

THE CIRCLES OF ETERNITY

A SERMON

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“For the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.” Ezekiel 1:21

I THINK we cannot very well doubt that these living creatures and the living creatures, or four beasts, as they are called in our translation, Revelation 5, are one and the same, and we know that the four living creatures in the Book of the Revelation are intended as representatives of the people of God. Hence in the 5th chapter of that book you find the four living creatures and the four-and-twenty elders, another representation, of the people of God, that they fall down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, which harps I take to be the gospel, and golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of the saints; and these sang that song that none can sing but they that are redeemed, from among men. They saw the Savior take the Old Testament; they saw. that he was both worthy and able to open its mysteries, to carry out its predictions, and establish forever its realities, Seeing this, they said, “You are worthy to take the book,” that is; not only worthy of such a mission, but also able, “and to open the seals thereof; for you were slain.” And as you have such love for us as to be slain for us, to die rather than we should not live, then you are worthy and you were not only slain, but “You have redeemed us to God by your blood,” and this proves your ability; therefore, if you could obtain eternal redemption you are able to take the government, to take the Old Testament, and to carry out its predictions. “You have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation and not only so, but, have made, us unto our God kings and priests; and we shall reign on the earth.” Thus, then, you get beyond dispute, here the meaning of the living creatures, the people of God. They are said to sing a *new* song, a new song because it is the song of their new creature ship; it is the song of the new heavens and the new earth, the song of the new covenant, the song of the new and living way, the song embracing in it that theme that can never grow old, that can never vanish away, that can never decay, but will remain new, and that forever. And you will find also in the beginning of this 1st chapter of Ezekiel, something like the conversion of sinners. Some of you perhaps may ask what the use of these wheels is, and I hope to be able to point out this morning what that use is. But, before I enter upon the subject, I may just observe, that in the beginning of this chapter we evidently have the conversion of sinners. These living creatures came out from a great whirlwind. And is not our sin called a whirlwind, which has carried us away from God? And does not the grace of God call and bring us out of that whirlwind? Was not Saul of Tarsus, take him as a sample,

whirled along by a satanic whirlwind against the saints of God, and towards hell? But the mercy of the Lord brought him out of that satanic whirlwind, and he could be carried away from God no more. Also, there was a great cloud from under which they came. And does not the Lord say, "I have blotted out your sins as a cloud, and your transgressions as a thick cloud"? And does not regeneration bring us out of darkness into the marvelous light of the gospel? Also, there was a fire unfolding itself, and are we not by nature children of wrath, and under a fiery law, though we know it not? Thus you have at the very beginning of this chapter a very beautiful description of the conversion of the people of God, their being gathered up from all quarters, brought out of the whirlwind of sin, brought from under it as a cloud, brought out of the fire of God's wrath, and brought into his glorious presence, as set forth in this beautiful vision of Ezekiel. And as for the wheels, the wheels are only one amidst the many other representations of the gospel; the wheels, I think, as we go along will prove to be nothing else but the circles of eternity. It was customary, in that age and in that part of the world, to speak of eternity as a circle. Daniel lived, as you are aware, about, or rather at the same time as Ezekiel lived, and he uses language similar; and we shall have to notice what he says, in order to open up this matter to us.

Now there are several objects which our text presents, but it is only one that I shall be able this morning to attend to, and that will be simply the wheels. And before going further I may just make this remark, these wheels were put into a transverse form, so that in that transverse form they appeared like a globe; they were spherical, forming a globe. We shall show the reason of this. And their workmanship was perfection, it was most exquisite. "Their work," said Ezekiel, was like unto the color of a beryl." It was that kind of workmanship so put together, that neither angels nor men could equal it. Men, though they have made wonderful progress in mechanics, never formed a perfect joint of anything yet, and I suppose they never will. Men have never yet advanced so far in mechanics as to be able to weigh a perfect weight. There is no man under the heavens can ever arrive at a perfect weight of anything no man can weigh anything in the most delicate instrument, and say, That weighs so much, and no more; there is sure to be a fault; nor can any man form a straight line, not in the scientific sense of the word. Although our progress in these things is truly wonderful, and the works of our engineers are, under the Lord's hands, a great blessing to the world, and subserviently, to the Church, still, at the same time, while they approach as near in these matters perfection as creatures can, yet it is not perfection. No; instruments may be used to point out imperfection in the most perfect work of man. Not so with the work of God; these wheels are of such exquisite workmanship that every joint is perfect, the circle is perfect, and everything belonging to it has divine perfection in it. And what a nice and, beautiful, representation does this give of the gospel! Is there any workmanship so exquisite as that of the gospel? By-and-bye, when we get to glory, and see all its joints, and all its curves, and all its circles, we shall stand amazed at the perfection of the workmanship. Hence that scripture I have often noticed, where it is said, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." It is not the common Greek word for creation there used, but the Greek word there is *poieema*, to denote that this workmanship in Christ Jesus is of a superior order, is of a more exquisite order than anything else. And I make no hesitation in saying that, next to the person of Jesus Christ, the Christian, in his ultimate perfection, when raised from the dead, will be the most wonderful workmanship of the blessed God; that he should thus condescend to raise up the poor fallen clay that we are into the infinite, exquisite, shall I say, perfection of his dear Son. We are to be like Him, and to be with him, and to see him as he is.

