

Lecture XVII.

Of Creation

Heb. xi. 3.—“Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.”—Gen. i. 1.
“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

We are come down from the Lord's purposes and decrees to the execution of them, which is partly in the works of creation and partly in the works of providence. The Lord having resolved upon it to manifest his own glory did in that due and predetermine time apply his own power to this business. Having in great wisdom conceived a frame of the world in his mind from all eternity, he at length brings it forth, and makes it visible. We shall not insist upon the particular story of it, as it is set down in general, but only point at some things for our instruction.

First, Ye see who is the Maker of all things, of whom all things visible and invisible are—it is God. And by this he useth to distinguish himself from idols and the vanities of the nations, that he is that self being who gave all things a being, who made the heavens and the earth. This is even the most glorious manifestation of an invisible and eternal Being. These things that are made, show him forth. If a man were travelling into a far country, and wandered into a wilderness where he could see no inhabitants but only houses, villages and cities built, he would straightway conceive there hath been some workmen at this; this hath not been done casually but by the art of some reasonable creatures. How much more may we conceive when we look on the fabric of this world—how the heavens are stretched out for a tent to cover them that dwell on the earth, and the earth settled

and established as a firm foundation for men and living creatures to abide on—how all are done in wisdom and discretion—we cannot but straightway imagine that there must be some curious and wise contriver, and mighty creator of these things. It is here said “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed.” Indeed faith only in the word of God, gives true and distinct understanding of it. Innumerable have been the wanderings and mistakes of the wise of the world about this matter, wanting this lamp and light of the word of God, which alone gives a true and perfect account of this thing. Many strange dotages and fancies have they fallen into; yet certain it is that there is so much of the glory of God engraven without on the creature, and so much reason imprinted on the souls of men within, that, if it were not for that judicial plague of the Lord’s darkening their understandings, who do not glorify him in as far as they know him, no man could seriously and soberly consider on the visible world, but he would be constrained to conceive an invisible God. Would not every one think within himself—all these things, so excellent as they are, cannot be out of chance, neither could they make themselves, so that of necessity they must owe what they are to something beside themselves? And of this it is certain, that it cannot have its original from any other thing, else there should be no end; therefore it must be some Supreme Being, that is from no other, and of which are all things.

But next, consider when these things were made—“In the beginning.” And what beginning is that? Certainly the beginning of the creation, and of time, to exclude eternity. Whatever may be said of that subtilty, that God might have created the world from all eternity, for it appears, even in created things, that there is no necessity of the precedent existence of the cause, since in the same instant that many things are brought into being, in the same do they bring forth their effects, as the sun in the first instant of its creation did illuminate, yet certainly we believe, from the word of the Lord, that the world is actually but of a few

thousand years standing. Six are not yet run out since the first creating word was spoken, and since the Spirit of the Lord moved upon the waters. And this we know also, that if it had pleased his majesty, he might have created the world many thousand years before that so that it might have been at this day of ten hundred times ten thousand years standing, and he might have given it as many years as there are numbers of men and angels, beasts yea, and pickles¹⁴⁹ of sand upon the sea coast. But it was his good pleasure that that very point of time in which it was created should be the beginning of time; and from that he gives us a history of the world, upon which the church of God may rest, and so seek no other god but the God that made these heavens and earth.

This will not satisfy the ungodly curiosity and vanity of men's spirits, who will reproach the Maker for not applying sooner to his work, and sitting idle such an immeasurable space of eternity. Men wonder what he could be doing all that time, if we may call it *time* which hath no beginning, and how he was employed. I beseech you, restrain such thoughts in you with the fear of his glorious and incomprehensible majesty who gives no account of his matters! It is enough that this is his good pleasure to begin then, and he conceals his reasons, to prove the sobriety of our faith, that all men may learn an absolute and simple stooping to his majesty's pleasure. Remember that which a godly man answered some wanton curious wit, who in scorn demanded the same of him—"He was preparing hell for curious and proud fools," said he. Let us then keep our hearts as with a bridle, and repress their boundless wanderings within bounds, lest we, by looking upward, before the beginning of the world, to see what God was doing, fall headlong into the eternal pit of destruction, and into the hands of the living God. God hath shown himself marvellously these six thousand years in the

