man sitting in his ship, and sailing amid the boundless waves, steers his ship by looking at the stars. For of these matters the Scripture says well, *And let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for years* Genesis 1:14, not for fables of astrology and nativities. But observe how He has also graciously given us the light of day by gradual increase: for we do not see the sun at once arise; but just a little light runs on before, in order that the pupil of the eye may be enabled by previous trial to look upon his stronger beam: see also how He has relieved the darkness of the night by rays of moonlight.

Who is the father of the rain? And who has begotten the drops of dew Job 38:28 ? Who condensed the air into clouds, and bade them carry the waters of the rain , now bringing golden-tinted clouds from the north , now changing these into one uniform appearance, and again transforming them into manifold circles and other shapes? Who can number the clouds in wisdom Job 38:37? Whereof in Job it says, And He knows the separations of the clouds , and has bent down the heaven to the earth : and, He who numbers the clouds in wisdom : and, the cloud is not rent under Him. For so many

measures of waters lie upon the clouds, yet they are not rent: but come down with all good order upon the earth. Who _brings the winds out of their treasures_? _And who_, as we said before, _is he that has begotten the drops of dew? And out of whose womb comes the ice_ Job 38:28? For its substance is like water, and its strength like stone. And at one time the water becomes _snow like wool_, at another it ministers to Him _who scatters the mist like ashes_, and at another it is changed into a stony substance; since _He governs the waters as He will_. Its nature is uniform, and its action manifold in force. Water becomes in vines _wine that makes glad the heart of man:_ and in olives _oil that makes man's face to shine:_ and is transformed also into _bread that strengthens man's heart_, and into fruits of all kinds which He has created.

What should have been the effect of these wonders? Should the Creator have been blasphemed? Or worshipped rather? And so far I have said noticing of the unseen works of His wisdom. Observe, I pray you, the spring, and the flowers of every kind in all their likeness still diverse one from another; the deepest crimson of the rose, and the purest whiteness of the lily: for these spring from the same rain and the same earth, and who makes them to differ? Who fashions them? Observe, pray, the exact care: from the one substance of the tree there is part for shelter, and part for various fruits: and the Artificer is One. Of the same vine part is for burning, and part for shoots, and part for leaves, and part for tendrils, and part for clusters.

Admire also the great thickness of the knots which run round the reed, as the Artificer has made them. From one and the same earth come forth creeping things, and wild beasts, and cattle, and trees, and food; and gold, and silver, and brass, and iron, and stone. The nature of the waters is but one, yet from it comes the substance of fishes and of birds; whereby as the former swim in the waters, so the birds fly in the air.

This great and wide sea, therein are things creeping innumerable. Who can describe the beauty of the fishes that are therein? Who can describe the greatness of the whales, and the nature of its amphibious animals, how they live both on dry land and in the waters? Who can tell the depth and the breadth of the sea, or the force of its enormous waves? Yet it stays at its bounds, because of Him who said, _Hitherto shall you come, and no further, but within yourself shall your waves be broken_. Job 38:11 Which sea also clearly shows the word of the command imposed upon it, since after it has run up, it leaves upon the beach a visible line made by the waves, showing, as it were, to those who see it, that it has not passed its appointed bounds.

Who can discern the nature of the birds of the air? How some carry with them a voice of melody, and others are variegated with all manner of painting on their wings, and others fly up into mid air and float motionless, as the hawk: for by the Divine command _the hawk spreads out his wings and floats motionless, looking towards the south_. What man can behold the eagle's lofty flight? If then you can not discern the soaring of the most senseless of the birds, how would you understand the Maker of all?

Who among men knows even the names of all wild beasts? Or who can accurately discern the physiology of each? But if of the wild beasts we know not even the mere names, how shall we comprehend the Maker of them? God's command was but one, which said, _Let the earth bring forth wild beasts, and cattle, and creeping things, after their kinds_ Genesis 1:24 and from one earth, by one command, have sprung diverse natures, the gentle sheep and the carnivorous lion, and various instincts of irrational animals, bearing resemblance to the various characters of men; the fox to manifest the craft that is in men, and the snake the venomous treachery of friends, and the neighing horse the wantonness of young men Jeremiah 5:8, and the laborious ant, to arouse the sluggish and the dull: for when a man passes his youth in idleness, then he is instructed by the irrational animals, being reproved by the divine Scripture saying, _Go to the ant, thou sluggard, see and emulate her ways, and become wiser than she_. For when you see her treasuring up her food in good season, imitate her, and treasure up for yourself fruits of good works for the world to come. And again, _Go to the bee, and learn how industrious she is_: how, hovering round all kinds of flowers, she collects her honey for your benefit: that thou also, by ranging over the Holy Scriptures, may lay hold of salvation for yourself, and being filled with them may say, _How sweet are your words unto my throat, yea sweeter than honey and the honeycomb unto my mouth_.