Now I will just name some of the things suggested by these words; and you will perceive at once that I shall not be able to get through them all. The first thing, then, is that they are intended to set forth *the eternity of the gospel*. Secondly, *the universality of their aspect*. Thirdly, *the presence of the Lord in these wheels*. Fourthly, *their indicated knowledge*; they are full of eyes. Fifth, and lastly, for I must make that the last, though there are many more characters, *their uniqueness*.

Now first, then, that these wheels represent *the eternity of the gospel*. But it is in the gospel as it is in the physical world; if you wish to have a perfect knowledge, or a good knowledge, say, of any truth, you must know something of the correlative truths that belong to that one truth which you wish to understand; for you never can, as every philosopher well knows, understand any one truth perfectly without understanding all the correlative truths that are connected with that one truth. And I think upon this point many men dreadfully err upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. They keep repeating the Savior's name, and his name is upon their tongue every other sentence almost; but as to the correlative truths of God's love, of God's sovereignty, and of his decree, and of the covenant, and many other truths, all of which throw a light upon the one great center truth, the mediation of Christ, they pass these truths entirely by. If, therefore, we would rightly understand the mediation of Christ, we must understand all the correlative truths that have a tendency to open up unto us in a vast variety of forms the worth and the attractiveness of the mediation of Christ. Now every right-minded man values a thing not by the look of it, nor by the name that people give it, nor by what people think of it; but every right-minded man values a thing by the use that it is, founding its worth upon its usefulness. So, Jesus Christ is infinitely and eternally advantageous to us. Men judged of him after appearance, and so wrongly judged him; but those that could judge him according to what he really was, they judged him the chief of ten thousand, and altogether lovely; they judged him as the one thing needful; they received him with unbounded rapture, and felt that in receiving him they had received the everlasting God, and were safe and happy for ever. Now then, in opening up this part of our subject, the everlasting gospel, we have, in the first place, the Lord Jesus Christ raising up the truths of the gospel as those thrones that had been cast down. We will take the 7th chapter of Daniel to help us out with this matter. "I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit." Now this is Christ in his eternity. And what were the thrones that were cast down? When the Savior came into the world, where was his mediation in the professing world? Cast down. Where was that discriminating grace that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob so gloried in? Cast down. Where was that covenant ordered in all things and sure when the Savior came into the world? Cast down. Where was his righteousness, I mean the doctrine of it? Cast down. Where was the certain and eternal victory of the saints; in other words, that accomplished warfare, entire pardon, and the double, spoken of by the seraphic prophet Isaiah? Cast down. All these were cast down, and human tradition put into their place. Now this vision of Ezekiel represented to him this great truth, that God in the fulness of time would bring in the gospel, as represented by this vision; for it is a representation of the gospel dispensation. Now, when the Ancient of days did sit, these thrones were raised up; when the Savior came he raised up these truths; he opened them up, and raised up the disciples, raised up Jews, raised up Gentiles and enthroned them in this dignity; so that they were brought up into the love of God, into the righteousness and salvation of God, and David's prayer was answered in relation to them, "I am poor and needy; let your salvation, O God, set me up on high." Now this is one of the correlative truths connected with the gospel in its eternity. Now it is said of the Savior there (and a little farther on we shall see what a beautiful explanation is given of all this) that his, "garment was white as snow," which is the whitest thing, I believe, in nature. That denotes, of

