



the
Golden
Candlestick

**THE CHERUBIM AS RELATED
TO LIFE AND SERVICE**

Part 1

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAISE

Reading: 2 Chron. 20:1-25; Psalm 50:23.

One word which has been strongly and repeatedly coming to my heart for some time is concerning the Lord cooperating with the praises of His people. The passage in 2 Chronicles 20:22, “And when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set liers-in-wait against the children of Ammon, Moab, and mount Seir ...”, is a magnificent commentary upon the phrase in Psalm 50: “Whoso offereth the sacrifice of thanksgiving glorifieth me; and prepareth a way that I may show him the salvation of God (ASV margin).” Great was the showing of His salvation on the basis of their praises.

The ministry of praise

As I have been thinking about this matter, it has dawned upon me how large a place praise has in the Word of God. My mind went back to the first mention of praise, and then slowly worked on, seeing the development, until the time of David when praise came to its fullest form of expression.

David received the pattern of the temple and all its service and ministry by revelation of the Spirit, and then put the whole thing into operation, or into order, and as a great part thereof instituted a very extensive and comprehensive ministry of praise. As you know, his singing ministry was spread over no fewer than four thousand people to form his choir. In twenty-four courses of ministry, under the government of chosen leaders in twenty-four courses, the four thousand singers and players maintained the ministry of praise in the midst of the Lord’s people continually.

I paused there, as I saw praise developed to such a full expression,

and noted that this came about under *David*. David represented sovereignty as sovereignty had never before been known in Israel; the full expression of kingship, sovereign government, and authority to be passed out into the world through sonship (for it was not Solomon who ordered or governed the ministry; it was David. Solomon only took it up to express what David had brought into being. Solomon represents sonship; David represents kingship, government).

This ministry of praise, reaching its fullest expression in David, naturally carries one's mind on to the Lord Jesus, and the real basis upon which praise is brought in among the Lord's people, the fact that He is in the place of supreme authority. He is Lord of all. When that is established a ministry of praise *ought* to come in. But when we come to this chapter in 2 Chronicles we seem even to advance beyond David in the application of the matter. Here this ministry which David established and brought into being in an ordered way, is taken up and used as an instrument by which faith expresses itself.

Praise before victory

There are many instances in the Word of God of congregational singing after a great deliverance. "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel ..." (Ex. 15:1). That was on the other side of the Red Sea. It is quite good and quite right to praise the Lord for all deliverances and victories entered into. Deborah sang a great song too but it was on the far side of the battle, when the victory was possessed. Elizabeth sang a song, but it was in possession of the blessing. There are many like that, and one does not mean to take any of the value from the praise by putting it that way, but here you have something which is on a higher level. Here is praise before the battle, here is thanksgiving before entering into possession, here is taking the position and declaring oneself before ever coming to the enjoyment of the issue as a literally possessed thing. So David's great choir was sent in front of the army and became the symbol of faith, taking victory in advance of the conflict.

That seems to be a ground in which the Lord particularly delights. The issue was no small issue. One thing was that the victory was possessed without fighting, without a casualty. Further, the spoil was so great that they did not know how to cope with it. This is being more than conqueror. This is superlative victory.

It seems to me that that is a position which the Lord aims at having in

His people. It is true to the experience of not a few that the Lord has often brought them to the place where He stands back while they cry for help. He does not come in to deliver when they are pleading for sovereign acts. He waits until they have come out of any realm whatsoever of despair or fear or question or doubt, and have come to a place where, although they do not possess the answer literally, in their hearts they are perfectly at rest about the whole thing. It is settled that the Lord is in possession of the situation, and they are one with Him in the issue. When the Lord has got us there, so often the thing just happens. We were anticipating some terrific ordeal, or expecting some mighty manifestation of God's power, and the whole of that big battle, the clash of which we were expecting in an objective way, has transpired within our own hearts, and it is all over. It is as though it were all done, and then other things simply fit in. There is no great ordeal. The thing happens, it comes to pass. Or, if there is something further to be done, it is not the ordeal we were fearing, it is not the tremendously trying experience we were expecting. The Lord seeks to have the victory in our hearts before ever He does anything on the outside; to have us in the place where, so far as the issue is concerned, we are ready to give thanks to the Lord. It seems to be a law of God's dealings with us. Of course, it contains at its very heart the greatest thing of all.

Here are these people, Ammon, Moab, Mount Seir, a great multitude; the Lord's people confronted with what is naturally overwhelming. As Jehoshaphat says, "... we have no might against this great company that cometh against us". Naturally they stood no chance. Whatever the case may be, that is how it is; the odds from the natural standpoint are all on the side of the enemy, and the Lord's people are completely at a disadvantage, at a discount. The situation all seems to say that that which is against us is bound to gain the day. Facing such a situation, whatever it may be, if those concerned can be brought to the place where they sing and give praise, what has happened? Undoubtedly *the Lord has been put above all that is against*. The Lord has been given a place which is a far greater one than all that opposes. Surely that must be the position, the meaning of it. It is but a declaration that while all this is against us, and we do not stand a chance in ourselves, the Lord is more than all. That is what it amounts to when we sing and praise in the face of such tremendous odds. On that ground the Lord will cooperate. The Lord waits for this. "Do you believe that I am able to do this? Do you believe that I am more than all these?" Yes, I believe — timidly, still fearfully, still apprehensively, wondering how the thing will go? Or exultantly, triumphantly, to the point of a song

of praise? It seems to me that the Lord often waits for that song; not a feigned song, like the boy going home in the dark, who sings to keep himself from being afraid, but really the song of faith. The Lord comes in on that ground. We have found it so more than once, and to that position the Lord seeks to get His people. We are waiting for the Lord to *do* something, and the Lord perhaps is waiting for us to believe that it is all done. “Before they call, I will answer”; but that faith which carries us to the other side of the conflict must be put into expression.

