

THE PLAN OF THE AGES.

CHAPTER XII.

Concerning the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times and the End.

Accustomed as most minds are to think only of the Church of God, and one's personal relationship to Christ through the Gospel, it may be useful to extend the vision beyond this narrow line, and endeavour to get a survey of the history of the human race—past, present, and future—in relation to God as Creator, and to Christ as Redeemer. Such a view must penetrate back to a period before the commencement of the human race, and forward to what may be revealed in Scripture as to the distant future. Throughout will be seen the wonderful Grace of God, ever triumphant over abounding sin.

At the creation of man the Blessing had been pronounced: "Be faithful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it." This whole scheme was frustrated by the Fall. No sinless human race has been possible—no fruitfulness to God, no development of that wondrous character of the Son of God on earth in and through this creation, as suggested by the words "after His likeness." The earth has never been subdued, and cannot be at present. The vast arctic and torrid regions, the waterless and treeless deserts, the waste lands too poor to cultivate, mountain ranges under perpetual snows, still remain—only here and there are there portions subdued and utilised by the human race. But a purpose announced by God is *never cancelled*, only postponed until the conditions for fulfilment can be established. The presence of sin makes fulfilment impossible. Only the deliverance from sin, the removal of sin, will make the original scheme possible, and this is in the future purposes of God.

Let us now review what we have already traced of the way in which the grace of God has in the past made an abounding provision for triumph over sin.

FROM ADAM TO CHRIST.

The Bible story takes up the narration of the work of God and Redemption in order, to the accomplishment of the original purposes in creation, and in doing so reveals the super-abounding grace of God over all human sin. (Rom. v. 20.)

1st. The dispensation from Adam to Noah, showing the utter failure of man under conscience to return to God.

2nd. The formation of the family through Abraham, from whom should come the nation formed under Moses, and from which nation should come the Redeemer of the world. So we see that from Adam to Christ preparation was being made for the Atonement, which was foreshadowed by sacrifice, foretold by prophets, and prefigured by martyrs and deliverers. During that period a great unnumbered multitude was gathered out, who through faith should be partakers of the first Resurrection, and be numbered among the chosen in Christ. All such believers from Abel to John the Baptist are included in the benediction of John xx. 29: "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed."

Then came the great central day in the world's history.

ATONEMENT DAY

"the meeting-place of the ages," when the Son of God, as the Lamb of God, was "made sin," that He might bear sin, and put away sin; conquering and bringing to nought that Being who was the origin of sin, and who had the power of death. Christ's triumph was not only over Satan, sin, and death, but also over all possible claims of the holy law of God, because He fulfilled them; and this was proved by His rising again—the mighty Victor—to return to God the Father, to re-occupy the throne He had vacated for a time, and to receive again the glory that He had with the Father before the world was.

We speak of the Incarnation; but the Holy Spirit's phrase is "sent in the likeness of sinful flesh, and made an offering for sin." (Rom. viii. 3.) If one may be allowed the expression, it was the Image of the invisible God entering into the damaged image of Himself, in order to be the Substitute and Sin-bearer for all. Thus by death and resurrection Christ doubled the link uniting Him to the human race whom He had created.

So we see that the cross of Jesus Christ is the centre of everything; it is the meeting-place of the ages. Marvellous paradox! the uttermost proof of Divine Love, and the uttermost manifestation of human hatred—or; as Dr. Mabie expresses it, "The cross speaks of reconciliation, for it was Christ's means of achieving the redemption of mankind; whereas the crucifixion expressed the intense hatred of His enemies." Let us always keep the two sides clear and distinct. Dwell on it, and see how it proves the depravity of mankind. No one would charge the Jews of those days with being special sinners; compared with their heathen masters, how

