

Sermon the Eighth.

THE CHURCH. A LESSON-BOOK FOR ANGELS.

"That now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God."—
EPHESIANS iii. 10.

God is a Spirit—a Being of pure intelligence, who depends upon nothing extraneous to Himself for His knowledge. He needs no book from which to learn. He necessarily, intuitively, eternally, and perfectly knows everything. No diminution of His knowledge can ever take place. Forgetfulness is unknown to Him, and no increase can be made to His wisdom. Everything that shall transpire through the undying ages of eternity was eternally present with Him. He seeth the end from the beginning, and of ancient times the things that are not yet done. He depends upon nothing out of Himself for His knowledge. He does not know a thing merely because it will be, but a thing will be because He knows it will. His mind did not catch the draft of all things from His foreseeing them, but all things from all eternity existed of His own will in His eternal mind. None have taught Him knowledge. "Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being His counsellor, hath taught Him? With whom took He counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of judgment, and taught Him knowledge, and showed to Him the way of understanding?" (Isa. xl. 13, 14).

How far removed from the Creator in this respect is every order of His rational creation. Man in innocence had his lesson-books, and delightful must have been his employment, with an unclouded intellect, an unblunted and unsoiled heart, to pore over the huge lesson-book of creation. How brightly and how rapturously would he read God's mind of wisdom and God's heart of benevolent love, written in the moving waters, the solid earth, the multitudinous animals, insects, fish, fowls, plants, and trees of the globe on which he was

brought forth; and as he turned his eyes towards the blazing sun, the soft moon, and the glittering stars that gemmed the unclouded heavens, how would his innocent bosom dilate with adoring wonder, and how would his gushing heart supply a river of crystal praise to his unfallen lips.

And even now that man is fallen, what a beautiful lesson-book does creation afford him! How have philosophical minds luxuriated in Nature's grand and minute lesson-book, written from end to end with "the eternal power and Godhead," the minute and comprehensive wisdom, the love and benevolence of "the Creator of the ends of the earth." Still, even to fallen man the earth is full of the Lord's wonders; "so is this great and wide sea," and "the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth His handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard" (Psalm xix. 1-3).

And even the angels themselves—those highest of all created intelligences—know nothing intuitively. They need their lesson-books; and they, with untiring delight, will read through eternity the ponderous folios of God's word, and works and ways. One of the books unclasped to their eyes, in the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the breaking up of all external distinctions among men, by their being mutually united to the Head of the Church, is given us in our text: "That *now* unto the principalities and powers might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God." Let us seek to enter the divine school for seraphs, and glance—

I. *At the pupils:* "The principalities and powers in heavenly places."

II. *At the volume from which they are learning:* "The Church," and,

III. *At the lesson they are learning from that volume:* "The manifold wisdom of God."

I. The pupils in this heavenly school are "the principalities and powers in heavenly places," or "in the heavenlies."

What an august company! The princes, the thrones, and powers of the celestial regions. Those bright beings who are pure spirits, free from a material case,

all burning with undiminished intelligence. "He maketh His angels spirits, His ministers a flaming fire." These celestial students being free from the claims of a material covering, are at perpetual leisure to learn from the pages of God's works, God's will, and to carry out the lessons they learn in diligent service of their Maker. How profoundly must beings of pure mind penetrate the subjects of their study. What shallow knowledge are we capable of, by the side of those burning intelligences of heaven! And what willing scholars are they. It is their delight to learn. "Which things the angels *desire* to look into." If the cherubim upon the mercy-seat might at all represent these angelic pupils, how appropriately are they represented with their eyes poring down on the mercy-seat. "Towards the mercy-seat shall the faces of the cherubim be." They take a heavenly pleasure in learning God's way, objects, and dealings in mercy to ruined man. They delighted to hear at Sinai the Gospel in shadows given to Moses. "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place." They gladly came down in a throng to gaze upon the infant Eternal in Bethlehem's manger.

"Bright angels left their high abode
To learn new mysteries here, and tell
The loves of our descending God,
The glories of Immanuel."