¹⁴⁹ [That is grains or particles.—*Ed.*]

upholding this world. If we did consider these continued and repeated testimonies of his glory, we should be overwhelmed with what we find, though we search no farther. And suppose we would please ourselves to imagine that it had been created many years before, yet that doth not silence and stop the insolence of men's minds, for it always might be inquired, what the Lord was doing before that time. For eternity is as immensurable before those multiplied thousands of years as before naked six. Let our imagination sit down to subtract from eternity as many thousands as it can multiply by all the varieties and numbers in the world, yet there is nothing abated from eternity.¹⁵⁰ It is as infinite in extent before that, as before the present six thousand, and yet we may conceive that the Lord hath purposed in the beginning of the world to declare more manifestly to our understanding his eternity, his self sufficiency, and liberty,—his eternity, that when we hear of how short standing the creature is, we may go upward to God himself, and his everlasting being, before the foundations of it were laid, may shine forth more brightly to our admiration, when we can stretch our conceptions so immensurably as far beyond the beginning of the world; and yet God is still beyond the utmost reach of our imagination,—for who can find out the beginning of that which hath not a beginning to be found out,—and our most extended apprehensions fall infinitely short of the days of the Ancient of days. O how glorious, then, must his being be, and how boundless! His self-sufficiency and perfection doth herein appear, that from such an inconceivable space he was as perfect and blessed in himself as now. The creatures add nothing to his perfection or satisfaction. He was as well-pleased with his own all-comprehending being, and with the very thought and purpose of making this world, as now he

¹⁵⁰ [What a sublime answer was that which one of the deaf and dumb pupils of M. Sicard gave to the question, "What is eternity?" It is "a day," said Massieu, "without yesterday or to-morrow,—un jour sans hier ni demain." The thoughts of our author on this boundless theme are hardly less sublime.—*Ed.*]

is when it is made. The idea of it in his mind gave him as great contentment as the work itself when it is done! O, to conceive this aright,—it would fill a soul with astonishing and ravishing thoughts of his blessedness! Poor men weary if they be not one way or other employed without; so indigent are all creatures at home, that they would weary if they went not abroad without themselves. But to think how absolutely God is well-pleased with himself, and how all imaginable perfections can add nothing to his eternal self-complacency and delight in his own being, it would certainly ravish a soul to delight in God also. And as his self-sufficiency doth herein appear, so his liberty and freedom is likewise manifested in it. If the world had been eternal, who would have thought that it was free for his majesty to make it or not, but that it had flowed from his glorious being with as natural and necessary a resistance as light from the body of the sun? But now it appears to all men, that for his pleasure they are made, and we are created; that it was simply the free and absolute motion of his will that gave a being to all things, which he could withhold at his pleasure or so long as he pleased. [090]

Thirdly, We have it to consider in what condition he made all these things, “very good;” and that to declare his goodness and wisdom. The creature may well be called a large volume, extended and spread out before the eyes of all men, to be seen and read of all. It is certain, if these things,—all of them in their orders and harmonies, or any of them in their beings and qualities,—were considered in relation to God’s majesty, they would teach and instruct both the fool and the wise man in the knowledge of God. How many impressions hath he made in the creatures, which reflect upon any seeing eye the very image of God! To consider of what a vast and huge frame the heavens and the earth are, and yet but one throne to his majesty, the footstool whereof is this earth, wherein vain men erect many palaces; to consider what a multitude of creatures, what variety of fowls in the heaven, and what multiplicity of beasts upon the earth,

what hosts, as Moses speaks (Gen. ii. 1,) and yet that none of them all are useless, but all of them have some special ends and purposes they serve for, so that there is no discord nor disorder, nor superfluity nor want in all this monarchy of the world: all of them conspire together in such a discord, or disagreeing harmony, to one great purpose,—to declare the wisdom of him who “made every thing beautiful in its time,” and every thing most fit and apposite for the use it was created for; so that the whole earth is full of his goodness. He makes every creature good one to another, to supply one another's necessities; and then, notwithstanding of so many different natures and dispositions between elements, and things composed of them, yet all these contrarieties have such a commixion, and are so moderated by supreme art, that they make up jointly one excellent and sweet harmony or beautiful proportion in the world. O how wise must he be who alone contrived it all! We can do nothing except we have some pattern or copy before us; but now, upon this ground which God hath laid, man may fancy many superstructures. But when he stretched out the heaven, and laid the foundation of the earth, “who, being his counsellor, taught him?” At whom did his Spirit take counsel? Certainly, none of all these things would have entered into the heart of man to consider or contrive, Isa. xl. 12, 13. Some ruder spirits do gaze upon the huge and prodigious pieces of the creation, as whales and elephants, &c.; but a wise Solomon will go to the school of the ant to learn the wisdom of God, and choose out such a simple and mean creature for the object of his admiration. Certainly, there are wonders in the smallest and most inconsiderable creatures which faith can contemplate. O the curious ingenuity and draught of the finger of God, in the composition of flies, bees, flowers, &c. Men ordinarily admire more some extraordinary things; but the truth is, the whole course of nature is one continued wonder, and that greater than any of the Lord's works without the line. The straight and regular line of the wisdom of God, who, in one constant

course and tenor, hath ordained the actions of all his creatures, comprehends more wonders and mysteries, as the course of the sun, the motion of the sea, the hanging of the earth in the empty place upon nothing. These, we say, are the wonders indeed, and comprehend something in them which all the wonders of Egypt and the wilderness cannot parallel. But it is the stupid security of men, that are only awakened by some new and unusual passages of God's works beyond that straight line of nature.

