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SERMON XXIII.

THE RECAPITULATION OF ALL THINGS IN CHRIST.

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“That in the dispensation of the fulness of times, he might gather together in one all things in Christ.”—Ephesians i. 10.

I. JEHOVAH, revealed to us in the Scriptures, has, from eternity, existed in the plenitude of an infinite and unchangeable being, which, as to its essence, is absolutely one; the unity of the Godhead being the fundamental idea of revealed religion. The infinite blessedness in which he has thus eternally existed, had a direct relevancy to the ineffable inbeing and actings of the three Divine persons—equal in power and glory, which constitute, in the unity of that essence, the adorable Trinity of the Divine nature. It is to be observed, however, that the unity and the trinity thus revealed to us, concerning the being of God, are predicated of different things, and not of the same thing; the former of the very essence thereof, the latter of the exact mode in which it exists.

The infinite God, in the exercise of that boundless goodness which is so great an attribute of his nature, and for the illustration of his own glory as the grand end of all his works, was pleased to manifest himself in the

whole work of creation ; therein communicating to us, as one portion of his handy-work, a dependent being ; and, throughout the whole, exhibiting his divine beneficence, wisdom, and power. Thus the heavens and the earth, and all that is therein, were created by Jesus Christ, the true God, and second person in the trinity ; and he who became incarnate, that he might save sinners, was not only with God, from eternity, but, as God, the sole creator of all things—the only source of all dependent existence—the absolute author of all created intelligence.

The direct relations of all things and all beings, are only to God ; the relations which all of them have with each other, are merely indirect, and through God. From him, and by him, and to him, are all things. Whatever is primary and fundamental in their condition, connects them, directly, with the throne of God. It is only those things which are secondary and incidental that connect them with each other ; and even these, as before stated, indirectly through God. It is in him that we live, and move, and have our being. The laws of nature, as we call them, are no more than the rules of his procedure, which, by their constancy, have become obvious to us ; the duties which we owe to one another, are results of still more exalted duties which we owe to him ; and our very power to bless each other, is strictly measured by his blessings to us.

II. A universe created, constituted, and governed, in that manner, presents to us the highest conceivable picture of felicity and glory. That it should wholly fall away from that condition, seems at once the most inscrutable mystery, and the most appalling calamity. God, in his blessed Word, has clearly explained to us the mode in which sin was introduced into that portion of his universe which appertains, in a special manner, to us ; and, more

briefly, the manner of its original entrance, at an earlier period, amongst the angelic hosts. Aside from these Divine teachings, we know, only, that our glory and felicity are gone; and that sin and misery have made their abode with us. It is when we sit down at the feet of Jesus, and learn of him, that the great story of our ruin and our recovery is exhibited to us, in all its fearful guilt, and all its unsearchable grace.

By sin, the angels, who fell, lost their first and sublime estate. By sin, the human race has lost the image of God in which we were created, and is exposed in the estate in which we stood, to all the miseries which flow from the just displeasure of God, in this world, and in that which is to come. By sin, the very earth we inhabit lies under the curse of God, and all creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together. The whole scheme of God's goodness, and wisdom, and power, as manifested in a heavenly and an earthly creation, in which sin had no place, is deranged by the entrance of sin into the heavens, and upon the earth. The relations of every part of that creation, to all the other parts, are wholly deranged; and the relations of the whole, and of every part to God, are most signally changed. Where there was order, there is confusion; where there was peace, there is anguish; where there was purity, there is pollution; where there was eternal life, there is death and hell.

There is a marvellous difference, in the dealings of God, with the two classes of his fallen creatures. Of the angels, a part only fell. Them he cast out for ever, but cursed not the bright abode which they had forfeited; instead of which, he provided for them a separate prison house of despair. Our guilty race fell absolutely, and without reserve. Them he cast out, without exception; but not all of them for ever. The groaning earth, which

they had polluted, he cursed for their sakes, but not eternally; instead of which, the abode prepared for the Devil and his angels, shall relieve the earth of the eternal presence of impenitent men. Wonderful are the dealings of God, and his ways past finding out!