And with profound awe and intelligent adoration they watched the path of the tempted, despised, stricken, smitten, dying Messiah—pored over the wonders of His empty tomb—and read the glorious truths in the rising, ascending, and exalted Mediator, and now with delight pursue their studies in the book of the Church.

They are a *numerous* company of students. John saw this mighty host of celestial learners. "The number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands." Oh, what a glorious crowd are surrounding the lesson-book to which we are about to refer! There is Gabriel, that stands in the presence of God. There are the host of fiery chariots and horsemen that surrounded Elisha in Dothan. There is that multitude that sang in unearthly strains at Jesus' birth,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." There are the "more than twelve legions of angels" that Jesus might have asked as His body-guard in the garden. There is the angel that was commissioned to strengthen Jesus in His agony, and that shining one whose face flashed forth a lightning-like glory as he sat on the stone of Jesus' sepulchre. There are the two angels who sat in mute adoration in Jesus' empty tomb. There are they who

"Brought His chariot from the skies,
To bear the Conqueror home;
Clapp'd their triumphant wings, and cried,
"The glorious work is done."

There are those glowing myriads that lined the streets of "Jerusalem the golden" when Jesus ascended to His throne.

"Cherubs on the Conqueror gaze,
Seraphs glow with brighter blaze;
Each bright order of the sky
Hails Him as He passes by."

There, too, are the reapers of the final harvest—the gatherers of the tares for the fire, and the collectors of "the elect from the four winds." There are all the holy angels that shall come with Jesus when He comes to sway His sceptre over that earth that rejected and crucified Him. Oh, brilliant company of minds of fire! These are the great students in God's college. These are they who learn by the Church the manifold wisdom of God. This leads us to notice,

II. *The volume from which they learn.*

Oh, where can books be found suited to occupy and instruct such glorious beings? Adam's book is open in their hands. The most soaring philosophers feel, though helped by the accumulated labours of the intellectual hosts of thousands of years, as if they were leg-logged to the outskirts of the universe. They feel as if they have only begun to read the first chapter in the volume of creation, but this is a volume that angels have read through and through with devout delight. They, too, have a book that earthly eyes have never seen. The wonders of the palace and throne of God, the heaven of heavens, the Father's house, the beatific vision of God

in the undulled splendour of heaven, the glorified human nature united to the Eternal Son, form volumes of deep wisdom that they ever delight to learn God from. The way of God in the whirlwind, His path in the mighty waters, the mysterious revolutions of the wonderful "wheels within wheels" of God's providence, they are ever studying with devout amazement, and crying in our hearing, if we were not too dull to take in the sound, "O WHEEL!" If we are so dull or sluggish as to be unmindful of the footsteps of Providence, angels are not so; they are "wise and observe these things, and understand the lovingkindness of the Lord." But it is neither nature, nor providence, nor law, that furnishes a book sufficiently profound for angels to learn from "the deep things of God," the "manifold wisdom of God." Oh, where can a book that tells more of God be found than the universe of greatness, God's providence of wonders, and God's law of justice?—where? Be astonished, O heavens! wonder, O earth! it is from the book of the Church. It is from that volume, of which every saved sinner forms a page, that angels are learning now their deep lessons in the knowledge of God. Oh, saved sinner, poor and tempted, and sinful and doubting though you may be, see your dignity; see what God has made of you. Miserable rags from a beggar's back may form paper for another Newton to write his lessons of wisdom upon; and you, poor believer—you are worked into a page upon which God has written problems for Gabriel to solve—lessons of His "manifold wisdom," for heavenly powers and principalities to learn. You have little thought you are pages, in an angel's hand, making up a book that tells more of God than the stupendous universe. All other books but that wondrous book—the Church in union with her Head, and God's love to, and redemption of, and dealings with the Church—give but a partial knowledge of God; but

"Here the *whole Deity* is known,
Nor dares a creature guess
Which of the glories brightest shone,
The justice or the grace."