course, the purity of his nature, the spotlessness of his character; for the robe sometimes represents the character of the person. Therefore, by a little reasoning you find that to be the meaning. "These are they that have washed their robes", character, meaning person, "and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Now, then, Jesus Christ's garment being as white as snow denotes the purity of his nature, the spotlessness of his character. What a lovely image to which we are to be conformed; you and I shall arrive at it by-and-bye; just as white, just as pure, just as spotless; the Church shall be without blemish and without spot. "And the hair of his head like the pure wool," from the shining of God's glory upon it, making it appear white; that is my idea of it; like as upon the Mount of Transfiguration, when God's glory shone upon him, it caused that beautiful and heavenly appearance. And now comes in this great matter of the gospel, the living character of the Savior's throne, the living glories of the Savior's throne; to show that the laws of his throne will never become a dead letter. The law of love will never be a dead letter, the law of election will never be a dead letter, the law of justification will never be a dead letter, the law of salvation will never be a dead letter. Now mark, "his throne was like the fiery flame." That is a figure of speech to denote that he reigns in living truth, as the fiery flame; not fire to injure, but fire to enlighten, fire to warm. "Is not my word like fire?" "Did not our hearts burn within us," while fire thus from this mediatorial throne fell upon our souls, burnt up our sorrows, burnt up our troubles, set our souls on fire, "did not our hearts burn within us?" Here then is Christ in his eternity; here are the truths of the gospel, called thrones; here is the purity of his character, and here is the living character of the laws of his throne. "And his wheels", the circles of eternity, "his wheels as burning fire." Everlasting love will burn forever; everlasting election will burn in its intensity of delight forever; predestination will burn forever; mediation will live and shine on, and that forever; yes, regeneration, there is an eternity in that, "Born of an incorruptible seed, that lives and abides forever." But, say you, that has a beginning, it has in the manifestation of it; but in its purpose it was from everlasting: his mercy is from everlasting to everlasting; "His wheels as burning fire." Now you can understand this, can you not? Why, it will let you into the secret when you go and hear a time gospel, a gospel that may apparently live today, and die tomorrow; when you hear an uncertain gospel, that has not eternity in it. Nothing but the true gospel can bless our souls, or do us any good. Now what does my text say? "The spirit of the living creature was in the Wheels." It is this that gives life. Let the Holy Spirit appear in his mighty power in the everlasting truths of the gospel; the same Spirit that dwells in the saint's dwells in God's truth; the same Spirit that gives life to us gives life to those blessed truths. So, his wheels were as burning fire. Again, "A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him." Well, what is this but the gospel? "I am come to send fire on the earth." And that fiery stream threw the devil down like lightning from heaven; that living, fiery stream on the day of Pentecost burnt the devil out, made the souls of thousands too hot for the devil to stay there; and the Holy Spirit himself delighted to appear as a cloven tongue of fire, to denote that the glorious gospel was a fiery stream; not a dead letter, but it went forth in its living, majestic and glorious power. "A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him. Therein lies the brightness of his coming; therein lies the secret of his might. And the glorious gospel now is the same to us. Many, many times has my soul been bound and fettered, and my heart as hard as the nether millstone; but the glorious gospel has come, and like the three in the fiery furnace. burnt off every fetter, softened the heart, lightened the eyes, endeared the Savior, and caused my soul to be happy in this living gospel. What is the result of this gospel going forth, throwing out its rays, as I shall presently have to observe, in all directions? "Thousand, thousands ministered unto him." How was that? Why, everybody ministered against him, but here were thousand, thousands that ministered unto him; that is, that became his servants. Is it not so now?

