

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TWO CENTERS

IT is in Christ, as we have already said, that Jehovah's purpose of self-manifestation centers. Its origin, its progress, its consummation, are all directly linked with Him. He is the brightness of the glory of Jehovah, and the express image of his person" [Heb. 1:3]. He is the WORD—the utterance of Jehovah's mind, the witness of His character, the exponent of His purposes. Godhead is in Him represented and revealed.

It is, however, round two great centers that this manifestation is made to revolve. The two Advents of Christ are the two periods, or events, or stages, in which the Divine purpose is specially displayed. And it will be found that as all *historic* truth bears in some way or measure upon the First Advent, so all *prophetic* truth is connected with the Second. The thoughts of God gather themselves round these. For these thoughts, like the orbs which He has lighted up and hung in the firmament, have their centers and their orbits, their revolutions and their periods. Or rather, we should say, that the outer and visible world, with all its movements, and with all the laws which regulate these movements, is but the image of an inner and invisible world; even as the earthly tabernacle was formed after the pattern of heavenly things, which the Lord showed to Moses in the Mount.

These two advents, then, are the two *foci* of that vast eclipse around which all things are revolving. To the Church of Christ at first, these two events seemed but as one undivided event; for she stood at the extreme end of the *axis*, looking along the line. But as she advanced onwards, a distinction became more visible. At length she reached the first of them, and then, beyond it, she saw the second, quite separate from the first; but how far, she could not say. Many events seemed to cluster round; but the order in which they were to occur was

somewhat uncertain. But as she traveled onward, and as century after century elapsed, events began to spread themselves out, and to marshal themselves more exactly than before. And as we near the consummation, we may expect yet clearer light, and more accurate insight into the order, as well as the nature, of those mighty events that are coming on the earth, and for which, whatever may be the slumber or intoxication of the world, it becomes the Church of Christ to be fully prepared, lest the "hour of temptation" overtake her unawares.

The events for which the Church is called upon to look are many. The advent of her Lord towers preeminently above all the rest; yet still, in connexion with it, there are other events not a few. There is the resurrection of the just. There are the rise and fall of Antichrist. There are the sore judgments and sore wrath which are to overtake the world. There are the restoration and salvation of Israel. There is the conversion of all kindreds and nations. There is the glory of the millennial state. There are some of the events which cluster round the Second Advent: and just as His first coming was specially self-manifestation in *grace*, so His second coming is self-manifestation in *glory*. Both grace and glory are in each of these comings; but in the former grace predominates, and in the latter, glory.

Most of the prophecies touch, however briefly, the whole history of the Church. Their chief burden may be some particular part of that history; but they seldom stop there. They generally take in the whole, though giving but a glance at events or objects not directly included in their theme. More or less, we find *all* the prominent parts of God's purpose referred to in every prediction, and the two *centers* invariably come up to view, whatever be the burden of the

prophet. To the second of these two centers we find the greatest prominence given; and all predictions run onto it as to their common *terminus*. "It is spoken of by all the holy prophets since the world began" [Acts 3:21]. Not that there is vain repetition anywhere; but each seer utters his vision, and closes it with some word or figure, as a link to fasten it on to the consummation, or coming of the Lord. It is no minute Church-history of the future that he is commissioned to deliver, but simply a chapter, a section; oftentimes a mere fragment; yet however small, it contains something which, while it shows us that the whole was present to view, makes known the true place of the particular vision in the series, and reveals its relation to the final crisis towards which everything from the beginning has been pointing, and into which all events are to flow, as the river, with its hundred tributaries, pours itself into the ocean.

Nor is there aught of imperfection about this mode of utterance. It is, in truth, both natural and artistic perfection. Any other method would have rendered these prophetic sketches like Chinese pictures, without perspective and without proportion. But this is according to the exact laws of art, which, in so far as they are true, are copies of nature. Each prophet paints a particular scene or fragment of the mighty landscape. His foreground is always the spot on which he stands,—it may be the wilderness, it may be Babylon, it may be Lebanon, it may be Jerusalem. Then the particular scene he wishes to depict is drawn with minuteness and fullness. Then, in the far background, we have—dim, perhaps, and apparently insignificant, but necessary to the completeness of the scene—the distant hills which circle in the whole prophetic field, on whose well-known summits there rests the calm brightness of that boundless day, on which, when these intermediate scenes of change and storm are past, the Church is to enter, with her Lord, as her inheritance of rest and joy.