But here let us pause and make some serious inquiries. Are we members of that Church which forms an angel's lesson-book? Angels might see, by a spared

sinner, the forbearance of God, and by a damned sinner, the justice of God; but it is only by the saved they learn the "manifold wisdom of God."

1. The Church are the *chosen of God*. "According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world." Are we amongst the chosen of God? Yes; we are if the Gospel call has been obeyed by us. "Whom He did predestinate, them He also called." If ever, as weary and heavy-laden sinners, our souls have been led by the Spirit of God to obey the Redeemer's blessed invitation, and to come with all our guilty load to Jesus, the bleeding Saviour of the lost, and to rest under the shadow of His bleeding cross, we may sing,—

"Free election, known by calling,
Is a privilege divine;
Saints are kept from final falling:
All the glory, Lord, be Thine."

If lovingkindness has drawn us to mercy's banquet, everlasting love was set upon us before time began: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee" (Jer. xxxi. 3).

2. The Church are the *blood-bought ones*. "The Church of God which He hath purchased with His own blood." The blessed Surety laid down His precious life to redeem from death His loved Church. "Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it." Oh, are you bought with blood? Did Jesus pour out His blood for you? This is a question that might soon be answered if Jesus died for everybody, for you are one of everybody; but if millions of the blood-bought will perish, it would be no proof of your safety if you could say you are one for whom Jesus died. But rest assured that, if Jesus died for you, heaven is yours. You have Jesus' own word for it: "I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one Shepherd." Has the Lord brought you? Has He brought you from the world—from your own righteousness—from a natural religion? Has He brought you to Himself—a pupil to His prophetic school—a polluted sinner to His priestly atonement and advocacy—a willing soul to His kingly yoke? Are you

learning of Christ—hanging upon His finished work—battling with your corruptions, and yielding your soul to His government? Are the doctrines of the Gospel learned by you as a joyful, harmonious sound? are the promises trusted by you by a living faith? and are the precepts chosen by you, as the way of God's commandments, in which you would fain daily run? Then are you a member of the Church of the blood-bought.

"Dearly you're bought, highly esteemed,
Redeemed, with Jesu's blood redeemed."

3. The Church are the *congregated ones*. Indeed, the word Church means a congregation. Hence the term congregation in the 22nd Psalm, "In the midst of the congregation will I sing praises unto Thee," is rendered Church in the New Testament. "In the midst of the Church will I sing praise unto Thee." The Church are the people gathered to the great Shiloh. "Shiloh shall come, and to Him shall the gathering of the people be." The Church, then, are all who are stones gathered relyingly to Christ as a foundation—all who are clients gathered to the great Advocate; patients gathered to the good Physician; thirsty ones gathered to the open Fountain; hungry ones gathered to the Bread of life; wanderers gathered into the Way to the Father; naked ones gathered to the "Lord our Righteousness;" willing ones gathered to the standard of the Captain of salvation. In a word, they are the Church to whom Jesus is the attractive centre, who encamp, in company with the true Israel of God, around Jesus as their tabernacle, their place of dealing with God, and who get from Jesus strength to battle with sin, self, and the world, and to follow the guidance of the fiery, cloudy pillar towards the Canaan of rest. This is the Church which Jesus will present to Himself—"a glorious Church, not having spot nor wrinkle, nor any such thing." If through grace you are amongst the gathered company, you are of that Church that angels are learning lessons by. Oh, wonder of infinite wisdom, that God should so deal with lumps of sinful clay! that God should take defiled worms and make lesson-books for angels of them! but such is indeed the case: we have it upon infallible authority. But let us, having glanced at the bright pupils and their book, consider,

III. *The lesson learned from this volume—"the manifold wisdom of God."*

It cannot be that in themselves, as creatures, they can furnish the greatest lessons of divine wisdom. Other men, in this respect, teach as much of God's wisdom as they do. Yea, all the universe is written over with lessons of God's wisdom; but by the Church is known the divine wisdom in peculiar profundity. Here it is not, as it were, outspread and simple wisdom, but it is wisdom in many folds; it is wisdom in layer upon layer, in mysterious depths; it is manifold wisdom.

