**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**07. CREATION by JAMES DENNEY**

*"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."*

*Genesis 1:1*

The Bible begins with God: that is one of the marks which distinguish it not only from much ordinary thinking, but even from many of what are called religious books. It never attempts to prove that God exists: the existence of God is for it the primary certainty. It never seeks to rise through nature up to nature's God; for the Bible writers, God is far nearer, far surer, far more vividly real than nature. A heathen writer who wished to give such an account of the universe as we find in this chapter would start with the world, or with the dim confusion of elements out of which the world was to emerge; and in due time, as the confusion settled into order, the gods would appear in their proper place among the other beings constituting the universe. To such a writer, in short, his gods are part of the world; they belong to the glory and beauty which he sees around him; but to the Israelite his God is before the world and above it; He is its Creator; from beginning to end it is absolutely dependent on Him.

A modern mind, again, is apt to think of the world without thinking of God or of gods at all. The idea of creation has been displaced in it by that of nature. Nature means the world regarded as a system of things having its life in itself, and capable of being interpreted without looking beyond it. In this there is no doubt a relative truth. Such as it is, the world is there, and it has an independence of its own. But the Bible point of view is that it owes this independence to God. He has given to it to have life in itself, yet it lives and moves and has its being in Him.

The main aspects in which creation is viewed in Scripture are two. In the first place, it is creation out of nothing. The world is originally and for ever dependent on a power beyond itself. It has no value, no reality, no being, but what it owes to Him who created and who sustains it. It is passing, passing, passing, but from everlasting to everlasting He is God. In the second place, it is creation in Christ. This is an idea on which great stress is laid in the later New Testament books. For Him who, sees into the heart of things, in the light of the Christian revelation, the world is not merely a vast system of natural phenomena, it has a Divine and indeed a Christian meaning. It is all here with Christ in view. Nature is destined from the first to rise into a human and spiritual kingdom; embedded in its original constitution is a reference to the Person and the Sovereignty of Christ. There is not only the seal of God upon it, but in some deep mysterious way there is the promise of Christ in it. It is nearly a generation now since Professor Drummond's "Natural Law in the Spiritual World" profoundly impressed a wide circle of Christian readers; but what the Bible doctrine of creation in Christ implies is something far more wonderful and Divine - it is spiritual law in the natural world, the tokens of Christ's presence and working in the whole field of being. It is not, however, these general aspects of Bible teaching on creation which I wish to consider at present, but rather the religious significance of the doctrine of creation as Scripture reveals it. This may be put under four heads.

**1.** To begin with, creation in Scripture constantly appears as an inspiration to worship. The contemplation of heaven and earth fills the mind with adoring thoughts of God. We see it in Psalms like the 8th, the 19th, the 29th, the 36th, the 104th, and many more. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night teacheth knowledge. There is no speech nor language; their voice is not heard. Their line is gone into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." The Psalmist does not mean that he came to know God by studying astronomy; on the contrary, his mind was full of God when he looked up at the heavens over his head; but the changing splendours of night and day gave him a new sense of God's greatness, and opened his lips in adoration. Everyone who knows God at all knows that He is great, but it is through the works of God in nature that imagination is quickened to apprehend His greatness, and that all that is within us is stirred up to magnify His name. We do not praise Him as we should till Nature, too, inspires our praise, and we join our voices to those who cry: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory".

This inspiration to worship is peculiarly needed at present for two reasons. One is the accidental reason that such a vast proportion of men now dwell in cities, where Nature, it may almost be said, has ceased to be an appreciable part of the environment of their life. They do not see the face of the earth, and very often not the face of the sky. "Thou hast made summer and winter," says the worshipping Psalmist, but summer and winter are all one in our blank stony streets. "Thou crownest the year with Thy goodness," he says again; but the townsman's year has no crown; unless he gets a holiday in the country, it is one monotonous strip of time. No doubt it is in the providence of God that city life has developed, but whatever the virtues it evokes in man, whatever the stimulus it applies to his intellect, his ambition, his faculty for government, it will hardly be contended that it is favourable to worship. It is rather in the face of nature than amid the importunate pressures of society that we can lose ourselves in the adoring contemplation of God. And when we get the opportunity to do so, surely it is a sin as well as a folly to carry as much as we can of the city's drawbacks into the country, and to prefer holiday resorts haunted by the same excitements which make it hard to realize God's presence when we are at home. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills."

