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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

WHO THE CHERUBIMS ARE.

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A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 16TH AUGUST, 1868,

By MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET.

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“And the likeness of their faces was the same faces which I saw by the river of Chebar, their appearances and themselves: they went every one straight forward.”—EZEKIEL x. 22.

It is to my mind a matter of surprise that there should be among divinely taught people two opinions as to who are intended to be represented by the cherubims spoken of in the 1st chapter of this book and in this chapter. The most prevalent opinion is that they represent the angels; but it can be easily shown that the angels do not, in character, or position, or destiny, at all answer to what is said of these cherubims; and that therefore these cherubims, these four living creatures, which are the same that you read of in the Book of Revelation, are intended to set forth and represent the people of God, and the people of God answer exactly, in every respect, to what is said concerning these cherubims. And, indeed, when cherubims were first introduced, even there they appear to point to the ministers of God. The Lord placed cherubims, and a flaming sword, at the east of the garden of Eden, to keep the way of the tree of life. That sword turned every way, to keep man from getting to God by his own doings; the old way was cut off. And these cherubims appear to me to represent one part of the work of the gospel minister, which is to cut sinners off from all hope of access to God by the law, from all hope of mercy, or grace, or salvation, in the creation order of things. There must be a new order of things introduced—the promise that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. And as the sword turned every way, so the minister must turn the sword of the law every way; for “the law was added because of transgression;” and “what the law saith it saith to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” And the Lord will stop the mouths of those that he intends to save; that he will do while they are in this world, to the end that they may see the way in which they are shut out, and then seek after the way in which they can have access to God. Also the two cherubims in the tabernacle, what are these but representatives of the Old and of the New

Testament church? called in the Book of Revelation two olive trees and two candlesticks; that is to say, partakers of and ministers of the golden oil of God's grace; that is their character as olive trees; and candlesticks mean light-bearers, and every Christian is a light-bearer; and especially a minister should be a light-bearer, should himself in the gospel be as a burning and as a shining light. Now these two cherubims thus represent the Old and New Testament church. They looked towards each other; and so the Old Testament church looked forward to the time when Christ should come; and we look back to the Old Testament church and see that the predictions which were then put upon record have been fulfilled. And both the cherubims rested upon the mercy-seat. Old Testament sinners were saved according to God's mercy; and New Testament sinners, or believers, are saved by the same mercy. They rested upon the same ark, the same everlasting covenant, and there was the presence of the same God; and there the high priest came to them, and they were consecrated to God, and had the blessings of God's presence by the blood of the sacrifice. "Christ, that he might sanctify the people, suffered without the gate." Those are the two witnesses that look towards each other, and while they look towards each other, both of them are looking down at the mercy-seat. Every one in the Old Testament ago taught of God looked for mercy, and every one thus taught had been from that day to this, like the publican, looking for mercy. Thus these cherubims, when made to represent that which concerneth us, are instructive. And so in this vision I think we shall see as we go along this morning that this description of the cherubims is not a matter so unpractical and unexperimental as people may suppose. Dr. Johnson, after admiring the great powers of Milton in his "Paradise Lost," says that the great drawback to that poem is that there is nothing in it that applies to the experiences, practices, and circumstances of life; and therefore in that sense it is unprofitable; when we have read it we care but little about it afterwards. We want something to guide us, something to sustain us, something that shall profit us; but this vision of the cherubim, if rightly understood, contains a vein of real experimental godliness.

I will therefore at once proceed to notice *what these cherubims are*; and that will come out by two circumstances—first by their position, and secondly by the explanation given of them in the New Testament. This is as far as we shall get with the subject this morning; the other parts must be for next Sunday morning. *What these cherubims are.* The word *cherubim* itself signifies "a fulness of knowledge," and therefore is expressive of that fulness of acquaintance with eternal things to which the people of God shall ultimately come. They are called "living creatures;" a term, as you are aware, that applies to the people of God in a way that it does not apply to any other creatures in existence—no, not to angels; for Jesus Christ is not the life of angels, not in the way that he is the life of his people. So that even angels are not living creatures in that lofty, divine, mediatorial, salvational, and glorious sense in which the people of God are; for Christ has identified his own eternal existence with theirs; yea, God himself has identified his own existence with their eternal welfare. They are, then, living creatures in the very highest sense of the word. But let us look at the origin of their position, and see if we can realize it. We read in the 1st chapter of this book that "a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself;" and these living creatures came out of this whirlwind, out of this cloud, and out of this fire. Think you there is any difficulty in explaining this? Just go to the 64th of Isaiah, and read the following words:—"We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." Now this whirlwind is from the north; the north is expressive of winter, and the winter is expressive of the curse under