The wisdom of God known to angels by the Church must be the many and unparalleled displays of the deep wisdom of God in all His plans, purposes, and dealings with the Church past, present, and to come. It will be no wonder if I should fail in attempting to announce the depths of wisdom displayed in this angels' lesson-book. I do not expect to read out a single chapter. If I can spell out the headings of some of the chapters, I must not expect more. Where angels find everlasting occupation for their piercing and mighty minds, no wonder that I am lost in powerlessness.

1. Many of the folds of the wisdom of God, with regard to the Church, are seen in the arrangement of the well-ordered covenant. The eternal Father entered into a covenant with His eternal Son, set up from everlasting in that covenant. Three great objects were ever kept in view in the formation of this infinitely wise compact. First, the equal display and unparalleled glorification of all the divine attributes; second, the exaltation of human nature into personal union with the eternal Son, and the special satisfaction and honour of Immanuel, God with us; and third, the redemption, salvation, preservation, sanctification, instruction, and glorification of all the chosen of God. In order that these ends might be accomplished, divine wisdom unfolded the vast plan. The Son of God foreviewed in union with His holy human nature is appointed representative Head of the Church. He is constituted the second Adam. Hence, as the first Adam was the law head of all his race, so the second Adam is the law Head of all His members. And thus as Adam's disobedience is the sin of the world, and his condemnation their condemnation; so Christ's obedience is the obedience of the

Church, and His acquittal her discharge (see Rom. v.) The Father thus connected the Church with His dear Son, and the Son entered into such engagements that from everlasting to everlasting the legal condition of the bride and the Bridegroom are one. Is she in debt? this involves Him. Is she under condemnation? this exposes Him. Has He discharged the debt of obedience? she is free from claim. Has He borne the penalty of her transgressions? she is redeemed from the curse of the law.

Besides, in this wondrous covenant, He was constituted not only the legal, but also the *domestic* Head of the Church. He, the Father's own Son, is the first-born among many brethren; so that they, through fraternal union with the "heir of all things," are "heirs of God" "If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ." It is through union with Christ as a Surety or law Head, that the Church receives her standing in justification. "Accepted in the Beloved." "In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified." And it is through fraternal union with Christ as a domestic Head, that the Church receives her inheritance. It is a mistake to make our title to glory lie in our justification. It lies in our adoption: "If children, then heirs."

Moreover, the Church had union given her with Christ as a Root or a Head of influence. She was in Him from all eternity, as the fruit is in the seed. He is the "corn of wheat" that has "fallen into the ground, and brings forth much fruit." All our *holiness* is virtually eternally in our Head of influence, in our true Vine; so that as truly as we are justified through covenant union with a law-Head, and enriched through covenant union with an Elder Brother, so are we sanctified through covenant union with a Head of influence. And that the intentions of God might not fail of application, the Holy Spirit was promised. Indeed, the covenant of grace might well be said to be "ordered in all things and sure."

2. Another of the wondrous mass of folds of divine wisdom manifested in God's dealings with the Church, is seen in the incarnation and complete work of the Son of God for their salvation. How it must have filled with devout wonder the minds of angels, to behold in the infant Jesus the mighty Maker of the universe—Eternity and a span in union; the Omnipotent and the feeble

babe in one. If Gabriel should inhabit a snail, and take up that snail into personal oneness with himself; or if the bright sun were to reside in a pebble; there would be but the union of creature to creature, a high rank of God's works to a lower one: but the union of infinite with finite is the bringing together of the utmost opposites. Angels admire and saints love and trust the Incarnate Mystery. How, too, must they have looked down adoringly to see the Lawgiver fulfilling His own law. Human hands wrought our garment of righteousness, but they were the human hands of One who is personally God. No wonder that His righteousness acquits all who were united to Him. The advocates of indefinite atonement charge us with making the work of Christ of less than infinite value. So far from doing this are we, that we believe none but one who is personally God could have a righteousness to spare for others. The most exalted creature can only do his own duty; and we believe that if millions more had had federal union with Jesus, there is enough value in His righteousness to acquit them all.