III. In the counsels of eternity, the set purpose of God was to reconstruct the universe, thus polluted and deranged by sin. Heaven was already emptied of its fallen angels, reserved in chains of darkness, for the judgment of the great day. For the earth and for man—no more covenant of works—no more, do and live; but a covenant of grace—believe and live; life and immortality brought to light by the gospel!

From motives drawn from within his own breast, and which we express by saying—of his good pleasure: without the least claim on the part of his fallen creatures, and therefore, of free grace: without all accountability for his own conduct, and, therefore, of sovereign grace: by a method most thorough, and most complete, and, therefore, of efficacious grace; for an end worthy of God, and, therefore, for his own glory: it is thus, that God proceeds in the sublime proposal of his purposed reconstruction of his universe—in a way of infinite mercy as it regards fallen man.

Our Divine Redeemer has told us nothing more plainly than that, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must be born again. We have lost the image of God, in which we were created: we must be restored to that lost image, or we must perish for ever. For us, all that was lost by the fall—nay more—is restored in Christ; for, in him, we are made partakers of the divine nature. In him, the Godhead has taken our nature into eternal union with his own nature; and he is formed in us the hope of glory. By him, also, the Eternal Spirit, purchased by

his blood, makes us temples in which he dwells—living temples—a habitation for God. A service and an enjoyment of God, infinitely beyond what had been possible under the covenant of works, if man had never fallen, awaits the redeemed under the covenant of grace, and that reconstruction of the universe which is to be accomplished under it.

The angels that kept their first estate, look to Christ, the head over all things, and, as such, the head of the Church, and in him are confirmed for ever in that heavenly estate. He who created them by the word of his power, confirms them eternally in their exalted condition; and does this as he is the Christ of God. Redeemed men—the peculiar purchase of his blood, and the most surprising monument of his mercy and love—find him their very life, when they appear with him in glory. Fallen angels lie under his sentence in endless despair; and lost men will find no part of their condemnation more terrific, than that which will spring from the certainty, that he whom they despised and rejected, and who judged and condemned them, was both able and willing to have saved them. All created intelligences, and the earth itself purified by fire, and emerging with the new heavens from the bosom of that old creation which is vanishing away, reunited again in one body, under one head, will be gathered together in one—all things recapitulated in Christ. In a sense still more exalted than that in which, at their creation, God pronounced all the works of his hands to be very good, will all be presented, at last, faultless before God; and the grand problem, created by the introduction of sin into the universe, be finally solved, to the infinite glory of Jehovah of Hosts. Good—very good—faultless, immaculately faultless, will be all the procedure, and all the results, throughout all the universe;

the unsearchable riches of grace, and the awful severity of justice, alike exalting the majesty of the Son of God.

IV. In the course of creation, and in the order of providence, in the development of nature, and in the unfolding of all the dispensations of mercy, there is an everlasting concatenation and dependence of all things. They follow each other in a sublime order—every thing complete in-itself—and yet all but portions of a still more complete whole. All things have a force peculiar to themselves, and then all work together with an irresistible power; and the end of each, and the result of the whole, is for good to them that love God. The dispensation of the fulness of times, is the vast cycle in which they all work together, the immense period through which they all emerge in their successive manifestations; conspiring to that good end of the economy of the completion of times, when all shall be once more brought under an absolute and infinite headship, and that in Jesus Christ.

Before any work of creation at all—before all existence save that of the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable Spirit, which fills immensity—even from everlasting—was the period of gestation in the Divine mind of those boundless thoughts, which, for his own glory, all the fulness of the dispensation of times, was to make manifest. Thoughts of a work of creation only less immense, than he who fills immensity. Thoughts of an order of providence, covering the immensity of his creation and extending to eternity.

Then burst forth the work of angelic creation—the calling into being of cherubim and seraphim—the thrones, and dominions, and principalities and powers—the sublime hierarchies of the unseen world. This first, great period, of whose duration we know nothing, divides itself in two most distinct portions. It may have been almost from the depths of eternity, up to the fall

of a portion of these bright intelligences, that the first portion of this angelic period flowed on: and from that fearful catastrophe, to the creation of man, the second portion of that period rolled past the throne of God. Ages—it may be countless ages—of which we know so little, and which it is so easy for the imagination to crowd with all purest and most exalted things; but in the midst of which God has revealed to us a revolt against his infinite majesty in heaven itself.