The first promise given, before Adam left Eden, is the briefest, but most comprehensive history of the Church to be found in the whole Bible. The two centers are there; the one

predicted as the bruising of Messiah's heel, the other as the bruising of Satan's head. This promise was, as it were, the fixing of the two centers, round which all after-events were to revolve. It was marking out the two chief eminences from which the history of the world and of the Church might be best surveyed. The second promise, I mean that of Enoch, is exclusive in its reference to the *second* center. It takes for granted, of course, a long previous state of wickedness on the earth. It assumes, also, the redemption of a remnant, "ten thousand of His saints," or, more literally, "His holy myriads;" but still, the vision is not of the First Advent at all, but of the Second alone. Even when prophesying long before either the first or second comings, and looking along the line, it is rather the terrible glory of the Second Advent that fixes his eye, than the grace of the First.

It would be interesting to note each successive prophecy, as, age after age, it came forth to man; and to mark at what point the seer stood, and which of these two centers is most prominently brought out to view; but this is impossible here. Only a few specimens can be given. Take "the last words of David:" (II Sam. 23:1-7)—

David the Son of Jesse said,
 Even the man who was raised up, said,
 Concerning the Messiah of the God of Jacob,
 The sweet burden of the Psalms of Israel:
 The Spirit of Jehovah spake by me,
 And His word was on my tongue,
 Spake the God of Israel to me,
 Spake the rock of Israel!
 There shall rule over me a Just One.
 He shall rule in the fear of God.
 And as the light of the morning shall He arise,
 The sun of an unclouded morning,
 Shining after rain upon the tender grass of the
 earth.
 Though my house be not perfect with God,
 Yet an everlasting covenant has He made with
 me,
 Ordered for all time and sure.
 Surely it is all my salvation and all my desire!
 But the sons of Belial shall not grow,
 As thorns to be cast out are they all;
 Though not by the hand shall they be taken,

But the man touching them shall be wounded as
with iron and the shaft of a spear,
And with fire shall they be utterly consumed
upon the spot.

This is a vision of the Second Advent, yet commencing with, though touching lightly upon, the First, when referring to the “Anointed of the God of Jacob.” Then the Righteous King is set before us, with all the blessings of His beneficent reign—a reign established upon the destruction of Antichrist and his hosts.

Or take a Psalm, the sixty-seventh, the prayer of the Jewish Church, the same as that of the Bride, “Make haste, my beloved:”—

God be merciful to us and bless us,
Cause his face to shine on us.

And what shall be the effect of such blessings to Israel? It shall be knowledge and salvation to the Gentiles; “for Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit” [Isa. 27:6]:—

That thy way may be known upon the earth,
Thy saving health among all nations.

The prayer then proceeds with still greater enlargement and fervent urgency:—

Let the people praise thee, O God;
Let all the people praise thee;
O let the nations be glad and sing for joy.

Why all this gladness and exultation throughout the earth? Because now misgovernment and oppression are at an end. The Righteous King has come, the true Melchizedek, and all the earth rejoices under His just and peaceful sway:—

For thou shalt judge the people righteously,
And govern the nations upon the earth.

Again the prayer ascends; or rather, I should say, there is heard a loud summoning of the nations to lift up the voice of praise:—

Let the people praise thee, O God;
Let all the people praise thee.

And why this redoubled call for gladness? Why this loud summons to the nations to unite

in praise? Because all things have been made new. The curse has been removed and fertility restored:—

The earth shall yield her increase,
God, our own God, shall bless us;
God shall bless us,
And all the ends of the earth shall fear him.

In all this it is more especially the second coming of the Lord on which the Church has her eye fixed. It is round the second of the two centers that she sees these glorious events revolving.

Or let us take the eighty-second Psalm, a psalm which singles out a particular scene or class of objects and dwells on them. The objects are not in themselves directly connected with either of the Advents; but the seer, in his closing words, links them on to the *Second*, and there the curtain falls. It is the misgovernment of the earth during the absence of its true King that is the psalmist’s theme. They who have been entrusted with kingly power are seen utterly perverting it, and employing it only for oppression and selfishness. God interposes. He summons the potentates of the earth, who are here called by the name of “the mighty,” and “gods:”—

God standeth in the assembly of the mighty,
He judgeth among the gods.

Princes are here called “gods,” especially the Jewish rulers, on whom God bestowed the name, as one of peculiar honor. And when they are thus gathered round Him, He expostulates:—

How long will ye judge unjustly
And accept the persons of the wicked?
Defend the poor and fatherless,
Do justice to the afflicted and needy,
Deliver the poor and needy,
Rid them out of the hand of the wicked.