How, too, must their awe, and love, and wonder have been drawn forth to behold the scene in Gethsemane, and at Calvary. Ah, in those sobs and groans of bitter woe, in those drops of sacred gore, they could read the evil of sin, the depths of divine compassion, the integrity of God's truth, the sternness of strict justice, the benevolence of infinite love and grace. Ah, they saw that over that bloody sacrifice all the divine perfections could meet in harmony. They learned by this God's dealing in redemption with the Church—how mercy and truth meet together, how righteousness and peace kiss each other. And I might go on to show how they looked on with wonder as Jesus rose, taking His Church with Him, from the tomb and up to eternal bliss. Angels could see the Church's union with Jesus in all this, and they wonder not when they hear the saints sing in gladness—

"Hail, sacred union, firm and strong!
How great the grace, how rich the song,
That worms of earth should ever be
One with incarnate Deity!
One in the tomb, one when He rose;
One when He triumphed o'er His foes;
One when in heaven He took His seat,
While seraphs sang all hell's defeat!"

Angels, too, must have looked on as adoring pupils when the promised Spirit was poured down in mighty and wise effusion upon the assembled disciples on the day of Pentecost. How must they have listened with delight to the cloven tongue of mercy, uttering the tale of the cross in the many languages of the gathered crowd! How must they have adored mercy rejoicing against judgment! Judgment had once divided human tongues and scattered man. Now mercy divides its tongue to gather the chosen remnant out of every nation, kindred, people, and tongue under the whole heavens. And what lessons of divine power clothing human speech must they have learned from witnessing three thousand hearts bleeding at once under the wounds of the sword of the Spirit, and three thousand wounded consciences healed at once by means of the word of this salvation. If there is joy in heaven in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth, what thunders of praise must have rolled from exulting seraphs, when they beheld three thousand prodigals at once locked in their heavenly Father's forgiving embraces!

And from that moment until now they have been glad learners of the manifold wisdom of God, by His government of the world for the good of the Church, and by all His multifarious dealings with the various stones that compose the mystic temple of God's worship, "the Church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven." They admire how God looks to it that even one who may never know the mercy of union with Christ Himself, if he is to be an ancestor of a stone in mercy's building a hundred generations hence, must be preserved in being until God's intentions are accomplished in him. They see the great wisdom of God in preserving His sheep, while wandering the downward road, from death until brought to the fold of grace; and they behold with delight and awe the wisdom of God in ordering the coming together of the means of conversion and the persons to be converted. If a Lydia is to be converted, she must be at Philippi when Paul visits the place, and must go to the river side just when Paul and Silas are to be on that spot. If Paul is to be the means of conversion to the jailer and his household, persecutors are permitted to cast him into prison, that there he may

preach salvation by grace, through faith, to the convinced jailer and his household. Indeed, every vessel of mercy may sing, and angels learn the wisdom of God, in the song,

“His decree that formed the earth,
Fixed my first and second birth;
Parents, native place, and time,
All appointed were by Him.”

As fold after fold is laid bare of the layers of divine wisdom in the salvation, preservation, regeneration, perseverance, and glorification of the Church, these celestial pupils learn and admire incessantly the infinite wisdom of God. And they will go on learning, until, with their education finished, they join the glad shout of “Grace, grace unto it!” from the millions who shall witness the raising of the headstone of the temple of God.

It would be interesting and profitable to go more fully into the unfoldings of divine wisdom to angels in the book of the Church, but I must not weary you. I can only say, in concluding, have you ever furnished a lesson of divine wisdom to an angel? are you in the Church? Oh, important inquiry! There are only the Church on the Rock and the world lying in wickedness—the Church saved, the world lost! Oh, which are you? which are you?—the sinner in his sins, pursuing the road to hell? or the saint in Christ, travelling the narrow path to bliss? Put not the question from you; ponder it before God; and may your conscience give such an answer as shall be a blessing to your soul. Amen, amen; let the saints unitedly say, Amen.

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