Next came the creation of man, in the image of God. A new race; in this agreeing with the angels, that each one was a separate activity, an individual and responsible power in the universe; but in this differing from them, that it was strictly a race—all created of one blood—and not, like the angelic hosts, a mere collection, no matter how immense, of isolated individuals, neither descended from, nor related to each other. To this original and fundamental distinction between the nature of men and that of angels, is to be traced, perhaps, as much as to any other cause, the vast difference in the career and destiny of these two great families of God's intelligent creatures. And this part of the dispensation of the fulness of times, like the one that went before it, is divided into two portions, by a revolt against God; a revolt now in paradise, as before in heaven. "By one man's disobedience sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."

The covenant made with Adam; for himself and his posterity, was broken by Adam, both for himself and them; and the first portion of man's dispensation on earth witnessed only his own ruin. How futile all our attempts to save our souls by our own works must appear, when we reflect, that this requires of us, in our fallen condition, two things, the smallest of which was beyond the strength

of Adam, before he fell; for we must begin by retrieving what has been lost by the fall, and after that, we must continue in that likeness of God, we have first to recover. There lay open before God, if we may thus speak, three courses, either of which, as far as we can comprehend, he might have taken with man, after the fall. He might have left the whole race to perish, as he did all the fallen angels: or, he might have provided some remedy, by which the whole race would inevitably and necessarily have been recovered and saved: or, he might have interposed in that manner, which, taking in the whole scope of his own being and attributes, and the whole nature of man, would the most perfectly illustrate the glory of God, in providing a redemption adequate for all men, but effectual only to such as should receive it, by grace through faith; passing by the rest, and condemning them for their sins. It is obvious, that the first, or the second method, would have been infinitely simple and direct; the first, a mere illustration of his justice; the second, of his compassion. God has chosen the third; and, by means of it, his justice and his mercy alike, along with all else that constitutes his glory and blessedness, will be made supremely and eternally manifest to his universe. This Divine dispensation of grace, for the salvation of sinners of the race of man, develops itself throughout all our human dispensation after the fall; and, when it is absolutely consummated and completed, all things will be recapitulated in Jesus Christ, and the whole universe, so long defaced and deranged by sin, be united again under one head, even the glorified God-man!

It is this vast and glorious portion of the dispensation of the fulness of times, of which all the Scriptures most fully treat. What went before it, is but briefly dwelt upon in the lively oracles; only enough, perhaps, to make

us fully comprehend the relations of this part to the entire spiritual system of the universe. What follows after it, in the depths of the eternity to come, is only indicated in the most general manner. No eye ever saw, no ear ever heard, no heart ever conceived, what God will do, finally and for ever, for those whose names shall be found written in the Lamb's Book of Life; when the kingdom of Messiah is delivered up to God, even the Father, on that sublime record of complete redemption, and God will be all in all. On the other hand, the wildest imagination can scarcely embody the dimmest horror of that lake of torment, in which death itself shall die, and hell be consumed for ever!

The covenant of grace, springing from the bosom of God, and conceived from all eternity, is administered in different ways, but is still really administered, throughout all that second part of our human dispensation of which we were just speaking, as extending from the fall of man, to the consummation of all things. Before there was a gathered and visible Church in the world; before there was any outward mark, separating between God's people and God's enemies; before there was any written revelation from heaven; before there were any office bearers, or any permanent signs and seals of that covenant of grace, it was, nevertheless, administered, in a way then sufficient, and also really Divine; and the Bride of the Lamb, still found her spouse faithful to her. Then came the call of Abraham, in the midst of the idolatries of Ur, of the Chaldees, to be the father of the faithful. After that followed the law given from Sinai, and the great ceremonial and typical dispensation, and holy men of God speaking, from age to age, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, and all the array of God's wondrous dealings with his ancient people. And when the set time was

come, God sent forth his only begotten Son, made of a woman, made under the law; God manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory—the incontrovertible mystery of godliness! Then came the day of Pentecost; the outpouring of the Spirit; the Scriptures completed; the Church of God re-organized afresh for its great labor of truth and love; and the long ages of conflict and of grace, of trial and of triumph, in the midst of which, thus far run out, we stand in our lot to-day. Thus far have we come; so much have we already seen or known; and, by the grace of God, we are what we are. The current, flowing from eternity to eternity, has reached this mark, where our feet touch its margin, and our hearts sigh to launch away upon it. But all things are not yet gathered together in one, nor is the dominion of Christ yet set up over them, in its final and infinite fulness; and, as yet, therefore, the dispensation of the fulness of times is not completed.