But expostulation is vain. They refuse to hear the voice of God. They persist in their tyranny and wickedness:—

The know not, neither will they understand,
They walk on in darkness.

And what are the effects of this mismanagement and injustice? Just what might have been expected? Disorder fills the earth. Everything is shaken and upturned:—

All the foundations of the earth are out of course.

Nothing remains, then, but that God should interpose. He must judge and avenge the cause of the oppressed. He must cast down and sweep away those whom He had raised up and honored:—

I have said, Ye are gods,
And all of you children of the Most High.
But ye shall die like men,
And fall like one of the princes.

Though He himself dignified them with such a title, giving them His own name, yet He would not spare them. They shall die the common death of men, and fall like any of the princes of the heathen to whom no such name of honor had been given. Having pronounced their sentence, there is a pause. God stands silent. The whole assembly is dumb. Then the voice of His saints is heard appealing to Himself, calling upon Him to take to Himself His great power and reign:—

Arise, O God, judge (or rule over) the earth,
For THOU shalt inherit all nations.

And thus the closing words connect the scene with the second coming of the Lord, showing how all present misgovernment is to end in that day when God shall cast down the wicked from their throne, and Himself assume the seat of royal power.

It is to be feared that prophecy has too often not been studied with reference to these centers. Yet they are God's centers. They are the two leading points to which the Lord directed the eye of His disciples when He said, "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" [Luke 24:26] and in which the Apostle Peter sums up all prophecy, "The sufferings of Christ and the glory which should follow" [I Pet. 1:11]. And our right understanding of the prophetic Word will be in proportion as we keep these in view, and

arrange events according to their connexion with the one or the other. Neglect of this has led to much confusion; and there has been sad entanglement of passages and predictions, as well as dislocation of scenes and misarrangement of times. Associations have been formed which are not easily undone; ideas have been connected with words and figures, which are not to be corrected in the day; the past and future have been carelessly mixed up together. This lack of classification and system has been a grievous hindrance, a hindrance which only of late years has been begun to be recognized and provided against. While science was classifying and arranging its facts, making thereby prodigious strides, Biblical study has overlooked this secret of true progress and solid exposition. The treasures of gold and gems which cover the prophetic age have been allowed to remain in bright disorder; admired, but not arranged; examined, but imperfectly classified.

So long as prophecy is perused in this spirit of careless disregard; so long as it is looked upon as a field of nearly uniform sameness throughout, so long will its real riches remain unknown. To the vigilant, accurate eye, that can arrange as well as appreciate its stores, it will appear bright with an endless yet well-ordered variety. Viewed thus, it spreads out before us, like a broad, well-watered plain, various yet regular, profusely wild, it may be, yet not disorderly in its beauty. Viewed in the drowsy fashion we have referred to, it stretches out into an untamed wilderness—a mere chaos of verdure. Not more diverse do the heavens appear to the practiced eye of the astronomer and to the ignorant gaze of the peasant, than does the starry firmament of prophecy, with which Jehovah has over-canopied His Church in this dark midnight of the world, appear to the thoughtful, classifying expositor, and to the apathetic glance of the prejudiced or the careless reader. The midnight arch of heaven appears to the ignorant gazer nothing but an azure roof inlaid with stars of various luster—a wilderness of bright disorder—a chaos of orbs flung together by chance, and coursing too and fro without path or law; while to the

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skilful eye of science it stands forth as a fair array of God's well-marshaled hosts, each star poised upon its own center, pursuing its own orbit, and fulfilling its appointed times. So is it with prophecy. To hasty, superficial readers, there appears much that is beautiful in the inspired records of futurity, but that is all. For more than this they think not of searching. The general reflection from its surface is all that they see, and with it they are contented. To those, on the other hand, who, believing that

such a method of reading prophecy is irreverence and presumption, have sought to bestow upon it, as upon all parts of God's Word, no less care and thought than upon the most condensed geometrical demonstration, or the most intricate algebraical process—to them the page of prophecy unfolds itself into a series of minute but most orderly details, and presents a surface infinitely diversifying, yet bearing everywhere the marks of perfect regularity and exact design.

Son of Man, we long to see
Thy last and brightest day;
When, oh, when shall all things be
Subjected to thy sway?
On all flesh thy spirit shower,
That every soul its Lord may own,
Seated in full glorious power
On thy millennial throne.

*Charles Wesley
on Isaiah 2:17*