It is necessary for us to remember that sovereign acts of the Lord do not necessarily carry with them moral values for us. Supposing you are in a great difficulty, and you have no way of getting out whatsoever, and you cry to the Lord, and say, Lord, get me out of this difficulty! And the Lord says, “Alright, My child, I am here, and will deliver you”, and then He simply, as it were, reaches down His hand and takes you out of your difficulty. What is your moral gain? Supposing you are in another difficulty, and the same thing happens again, and you are getting into difficulties every day and all the time the Lord is coming and taking you out of your difficulty. What is your moral or spiritual gain? Nil! And do you think the Lord is satisfied with that? That may be all right for infants. We might treat our little child like that. Yet I think we might have a reservation, we might want to see something more developing in them than that they only look to us for help when they find themselves in difficulty. We would like them to learn something. We would like them to increase in intelligence, in understanding. A spoiled child is a very unpleasant child. No one has very much respect for a spoiled child; it is a very spoiled child who in every difficulty simply turns with a whine to its parent to help him. The Lord does not want spoiled children, and He does not want us to continue to be infants unduly. Therefore He does not act sovereignly because He is desirous of increasing spiritual and moral value. The Lord’s sovereign acts are not withheld from His people, but very often they are delayed because His people have not reached a certain place of spiritual and moral ascendancy.

Do you not think it was real gain to those three men in Babylon that the Lord did not keep them out of the fire, but saved them in it? I am sure it was a great gain to them. It was a sovereign act, but it was not a sovereign act to keep them from going into the fire. There were far bigger issues at stake than just acting to keep them out. We so often come to the place where we appeal to the Lord *to do something!* We cannot understand why it is that the Lord does not *do* something. The Lord is able, He can, it

is in His power to do it — why does He not do it? Very often we have a controversy with the Lord, perhaps a quarrel with the Lord. We may even reproach the Lord that He does not step right into that thing and act sovereignly, and do it.

It represents a very real spiritual increase if before ever there is a sovereign act of God we have come to the place of victory. That is, "... our God ... is able to deliver ... but if not ...". The alternative to that would be: "Our God is able to deliver! We believe He is able to deliver! If He does not deliver I do not know what we shall do about it! I do not know what we shall do about Him! I do not know whether I shall be able to believe in Him any more! I have trusted Him to deliver me, and He has not delivered me! I do not know whether I have not misplaced my faith!" The Lord reads us through and through, and knows us. We know ourselves sometimes a little better than we will let on; that is, we try to make ourselves believe that we are in a position that we are not really in. The Lord knows us better than we know ourselves behind all our subterfuges, all our make-believe, and He knows when the last element of putting Him to the test has gone. "Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God" (Matt. 4:7), "Ye shall not make trial of the Lord your God, as ye tempted Him ..." (Deut. 6:16). The Lord knows when the last element of making trial of Him has gone, and we have got right over, and now whichever way it goes we trust the Lord, whichever way it goes the Lord is right. When we really do get there the Holy Spirit spontaneously rises up in our hearts with divine approval. It is not just reaction. The Holy Spirit rises up and gives the sense of rest, and that the Lord is satisfied, and we are now in peace, the quarrel is over, the inward conflict is at an end, we are spiritually in victory. Then the Lord has a way made to do anything He wants to do. While we are fighting to have our own way, while we are quarrelling with the Lord, while we are questioning, while we are apprehensive and fearful the Lord can do nothing. When we get through to the place where, although the literal expression of victory still lies ahead, nevertheless in our hearts we are through with the battle, then the Lord has a way for doing anything He wants to do, to show the salvation of God. The Lord is Lord. The Lord is on the throne. The Lord is Victor.

That is the meaning of praise in this passage. Real, genuine praise springs from a heart at rest in God, which trusts the Lord, believes Him, gives Him His place above all things and all others. It is praise on the ground of Sovereignty, Kingship, Lordship.

There seems to be a tremendous power in the right kind of praise.

There are great issues bound up with it. Here in history is an illustration of a spiritual truth. A mighty, terrible army, overwhelmingly too large for the people of God, simply brought to nothing and compelled to yield up all their spoil to the Lord's people, on the ground that the Lord's people, before ever the battle was entered into, got through in praise. There is something there that you and I have to learn.

We must have dealings with the Lord on the matter, to be enabled, counting upon Him and His strength, to face things in a spirit of praise; not waiting until we are on the other side to praise the Lord for the deliverance, but to praise ahead, and to prepare a way for the Lord by offering the sacrifice of thanksgiving. The Lord enable us to get to such a place of triumph.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHERUBIM

Gen. 3:22-24; Ex. 25:18, 26:1, 37:7; 2 Kings 2:19-22; Ezekiel 10:4-5,8, 19-20, 47:7-8; Rev. 5:6,8-14, 19:4, 22:1-4.

Although it may be very elementary, it is nevertheless of the greatest importance that all the Lord's people should know and have in their hearts quite clearly and definitely what it is we as the Lord's people are here for.