And what are the dispensations which are to come? If we will simply and sincerely believe God, we need not err concerning them. The great promise of the Old Testament Scriptures was the incarnation of the Son of God, his first coming as the Saviour of sinners. The great promise of the New Testament Scriptures, is his second coming, without sin, unto salvation; the second advent of the Redeemer glorified. Though now we behold him not, yet we know that he is infinitely exalted at the right hand of God, a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel, and the forgiveness of sins. Nor has he left us comfortless. But, according to his gracious promise, he has sent us another Comforter, even the Spirit of all truth, all life, and all holiness; who has made his abiding place in the hearts of Christ's followers; who abides there

still, and who will abide there continually, till the promise of the Saviour, and the immediate dispensation of the Comforter shall end in the visible manifestation of the God-man! The personal dispensation of Jesus Christ, if the grand idea may be so expressed, is not one continuous, but is a varied and successive manifestation, continually increasing in glory and majesty. There was first his personal ministry, ending with his ascension up into glory: this he often calls the kingdom of heaven, properly and simply. Then followed that kingdom with power, even the power of the Holy Ghost, in the regeneration and sanctification of men, in a manner, and to an extent, certainly never witnessed before the ascension of Christ; and which is the peculiar characteristic of that portion of the personal dispensation of Jesus, extending from his ascension to his second advent. There is still to come that kingdom with great glory, commencing with the return of the glorified master, and manifested throughout all those stupendous events—the resurrection, the judgment, the millennial reign, the final delivery of the kingdom itself upon the Book of Life, and the retributions of eternity.

The second person of the adorable Trinity, is the central object of all the revelation of God. It is he who created all things; it is he who governs all things; it is he who will judge all things; it is he alone who saves sinners; it is in him that all things are to be gathered at last under one head. It is only as we make him the grand object, that all our expositions of the dispensations that are past become true and consistent; and it is only while every thing culminates to him, that all the future opens itself to our comprehension. This Divine Word made flesh, and so two natures united in one new person for ever; once crucified, now exalted, hereafter to return in great glory: behold the key of all Scripture! Fixing upon the

point of that return, all things that remain are—and are then only—plain. With him will come all his holy angels. His living saints will be transfigured as they behold him ; and the bodies of those that sleep with the pale nations of the dead, will arise in the first resurrection, as they hear his voice. Vengeance on the living who reject him—a final and eternal end of all offers of mercy—the continued death sleep of the impenitent, till the judgment of the righteous is over. That judgment ascertains, not the fact so much, as the manner and circumstances of their salvation, and their place in the mansions of the blessed, and amongst the redeemed host. With his glorious coming Satan is bound ; and then are solved all the great problems of Antichrist—of the Gentiles—of God's ancient people—of the powers of this earth—of all apostacies—of all idolatries—and chief amongst all, of the visible Church. And then, “when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison ;” and the wicked dead, “who lived not again until the thousand years were finished,” shall come forth to shame and everlasting contempt in a resurrection of damnation. In this, deceived once more, and for the last time by Satan, they shall make one final, fearful struggle, before they and the devil, “and death and hell are cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death,”—the doom of all the wicked, “judged every man according to their works,” by him “from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away ; and there was found no place for them.” In that tremendous day, “whosoever is found written in the Book of Life,” may shout aloud, “O death, where is thy sting ? O grave, where is thy victory ?” For then, indeed, will this corruption have put on incorruption, and this mortal immortality ! And then will the dispensation of the fulness of times have come. Then will all things

which are in heaven, and which are on earth, be fully gathered together in one—even in Jesus Christ. Then shall he have reigned till he has put all enemies under his feet—the last of whom are hell and death. “And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.” And then, at the name of Jesus, shall every knee bow, of all things divine, and earthly, and infernal; and every tongue shall confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