Then, fourthly, Look upon the power of God in making all of nothing, which is expressed here in Heb. xi. There is no artificer but he must have matter, or his art will fail him, and he can do nothing. The mason must have timber and stones laid to his hand, or he cannot build a house; the goldsmith must have gold or silver ere he can make a cup or a ring. Take the most curious and quick inventor of them all,—they must have some matter to work upon, or their knowledge is no better than ignorance. All that they can do is, to give some shape or form, or to fashion that in some new model which had a being before. So that, whatever men have done in the world, their works are all made up of those things which appear, and art and skill to form and fashion that excellently which before was in another mould and fashion. But he needs not sit idle for want of materials, because he can make his materials; and therefore, in the beginning he made heaven and earth, not as they now are, but he made first the matter and substance of this universe, but it was as yet a rude and confused chaos or mass, all in one lump, without difference. But then his majesty shows his wisdom and art, his excellent invention, in the following days of the creation, in ordering and beautifying and forming the world as it is, and that his power might be the more known; for how easy is it for him to do all this? There needs no more for it but a word,—let it be, and it is. “He spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.” Not a word pronounced, and audibly composed of letters and syllables—mistake it not so—but a word inwardly formed, as it

were, in his infinite Spirit. Even the inclination and beck of his will suffices for his great work. Ye see what labour and pains we have in our business,—how we toil and sweat about it,—what wrestlings and strivings in all things we do; but behold what a great work is done without pain and travail? It is a laborious thing to travel through a parcel of this earth, which is yet but as the point of the universe; it is troublesome to lift or carry a little piece of stone or clay; it is a toil even to look upward and number the stars of heaven. But it was no toil, no difficult thing to his majesty, to stretch out these heavens in such an infinite compass; for as large as the circumference of them is, yet it is as easy to him to compass them, as it is to us to span a finger-length or two. It is no difficulty to him to take up hills and mountains as “the dust of the balance,” in his hand, and weigh them in scales. Hath he not chained the vast and huge mass of the weighty earth and sea, in the midst of the empty place, without a supporter, without foundations or pillars? He hangeth it on nothing. What is it, I pray you, that supports the clouds? Who is it that binds up their waters in such a way that the clouds are not rent under them, even though there be more abundance of water in them than is in all the rivers and waters round about us? Job xxvi. 7, 8. Who is it that restrains and sets bounds to the sea, that the waters thereof, though they roar, yet do not overflow the land, but this almighty Jehovah, whose decree and commandment is the very compass, the bulwark over which they cannot flow? And all this he doth with more facility than men can speak. If there were a creature that could do all things by speaking, that were a strange power. But yet that creature might be wearied of speaking much. But he speaks, and it is done. His word is a creating word of power, which makes things that are not to be, and there is no wearying of him besides, for he is almighty and cannot faint. But why then did he take six days for his work? Might he not with one word of his power have commanded this world to issue out of his omnipotent virtue thus perfect as it is? What needed all this

compass? Why took he six days, who in a moment could have done it all with as much facility? Indeed herein the Lord would have us to adore his wisdom as well as his power. He proceeds from more imperfect things to more perfect;—from a confused chaos to a beautiful world,—from motion to rest,—to teach man to walk through this wilderness and valley of tears, this shapeless world, into a more beautiful habitation; through the tossings of time, into an eternal sabbath of rest, whither their works shall follow them, and they shall rest from their labours. He would teach us to take a steadfast look of his work, and that we should be busied all the days of our pilgrimage and sojourning in the consideration of the glorious characters of God upon the works of his hands. We see that it is but passing looks and glances of God's glory we take in the creatures; but the Lord would have us to make it our work and business all the week through, as it was his to make them. He would in this teach us his loving care of men, who would not create man till he had made for him so glorious a house, replenished with all good things. It had been a darksome and irksome life to have lived in the first chaos without light, but he hath stretched over him the heavens as his tent, and set lights in them to distinguish times and seasons, and ordained the waters their proper bounds and peculiar channels, and then maketh the earth to bring forth all manner of fruit, and when all is thus disposed, then he creates man. To this God, the Maker of heaven and earth, be glory and praise. [092]