Were we to ask the majority of Christians why they are here on the earth as Christians, the answer would be, "To serve the Lord", or something to that effect. I have no doubt whatever that it is true. But it is only a part of the truth, and it is a relative part at that; that is, it is related to something else, and apart from that something else it will lack what is essential to its effectiveness. We are here on this earth as the Lord's people for something more than that, and the 'more' includes that. It can be put in very simple form, but the simplicity of the form does not mean that it is a simple thing. It is this: *We are here to learn Christ.*

Learning Christ

The relation of working for the Lord, or service for the Lord, to learning Christ is this, that the best way to learn Christ is actively, and that we learn more of Christ along practical and active lines than we do along other lines. But we must be very careful what we mean when we say practical and active lines. A great many of the Lord's people fail to grow and increase in the knowledge of Christ because they do not use what they already have. They pile up their theoretical knowledge, which is never translated into experiential knowledge because they do not put it into operation; they do not work with it in everyday life.

As the Lord enables we are going to be occupied with the inclusive thing and this relative thing for a little while. The inclusive thing is:

Knowing Christ

In one's own heart there is no doubt or question whatsoever but that that is the purpose for which we are here. Everything, without a minute exception, as to the whole range and realm of our relationship with God is bound up in His Son, Jesus Christ. We can know nothing of God outside of Him, and there is everything that ever we shall need to know of God in Christ for service, for living and for everything else in time and in eternity. Therefore our primary business is to learn Christ, to know Christ.

If He is the Antitype of which the Land of Promise was the type, then He will need to be dug into to discover the wealth, the riches, all those excellencies represented by the gold, silver, brass, iron, and much more. He is a fulness which will be yielded up through all coming ages. We have to begin to know Christ now, and that is our business.

All service begins with bringing men to know Christ, and it goes on. It is not as though when once a soul has been brought to know Christ in relation to sin and salvation that that soul knows Christ. Our service will ever go on in bringing others into a *fuller* knowledge of Christ.

Having said that, which is a very far-reaching, comprehensive thing, we must come to some definite, specific line of application and procedure in relation to knowing Christ. And that is at least suggested or introduced by the passages which we have mentioned, beginning in chapter 3 of the book of Genesis. We must note the two things which characterised the two lines of Scripture.

The first line has to do with the cherubim. Right through the Bible the cherubim occupy a place. We have not referred to all the references, but have taken links in the chain. The other line was the tree of life, the living trees by the living water; the river of life; the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God. Those two lines represent a spiritual history; they represent Christ.

The significance of the cherubim

The significance of the cherubim is not easy to understand. It is capable of getting you into realms of mystery. There are many Scriptures concerning the cherubim, firstly at the gate of the Garden, to guard the way of the tree of life; then as upon the ark, the mercy seat; then upon the veil of the tabernacle, wrought in the very fabric; then in the prophesy of Isaiah (here called "seraphim", but I think little doubt exists that they are

the same as the cherubim); then in the prophesy of Ezekiel, occupying such a large place; then, passing right over to the book of the Revelation, where the name is not used but undoubtedly, from the descriptions in both the Old and New Testament, it is the same representation, the living ones.

Here a correction must be made. In the Authorised Version a very unfortunate word is used, “beasts”. There is no warrant whatsoever for translating the word as “beasts”. And when “living creatures” is used it is still imperfect; it gets nearer the reality, but is not quite correct. The Greek word is one word, “zoa”. “Living ones” is the best translation we can get. “Zoe” is “life”, that specific, peculiar kind of life. It is the word used concerning the life which Christ gives, the eternal life, “aionian zoe”. “Zoa” is the plural, “livings”, or “living ones”.

When we have read all that the Scripture has to say about the cherubim, we can, I think without any fear, gather it all up and say that *the cherubim are a symbolic embodiment of the spiritual features of Christ in incarnation, and of the church in the good of His redemption*. If you take the statement and sit down with it, and go to the Scriptures with it, you will see how that is borne out.

Think of the form the cherubim took, the fourfold representation: the face of a man, of a lion, an ox and an eagle. The lion, monarchy; the ox, service; the eagle, heavenly mystery; the man, representation of God, “Son of Man”. It is not difficult to see those four spiritual features in Christ. He is Sovereign, “the government shall be upon his shoulders”; the authority in heaven and on earth is given unto Him as Son of Man. The service and the sacrifice are perfectly patent. So the heavenly mystery, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Then the Son of Man, the Prophet Who speaks for God and represents God on the earth. There is the form of the cherubim.

Do you notice that the living ones, the cherubim, and the four and twenty elders go together, and they all worship the Lamb; they all enter in spirit into the meaning of redemption? These are not angels, or super-angels. Angels do not know the glories of redemption; they cannot sing the song of the Lamb. The four and twenty elders are representative of the whole triumphant host, singing the song of the Lamb, and the living ones with them falling down and worshipping Him that sits on the throne, *and the Lamb*.

It would take hours to cover the whole ground of this twofold representation. Here is Christ in incarnation, Son of Man, and the company of the redeemed, joined in one. The cherubim include both. The cherubim

are the embodiment of all those spiritual features of Christ in incarnation, and represent the church in the good of redemption. The very name “cherubim” is indicative. While it is the plural of cherub, it goes beyond that, and the name means a multitude. Surely that is significant when you bring it over to the book of the Revelation and read of the ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, with the cherubim and the living ones.

