

# The Administration of the Fullness of the Seasons

Ephesians 1: 10

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Christ is the true and only center of the purposes of God, as it is only by Him the Holy Ghost reveals them. Hence it is, and must be in the proportion of our Spirit-taught acquaintance with Christ, that the divine plans are understood and appreciated. When He is not steadily kept before the soul, what becomes of the study of scripture itself? It is no longer truth which sanctifies, but barren theology which puffs up. And why has prophecy been perverted to unfruitful and injurious speculation? Because God's grand object has been lost sight of ("that in all things he might have the preeminence" one might perhaps apply here); and thereby the Spirit has been grieved, and has blown upon the busy exercises of man's mind. "He shall glorify me," said the Lord, "for He shall take of mine and show it unto you" (John 6: 14). The moment the view of the glory of Christ is supplanted by researches into providence for instance, important as this may be in its place, the temple of prophecy degenerates into a counting-house of human intellect; and the tables of those traffic in mere erudition crowd its courts, until by the just judgment of God it is left desolate. But by His grace a better sanctuary is opened for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see Jesus crowned with glory and honor in the heavens. May we have grace to draw near through the rent veil, and there by our Master's side, with unshod feet and worshipping hearts, follow His eye and finger as they rest upon the spheres of His varied but harmonious glory!

"Since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, besides Thee, what He hath prepared for him that waiteth for Him." There the Jewish prophet necessarily stopped. "But," says the apostle (1 Cor. 2) taking up the words, "God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit." "We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world (or, the ages] unto our glory." How often we hear a member of the body of Christ quoting the words, "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard it," to justify an ignorance which the Spirit of God takes pains to show us is no longer excusable. The things which God hath prepared for them that love Him are now disclosed. Our position is the contrast of that of the Jews. God did reveal them to us through His Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. True, these depths are not the things of man, and are therefore undiscoverable by human ken. But a Christian is called no longer to walk nor to think *κατὰ ἄνθρωπον*: if he seem to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise. "The things of God knoweth no one except the Spirit of God." And what is that to the Christian? Everything. "For we received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God." "We have the mind (*νοῦν*) of Christ."

So in Ephesians, God caused grace to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself for the administration of the fullness of the seasons, to gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in the heavens, and which are on the earth, in Him in whom also we obtained inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose, etc. (Eph. 1: 9-11).

The great and precious revelations of the Old Testament, as Moses told the Jews (Deut. 30: 29), belong, in an emphatic sense, unto them and their children. Jehovah their God had reserved these secret things unto Himself. Hence the force and importance of the verses just cited from this epistle. His grace

He caused to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence. He has made known unto us the secret of His will, according to the good pleasure which He purposed in Himself for an administration of the accomplishment of the set times. And what is this purpose of God? It is in one head, Christ, to sum up the universe, the things in heaven, and the things on the earth; in Him in whom also we were allotted inheritance. That is, the mystery of God's will consists of two great parts: first, Christ is to be the Head of all things heavenly and earthly; and secondly, the church is to be associated with Him in that inheritance. And so the apostle, having treated of the design of God to re-head all things in Christ, turns also at once to the collateral purpose of joining the church as heir with Him, first alluding to the Jewish saints brought into this relationship, and then to the Ephesians themselves, the Gentile saints whom he was actually addressing: "that we [*i.e.* the Jews now believing] should be to the praise of His glory who are pre-trusters in Christ; in whom ye also, *i.e.* Gentile believers], etc. When they heard, they believed the gospel. For they had no previous revelation or hope like the Jews.

In the closing verses of this chapter we have the same twofold truth, with this difference, that it is not in connection with God's future purpose respecting the heading up of all things in Christ when the appointed times are completed, but with Christ's present exaltation at the right hand of God. Nevertheless, here as before, is seen the double glory of Christ. God hath given Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all. And thereupon Eph. 2 enters into the manner of God's display of His grace in His kindness towards Jew and Gentile in Christ Jesus.