The second reason why we need that inspiration for worship which comes from nature is more serious: it is that our religion is specifically a religion of redemption. The question in which it originates on our side is, What must I do to be saved? and when that question has once been seriously asked, we soon realize that nature can do nothing to answer it. Neither earth nor sky nor sea - neither sun, moon, nor stars - have a word to say to the man who is suffering from a bad conscience. Hence when such a man finds the Healer and the Saviour he requires, he is apt to concentrate his religion in the sphere of conscience. What is worse, he is tempted to concentrate it upon himself. He may sink so far as to imagine that God only exists to minister to him, and that he and not God is the centre of spiritual interest in the universe. There are other checks upon this repulsive degeneration of what should be the highest type of religion - the religion of the man who has been redeemed by the passion of a Divine love - but they need not be considered here. All I wish to say is that one of the preservatives against it is the surrender of the soul to those impulses to worship which come from the contemplation of nature. What must I do to be saved? is a question apart from which there is no Christianity, but it is not the only question which rises spontaneously in the soul made for God. "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?" These also are religious questions, and it is a poor religion which does not ask them, and find in that which prompts them a new motive for worship. There is something pedantic in Sir John Seeley's idea that the God worshipped by the astronomer and the geologist, dwelling as they do in the immensities of space and time, is greater and more wonderful than the God of the average Christian. I do not believe that even Kepler or Newton was more profoundly impressed by the starry heaven, or by the unsearchable greatness of God revealed in it, than Job or Homer or the Psalmists. It is not science that is needed to enrich religion here - though no question it has its contribution to make - but contact with nature and sensibility to it. It is through the senses, not through science, that imagination is impressed; but we need this impression to give elevation, dignity, and calm to worship, and to free it from settling feverishly on ourselves. The New Testament is not to be cut off from the Old, and it would be an immense enrichment of worship in many churches if they abridged their hymn-books, in which "personal" religion has run wild, and praised God oftener in Psalms like those just mentioned.

**2.** To go on to a second point: creation appears in Scripture not only as an inspiration to worship, but as an inspiration to trust in God. This is perhaps the point on which most stress is laid in the Bible itself: the doctrine of creation is called up to reassure those whose faith is being almost too severely tried. We find a striking instance of this in Jeremiah. God bids Jeremiah buy and pay for a field on which the Chaldean armies were encamped, with the assurance that it was quite a safe investment; in spite of its occupation by an irresistible enemy, houses and fields and vineyards should yet again be bought in that land. Jeremiah completed the bargain half despairing, and then, not to fall wholly into despair, he prayed, "Ah, Lord God ! behold, Thou hast made the heaven and the earth by Thy great power and by Thy stretched out arm; there is nothing too hard for Thee". That is the use of this doctrine. When we let it sink into our minds, heaven and earth become a kind of picture of God's omnipotence; they are reassuring to all who trust in Him; they tell them with a sublime communicative confidence that God is able to keep His word. And is it not this which explains the peculiar appeal to God in a prayer of Jesus uttered at a crisis in His career? "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." To judge by outward signs, it was an unprosperous and disappointing time for Jesus; but He can contentedly and even joyfully accept the will of the Father, disconcerting as it seems, because it is a sovereign and omnipotent will, which cannot fail to achieve its purpose in the way which seems good to it. Just because creation is an index to God's resources, it teaches us not to despair because we have come to the end of our own.