The question of life

The whole question in view in every case where the cherubim are seen is the question of life: life which is eternal, incorruptible, death-conquering. We begin again in Genesis 3, where they were placed to guard the way of the tree of *life*. It is a question of life, the question of who shall live with this life, and who shall serve God in the power of this endless life.

Note that life and service go together from the beginning. Adam was called to be God’s fellow-worker, God commissioned him concerning the creation to be a worker together with Him, in fellowship with Him, in relation to the whole creation. When Adam sinned his vocation broke down, his fellow-workmanship with God came to an end, and his life on earth was put under a strict limitation, with that particular, peculiar life (represented by the tree of life), being shut off from him. This meant that this man could never have fellowship with God in this work.

You come to the tabernacle, the veil, the mercy seat and the cherubim. We know quite well that no one dare pass through that veil into the place of that mercy seat without dying, apart from specifically prescribed grounds; and when those grounds are prescribed by the Lord, the termination of the prescription is “lest he die”. To turn that round the other way, if he is going to overcome death by going through there, there are grounds which he must observe, otherwise his life and his service will be terminated.

The cherubim are the custodians of life which sinful man cannot touch. This life is in His Son. This life is in His church. Let sinful man on any other ground than that prescribed by God touch the work of God, the things of God or handle what belongs to God, and disaster will overtake him.

Come to Ezekiel. You know the historic setting of the prophesies of Ezekiel. Again the cherubim are associated with, inseparably bound up

with, life; the wheels, the wings, the spirit in the wheels, and the cherubim one with the wheels, and the wheels one with the cherubim, so that when the cherubim spread their wings and were lifted up the wheels also were lifted up, and when they went forward the wheels did not depart from them. They are one. It is life. It is all a question of life. When you look at the Lord's people in Ezekiel's day you see only death. The Lord through His servant, the prophet, is seeking to bring before His people the meaning of life, the way of life, deliverance from death. That is all we can say about it.

We pass to the book of the Revelation, where the very name given to them is enough — the livings, the living ones; the emphasis upon life is given, the *living ones*. Why could they not have been called by some other name, a proper name? No, it is the whole question of life. Ezekiel's river and trees on either side and the Paradise of God with the tree of life and the river of water of life, all show that it is a question of life.

Now let us note one or two things. If the cherubim are a representation of Christ, or an embodiment of the spiritual principles of Christ incarnate, and the question of life is inseparably bound up with the cherubim, then this is all a setting forth of the great fact clearly stated many times in the New Testament, that this life is inseparable from Christ. This life is in Christ, can only be had in Christ, and that on the ground of redemption; redemption because the flaming sword has lighted upon a Substitute for sinful man, judgement has come upon that which was laid under the curse.

See Elisha removing from the spring of the waters that which was in the nature of a curse. It worked out to the falling of the fruit before ever it got ripe, everything miscarrying, never coming through to completeness. That is the mark of the curse.

In the book of the Revelation, when you come into the presence of that which is for the health of the nations, this *living water*, this *tree of life*, it is Christ, and the curse is gone. That is redemption unto life, life which has conquered death, life which is incorruptible and cannot be overcome of death. This is in Christ only, but it *is* in Christ,

We come to the outworking of this life. What is the innermost feature of this life? What is its essential quality? If Elisha stands again to illustrate, it is that which does not fall, fail, come short, end in imperfection, but it is that which goes right through, ever through, never touched by death, always increasing in perfection. It is an energy which persists indefinitely, and produces that which is always an expression of the fulness

of God. "Trees yielding their fruit every month". That is an extraordinary tree! A tree whose leaf is never turning colour, and never fades or falls, always green! This is set forth to represent and express something more than nature. It is all there to proclaim the essential quality of this life. Fruit every month! That means continuous fruitfulness, not in season and out of season, but always in season, continuous fruit; continuous freshness, greenness, with no sign of autumn, but always in full verdure. It is the essential quality of this life.

Link that with service. Come back to Adam as a fellow-worker with God, See the change in the nature of his work after his sin and fall. The work, like himself, becomes at once touched with death; all the marks of death, arrest and limitation are there, with nothing coming through to perfection, completeness. Why are the cherubim there? Surely to say so clearly, in the light of all the rest of Scripture, that the work of God must be done by the life of God, and unless it is it falls under death, it comes short, it does not go on. It gets to a certain point of development, and there it ends and fades. Only that life which is on the basis of God's own life, and only that work which is done on the basis of God's own life, goes through to perfection, to fulness, and keeps on, ever on.

Christ embodies that life. "I am He that lives, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore" (Rev. 1:18), "unto the ages of the ages" (R.V.M.). He is the Tree of Life. To those who believe He has given that life, eternal life, life to go on. But He has also made it the basis of fellowship with Him in the great eternal purposes of God which do not belong to any one period, any one day or generation, but are eternal, coming out from eternity, going straight on through time, and pouring themselves out in the great ocean of a future eternity. His life is the basis of our relationship and of our service.

We turn to the other side for a moment by way of warning. We have referred to this life as the energy, that which energises men in their living and in their serving, and *everything* depends in the long run upon what it is that is energising us in living and in serving; whether it is our own natural life upon which we are drawing, and which we are directing into spiritual things, the things of God, either to live or to work: or whether it is His own divine life. It makes all the difference.