which we are, as you may see in Solomon's Song, when Jesus Christ comes in triumphantly, saying, "The winter is past, the rain is over and gone;" which we all understand to mean that Christ hath put away sin, that he hath put away the curse of the law; there shall be no more curse. Now in the first Adam, our iniquities, like the wind, like the blasting, poisonous wind, the whirlwind, have carried us away. There are, as you are aware, such things as poisonous winds, called simoons; this poisonous wind has carried us away from all the holiness, righteousness, and standing that we had in the first Adam. And this is a kind, too, of Satanic wind; for what has our sin done? It has carried us away. Perhaps the wind is very soft, it may be to thee very pleasant; but if thou discover in what direction the wind is carrying thee along—that it will bring thee at last to hell—if thou discoverest this, thou wilt begin to tremble, and draw back, and stand against that sin that has carried thee away from God, and if not stopped will carry thee into hell. And then, when Jesus Christ is revealed to such a one, he takes his stand by faith in Christ, and then the Lord stayeth the rough wind in the day of the east wind, and the soul comes out of this storm into that peace which is by Jesus Christ, which passeth all understanding. Also there was a great cloud; and what is this great cloud but mortality, death, and hell? Are we not all of us under the cloud of mortality? It may well be called a great cloud, for it has covered the whole human race. There is not one man or woman upon the face of the earth that is not under this dark cloud of mortality. Oh, how dark is the state we are in by nature, apart from the mercy and grace of God! Secondly, it is the cloud of death,—that is a dark cloud. Our friends go into that cloud; and when any around us die that we have known, and that we have no hope of, they seem removed out of sight in a bad sense by the cloud of death. And then comes the darkness of hell,—“reserved in darkness unto the last day.” And then comes darkness eternal, and, as Milton says of the light they have there, that light is only to discover sights of woe. Here is the great cloud. Why, angels were never thus carried away; they were never under this cloud. But some of us have found out that we are under the dark cloud. And then the Lord steps in, and if we cannot see, at least we can hear something in this solitary dark cloud. We hear our Maker, we hear the Judge of all, we hear the everlasting God by his dear Son, saying,—I, even I, against whom you have sinned; I, even I, who am your righteous Judge; I, even I, that might cast you into hell body and soul,—I have brought you to tremble at your condition, and to sigh after mercy, and to believe in my dear Son; “I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins; return unto me, for I have redeemed thee.” The soul will indeed return, and say,—

“Lo, glad I come, and thou blest Lamb
Shalt take me to thee as I am;
Nothing but sin I thee can give,
Nothing but love shall I receive.”

Then there was the fire infolding itself. What is the fire? Why, the fire is burning in your bones now; it is burning in your flesh now, it is burning in you now. And what fire is it? Why, the fiery law of God. “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” That is the judgment, the fire that is lighted up in every man's bones, and it goes burning on. In spite of all the progress that is made in the various sciences of the day in which we live, no plan has been yet discovered by which we can stay the progress of mortality, much less by which we can stay the spirit in the day of death. Here, then, the fire of God's judgment infolds itself in the dark cloud of mortality; and this fire will go on and infold itself in the dark cloud of death. Ah, for a man to die in his sins, to die among the unclean, to die unrighteous, to be under the tremendous accents of highest heaven, “He that is filthy, let him be filthy still; he that is

unjust, let him be unjust still;”—and then how will the fire of eternal wrath unfold itself in the darkness that must for ever be felt! But these living creatures came out of this fire; and so, as we have been reading, Jesus hath delivered us from the wrath to come. I never seem weary of gazing upon the simple, but at the same time infinitely important and essential truth that the fire fell not upon the people, but upon the sacrifice, and the people escaped; they fell upon their faces as they saw the fire fall upon the sacrifice, except that on their behalf; and they might well say, “The Lord is good, and his mercy endureth for ever.” Just so, if you would be saved, it must be by the sacrifice, by Christ Jesus. The fire fell upon him, the curse fell upon him.

“On him almighty vengeance fell,
That must have sunk a world to hell.”

Now Ezekiel was among the captives by the river Chebar, and the heavens were opened, and he saw the visions of God; and he looked forward to the New Testament dispensation, for this very vision is a New Testament vision given in Old Testament ages; it pointed forward to New Testament times. He saw these wonderful things, and the man was overwhelmed with their revelation to his soul. He saw these living creatures come out of this whirlwind, out of this cloud, and out of this fire.