pure were their lives, how noble their aspirations for national liberty and a king of their own! *But* they could not stand the teaching of One who spake with power and authority, who condemned their deceitful ways, their oppression of the poor, their hypocritical religion, in terms as unsparing as any of the prophets whom their fathers had put to death. Much more, then, must Jesus of Nazareth be put out of the way, since He did not herald His messages with “Thus saith the Lord,” but with a royal “Verily, verily, *I* say unto you.” The pretensions of the “Man of Galilee,” the “Nazarene,” should soon be extinguished, and in a way that would convince all His disciples of their folly in trusting Him. So the leaders of the Jews argued, and proceeded to plan out the world’s stupendous crime, and of deliberate purpose they crucified the Son of God, the Creator of the universe; but they had not the power of putting Him to death. It was written of Him long before, that He “poured out His soul unto death,” and all through His life on earth it was the exodus to which He looked forward. “I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one taketh it away from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John x. 17, 18, R.V.); and when He could say, “It is finished, He bowed His head and *gave up* the ghost.” Thus was the shame of the crucifixion turned into the glory of the cross. Human hatred provided the theatre in which the love and power of God should be manifested to the utmost, and the emblem of deepest degradation became the believer’s watchword, so that multitudes have echoed the apostle’s words, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

How far-reaching and how wonderful are the results of the cross! Far-reaching, in that to all the world a free salvation is offered; wonderful, in that believers are brought into a new position of blessedness.

FROM THE FIRST TO THE SECOND ADVENT

is the next time-period to notice; that is the present one, which commenced with the First Advent of the Lord, or, perhaps a little more accurately, at Pentecost, when the foundation of the Church was laid—the Church, which is composed of believers in the Lord from every nation and people, gathered out by the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the Gospel and the circulation of the Scriptures. This company, known by the different titles of His Body, the Habitation of God, His Bride, and Wife, will be complete by the time of the Lord’s return. Then He will translate the Church, and at the same time raise the blessed dead from Abel onwards to receive them into heavenly places.

The benediction of John xx. 29, still holds good, but the new facts concern Position, Place, Relationship, and Inheritance.

2 Pet. i. 4, R.V.: “Ye may become partakers of the Divine nature.”

Eph. v. 30: “Members of His (Christ’s) body.”

2 Cor. vi. 18: “Sons and daughters” of the Lord Almighty.

Rom. viii. 17: “Heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ.”

1 Pet. i. 3, 4: “An inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Thus, with the exception of the few hundreds who became disciples while the Lord was on earth, all believers, from Abel to the last one brought in up to the Second Advent, partake of the benediction promised to those who should believe in the Unseen One, and are made partakers of

RESURRECTION FROM AMONG THE DEAD.

1 Cor. xv. is the great chapter on this still future fact, and the apostle’s statements are quite clear as to the blessedness of this resurrection. There are two phrases in this connection: “the resurrection of dead ones,” and “the resurrection from (or, from among) the dead ones.” Cf. vers. 12 and 13, and Phil. iii. 11. What is this resurrection? Verses 42–44 define it as far as so great a mystery can be made intelligible to our finite understandings. The body shall be raised “in incorruption,” “in glory,” “in power,” and “a spiritual body.”

Phil. iii. 21, R.V., adds to this, “the body of our humiliation shall be conformed to the body of His glory.”

In this magnificent fashion shall it be shown forth how, by the cross, Christ has been “more than conqueror” over the malice of His enemies, and over sin and death, and could prepare those who believe without seeing for the *celestial* sphere of life, of service, and of glory.

This is the new scheme of grace and salvation which was put forth to contravene the results of man's disobedience in Eden; not merely to restore man to his former state of innocence on earth, but to raise him infinitely above that, making him a new creation, fit for the heavenly sphere. All partaking of the first resurrection will be in glorified bodies, and may be termed *Celestials*. Heaven is their home; the Lord is in their midst. Grouped around Him, they will be in various positions of splendour, relationship, and power. The Church will occupy the closest place of affection and power, having followed Him in the time of His rejection and sorrow; and they, with all the Old Testament saints, will accompany the King and administer the affairs of His kingdom—a kingdom not of this world only, but of the whole universe.

Concerning this great company of "Celestials" we know one or two things. The Lord tells us in Luke xx. 35, 36, that the children of the resurrection neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels. There will, therefore, be no increase of this company. They are the result of Divine grace abounding over abounding sin, made partakers of the Divine nature, possessors of immortality and glory, and so above and beyond a fulfilment of the original purpose as ordained in Gen. i. 28.

THE MILLENNIAL REIGN OF CHRIST.