Cain is a great example. He directed his own energy, his natural life, into that which he expected God to accept. What happened? He came up against a blank wall, he found that when he had expended his energy, working with his brain and with his hand, and had brought the result of his

own energy, *its* fruit to God, there was no way through, the door was closed. Cain became an historic tragedy. His very name is not pleasant to hear. He is one of those monuments in the course of history who, seeking to satisfy God, offer something acceptable to God on the basis of their own natural life, and the pages of Holy Writ are strewn with the tragic results of attempting to do that. Even Abraham has left a terrible expression of the tragedy of doing that. Hagar and Ishmael! What a tragedy! You cannot kill that sort of thing; it is a living death. You cannot exterminate it. When Abraham turned to realise something for God, something divine, to realise some divinely given vision, fulfil some divinely given promise, to enter into God's mind by his own natural energy, his own natural life, Ishmael was the result. God has felt it worthwhile to allow the thing to remain on record, even with an Abraham. You might think of Abraham, the friend of God, so full of faith, so faithful, so sacrificing, so utter for God, and say, "Oh, surely in kindness, in generosity, God would have wiped that thing out of the story!" God has thought it worthwhile to let it be known that even in the case of an Abraham, turning aside to realise divine ends by natural life, is a costly thing in its outcome. It stops short. It never gets through to God's end.

Take Moses. What faithfulness! What devotion! What sacrifice! What suffering through many years! And then just one act out of his own strength, his own passion. Sometimes, in some cases, it comes out through the mind — thinking, reasoning, planning, scheming, devising — the intellectual side of man, energised by his natural life. Sometimes it comes out through the heart, the passions, the emotions. Moses, after all, says: "Hear now, ye rebels; shall we bring you forth water out of this rock?" As a result God said he should not enter the land. Hear His servant plead with Him! "Let me go over, I pray thee ...". Then God said, "Speak no more unto Me of this matter." Then it was put in the Book that in all successive generations the story would be told by parents to their children how this great man, with all his sacrifice, endurance and suffering, had failed once like that, and God had not let him go over. The children would say to the parents as the story was told, "But is not that very hard and cruel of God? That seems very unkind and terrible!" Ah, yes! But disobedience to God is a very awful thing! You can never tell how awful disobedience to God is! That is how God regards it and then the children would learn the meaning of obedience and disobedience.

What was the problem in principle? It was a rising up in his own natural life in jealousy for God. God says, No! I do not want your natural

life to be jealous for Me! It can get nowhere! It lies under a curse! It is a fruitless thing! It is a barren thing! You must not bring that into this realm; this realm is holy! We could take more illustrations from the Word, but we will leave it there.

It may be you have some history on the matter. If I look at the things outstanding in my own life which cause me shame, regret, sorrow of heart, things which I saw only led to distress, to suffering (not fruitful suffering) those were the things which resulted when *I* made up my mind that *I* was going to do something, or go somewhere, and *I* set myself to realise it, *I* determined and *I* put my hand to it to bring it about. It may have been something that God wanted or it may not have been. The question for the moment is not as to whether it was God's will or not. The question is, Was it God's way, on God's basis? Or was it the strength of natural life? If we want something very badly it is surprising how we can manoeuvre and negotiate. Something cunning seems to come up somewhere to get that, to bring it about, and then it is all dressed up in language about the Lord, and the Lord's will, and having been given a vision, and so on, and all the time there has been a manipulating to bring it about. There is a determination, and arrest, deadlock, hold-up, postponement, very often a need to return to that very point with months, perhaps years, lost, and begin on a basis other than that.

No! This life of ours cannot produce God's thoughts or purposes, and it cannot do God's works. It cannot be the energy by which the ends of God are reached. The Word of God from Genesis onwards makes that perfectly clear, whether in the case of Adam, or Cain, or Abraham, or Moses, or Paul. "Lest I should be exalted above measure ... there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me", was God's precaution against Paul the natural man, in his natural life! All that Paul ever had to say about weakness, and the necessity for it, infirmity and its values, was said out of having learned the lesson that God's work is best done by God's life, not ours.

Smiting of self

There is a smiting to be done somewhere. Cain was smitten; Moses was smitten; Paul (in that realm) was smitten. In another class Ananias and Sapphira projected themselves with their own thoughts, the working of their own minds, into the holy things of God, and were smitten. There is a custodian — the cherubim — "lest he die". Our life, sinful and cursed at

its very spring, being projected into the things of God is bound sooner or later to come up against that smiting, that flame. To put it in another way, it is bound to come up against the cross of Christ.

You and I are bound to come up against that at some time or other. It is not a question as to whether we have accepted our crucifixion with Christ. It is a matter of the fact, and not our acceptance. Do you think that God lets us off because we have not accepted? No! The acceptance is on the ground of our recognition of the great fact. Not to have accepted, not even to have seen it, does not mean that we are going to finally escape. We come under the law of the cross, whether we understand the cross or not. But God is very patient and very gracious. At some time or other we come into deep exercise about our life; we are not growing very much, we have gone so far and do not seem to have got any farther. We are putting a tremendous lot of labour in, and pouring ourselves out, but the spiritual effectiveness and real value is very small. What is the matter? Some of us have been there, and we have gone to the Lord, and asked what is the matter, and the Lord has taken us to Romans 6 and that has cleared up everything. The Lord has shown us the fact of the cross, where the natural life was, by Him, for ever set aside as the life of man in relation to God. His *risen life* is the life for the believer, and that life goes on, there is no miscarriage, no stopping short, no failing, it goes on and on.