Do we not minister to him testimonially, and testify of his excellency? Do we not minister to him in giving up our hearts and souls to him? Do we not minister to him in living, to him? though the Son of man in the way of creature merit, came not to be ministered unto, as though we could add anything to him, because all we minister to him, we first received from him. Therefore, it is if Naphtali be a hind let loose and gives goodly words, it was the liberty that Naphtali realized that gave him those goodly words, and enabled him with goodly words to speak well of the goodness of God and of the greatness of his salvation. "Thousand, thousands ministered unto him and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him." Now what are we to understand by these ten thousand times ten thousand standing before him? If we go to the 5th of Revelation, we shall see ten thousand times ten thousand angels standing before him round the throne, and I would let that be a part of the meaning; but I question whether that is the Holy Spirit's meaning here, You must not suppose that a sameness of language always contains a sameness of meaning; words may be the same, but the meaning very different. I therefore, very much question whether we ought to take the 5th of the Revelation as explaining the ten thousand times ten thousand who stand before, him. Now, mark here is a distinction between those that minister to him and those that stand before him, I believe those that stand before him to be the whole human race. "You have given him power over all flesh." He surveyed the whole human race, and he asked for the heathen to be given unto him, and God gave him the heathen, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession; and the whole human race standing before him, he takes out of them those that were given to him. "God made choice among us," said Peter, "that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe;" and James said, "Simeon has declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name." "The judgment was set." That does not mean the ultimate judgment; Daniel is not there speaking of the ultimate coming of Christ; though he speaks so sublimely there, he is speaking of his first coming. "The judgment was set." And what was the judgment? This; "He that believes has everlasting life." Oh, how infinitely different from the gospel of that day! See the 23rd of Matthew, and see the infamous foolery men had invented in order to have the favor of God. The Savior gives the judgment from which there is no appeal, from which there is no deviation, "He that believes has everlasting life; he that believes not shall be damned." That is the judgment that is set. "And the books were opened." The books of the Old Testament had been closed. Said the eunuch, "Of whom speaks the prophet in this way? of himself or some other man?" They had taken away the key of knowledge. But when our loved and increasingly adored Redeemer came, he, beginning at Moses, the book of Psalms, all the prophets, expounded unto them in all things concerning himself. Daniel's heart glowed with delight as he looked through the intervening time between his own day and the time when Christ should come, and saw this living chariot go forth, saw the books of the Old Testament opened to lost, dying man, and saw ten thousand times ten thousand precious souls coming from darkness into this marvelous light, to crown this wondrous Person Lord of all. "The books were opened." But shall Satan, while he sees this gospel going forth in this way, while he sees all this go on, shall he be quiet? No. Now let us see what Daniel said upon the opposition, and see how it will apply. Daniel looked at the main body of organized hostility to God and truth, and that main body of hostility he calls the horn and the beast. "I beheld them because of the voice of the great words which the horn spoke; I beheld even till the beast was slain, and his body destroyed, and given to the burning flame." This, perhaps, may seem to some of you little ones exceedingly obscure; if it does, then just listen to your humble servant a few minutes, and I will try to make it plain. We will take the horn to mean any opposing power, and the beast to mean the same thing in substance, a wild beast. Now this wild beast is slain. What is this wild beast? Sin in its enmity against God. Go to the 2nd of

Ephesians; "That he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby." That is the beast, the wild beast, the enmity that governs all men. All men are as wild beasts by nature in relation to eternal things. But when Christ comes in, he slays the wild beast, and you can roam the forest of this world no longer; your face is set towards the ark of the Lord; you move your way there, you are received there, carried through the flood, and come out at the last triumphant, to the honor of that grace that does such great things. Can you understand it? Well, but it says his body was destroyed. Very well; go with me again, then, come to the 6th of the Romans, "Knowing this" knowing this, bless the Lord for that knowledge; if the Lord had not done it, I do not know who could, "knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin," the body of this rampant beast, the body of this subterraneous power, "might be destroyed." Thus, sin by the Savior is not only slain, but it is to be destroyed. Not a hoof shall be left behind; no, not a dog shall be left to move his tongue against one of the children of Israel. But he is "given to the burning flame." Decidedly so. I hope I shall burn some of you today. Well, that is very wicked. God make me more so, then, if it is. If you have come here today with a carnal mind, God help me instrumentally to burn that up; if you have come here with enmity, God help me to burn that up; and if you have come here as cold as ice, then the Lord burn it up, and send you away full of love to his blessed name. So, then, "given to the burning flame." Thus, by what the Savior has done the beast is slain, his body destroyed, and by-and-bye, when the burning flame of the gospel shall have done its work, then not a vestige shall be left behind. This glorious gospel goes forth in the majestic way I have tried to describe; and it meets this opposition; Christ has slain this wild beast, destroyed the body, and gives the remnants thereof to the burning flame; all by-and-bye shall be ended. Now applying these things mystically does not take away their historical meaning, any more than applying the Levitical dispensation spiritually takes away the historical and original meaning of that. Therefore, in applying these things mystically, I do not take away the fact that Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome are the four great wild beasts; but then we have God's own authority to take a mystical view as well. There is the mystery of Babylon as well as the history thereof, the mystic as well as the literal; and they are intended, therefore, to apply to our instruction. "As concerning the rest of the beasts, they had their dominion taken away; yet their lives were prolonged for a season and time." Learned men have written a great deal to show that the rest of the beasts are Persia, Greece, and Rome, that their dominion was taken away, but their lives to this day are prolonged. Well, I should be the last to say a word against the industry of learned men; we are much indebted to them, under the Lord, for extending our domain of knowledge; but while I respect them and value their labors, yet the historical truth of this does not hinder its having a spiritual meaning. You just see how all the words I have quoted will apply to you. Their application is, to my mind striking, "The rest of the beasts."