V. God is exhibited to us in the Scriptures, in two very distinct relations to the universe. First, as he is its creator, proprietor, and natural ruler; secondly, as he is its moral governor and final judge. In a universe free from all sin, and, by consequence, from all defilement and derangement, these two relations of its sovereign Lord would seem to be absolutely co-incident. The entrance, and the prevalence of sin, on the other hand, would appear to distinguish them more and more from each other, in proportion to the extent and malignity of the sin, and the purpose of God to punish, to extirpate, or to pardon it. According to the mode of dealing with the subject, which God, in his infinite wisdom might select, would be the predominance which would be given to the natural, or to the moral aspect of his government; as, on the one hand, that of an absolute ruler; or as, on the other, that of a merciful parent, proposing remedies, giving aids, prescribing terms, and exhibiting motives to his rebellious children. As to the plan actually adopted by God, it has given a pre-eminence so absolute to the moral aspect of his dominion, that the head over the redeemed has been constituted, as such, head over all things; and invested, as the Saviour of sinners, with all power in heaven and upon earth. The mode of acquiring this power, and of

extending its actual efficacy—in other words, the person, the work, and the glory of the Divine Redeemer, are the grand theme of all revelation. The infinite humiliation, and the infinite exaltation of Christ, are the two extremes which the subject presents. From the first of these—up through all the gradations between them—the kingdom, and the power, and the glory of the Lord Jesus, gradually expand themselves. Through all the successive periods of all the dispensations of times, in all their fullness, his final and eternal headship struggles more and more into view; until it becomes, first, a fundamental truth, and then a palpable necessity; and, at last, the very crowning glory of the infinite grace of God, and the climax of all his plan of redeeming love.

The grace of God, as it is exhibited to lost men, is subject to several great and perpetual limitations, which characterize the very nature of its whole economy, under every manifestation. The first limitation is, that we have no access to God for salvation, except through a Divine Redeemer, crucified for us. The second is, that there is not, that there never was, and that there never will be, but one mediator between God and man. And the third is, that Jesus Christ, of Nazareth, is he—and his the only name given under heaven amongst men, whereby we can be saved. In like manner, there are conditions of our discipleship, responsive to these palpable limitations, and, like them, absolutely unchangeable. The first is, deny thyself; the second—take up thy cross; and the third—follow Jesus Christ in the regeneration. The nature of God, the nature of man, and the nature of salvation itself, for such sinners, by such a God—all united as elements, make up that awful problem, whose only gracious solution is, Christ crucified, unto them which are called the power of God, and the wisdom of God. The

incarnation of the Son of God, and his perfect obedience and infinite sacrifice; the justification of ruined sinners through faith in him; their regeneration and sanctification, through the eternal Spirit, purchased by his blood, and sent forth as the proof of his glorification; the second coming of Christ; the resurrection and reign of the saints; the resurrection of the wicked; the general judgment; the retributions of eternity! Point by point, as each great truth is exhibited; and step by step, as each sublime act is developed—the infinite fitness of Jesus Christ, to be head over all things, becomes more and more illustrious; and the infinite certainty, that the dispensation of the fulness of times can beget no other result, settles more and more profoundly into the hearts of his children. The security, and blessedness, and glory of union with him, become continually more striking, as we more perfectly realize what he is and what he does. The precious truth we have been contemplating inspires us with a confidence in him, and quickens our desires to be in him, and begets a readiness and an ability to serve, and to enjoy him, proportionate to the clearness with which we perceive all its power and its fulness; and the simplicity and sincerity with which we abandon ourselves to its influence over our souls. Nor can any thing afford evidence more clear and fearful, that they who are without Christ, must also needs be without God and without hope. Nor could one from the dead make it more certain, that they must perish without remedy, who shun and hate the only being in the universe who is able to bless, or to save them; and who outrage and insult not only the majesty, and the justice, but the compassion and love of him who is over all, God blessed for ever!