We now come to a period still in the future—the period following the resurrection and translation of the Church. Then will be ushered in, by a series of judgments on apostate Christendom and the antichristianism succeeding it, the glorious reign of Christ in righteousness over the earth, with the restored nation of Israel as centre of all His power and revelation, His executive agency, through whom He will carry out the purposes originally communicated to the fathers and patriarchs. Then will the earth be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. Isa. xi. 6–9. Many hold that the earth (translated "land" by Bishop Lowth) here means only the land of Israel as indicated by the phrase "My holy mountain." For fuller descriptions of that period compare Isa. xxxii., xxxiii. 24, and xxxv., which foretell extraordinary alterations in the condition of the land itself, changes physical and terrestrial, but resulting from the outpouring of the Spirit of God in mighty power to heal in physical as well as spiritual realms. The wildernesses coming under cultivation will produce food for the rapidly multiplying population, for sickness and death will occur solely as the punishment of sinners; faithful subjects being in perpetual enjoyment of life and health.

Nevertheless, sin will still lurk, and sorrow will again appear, as proved by the awful prediction of the great rebellion of Rev. xx., which will succeed the millennial reign.

Clearly, then, the millennial period will not be the fulfilment of the original purpose in the creation of man, but the last step towards the accomplishment of it. During this epoch a great unnumbered multitude of believers in Christ, as the "Priest after the order of Melchisedek," will be won. It will be the time of the widest blessing on record; but the position of those blessed may be of an inferior nature to that of the saints of preceding periods. They will have *seen* and believed, and their position will not be one of heavenly but of *earthly blessedness*. There is

no mention of their ever going to heaven. They will be the *Kingdom of Christ*, His loyal subjects, saved and protected by Him, possessed of the life everlasting, and destined for a future of magnificent blessing. The people of Israel, the Central Nation, will have clustered around them "the nations of them that are saved." The release of Satan from imprisonment at this juncture will be the signal for all secret enemies, those who had only yielded "feigned obedience" (Psalms xviii. 44: lxxx. 15, M.), to rise in rebellion and follow the great adversary to attack the "beloved city." Fire from God will swiftly destroy his army, and Satan himself will be cast into the Lake of Fire. The setting up of

THE GREAT WHITE THRONE

is the next event foretold. (Rev. xx. 11–15.)

When this takes place, all of the human race who have believed God will be living in their differing states of blessing, and all the multitude who have refused God's Word and died in unbelief will be raised from the condition of physical death. They will have to stand face to face with their own works, seeing them not under the glamour and distorting light of man's imagination, but as they appear in the blinding light of that great white throne of God, that there they may be judged "according to their works."

After this

A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

(Rev. xxi.), the dwelling-places for the two companies of celestial and terrestrial beings respectively. "The glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another." Both companies coming from this earth of ours—the celestial apparently a fixed number, since they are as the angels, not marrying and multiplying; but the terrestrial like Adam and Eve in their pristine innocence, to carry out the commands of Gen. i. 28. So at last we have the nucleus formed for the human race, redeemed by the Lord Jesus, part of the new Creation, consisting of saved nations, with the Everlasting Nation—the Holy Nation, the Peculiar People, the Kingdom of Priests—as its centre. All sin will have been eliminated—all death, sorrow, crying; will have passed away, and there shall be no more of those "former things." The Holy Spirit will be in full and eternal possession of all such, and the New Earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness, will be the new and eternal home of the *redeemed human race*. Beginning originally with one couple who failed, the long period of "Grace Abounding" will have gathered out the marvellous hosts of celestially-blessed, and have also prepared those blessed in the millennium to continue in the full possession of the new earth.

THE NEW EARTH

The new earth will be a marvellous sphere. There will be no more sea. All will be subduable and subdued to provide for all the wants of the sinless human race, and their population will increase and develop—for "of the increase of His government there shall be no end" (Isa. ix. 7). In this particular of increase the Celestials and Terrestrials will differ. If, then, the human race shall multiply, and there shall be no death to decimate or reduce the numbers, will not the earth become too small to hold the race? Very probably it will; and, if so, we entertain the idea that possibly all the surrounding stars may become fresh homes and spheres for the development of the race. For this there is no Scriptural warrant, however. It must be borne in mind that we have no idea how sin has limited the powers of man, has cut him off from all contact with any world outside his own.

