

God's Eternal Decrees and Providence Ezekiel 1 & 10

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 87-91, 338-339, emphasis added; updated to modern American English.

Ezekiel 1:19-20

“And when the living creatures went, the wheels *went by* them; and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. Wherever the spirit was to go, they went, there *was their* spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them; for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.”

By this verse the Prophet teaches, that **all the changes of the world depend on celestial motion**. For we have said that the living creatures represent to us Angels whom God inspires with a secret virtue, so that He works by means of their hands.

Now, therefore, when he says, that the wheels proceeded through a higher movement than their own, it follows that **nothing happens by chance in the world**, but that God, by His own incomprehensible wisdom, so directs all things that nothing happens except by that secret instinct which is imperceptible to us.

Therefore in this teaching of the Prophet, as in a glass, we ought to consider what is concealed from human comprehension. We see many things happen, and in the meantime we think the motions, which are so perplexed and multiplied, confused; but the Prophet meets this perverse imagination, and teaches that the wheels rest by themselves and are set in motion by a higher force—that is, as the living creatures or cherubim are moved, so the wheels are drawn along by their influence.

Now, therefore, because we perceive the meaning of the Holy Spirit, so the usefulness of the doctrine is to be noticed. When we see men planning so many things that they disturb the whole world, when we see many conspiracies made, and then all things necessary for action prepared, let us perceive **that God governs all things, but in a secret manner which surpasses our senses**. Also, when we see many things happen as we think unseasonably, let us think that Angels are discharging their duty, and that by their motion and inspiration things in themselves motionless are borne along. The same may be said of other things: winter, for example, may be too mild or too rough; in that excess, let us consider what the Prophet teaches here, which is that God so governs the order of the seasons, that nothing happens unless by His inspiration. When, therefore, *the living creatures went forward, the wheels near them also went forward*, he says, meaning that the living creatures were the rule by which the wheels directed their course, and *when they were raised*, he adds, *the wheels were raised also*. . . .

EZEKIEL 1:21

“When those went, *these* went; and when those stood, *these* stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up over against them; for the spirit of the living creature *was* in the wheels.”

He continues the same sentence, that the wheels were fixed, not that they fell but stood without motion, which we know to be unnatural, for a wheel cannot stand on any part of its rim, but will either fall on one side or the other, or will roll on: for the Prophet says that the wheels were immovable. From which it follows that their moving force was external to themselves. Afterwards he confirms the same by additional words. *For as the living creatures and the wheels stood together, so they moved and were elevated together.* Here the Prophet enlarges upon what he had just touched upon. For although the matter is obscure, yet this copiousness excites attention, and leads us to understand that the motion of the wheels is not uselessly transferred to the living creatures, and that the cause resides there: because if this had been said briefly, it might have been transmitted carelessly, but since the Prophet so often asserts the motion of the wheels to be derived from the living creatures, **hence it follows that all changes of things which are seen in the world have their origin from some external source**, as I have formerly said.

The reason, too, is repeated—*that the spirit of the living creatures or animals was in the wheels*: for here as before there is an alteration in the number. Though the Prophet understood the spirit of the living creatures to be in the wheels, yet the wheels do not comprehend anything, but receive vigor, as the moon obtains its brightness from the sun. So we perceive that the wheels are impelled, not that the intelligence of the living creatures had been transfused through the wheels. For God does not give mind and judgment to either winter or summer, to either peace or war, to either the calm or the storm, the pestilence or anything else. What then? Neither air, nor earth, nor sea, have any rigor by themselves, unless so far as God by His angels directs the earth to this use, or while He bends the minds of men in one direction or the other, to either war or peace.