But nature, according to Scripture, is an invitation to trust on another ground. It is a revelation not only of the infinite power of God, but of His constancy. It is probably quite true to say that the people who wrote the Bible had no idea of what we mean by a law of nature; most of us have no very distinct idea ourselves. But they had a strong impression of the faithfulness of God as exhibited in all the great aspects of nature, and of the unreservedness with which He might be trusted. The alternation of day and night is God's covenant, and it is the very type of what can be de pended on. It is because God is true to His word that we can count upon seedtime and harvest, summer and winter, cold and heat. "For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven. Thy faithfulness is unto all generations; Thou hast established the earth and it abideth. They continue this day according to Thine ordinances; for all are Thy servants." The laws of nature, as we call them, are the will of God; the immutability of its laws, so far as it is a fact and a fact capable of interpretation, means the constancy of His character. They all invite us to trust in Him as a God who is worthy of trust, and will not put us to confusion. It is a bad conscience that sometimes makes us take them otherwise. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Why do we so often read this as a threat? Why do we not as instinctively read it as a promise? It is not one any more than the other, but a declaration confirmed by nature on every hand that God is faithful and can be counted on under all circumstances. He will not deny Himself nor fail His creatures.

Do we ever stay our faith thus in times of despondency, or win for our religion the amplitude and calm which belong to such a sense of God? Not even a New Testament believer, fervent as his trust in the Father may be, can afford to lose such a sublime in spiration to faith as Isaiah found in the midnight sky. “Lift up your eyes on high, and see who hath created these, that bringeth out their host by number: He calleth them all by name; by the greatness of His might, and for that He is strong in power, not one is lacking. Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, my way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed away from my God? He has forgotten to do me justice." If God is faithful there, He will be faithful here. That is the very description of what He is - a faithful Creator, as Peter calls Him. We may be sure that He will prove true to every hope He in spires, to every promise He implants, to every trust He evokes. The laws of nature do not restrain His freedom: they proclaim His trustworthiness. They say to us, in the voice which goes out to the ends of the world, "Fret not thyself in any wise". "Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him." He that believeth shall not make haste, but a peace and constancy like that of nature will fill his heart even as he trusts in God the Creator.

**3.** In a third way the doctrine of creation is important to religion: it contains a religious motive for the study of the world around us. Perhaps it was of history rather than of nature the Psalmist was thinking when he said, "The works of the Lord are great: sought out of all them that have pleasure therein"; but we may legitimately apply his words to our subject. A philosopher of our own has compared the face of nature to visual language - language addressed not to the ear but the eye. It is like the page of a book, a book written by the finger of God, and meant by God to be read; and surely of all people in the world those who believe that God has written it - those who believe that in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth - ought to be most eager to read it. Yet in point of fact this is not the case. We owe our religion to Israel, but not our science; and often among ourselves we find that those who are absorbed in religion are indifferent to science, and those who are devoted to science are indifferent to religion. Sometimes in both cases the indifference passes into hostility, and histories have been written of the conflict between science and religion. I am not going to discuss this here, but surely it should be plain to the religious, at all events, that they can have no quarrel with science. If God created all that is, whoever finds out anything about the world is finding out the truth of God. He may not know this, but it is the fact, nevertheless. The truths of astronomy with its infinite spaces and of geology with its measureless times, the truths of chemistry with its wonderful combinations and of physiology with its secrets of life and death, the truths of the higher and harder sciences of mind and history, they are all the truths of God. They are there to enlarge our knowledge and to exalt our thoughts of Him, and every man of science is in this sense a minister of religion. God, in the works of His hands around us, is calling us to enter into His thoughts; He is putting his own powers and resources at our disposal, and it is not impious, but a part of true religion, to try to follow God's thoughts as they are embodied in creation, and to use in His service the powers which He has there placed within our reach.