The way of the fulness of life, after all, is the way of the cross. So many of the Lord's people have thought that the cross is a way of continuous death, nullifying, neutralising, ending, winding up. Yes, but only in one realm. Anybody who talks about the cross of Christ and never enlarges and increases spiritually has an altogether wrong apprehension of the cross. The cross is intended to release us from ourselves and our limitations, out into Him, the Christ of God, the *Man* in fulness, to bring us into that fellowship which is the fellowship of members of Christ's body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all. That is what the cross is for. Until we recognise that the cross represents the end of our natural life as the energy of our being — mind, heart and will — and that the life which is in Christ alone is now the energy for our entire being in relation to God for life and service, we do not begin to live and grow. Until we get there we are bound to know arrest.

This is a life of faith. These spiritual things cannot be reported in the newspapers. Real spiritual growth and real spiritual fruit in service is not a thing that you can always write down and show to others; it is something out of sight, it is something heavenly. I cannot put my spiritual growth in

the last ten years before your eyes for you to look at. You might be able to recognise some measure of spiritual growth, but you will never be able to judge of what that is to the full in its value. And then in connection with work and service, there may be nothing to be seen and yet it may be tremendous before God. Take Christ on the cross. What can be seen when He is there as to His service, His life work? What is the value of His life on the earth when He is on the cross, and all the crowds have gone, and the intimate circle have dispersed? There is a value in heaven which it will take all eternity to exhaust. The value of that was seen by spiritual intelligences.

Look at Paul at the end of his life. In prison, all Asia turned away from him, left practically alone, perhaps more isolated than any other man on the earth in his day, more ostracised, more slandered, misrepresented, with more enemies than any other man; a lonely man at the end of a life poured out for God. What is the good of it all? What is the spiritual value of that? After centuries we know the spiritual value of Paul's life. But looking at the man as the world looks at things what is the value of it? It is a life of faith. The man who comes along with his own energy in work for God can build up great things that he can put in the papers, tabulate, advertise, and present to the world as the result of his efforts. Eternity will reveal just how much of real, abiding spiritual value there is. This law governs whether we like it or not, whether we will accept it or not. The law is clear, and only that which is the product of the life of the risen Lord will abide eternally.

For the Lord's people this is a life of faith. "Therefore the world knows us not", says John, "*because it knew Him not.*" The Lord give us a heavenly standard of values, heavenly ways of estimating, and grace to abandon ourselves at any cost to living and serving by His life. Though on earth there may not be a great deal to show for it, that life does count; it is a mighty thing, it is an imperishable, incorruptible, indispensable life, it goes on, and it bears fruit.

THE WHEELS OF GOD'S COUNSELS AND PURPOSES

Reading: Ezekiel 1.

We find that on the veil of the tabernacle hanging between the holy and the most holy place there were wrought in the fabric representations of the cherubim. We know that that veil itself is a type of the incarnation, Christ in the flesh. The apostle says that quite definitely and clearly in the letter to the Hebrews, and that this veil is His flesh; and while He was on the earth — that is, until there was a cleaving in the cross — there was no way through to God, there was an exclusion from God. When in the cross the veil of the flesh was cleft, God attested the fact by a sovereign act from heaven. In the hour when He yielded up His spirit the veil of the temple was rent from the top to the bottom. Then the way into the presence of God was made clear, through His blood and through His riven flesh. So that the veil represented the incarnation, but again, as we have already seen, it is a matter of fellowship with God and the service of God.

The priests performed their service on the one side of the veil. They could not enter into the fulness except through that veil. If they tried to pass through the veil unbidden by God, and unprovided for by God, they were smitten and died; death met them. The cherubim were (as it were) the custodians of the divine life, which no man could lay his hand upon and appropriate, live by, or serve in, except on very special grounds. Those grounds were, in the case of the tabernacle, the types of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus in the shed and sprinkled blood of His cross.

Once a year the High Priest took blood and passed through, declaring that a day was coming when, in virtue of the blood of God's own Son (not a type, the blood of bulls and of goats), a way would be opened into the very presence of God. What goes on around the veil, so to speak, is an expression of oneness with God, cooperation, fellowship with God in His work.

Now we pass into a very much fuller development of this truth in the case of Ezekiel. We note that the thing which is before us is fellowship with God, and the service of God. In chapter 1 of the prophecies of Ezekiel we have that which became the basis, the foundation of the prophet's ministry. It is, as it were, that which was his induction to the prophetic ministry. Ezekiel was inducted to his prophetic ministry by a vision. The vision had a number of elements or features. Moving from the earth level upwards, as Ezekiel presents it, we begin with the cherubim, but I want to reverse the order, because I believe that we are in the reverse order. The explanation is this, that Ezekiel had mainly to do with Israel. His prophecies and his ministry were connected with Israel, therefore connected, in the main, with an earthly people, with something of God related to an earthly history, and therefore he would move from the earth upwards.

The same principles hold good in our case, but the order is reversed. You find all these elements in the New Testament, but you begin where Ezekiel ended. So, because we are not having to do with merely earthly people and earthly history, but with something over and above that which includes it, we begin from above. Ezekiel's vision ended with the throne; we begin with the throne. That is where the New Testament begins. In the book of the Acts everything for the church begins with the throne. Perhaps it was even more than that, for Ezekiel did not actually end with the throne; he ended with the presentation of a Man above the throne, a Man having the glory of Jehovah above the throne. That is where the New Testament begins: the Man, having the glory of God, above the throne. From that point we work backwards with Ezekiel's vision.