And now, secondly, let us trace their position a little farther. You see after all there is something experimental in the matter. We must know whether our being carried away from God in the first Adam has become to us such a terror, that we have been constrained, seeing how we are thus shut out from God, to seek access to him by that Saviour who hath said, “I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved;” and that we do see there is a dark cloud, and that this dark cloud rests upon a great many things. Ah, how it darkens our families sometimes! how it darkens our circumstances! and how it sometimes darkens the pulpit, when the minister is under the bondage of his mortality! for he has evils within him bringing him into bondage, and a dark cloud rests upon his mind, so that he feels as though he could say with Jeremiah, “Thou hast brought me into darkness, and not into light.” Just so the Christian. Ah, how often is it that a dark cloud rests upon your mind! You can hear the minister preach, but, as it were, can see nothing; all seems dark and gloomy. Nevertheless, while darkness rests upon us here, there is no darkness in Christ, there is no darkness in our God, there the scene is changed altogether. There there is no poison wind, there there is no cloud, there there is no anger; there all is love, all is life, all is blessedness, all is peace. Who then are the persons that answer to this but the people of the living God? The second position of these cherubims also answers entirely to the people of God. You read in the beginning of this chapter that the cherubims stood on the right side of the house, that is, the temple of the Lord. Now there does not seem much in that at first sight, but look at it; let us have a little piece of topography here. You must look at the temple as facing the east; and in the front of the temple the altar of sacrifice stood on the north side, or rather the north side of the court—towards the north; just to teach us the very truth I have stated, that the dear Redeemer was to come and place himself under the law, place himself under our sins, under wrath, place himself where the winter was—the north. And so when the Israelites passed over Jordan, they passed over on the south side of the priests. The priests stood on the north side, hereby beautifully typifying the dear Saviour as standing in our place. So that the priests stood in all the danger; the waters accumulating on their right hand, but receding on the left, where the people were. The waters accumulated where the priests were till the people had all passed over; but where the people were the waters

receded. So here the cherubims stood on the south side—that is, the gospel side. There is the altar in the north, where the fire is to descend. And then, again, you will find in the end of this book that when Ezekiel is led to represent the gospel as a river, this river comes out on the south side, not on the north. It is not by the law; there is the sacrifice there; but the river comes out on the south side. These two opposite cardinal points represent the law and the gospel: the one the symbol of winter, the other of summer. The cherubims stood on the right side. And it is no small mercy, friends, to be on the right side. The Lord places his people on the right side while they are here; that is, he makes them leave law ground, and take their stand upon gospel ground; and those that take their stand upon gospel ground shall never be moved; so that they are on the right side. They are on the right side in another sense—they are on the side of God's blessed truth, and being on the side of his truth, they are on the right side. And what shall we say to the last great day, when the whole human race will then be severed into two, the one on the left hand, the other on the right? So that it is indeed an infinite mercy to be on the right side. See, then, their position—on the south, they take their stand upon gospel ground in contrast to law ground. Can anything be more clear than this? Then the next thing is the association of these living creatures with the eternities of the gospel. Here are the four wheels in a transverse form, forming a globe. These wheels are what the ancients called the circles of eternity. The ancients, like ourselves, could not find any better idea by which to represent to their minds eternity than a circle—that that has no beginning, that has no end. Now these living creatures were thus one with these wheels, these circles of eternity. And is it not just so now? I know not what I should do without this, there does not appear to me to be any gospel that can be saving to man if you take away the eternity of it. If my soul be immortal, which it is, and will have to live for ever, what would be the love of God to me if it were not eternal? What would being chosen to salvation be if that choice were to stand of works? It would soon come to nought. My election stands not of works, but of grace, and stands for ever. This is another representation, then, of their position. "And the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels;" so the Holy Spirit is the life of the great truths of the everlasting gospel of the blessed God. And they were full of eyes—the wheels were full of eyes, and the people too; just to show that the people of God should not be as the horse nor as the mule, of no understanding, but that they should be guided by that understanding that the Lord gives them; so that they should know the truth, and the truth should make them free. But you find another point in their position, and that is that they were associated with the eternal Three. Here is God the Father's presence on the throne; here is the man clothed with linen amid the wheels, representing Jesus Christ; and here is the Spirit of the living God; so that these living creatures are sweetly associated with the eternal Three. And I may say that the longer I live, the more I seem attached in my soul to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, there is something in it so beautiful and delightful. If you for one moment call in question the doctrine of the Trinity, you then call in question the personal deity of the Saviour; and if you got rid of the personal deity of the Saviour, where would be the efficacy of his atonement, the divinity of his righteousness, the dignity of his person? yea, further, what would be his right to be worshipped?—yea—I do not like to go too far, lest I should say something that it is not proper to say; but I had almost said the Saviour himself (one trembles to say the word) must have been one of the greatest deceivers that ever lived in the world if he were not God. He declared that he was. Why, when Thomas said, "My Lord and my God," Jesus knew that Thomas meant him, and he did not deny it, but he blessed