A zone of death surrounds the earth only a few miles high, where the air is too rarefied to maintain life. But with sin and death abolished, and the renewed order of things established, what may not be possible for the redeemed on earth, as well as for the redeemed in heaven? Our present limitations need be no barrier in the future for the triumph of Christ as the Atonement.

THE FUTURE OF THE HUMAN RACE.

Our next enquiry will be, Have we any light at all thrown upon the future of the human race after the period of the Great White Throne, which has been called "*the Dispensation of the fulness of times*," by Mr. G. F. Trench, in his book, entitled "After the Thousand Years"? And the answer is, Yes, there is a little light.

Three times in the Old Testament we find the following sentence: "The faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him, unto a thousand generations" (Deut. vii. 9.) "He hath remembered His covenant for ever, the word that He commanded to a thousand generations" (1 Chron. xvi. 15, and Ps. cv. 8). Then, again, the phrase in Deut. xxxii. 7: "Consider the years of many generations." It would seem that the Lord would call our attention to what may be termed *the limit of prediction of the human race*—not the limit of duration, only the limit of prediction. Many generations have passed, and in their history many marvellous things have occurred. In Bible story alone, what wonders of grace and power, culminating in the Cross of Calvary, the Resurrection from the dead, and the Ascension to the right hand of power. Since, then, the progress of the Church of God is about to culminate in her removal at the Second Advent, and to be followed by the restoration of the Scattered Nation, the millennial reign of the Lord in righteousness, and the world-wide blessing—all these things are to be considered in order to have the vision of faith strengthened for the years yet future of many generations. Thus will be brought out the goodness and long-suffering of God, the patience of God with sinners, and His abounding grace over abounding sin.

THE GENERATIONS.

The first point of enquiry is, May the expression "thousand generations" be taken literally? To answer it we must look at the use of lower numbers than a thousand. We find the expression "third and fourth generations" in Deut. xxiii. 18, and Gen. xv. 16; also the expression "tenth generation" (Deut. xxiii. 2, 3); "fourteen generations" (Matt. i. 1–17); and they are rightly taken in the literal sense. It is therefore consistent to allow the higher number, "a thousand," to signify a definite number rather than an indefinite one.

What is meant by "generations"? The term signifies "the natural succession of the human race from father to son, and son's son, and so on." (Joel i. 1–3; Job xlii, 16, etc.) In many places the future

generations are referred to, in which God will manifest Himself and His power, keeping His covenant of mercy unto a thousand such.

Turning to Luke iii. 23–34, we find fifty-five generations are traced from Abraham to Christ. From A.D. 1 to the end of the last century, estimating at the rate of four generations to every hundred years, we get 76 to add to 55, making a total of 131 generations from Abraham to the present time.* Allowing forty generations more for the remainder of this dispensation, and the millennial period, there would remain over 800 generations for the future of the human race in the “Dispensation of the fulness of times.”

What a vista of glory and blessing! What a marvel of grace! What a triumph for the Atonement! Here shall He not see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied? As the centuries go on, and the sinless human family increases and multiplies, what a glorious fulfilment of Gen. i. 28—the weary, toilsome, sinful, rebellious millenniums succeeded by the hundreds of millenniums of unbroken, undisturbed peace and holiness. The King of kings acknowledged, loved, obeyed; and all through this period the Bible loved, read, and prized as the incorruptible Word of God, giving the history of the human race in the dark period, and the meaning of those wounds in the hands and feet of Emmanuel; explaining, too, the origin and the destiny of those marvellous hosts of Celestials, who now and then may come within the range of vision of the redeemed human race, and be the communicators of fresh Divine truths and purposes, for the enlightenment, enrichment, and increasing blessing of earth’s populations. If there be any truth in this foreview, well may Moses have said, “Consider the years of many generations.” Having thus seen how Old Testament predictions, when carefully considered, give wonderful details concerning the future glories of the new earth, let us turn again to Rev. xxi.-xxii. and read them as descriptive not of the millennial period, but of that which succeeds it.

We shall find that the seer of the Revelation barely touches on the new earth, for his eyes are upon the entirely new feature that now appears,

THE NEW JERUSALEM,

“coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

It is the connecting link between celestial and terrestrial, that they may be in close touch with one another.