If we turn to Acts 3 it is clear, that the times of refreshing and the restoring of all things were no secret of God's will. Peter speaks of this restitution of all things as the familiar hope of the Jewish nation. God had spoken of this by the mouth of His holy prophets since the world began. It therefore must be a distinct thing from, however closely connected with, the mystery of Eph. 1: 9-11. Let us take one of these prophetic testimonies, and the difference will be plain.

Therefore say unto the house of Israel, thus saith the Lord Jehovah, I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for my holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen whither ye went. And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am Jehovah, saith the Lord Jehovah, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you. And I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall receive no more reproach of famine among the heathen. Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations. Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord Jehovah, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel. Thus saith the Lord Jehovah, In the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities, I will also cause you to dwell in the cities, and the wastes shall be builded. And the desolate land shall be tilled, whereas it lay desolate in the sight of all that pass by. And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are become fenced, and are inhabited. Then the heathen

that are left round about you shall know that I Jehovah build the ruined places, and plant that which was desolate: I Jehovah have spoken it, and I will do it. Thus saith the Lord Jehovah, I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them; I will increase them with men like a flock. As the holy flock, as the flock of Jerusalem in her solemn feasts; so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of men: and they shall know that I am Jehovah (Ezek. 36: 22-38).

This citation is the more observable, because it seems the one the Lord had chiefly in view in His conversation with Nicodemus (John 3). Jesus had laid down the necessity of being born afresh as the condition of seeing the kingdom of God; and to the question of the Jewish ruler, He answered, that except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter that kingdom. Flesh and Spirit admit of no modification in the nature of each, which remains distinct and unchanged. Hence Nicodemus was not to marvel if Jews must be born again in order to have part in God's kingdom; for the question is about the kingdom, and not salvation merely. When then Nicodemus still inquires, "How can these things be?" the Lord says,

Art thou the teacher of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, we speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

Thus it is clear, that when the Lord spoke of the need of the new birth, the Jewish teacher ought to have understood; for so had the prophet Ezekiel shown.

Before Israel enjoys the earthly blessings in the promised land, Israel will be born again. Israel will be sprinkled with clean water, and will have a new spirit put within them. It is afterwards they have the earthly things of the kingdom of God. "I will also save you from all your uncleannesses; and I will call for the corn, and will increase it," etc. "And they shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden." The important thing to notice, is, that in all this the Lord had not gone beyond the earthly things, or that which was essential to their enjoyment, i.e. the new birth. Of course, to have blessings in heavenly places a man must *à fortiori* be born again; but even the Jewish people, as we have seen, must be born afresh to have the earthly promises in God's kingdom. In speaking of the new birth, He had not gone beyond the range of earthly things and what a Jew ought to have learned from the prophets.

If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?

On the latter, the Lord does not touch further than to intimate the lifting up of the Son of man, and the gift of the Son of God in God's love not to the Jews on but to the world: which things involve, as we know, the exaltation of the Lord into glory on high, and the union of the church with Him there, as the fullness of that heavenly Man. The lifting up of the Son of man was, so far as man's responsibility is concerned, the demolition (though in God's wisdom and grace the ultimate security) of all the earthly hopes of the Jews. For in Christ all the promises of God found their meeting-place; and if He had been received, they would have been made good to His earthly people. But He was rejected. Wherefore God also highly exalted Him. The promises remain to be accomplished, based as they are upon the blood of the Mediator; but before that accomplishment takes place, a new and extraordinary work goes on; namely, the formation of the body to share the glory of Christ above, when God's purpose is fulfilled of gathering all things, heavenly and earthly, under the headship of Christ, for the church shares that inheritance with Him. This, then, was the mystery of the will of God: not the kingdom of God, nor the new birth, indispensable as it is for its earthly promises. Of these the Prophets had spoken; but they were silent on the purpose of God which destined Christ and the church to rule

over all things in the heavens and on the earth. The restitution of all things was not in any sense a mystery; but that was.