There was the firmament, and above the firmament was a throne and the Man. Beneath the Man and the throne there was a firmament, the heavens, the heavenly realm. We only need to pass rapidly into the letter to the Ephesians to understand what that represents in our case. How familiar we are with the constant repetition in that letter, "in the heavenlies"! We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ in the heavenlies. We have been made to sit together with Christ in the heavenlies. And at the end of the letter we read that our wrestling is in the heavenlies. There is a heavenly realm under the throne in which there is a Man with the glory of the Lord, and the church which is His body is bound up mainly with that firmament, that heavenly realm, and what is taking place there.

The significance of the wheels

Coming down in the vision of Ezekiel in reverse order, we come to the wheels. What do these wheels represent? I think there is little doubt but that the wheels are a type of government, and the eternal counsels of God in government in the purpose of God through the ages. These wheels are going, they are going on, and they are directed to all quarters of the earth. Universality is their great characteristic. They can go in any direction, but they move on, ever on.

Again the Ephesians letter may interpret the wheels for us by those familiar words, “Who works all things after the counsel of His own will”. You can almost see the wheels in that. You can see goings — determined, straightforward, irresistible goings, “Who works all things after the counsel of his own will”. These are the counsels of God from eternity being worked out through the ages in relation to the heavens and in relation to a Man upon the throne. Ephesians is the explanation of this chapter. There is One in the throne, a throne of glory; there is a heavens connected with that throne and connected with all that is under the heavens and there are the counsels of God from eternity, like an irresistible force, like wheels driving on through the ages, connected with that Man in the glory, with that throne, with those heavens, and also having to do with this world.

The two things about the wheels are, firstly, that they are full of eyes. Their rims are full of eyes. There are eyes everywhere. Secondly, the spirit is in the wheels. Those two things are, again, symbolic. The eyes denote perfect knowledge. In the whole universe everything is comprehended by Him. He is cognizant in every realm of all that is going on. The spirit denotes divine life, divine energy in an executive way. These wheels, which are the counsels and purposes of God from eternity, are being energized by the Spirit of God, Who cannot be resisted.

The significance of the fire

Then the third thing, working downwards, is fire. In the case of Ezekiel’s ministry, which was here being constituted by this vision, of course the fire was the fire of divine judgement being brought to bear upon the unfaithful people. Jerusalem was destroyed, the land was desolate, the people were in captivity, the glory of God had departed from Jerusalem. The judgements of God were being wrought upon His unfaithful people. Fire speaks here of God’s dealings with everything in view of His eternal

counsels in relation to those purposes which cannot be thwarted. If anything gets in the way of God's eternal purpose it will meet the fire, the judgement of God, and will be consumed. No matter what it is, if it withstands God then it has to pass through God's fire, and it cannot do that and survive. History is just full of that.

You have the example in Chaldea, in Babylon, withstanding the purposes of God in relation to His earthly people. What has happened to Babylon? What has happened to Chaldea? They are but names in history, a past glory, but torn limb from limb by the judgements of God. Many empires have stood in the way of God's counsels, and the same thing has happened. The mightiest of them, Rome, exhausted its power, drew upon all its resources to quench the testimony of Jesus, hurling its witnesses to lions, to wholesale massacre, but what has happened to Rome? The Roman Empire is marked by her ruins. She has passed as a tale that is told. But God's counsels go on, and God's church abides. Whether it be an empire, a world, or an individual getting in the way of the wheels of God, the fire is there cooperating. It is a great thing to be in God's purpose. It is a great thing to be on God's side. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. We do that when we oppose His purposes and get in the way of His counsels.

The cherubim

Then we come to the cherubim. The cherubim are the corporate or composite instrument of it all. We have described the cherubim and will not stay to do it again: the fourfold aspect of the lion, the ox, the eagle, the man; sovereignty, service and sacrifice, heavenly mystery, and the representation of God. This is Christ in incarnation. But this is the church, His body, brought into fellowship with Him in the good of His redemption, back into sovereignty: "Hath made us a kingdom ..." in fellowship with Him in His service and sacrifice aspect: "That I may know him ... and the fellowship of his sufferings"; in fellowship with the heavenly mystery, the body. The world does not understand the mystery of the true child of God. The world cannot appreciate the mystery of the true church of Christ. The body of Christ is indeed a mystery to this world, a heavenly mystery. Then again, the man to represent God, to be God's spokesman. In Ezekiel more than in any other part of the Scripture the term Son of Man is prominent. There are two outstanding connections of that title, in the prophesies of Ezekiel, and in the case of the Lord Jesus Himself. In the

case of the Lord Jesus the title sets Him forth as God's Servant, God's Representative Man, the One Who is here and Who can say, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Christ and the church represented by the cherubim.

The point here in Ezekiel 1 is this, that the son of man, Ezekiel, has his life and ministry constituted by a vision. It is that which makes him God's servant. It is that which defines his ministry. What a background for any man's life, for any man's ministry! What a background for our life and our ministry in relation to God! We are all called into this ministry. Are we called *in* Christ? I suppose we would all say, Yes! Well, there is no doubt about it, we are all called *in* Christ. All this is gathered up and realised in Christ. If we are called in Christ then we are called into all that Christ represents as to the eternal purpose of God, "Called according to his purpose". What is the background of that relationship and that calling, that ministry? Just that which we have said. The background first of all is a Man with the glory of the Lord, in a throne. It will always be that which constitutes us the servants of Jesus Christ, the servants of God. That is where the church commenced its history, the Man glorified in the throne. Stephen saw Him: "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"! Paul saw Him: "Jesus of Nazareth" in the heavens, having the glory of the Lord, and Paul went down before that unveiling. That was the basis of his life-work. That brought him in to his ministry. The church caught a vision by the Holy Ghost of the Man in the throne with the glory of the Lord, and that sent the church out into the world to do, to suffer, to die, to witness. It was that.