Now, therefore, we clearly see the meaning of *the spirit of the living creatures being in the wheels*, which is that **God transfuses His influence through angels, so that not even a sparrow falls to the earth without His foresight, as Christ says** (Matthew 10:29; Luke 12:6). Therefore, whenever the confusion of our affairs urges us to despair, let us try to remember this sentiment, that the spirit of the living creatures is in the wheels. And truly when we tremble in doubtful circumstances, what can we do but acquiesce in this doctrine—which is that **the end of everything will be according to God's decree, because nothing is carried on without His permission, and that there is no motion, no agitation under the heavens, unless He has inspired it by His angels.** Now it follows —

EZEKIEL 1:22

“And the likeness of the firmament upon the heads of the living creature was as the color of the terrible crystal stretched forth over the heads above.”

Now the Prophet states **the principal thing in this vision—that God was seated on His throne**: because if he had spoken only of wheels and living creatures, the vision had been partial, and therefore inefficient. But when he places God upon His own throne, we understand that angels, who inspire motion in other things, have neither vigor nor motion peculiar to themselves. On the whole, the Prophet here says that **angels** so move all things that are done under heaven, that no proper motion ought to be ascribed to them. And why? because **God presides over them and governs their actions.** This is the object of the latter part of the vision, which we are now going to explain.

He says then, *above the heads of the living creatures was the likeness of a firmament.* By these words he wishes gradually to draw us to God Himself, and God also so deals

with His Prophet that He places different steps by which the Prophet himself according to his capacity may gradually climb to an immense altitude.

The Prophet does not here speak concerning the throne of God, but only concerning the firmament. For when we raise our eyes upwards, God's glory appears nearer to us than it does on earth. True it is, that it shines equally on all sides; but heaven has in itself greater excellence than the whole earth, and the nearer we approach to God, the more conspicuous to us becomes His image. For truly God there exercises His own power and wisdom much more clearly than on earth.

How many wonders does the sun present to us! If we consider first the planets, and next the stars, we shall be inspired a hundred times with admiration. Therefore when the Prophet speaks of the firmament, he raises our thoughts so that they approach by degrees unto God. *He saw therefore the likeness of the firmament.* Had he simply seen the firmament, it would not have been a vision: for this is always visible. . . . The heavens then, which are always visible, could not render the Prophet sufficiently attentive. But he saw the *likeness of the firmament*, from which he noticed that it was not the mere sky, but a new form submitted to his eyes, as if God were bringing the Prophet himself into heaven with outstretched hand.

Above the heads of the living creatures an expansion was spread out. . . . As the appearance of terrible crystal, he says; for the color of crystal was in this sky which the Prophet saw, but God added the terror, because, as I have previously mentioned, on account of our sluggishness God must put forth violence when He wishes to attach us entirely to Himself. *Above the heads of the living creatures themselves, he says, upwards;* that is, that we may understand them to be subject to the sway of Almighty God, as we shall afterwards see.

Angels and Providence

The Prophet wished to teach, that in God's works nothing is abrupt, nothing cut off, nothing mutilated, but **angels so direct all actions and all events of things, that whatever God determines arrives at its own end.** But this does not prevent God from operating variously, and after arriving at one goal from beginning a new course. Now it follows —

EZEKIEL 10:17

“When the cherubim stood still, the wheels stood still; and when they were lifted up, *these* lifted up themselves *also*, for the spirit of the living creature was in them.”

As Ezekiel just said that the wheels were obedient to the movement of the living creatures, so he now says that they ceased with them. But in this place it seems as if some incongruity might arise, for it is not correct to say that angels ever rest. We know that their quickness and promptness in executing God's commands is celebrated (Psalm 103:20, 21).

Then since angels are the powers of God, it follows that they never cease from their office of working. For **God never can rest; He sustains the world by His energy, He governs everything however minute, so that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without his decree** (Matthew 10:29).

And there is that known and celebrated sentence of Christ, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working" (John 5:17). Since, therefore, God never rests from His works, how then can that resting be explained of which the Prophet says, *when the angels stood, the wheels also stood*? I reply: it must be taken in a human sense; for although God works continually by means of angels, yet He seems sometimes to rest between. For He does not govern His works in any equable manner, as for instance, the heavens are sometimes calm, and at others agitated, so that a great variety appears in *God's* works, from which we may imagine that He is sometimes in vehement motion, and at others at perfect repose.