Be it observed by the way, that 1 Peter 1: 10-12 does not at all refer to this mystery, but to other privileges which formed the burden of many a prophetic strain. The salvation of souls was certainly no hidden secret: "of which salvation the prophets," etc. They searched, no doubt what, or what manner of, time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify; but it is manifest that the sufferings of Christ and the glories that should follow, testified beforehand by the ancient prophets, cannot be the mystery which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit (Eph. 3). Here were things testified beforehand, ministered unto us and not unto themselves; for it was so revealed to them.

But clearly these previously revealed privileges totally differ from another sphere of blessing which from the beginning of the world was kept hid in God {Eph. 3: 9}. Nor do the Epistles of Peter once allude to our fellowship with Christ as His body. The mystery is nowhere introduced. We are regarded "as begotten again to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled . . . kept by the power of God" etc. We are exhorted to diligence, sobriety, confident hope, obedience in holiness, and withal to pass the time of our sojourning in fear, knowing our redemption with the precious blood of Christ. It is not doubted that the persons whom Peter addressed were members of Christ's body; but it is certain, that the Spirit here dwells upon the blessings which spring from the resurrection of Christ; our incorruptible life in power, holy and royal priesthood, pilgrim calling, and the like. He speaks not of our union with Christ in heaven. Hence also, when the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven is referred to, it is as the power of preaching the gospel unto us, never as the One Who constituted us, Jew and Gentile, God's habitation (Eph. 2), or Who baptized us into one body (1 Cor. 12: 13). In other words, the mystery is not treated in the Epistles of Peter, whereas it is the main subject to the Ephesians and also to the Colossians.

The administration, we have seen, awaits "the fullness of times," or the expiry of the various periods appointed by divine wisdom. All things are out of course, and waxing worse and worse, until Christ takes the reins. The only Righteous One is still an outcast from the world, though known to the church as crowned with glory and honor in heaven, while those who love the Lord of glory suffer here below. God's favored earthly people are a proverb and a byword among all nations, and driven out from a country of which God delighted to be the landlord. And what has been, what is, the history of that people and land? Their oppressors, the Gentiles, have they walked in abasement or in pride? Have they honored the King of heaven? And how fares creation? Does not the whole of it groan and travail in pain together until now? And where is Satan? Is it on earth merely that he walks about, or is there spiritual wickedness in heavenly places? Well, there is a set time for each of these things; and these seasons shall have a full term. Satan shall lose his away over the air and the earth; creation shall be delivered into the liberty of the glory of God's children; the smitten Gentile image shall give place to an everlasting kingdom; Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit; the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them, and Christ shall appear and we with Him in glory. This will be the fullness of the seasons spoken of.

When the destined fullness arrives, how great our joy, beloved, to see Him, not only as the Melchizedek blessing God and blessing man, but actual Possessor of heaven and earth, all things therein being beaded up in Him Who, though He be the most High God, administers as the exalted Man; to be too ourselves so near Him and so truly one with Him, that then we shall at length forget all save His love and His glory. And yet (O wondrous grace!) is it not so now, as regards His love? Are we not here and now members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones? Yet surely we may long for the

day when, seeing Him, we shall be for ever like Him, according to that working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.

Yes, all things in heaven and earth shall be headed up in Him, not things under the earth {infernal beings}; but every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Worthily has He won such a place, that blessed One. And how true the word!

Who, subsisting in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself, having taken upon him the form of a bondman, having come in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also highly exalted him, and freely gave him the name which is above every name (Phil. 2: 6-9).

It is false, utterly false, that Jesus took this place when He was born. It is true, that then was the fullness of the time come for God to send forth His Son. The very children were enslaved under the rudiments of the world, and all were shut up under sin. Man had proved himself competent to ruin himself under the law of God, only the more readily because it was good and he was bad. But was God's business done when the Son was here, come of a woman, come under the law? By no means. The Incarnation was but the means, not the end. Redemption was the grand point to which God turned. Therefore the Son was thus sent and come

to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye [the Gentiles, who had not been under the law] are sons, etc. (Gal. 4: 4-6).