But since this is so, and since it is so plain, why should there have been the friction which has undoubtedly existed between men devoted to science and men devoted to religion? Why have religious people suspected science, and why has science sometimes proclaimed war on religion? I suppose the reason must be in the main that they have misunderstood one another - failed to appreciate each other's interest in the world. The scientific man looks at the world and calls it nature. Nature means the world regarded as having its life in itself; there it is, and he takes it as it stands, raising no question as to its origin, its end, or its relation to anything beyond. But nature in this sense is not a Bible word at all; the very idea of it is foreign to the Bible; what we find there is creation, and creation means the world regarded as having life not in itself, but only in and through God. Nature is self-subsistent, but creation subsists through the Creator. Nature is there for itself, but creation is there as the scene of a spiritual life, the theatre of the acts and government of God. The scientific man, who takes nature one piece at a time, is apt to feel that at no particular point is God essential. But when we see how every science leads out of itself into another, as every department of nature issues into the whole - when we feel that all the truths of all the sciences are parts of one truth, and that that truth can only live and move and have its being in an eternal mind which is akin to our own - then we realize that nature is not without God, and without compromising the integrity of our science we can bring it into a living connexion with our religion. It is only in this connexion that the study of nature is truly reverent, and uplifting to the soul. It is conscious at once of the nearness of God in nature, and of his transcendence - of the intelligibleness of things, and of their unsearchable mystery. In both these characteristics it is akin to religion: religion also knows God, and knows that He passes knowledge. If religious people had always done their part in the study of the works of God, that sincere and reverent study which their Divine origin demands; and if scientific people had always remembered that every separate truth becomes false when it is cut off from relation to truth as a whole - that is, to the mind of God - we might have been spared much misunderstanding and strife, and a more noble and intelligent praise would have gone up to God from the hearts of all His children. This great reconciliation has yet to be fully accomplished, but the key to it lies in the very first sentence of the Bible.

**4.** Our last inference from the creation of all things by God remains: the life of man - his life as a free moral being- must have in the last resort a positive relation to the world; or rather man must recognize that in the last resort nature is positively related to his moral calling. In other words, it is a system of things which will be found to be on the side of man's higher life, and from which it is fatal for him to cut himself off. It is necessary to say "in the last resort," for in ourselves, nature is no longer what God made it; without professing to solve the mystery of evil, we must acknowledge that in us nature is rather what we have made it, that it casts a deforming shadow on what is in itself perfect, and puts the world out of joint. Even if it were not so, there would be a certain disproportion between what we are and what we are called to make of ourselves in the world - such a disproportion as implies effort and strain in a developing moral being - in a word, the denial of self. We cannot imagine any other situation for ourselves than one in which the moral life has to be conquered in and from nature; every inch of morality has to be won in incessant and resolute conflict. But though we must fight this good fight till our last breath, though we must deny the evil nature that is in us, and put to death, as Paul says, our members that are on the earth, we must not because of this excommunicate the good creation which is the work of God. The world as God has made it - the actual world into which we are born, and for which on every side of our nature we have affinities - that whole of nature into which we strike our roots to the centre - that and no other is the world in which we have to live a spiritual life. It is very natural when we feel the strain of the conflict to think that the sure way to victory is to renounce the world altogether, to cut the connexion with nature at the root, to cultivate a goodness which owes nothing to the world as God made it, and is a purely spiritual, sublimed, and supernatural thing. It is very natural to do this, but all experience proves it to be both a mistaken and a disastrous course. The virtue that is not rooted in nature - that has not the sap of nature in it - that does not articulate itself into the great life of the world and rejoice in God's presence and goodness there, is an impotent and ineffective thing; it does not tell on the world to any intent of which God approves; it tends inevitably to be Pharisaic, and is destitute of redeeming power. There is a place for asceticism, undoubtedly, in every spiritual life, but it is not a principle which can claim the whole sphere of morality for its own. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, and every creature of God is good, and to be received with thanksgiving. It is the morality which rests on this basis, and not that which makes it a principle to abstain from marriage and from meats, which can really establish the kingdom of God in the natural world which God has made. We must rectify the perversions which are due to ourselves, and once right with our Creator we shall know how to be right with all His works. We shall be able to say with St. Paul, "All things are ours; all things work together for good to them that love God".

When we have passed all these things in review- the inspirations it yields to worship, to trust, to knowledge, and to a rich moral life - we still cannot keep the insignificance of nature from returning on our minds. Nature without God is nothing. Even man without God is nothing. To learn this is to learn one of the greatest truths of religion. It has inspired the loftiest poetry, or all but the loftiest.

The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself

And all which it inherit shall dissolve,

And like an insubstantial pageant faded

Leave not a wrack behind. We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

This is nature by itself. But the higher truth of nature - the positive truth on which its place in religion depends - has been expressed in poetry if possible still more sublime, because in it God is present in His world, and all creation attests His presence. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts: all the earth contains is His glory." No worship is complete that has not in it an amen to the voice of the seraphim.