Is not then the Artificer worthy the rather to be glorified? For what? If you know not the nature of all things, do the things that have been made immediately become useless? Can you know the efficacy of all herbs? Or can you learn all the benefit which proceeds from every animal? Ere now even from venomous adders have come antidotes for the preservation of men. But you will say to me, The snake is terrible. Fear thou the Lord, and it shall not be able to hurt you. A scorpion stings. Fear the Lord, and

it shall not sting you. A lion is bloodthirsty. Fear thou the Lord, and he shall lie down beside you, as by Daniel. But truly wonderful also is the action of the animals: how some, as the scorpion, have the sharpness in a sting; and others have their power in their teeth; and others do battle with their claws; while the basilisk's power is his gaze. So then from this varied workmanship understand the Creator's power.

But these things perhaps you know not: you would have nothing in common with the creatures which are without you. Enter now into yourself, and from your own nature consider its Artificer. What is there to find fault with in the framing of your body? Be master of yourself, and nothing evil shall proceed from any of your members. Adam was at first without clothing in Paradise with Eve, but it was not because of his members that he deserved to be cast out. The members then are not the cause of sin, but they who use their members amiss; and the Maker thereof is wise. Who prepared the recesses of the womb for child-bearing? Who gave life to the lifeless thing within it? _Who knitted us with sinews and bones, and clothed us with skin and flesh_ Job 10:11, and, as soon as the child was born, brought streams of milk out of the breasts? How grows the babe into a boy, and the boy into a youth, and then into a man; and, still the same, passes again into an old man, while no one notices the exact change from day to day? Of the food, how is one part changed into blood, and another separated for excretion, and another part changed into flesh? Who gives to the heart its unceasing motion? Who wisely guarded the tenderness of the eyes with the fence of the eyelids? For as to the complicated and wonderful contrivance of the eyes, the voluminous books of the physicians hardly give us explanation. Who distributes the one breath to the whole body? You see, O man, the Artificer, you see the wise Creator.

These points my discourse has now treated at large, having left out many, yea, ten thousand other things, and especially things incorporeal and invisible, that you may abhor those who blaspheme the wise and good Artificer, and from what is spoken and read, and whatever you can yourself discover or conceive, _from the greatness and beauty of the creatures may proportionably see the maker of them_ Wisdom 13:5, and bending the knee with godly reverence to the Maker of the worlds, the worlds, I mean, of sense and thought, both visible and invisible, you may with a grateful and holy tongue, with unwearied lips and heart, praise God and say, _How wonderful are Your works, O Lord; in wisdom have You made them all_. For to You belongs honour, and glory, and majesty, both now and throughout all ages. Amen.

Appendix

Note.— In the manuscripts which contain this discourse under the name of A Homily of S. Basil _on God as Incomprehensible_, some portions are changed to suit that subject: but the conclusion especially is marked by great addition and variation, which it is well to reproduce here. Accordingly in place of the words in §15: ~~And here to find fault with?~~ and the following, the manuscripts before mentioned have it thus:

What is there to find fault with in the framing of the body? Come forth into the midst and speak. Control your own will, and nothing evil shall proceed from any of your members. For every one of these has of necessity been made for our use. Chasten your reasoning unto piety, submit to God's commandments,

and none of these members sin in working and serving in the uses for which they were made. If you be not willing, the eye sees not amiss, the ear hears nothing which it ought not, the hand is not stretched out for wicked greed, the foot walks not towards injustice, you have no strange loves, commit no fornication, covet not your neighbour's wife. Drive out wicked thoughts from your heart, be as God made you, and you will rather give thanks to your Creator.

Adam at first was without clothing, faring daintily in Paradise: and after he had received the commandment, but failed to keep it, and wickedly stretched forth his hand (not because the hand wished this, but because his will stretched forth his hand to that which was forbidden), because of his disobedience he lost also the good things he had received. Thus the members are not the cause of sin to those who use them, but the wicked mind, as the Lord says, *“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, fornications, adulteries, envyings, and such like.”* In what things you choose, therein your limbs serve you; they are excellently made for the service of the soul: they are provided as servants to your reason. Guide them well by the motion of piety; bridle them by the fear of God; bring them into subjection to the desire of temperance and abstinence, and they will never rise up against you to tyrannise over you; but rather they will guard you, and help you more mightily in your victory over the devil, while expecting also the incorruptible and everlasting crown of the victory. Who opens the chambers of the womb? Who, etc.

At the end of the same section, after the words Wise Creator, this is found: Glorify Him in His unsearchable works, and concerning Him whom you are not capable of knowing, inquire not curiously what His essence is. It is better for you to keep silence, and in faith adore, according to the divine Word, than daringly to search after things which neither you can reach, nor Holy Scripture has delivered to you. These points my discourse has now treated at large, that you may abhor those who blaspheme the wise and good Artificer, and rather may yourself also say, *“How wonderful are Your works O Lord; in wisdom have You made them all.”* To You be the glory, and power, and worship, with the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and throughout all ages. Amen.

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