Are there no evils within you? Does not the Christian almost instinctively spiritualize that scripture in the 104th Psalm, "You make darkness, and it is night; wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth." And when it is night with our souls, oh, what rebellions, what evils, what besetments, infidelity, atheism, then creep forth. "The sun arises; they gather themselves together, and lay them down in their dens." How true that is! And then in the next verse, it is very remarkable, David says, "Man goes forth unto his work and unto his labor until the evening." But when the evening comes again, and the wild beasts once more creep forth, then I cannot do the things that I would. So that, even in this sense the night come. I dare say our good clerk cannot always sing with the same liberty, and you cannot hear, and I cannot preach, with the same freedom. But when these beasts lie down in their dens then, "man goes forth unto his work and to his labor until the evening."

But their dominion is taken away; what a mercy is this! Sin shall not have dominion over you, shall not bring you to where you were before, for you are not under law, but under grace. Their dominion is taken away, though their life is prolonged, but prolonged only for a season and time, that is all, not for eternity; so that by-and-bye they must die also. Then apply the words also to any enemies you might have in the world. Pharaoh's power is taken away, he does not live long after and Haman's power is taken away, he does not live long after and you may have your adversaries, personal enemies, but then the Lord will take their dominion away, and by-and-bye will take their life away. But he will never take the life from the saints he has given unto them.

Now then, having thus noticed the 9th and 10th verses, come to the 13th and 14th; and they will lead us back in a sense to where we have been. Daniel takes another view of the gospel, explanatory of the former verses. "I saw in the night visions, and behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven." Why were these revelations called "night visions"? Because it was night with the Jewish church: they hated the light, and when the Savior came, darkness was under his feet; the light shined in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not. Called night visions, therefore, because amidst Jewish darkness these revelations were to be brought about. "One like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven;" not the literal clouds of heaven; the clouds of heaven there unquestionably mean the prophets; they are the heavenly clouds, and their doctrines have, do, and will to the end of time drop as the rain and distil as the dew upon the souls of the people of God. And Christ came in these clouds, cloud of witnesses. "And came to the Ancient of days." Now in the 9th verse, Christ himself is called the Ancient of days; in this 13th verse God the Father is called the Ancient of days. What is this but the doctrine the apostle preaches when he said of Christ, "Though he was in the form of God;" "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Here then is Christ in his eternity, and here is the Father in his eternity. "And he came to the Ancient of days." You know Christ came to God in his life, and in his death, and in his resurrection, and in his ascension, and in his intercession, and by-and-bye he will come and put an end to mundane time, then he will come to the Ancient of days finally, and all his people with him. "And they," the prophets, "brought him near before him." They all saw he would draw near unto God; they all saw that he could do what the publican could not do; Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven; the publican was afraid to lift up his eyes; Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven; to denote that we cannot look heaven's holiness in the face, but Jesus did for us. Therefore, said David, "I will lift up my eyes unto the hills," where the temple is, where the sacrifice is, where there is a way in which I can approach unto God. And now mark, this wonderful Person, coming thus to the Ancient of days, there were three things given unto him. See the analogy between the 9th and 10th and the 13th and 14th verses. There Jesus Christ is called the Ancient of days; here God the Father is called the Ancient of days; and there were given unto him three things, "dominion, and glory, and a kingdom." Now go back to the 9th verse; there you have the throne, and the wheels, the circles of eternity, in all their living forms of power rolling forth; what is this but the dominion, the glory, and the kingdom of Jesus. "That all people, nations, and languages should serve him." Now go back to the 10th verse; there you have the ten thousand times ten thousand standing before him. And now for the wheels; "his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed." All others shall come to nothing, but that must live forever.

Now the next point that presents itself I must have only just a word upon, as your time is gone, namely, *the universality of their aspect*. These four wheels had the form of a globe. Do you not

see an analogy here between this globe, thus looking towards the east, the west, the north, and the south, and the mystic city? There are three gates at each cardinal point of the mystic city, to denote, as the Savior said, that “they shall come from the east and the west, the north and the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God;” while the Pharisees, the carping and hypocritical Pharisees, must be shut out. Now its globular form I must not enter upon now. May the Lord lead us more and more into these dear mysteries, for his name’s sake. Amen.