Turning to the higher and larger sphere of Colossians, we hear the same truth. In the Son of God's love we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins; "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature." Is this His highest title? Is this His Divine glory? No; but founded upon it. He is the firstborn of every creature, not because He partook of flesh, nor because He was the holy Man Who triumphed over all the consequences of the first Adam's sin, and conquered him that led the first man captive at his will: in a word, not because He was here below, be it the most faithful and glorious, but because He was the Creator. He is the firstborn of every creature, *for* by (or, in virtue of) Him were all things created. Here is His right to the supremacy in question.

For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created through him, and for him: he is before all things, and by (or, in virtue of) him all things consist (Col. 1: 16, 17).

His primacy over all creation flows from His Divine creative power. He asserts it as man; but His title flows from another and higher source. But He is more than firstborn of all creation. "He is head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." This, as we have seen, is the glory especially dwelt on in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Sin was here below. Man, who ought to have been the first, was the lowest morally; and creation itself, by reason of him, was steeped in the bondage of corruption. And those whom God was about to bring into the church, what were they? Alienated and enemies in their mind by wicked works. Hence, though the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, though all the fullness was pleased to dwell in Him, even this could not meet the evil and misery of man, nor the holiness and the heart of God. The light of God was there, His love was there; in Him was life, and the Life was the light of men. Alas! it was manifest that the Jews, that all, were irreparably blind, yea, dead.

If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for

their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other hath done, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father (John 15: 22-24).

What was to be done? “Verily, verily,” saith the Lord, “except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.” His death could alone deliver. But this was ever before the soul of our blessed Master.

I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished?” “This is He that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood” (1 John 5).

Hence in the Epistle to the Colossians, Col. 1: 20-22, we read

And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, whether the things on the earth, or the things in the heavens. And you, that were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now did he reconcile, in the body of his flesh through death; to present you holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in his sight.

The church is reconciled even now. To the living members of Christ it can be said, You did He reconcile.” Creation is not so yet, though the blood of the cross is shed on which the reconciliation is grounded; it will be so in the fullness of the seasons.

At present no such administration takes place, though we here learn God's purpose that it shall. Christ is, no doubt, head of angels, of Jews, of men, of creation. But is He exercising these rights? Now it is of the administration when the periods are ripe that our verses speak. But none of these things are being yet gathered. On the contrary, there is yet to be a deeper crisis of rebellion than ever. It is now the time when all things are severed from Christ, or, if gathered, gathered only in the ruin and the wretchedness which the guile and power of Satan have introduced. It is also the time of another gathering, the gathering of the joint-heirs who shall be glorified with Christ.

But this is the gathering of Eph. 2, not of Eph. 1. It is the gathering of the members of His body, not of the subjects of His rule.

Some, I know, have conceived that by “all things in heaven and earth” is meant the church. But first of all the expression “all things,” etc., forbids the thought. The church never was and never will be, “all things.” And though now the calling is being effected on earth, it is not a gathering there, but out of it; and, even when complete, it is in heaven; whereas the gathering in Eph. 1: 10 is a gathering, at the same time, of all things that are in the heavens and that are on the earth under the headship of Christ. Again, not only is the church an elect body, but in v. 11 we have members of it referred to as an additional thing to the heading up all things in Christ, “in whom also we obtained” etc. Further, in v. 22 we have “all things” again spoken of as put by God under Christ's feet, Who is given as head over all things to the church; which therefore, far from being merged in all things, enjoys and shares His supremacy, as His body and glorious bride.

This is entirely confirmed by the verses immediately before and after v. 10: in the one case where the mystery of God's will is made known touching all things in heaven and on earth; and in the other, because we are spoken of as having the Holy Spirit of promise, Who is the earnest of our inheritance. Such is what we have in the mean time: not the possession which comes at the fullness of the seasons and not before, but the Spirit meanwhile, as the earnest until, the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory. For when that fullness arrives, it will be glory, His glory, and not as now the dealings and riches of His grace. The Lord hasten that glorious day!