Heavenly vocation

Then we come to the heavenly vocation. There is a firmament, a heavenly realm, in which Christ and His people are fulfilling a vocation. "That now unto the principalities and powers in the heavenlies ...", says Paul. Our ministry is not wholly and solely bound up with things on this earth. While it may bring very little comfort and consolation to our hearts in the time of spiritual ordeal and suffering, nevertheless the fact remains that often when nothing whatever can be seen here on earth among men as the result of a spiritual faithfulness, a sheer standing in faith against all odds, something is being wrought out in heaven by that stand, something is being wrought by God in a spiritual realm, but man cannot see that. Your faithfulness, whether you are seeing anything at all here on the earth

as the fruit of it or not is nevertheless counting. Many of God's servants can only be justified in having lived by this very fact. God has put them in a place and they have known that to depart from that place would have been to take themselves out of God's will for them, and yet nothing could be seen. All they have known has been that it was a terrific conflict to stand, to hold on, to withstand all the forces of evil which have sought to move them, to get them out. They have had to withstand the powers of darkness to remain where God put them. But in the eyes of men there was nothing to show for it. Yet in another realm where things are not judged according to the standards of men, something mighty has been going on. It is in the heavenlies that we are fulfilling a vocation more than on the earth. I believe that at the end of this dispensation — and that end surely is very much upon us now — the true spiritual church, the true spiritual people of God, will not be able to show to the world a great deal for their existence. It will look as though all the externals of their activities are falling away and going to pieces; they are getting no more successes, no sweeping victories, no great hauls of souls; they are being called upon simply to stand. But it means a terrific thing to be able to stand at the end. Does that mean that the work of the church has come to an end, its ministry is finished, and the Lord's people are no longer doing anything? When the church's ministry is at an end He will take it away. When its work is done He will not leave it lying about; He will take it to Himself. This standing, resisting, holding on, is in itself a mighty testimony, registering something of His victory over the powers of evil. There may not be much to show for it amongst men. It will not be possible to publish it, and advertise it, and say, "This is the result of our work!" It is telling in another realm, where men cannot judge it, "that now unto the principalities and powers in the heavenlies ...". Primarily that is where our witness is, and where our vocation is. It will have a registration here, but the registration here is not all. The registration is with a Man on the throne and the heavens that rule! And the heavens *do* rule!

We are constituted in our ministry, our spiritual vocation, "according to the counsel of him who works all things after the counsel of His own will". We are, "called according to his purpose." We have been brought into fellowship with God in relation to those things which He determined before this world was, and which He projected into this universe, into which He intended Adam to come and be a fellow-worker with Him. Adam failed, but He has not given up His purpose. He has chosen others, and He has chosen *us* in Christ. We who love God and are the called

according to His purpose come into the way of the wheels. We need a new strengthening by what these wheels mean. Our hearts very often need strengthening as to the meaning of these wheels, for so often, by reason of the domination of our senses, always wanting to see and know in a tangible way, we are tempted to feel that the purpose has broken down, and nothing is happening, nothing is going on; God is standing back from this world and letting things take their course, and there is no clearly defined line of action or movement. We sometimes feel that definiteness of purpose and vocation has gone. That is our feeling; it is not God. The fact is that God's wheels are going on. I like the emphasis here, "They turned not as they went." That does not mean that they did not revolve. That means that they did not diverge, they went straight forward, wherever the spirit went they went, they turned not as they went. God has no detours in His eternal counsels. God is ploughing a straight furrow through the ages, and God's purpose is as sure, as definite, as positive, as straightforward, as mighty in this hour as ever it has been, because God is not a God of time, of earthly change; God is a God of eternity and what He has purposed He will perform, and the wheels will go straight on.

The Lord renew in us a sense of positive purpose, that we are in something which will make its way through every kind of resistance, will hurl empires out of the way if they obstruct. Everything that endeavours to hold Him up will meet the fire. He is going on. The counsels of God *cannot* fail, the purposes of God cannot break down. What He has determined He will perform; the wheels go on, straight on. The Spirit is in the wheels, and He knows everything, He is aware of everything, "full of eyes". It is all in the church by Christ Jesus. "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that energiseth in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus unto all ages for ever and ever" (Eph. 3:20). That comprehends it all. God's purposes are in the church. God's Spirit is in the church. God's counsels are in the church. God is driving on concerning His church, and when God reaches His end there will not be lacking one bit of all that He purposed. He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to that power which works in us. The Spirit in the wheels, in the counsels, in the purposes, in the church. That constitutes fellowship with God, that constitutes ministry. Oh, if every servant of God realised that! What a strength it would be! No wonder Ezekiel is called the prophet of hope. When you have been constituted in your ministry upon such a basis there is a hope. Man with the glory of the Lord, in the throne, upon

the heavnlies, concerning the counsels of God through the ages. That is a background! The Lord bring us in spirit into a living apprehension of it.

To be continued