Thomas in his recognition of his Godhead, his wondrous person. The Lord ever keep us sound in the doctrine of the Trinity; in the personality and sovereignty of the Father, and of the Saviour, and of the Eternal Spirit; nevertheless these three are one, one existency, one nature, one mind, one will, one counsel, and one in everything in the great economy of our eternal welfare. Can we doubt, then, who these living creatures are? One more point;—they are associated with the rainbow. Here was the rainbow over their heads; and this rainbow was the symbol of the covenant that the Lord made with all living creatures; and this was a typical covenant, to represent the certainty of the abolition of the curse. “As I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee.”

I will now go to the New Testament, to show who these cherubims are, beyond all dispute. I am assured in my own mind that whether we consider their four wings, their faces, or any other part of the description given of them, upon which we have already had sermons that are in print, and therefore it is unnecessary here to enter into detail—I am assured that the Christian answers to them all as clearly as anything can well be. Now we go to the 5th of Revelation; and we read that when John saw no one to take the Old Testament, and carry out its gracious predictions to the salvation of sinners, he wept much; and there seemed to be a kind of silence, and trembling, and unhappiness. Presently the voice came, “Weep not; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.” His mediatorial work in the perfection of it opens the book, and explains everything. I defy any man under the heavens to bring an Old Testament prediction that is not opened up by the priesthood of Christ. If the seed of the woman was to bruise the serpent’s head, did not Christ do that? And if a priest was to arise that should be a priest eternally, does not the Saviour’s finished work answer to that, as it does indeed to everything else? When this was proclaimed, then the four-and-twenty elders, the representatives of the Church, and the four beasts, which ought to have been translated four living creatures;—I have but one out of several translations, but I have one by me where a learned man renders it in that way, and calls our translation a beastly translation for rendering it “four beasts,” and I think it is. Here, then, Ezekiel’s four living creatures and these four living creatures represent the people of God from all kindreds, tongues, and peoples—from the four corners of the earth. When it was proclaimed that the Lion of the tribe of Juda had prevailed to unseal the book, the voice seems to say to them,—

“Your harps, ye trembling saints,
Down from the willows take;
Loud to the praise of love divine
Bid every string awake.”

“And they fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps.” What do these harps mystically mean? The testimonies of the gospel; and each testimony charms the believer’s soul, calms his troubled breast, soothes his sorrows away. “Bring forth the fatted calf;” and they had music and dancing, and the music made the poor prodigal forget his sins and his sorrows, and made him happy. So the harps of the everlasting gospel are indeed music to our souls. “And golden vials.” These golden vials represent two things; in substance but one thing, but it may be divided into two. First, the golden vials represent their new creatureship. Their old creatureship is an earthen vessel, easily broken. Ah, by what mere trifles do some of our fellow-creatures meet with their death! Such and such a one was killed by the merest trifle. Earthen vessels, poor brittle things, snapped in a moment. But these golden vials represent the new creatureship, something more than mortal, something

more than earthly. And it also represents the sterling reality of their character. 23rd of Job. Job had not found out the modern secret of coming to God and casting his care upon him just as he pleased. Job had not discovered the modern secret of falling flat on the promise, and finding God when he may and how he may. He trieth me, but "when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold." There is the golden vial, to represent the sterling reality of his character. But how do you know you shall come forth as gold, Job? I know it by these four things. First, "My foot hath held his steps." Now for the word "foot" put the word "faith" there. Remember that Job was a believer; he had perfection in Christ. "My foot hath held his steps;" that is, my faith hath held his testimonies; and they may well be called steps, for it is by the testimonies of God that we go on step by step, step by step, from strength to strength, till we shall arrive where perfect strength is. David saith, "I have stuck"—I like that word; it is a plain, good old Saxon word; even a poor creature like myself can understand it,—"I have stuck unto thy testimonies;" would not let them go. "My foot hath held his steps." Then Job adds, "His way have I kept." His way—what is that? My Redeemer is the way; "I know that my Redeemer liveth." I bring in the apostle Paul to help me here; he saith, "I have kept the faith." "His way have I kept, and not declined." He would not go back from Christ to seek some other way.

"Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips." What is his commandment? It is this,—that ye believe on him, and that ye love one another. "I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food." Well, but, Job, your food is essential to you. Not so essential as God's mercy, as God's promise; and if I were to go without food, and starve to death, that would not send my soul to hell; that would kill only the body, which will soon die of itself; but take away the word of the Lord, then I should be lost. Ah, however good the Lord may be to us in providence, yet that goodness will not bear comparison with the goodness of his everlasting love to us in Christ Jesus. Therefore the blessed and glorious gospel of God, these words of his mouth, are sweeter than anything else can be. There is no bitterness of which you can be the subject which the words of his mouth cannot sweeten—yea, extract the bitter—yea, turn the bitter into sweet. Now, saith Job, "I shall come forth as gold." So then they had golden vials, to denote that they were new creatures, and to denote the reality of their character. These are the living creatures, the same as here in Ezekiel. And these vials were "full of odours, which are the prayers of saints." It is only the golden vial that is full of prayer.

Perhaps as a new creature you are a very little one, and therefore a very few prayers are as much as your poor heart will hold at present, and perhaps your faith is weak; yet if you can say, "The desire of my soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee;" well, such flowers as these never grew in nature's garden; such desires as these never did and never will arise from the flesh; they arise from the work of God in the soul. But then, say you, these vials were "full of odours," and I feel no savour; I am a poor, savourless, insipid creature. Go on to the 8th chapter; there you will find the mediatorial angel, Jesus Christ, "and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne." Ah, what poor, weak, feeble, insipid prayers are mine until the incense of Jesu's name makes them savoury to God, pleasant and acceptable to God! Now mark, these four living creatures (and there is no question about who they are, you find them singing what no others can sing; besides, angels are not praying creatures in the sense there represented)—these four living creatures and "the four-and-twenty elders fell down before the Lamb; and they sung a new song, saying,

Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof; for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us." Will that decide the matter? I think so. 10th of Revelation,—“As he hath declared to his servants the prophets,” so the Book of the Revelation is taken from the Old Testament, and “it is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.” You must go to the Old Testament and find it out. And therefore Ezekiel’s vision of the four living creatures and that of John in the Revelation are one and the same thing. “Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests; and we shall reign on the earth.” These are the living creatures. What do we say to the deliverance from the whirlwind, the cloud, and the fire? What do we say to this position on the south side of the altar, to this sympathy with the circles of eternity, the truths of the everlasting gospel? What do we say to this association with the eternal Three, to these golden vials, to this heavenly song? Is there anything strange in it? Not to those of you that know the Lord; and if it be strange to any of you, it does not follow that it shall continue to be so. If you are concerned for eternal things, you will by and by enter into these things; and the wider your range of Scripture knowledge—I mean, of course, spiritual knowledge—the more light you have concerning Christ and the everlasting covenant, the more spiritually-minded will you be, the more you will love, serve, and adore him. The reason we love him so little is because we know so little of him; and the reason we shall love him in perfection in heaven is because we shall there know him in perfection.

Now John the Divine, like Ezekiel, saw that these four living creatures were nothing else but sinners gathered up east, west, north, and south, who should form at the last that mighty multitude which no man could number; so John looks forward, and says, “And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth”—that is, the righteous dead,—“and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.” Now, what “every creature” is this, think you? Every new creature; not every creature of the human race—would that it were so!—but we must not rebel against God’s sovereignty; it must mean new creatures, born from heaven, having in them a heavenly life, destined for heaven, belonging to heaven, and who shall inhabit heaven for ever and ever. And every one of these new creatures—those who are in heaven, those who are on the earth and under the earth—the righteous dead—and on the sea—some sailing on the ocean that are lovers of God—“and all that are in them;” good men have been drowned in the sea, and their very bones, their very dust hath a voice—they all unite in acknowledging the blessing, the honour, the glory, and the power of the blessed God. And now mark,—“And the four living creatures said, Amen. And the four-and-twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.” Is there any difficulty, then, in understanding these things? Ah, what a blessed thing to have reason to believe that we are a part of these living creatures!

I will just notice two more scriptures, and then I must close. We find these same living creatures, in the 43rd chapter of this book, in the city of God; we will say something more about that another time. And then in the Book of the Revelation, while John speaks of them in his 4th and 5th chapters, you will find them in the 19th chapter amidst the triumphs of the gospel, just showing that the Lord has taken care of them. So that as they stand in Christ they are the same, “their appearances and themselves; they went every one straight forward.”