*Ps. Cv. 8, 9 shows that the covenant was made with Abraham and his descendants.

It is a picture that has entranced the saints of all ages, since it was painted by the pen of the seer, who was told to write what he saw. Men may tell us that its shape is a cube of 1,500 miles, and other details, but what remains in our thoughts is not calculations of size, but a vision of glory and beauty. All earth’s most precious things form its walls and foundations.

The jewels, which scientists tell us are but common earth, which has been subjected to enormous pressure or fire tests, are fit emblems of the saints and martyrs, dwelling in the heavenly city—whose radiance is not for them alone, but “the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it.” So it takes the place of the sun of our present system; and “the kings of the earth shall bring their glory and honour into it”; so it succeeds to the place that the earthly Jerusalem will occupy during the thousand years of Christ’s reign on earth.

Wonderful period! glories that human pen, even when inspired, could only hint at! for our language is limited by our comprehension; and if more had been written, who could have entered into it? The great apostle to the Gentiles surely had a vision of this glory when he wrote to the Ephesians, i. 9, 10: “Having made known unto us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself : that in

THE DISPENSATION OF THE FULNESS OF TIMES

He might gather together in one all things in Christ, *both which are in heaven and which are an earth*, even in Him.” Christ the centre of both celestial and terrestrial hosts, all gathered together around His blessed Person.

The epistle seems illuminated when read in the light of Revelation xxi. May it not be that these wonderful truths are what had been revealed to the apostle when apparently lying dead outside Lystra (Acts xiv. 19), but in spirit, caught up to heaven, he had heard unspeakable words, which for a time it was not lawful to utter (2 Cor. xii. 1–4)? How those words must have burned within him, until at last, in prison in Rome, where the last

colony of the Jews of the dispersion had rejected Christ as Messiah, he was allowed to tell out the glorious inheritance prepared for Gentiles as well as Jews who should lay hold of it by faith (Eph. iii. 3–6).

See also i. 11, 12: “Predestinated to the praise of His glory”;

i. 14: “The redemption of the purchased possession.”

i. 20–23 tells of the place which is to be Christ’s, and that of the Church with Him in the dispensation of the fulness of times.

ii. 6, 7. The Church an object-lesson to the universe.

ii. 20–23. Another vision of the New Jerusalem.

iii. 9–11. God’s purpose from all eternity, to manifest to the heavenly hosts His wisdom, through those whom He calls out to form the Church.

iii. 15–21. May not this also be an allusion to the celestials and terrestrials, both one “family”? and the later verses surely point forward to the time when, as the heavenly Jerusalem, believers shall “comprehend” that of which now we catch but dim and fleeting visions.

THE END.

And now, what about *the end*? “Then cometh the end, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father, when He shall have put down all rule and authority and power” (1 Cor. xv. 24). The kingdom on earth and in the heavenlies, whence Satan has had access, being now guaranteed free of all rebellion, is handed over to God, even the Father, and at length the prayer which the Lord taught the disciples to pray, and which has been made use of all through the centuries, and rightly so, “Thy kingdom come,” has its answer. The kingdom here referred to was not the Messianic kingdom, or the kingdom over Israel, but *the Father’s kingdom*—“Our Father ; ... *Thy* kingdom.” This is the closing act in the history of the human race as recorded in Scripture—the limit of prediction, not of existence.

From that point of view, so far distant, will start a fresh and unknown era in Divine purpose and glory, about which nothing whatever can be conjectured or said, only that “to Him shall be the glory for ever and ever.”

And the Church of God all through this period of the dispensation of the fulness of times will be having her magnificent sphere of service, not on earth, but throughout the universe, instructing the principalities and powers in the heavenly places in the things of God; and being the illustrators and exhibitors of His exceeding kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. The value and effect of the Atonement will be felt and seen in the ages to come, in that sin shall be an impossibility again. Its cost to the Son of God in making Atonement, its cost to God the Father in yielding His Son, will have been understood and displayed, and so there will be such a reconciling of all unto Himself that another rebellion can never be.

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the love of God; how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways are past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord, or, being His counsellor, hath taught Him? or who hath first given to Him and it shall be recompensed to him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things, To Him be the glory for ever. Amen” (Rom. xi. 33–36).