

CHAPTER THREE

THE PURPOSE OF GOD

THE purpose of God is SELF-MANIFESTATION. This has been His design from eternity, and it has been showing itself since the first creating word was spoken. Indeed, of necessity this always must be His purpose, and that just because He is God. It includes within it other purposes; but it is itself the chief and the ultimate, to which all others are pointing, and in which they shall find their completion. Let me explain what I mean.

I take that small seed which the winds are sporting with, and I bury it in the ground. I water it, and watch over it to mark its progress and see what it contains. Before long it shoots above the soil, putting forth its fresh foliage to the sun. Then, in the progress of time, it strengthens itself and rises upwards, spreading out its branches into a waving tree. In other words, that particle of vital dust which we call seed, has opened itself out, and displayed the amazing treasures which were lying in it undeveloped and unknown. This is *self-manifestation*.

I take that unsightly root which is lying at my feet, and I carefully lodge it in the soil. Soon it springs up and opens out its treasures, disclosing the lily in its fragrance and beauty. Who would have imagined that hues so bright, and fragrance so rich, had all been wrapped up in that shapeless form? Yet it was so; and the lily, in all its loveliness, was but the unfolded root! This is *self-manifestation*.

These are but poor illustrations of the great truth we set out with announcing. They refer to objects of a lower scale; unconscious and involuntary in all their processes of self-development; yet still they are sufficiently exact to make our meaning known. For that which all creation is doing, according to its creature-laws, for the glory of the Creator, is

that very thing which Jehovah is doing in regard to Himself, and for His own glory.

God's purpose, then, is self-manifestation, or self-revelation. It is to bear testimony to His own character. Creation in every form, animate or inanimate, is God's *witness*; the utterance of His mind and heart. His design is not merely to make known *that He is*, but *what He is*; to exhibit Himself the I AM, the Being of Beings, in whom all being is wrapped up, and from whom all forms of being spring; to unbosom and reveal Himself fully and perfectly; not partially and in glimpses, but completely and abidingly; by bringing forth into view and making visible all that is glorious, as well as all that is gracious, in the infinite and invisible Godhead. God does not create a world simply because He can do so, and wishes to put forth His power, but because He desires to bring out to view those riches of His own being and character which had otherwise been hidden. Again, God did not create this earth of ours a fair and happy world at first simply because He loved to see a fair world inhabited by happy creatures, but because, in that beauty and blessedness, His own character was most fully revealed, and His own glory most brightly reflected.

How He did this before man was created we know not, or at least we know little. It was through the medium of another order of creatures, and in another region than this of ours. Angels were the creatures through whom He manifested Himself; and it was in heaven that this manifestation was given. They were the eldest-born of creation, and their abode the very palace of the Eternal One. From that center the first ray of self-manifestation shot forth, and the Invisible and Incomprehensible began to make preparations for making Himself seen and known.

Whether He may be at this moment manifesting Himself by means of other races inhabiting those orbs that, like the dew-drops of the morning, lie scattered over infinite space, as if to catch and reflect at least the *material* glory of heaven; whether other processes of self-manifestation may be going on in regions far beyond our vision or thought, we know not. He has given us no intimation that any such process is now in action; nor have we the slightest evidence to prove that *as yet* there are, in these starry regions, races of intelligent creatures existing save those of angels and of men. That such will be the ultimate issue; that every atom of creation throughout the universe shall subserve the mighty purpose of Divine self-manifestation, we doubt not; but it would appear that, meanwhile, God is confining His operations to one special region of His dominions, concentrating His thoughts upon one particular process, out of which His one vast, original, all-comprehensive plan of a God-manifesting universe is to be evolved. It is on the soil of this small planet that He is sowing His seed, and raising, as in a nursery, those plants which are yet to clothe a glad universe with their everlasting foliage. It is out of the mountains of this planet that He is showing the stones with which He is yet to build for Himself a temple in every star of the firmament. It is here that He is constructing the materials, and sketching the design for His palace. It is here that He is weaving and adorning His robes of royal state with materials furnished by this orb. It is of the gold of this earth that He is fashioning a scepter for the hand, and a crown for the head of Him who is to be sovereign of the universe. It is from among the lowly dwellers of this narrow region that He is choosing for that King a Bride to share His glory and His love; nay, it is out of this very earth that this King himself is to arise, or rather, we should say, has arisen; for He who is to have dominion hereafter as King of kings and Lord of lords, is an inhabitant of this planet, the native of a Judean village, Jesus of Nazareth, the woman's seed!

But, without entering further on the question as to the existence of other spheres and other processes of self-manifestation, there can be no doubt that this earth, in the meantime, is the special one. It is here that this process is going on just now, and it is here that preparations are making for larger and brighter scenes of self-manifestation than eye hath yet seen or ear hath heard. God has been carrying on this process step by step for these last six thousand years. The work is still advancing; the plan is not yet consummated; but the rudiments of it lie all before us; the stones of the fabric lie scattered around; and prophecy unfolds to us much regarding the coming consummation, and presents to us in no faint colors the picture of the glorious reality which from the beginning God has had in view, and which shall, before long, be given to the gaze of the universe, as God's own perfect representation of Himself. For, though storms and darkness must intervene, yet still it is a bright issue to which prophets point, and towards which all things are tending! Beyond that saddening gloom, beyond these dreary wastes, there presents itself, in the prophetic picture, an infinite ocean of unimagined splendor, over whose surface shall be spread out all their various fullness the perfections of manifested Godhead in everlasting sunshine, for holy beings to gaze upon, and for Jehovah himself to delight in, world without end! Then shall the wilderness and the solitary place be glad; and then shall the "primal eldest curse," which has sterilized the soil and covered every region with its blight, flow back from off earth's surface; the creature shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption [Rom. 8:20-21], and this world stand forth again a beautiful creation, more glorious than when it sprang from the fiat of God.

The purpose of self-manifestation develops itself chiefly in connexion with two great events, the first and second advents of Christ. Round these two points all other events cluster. From these two *foci* all light is radiating, and round them all events revolve. It is only by keeping our eye on these that we can understand the mighty scheme, and enter into the mind of God respecting it, giving to

each event its proper place, order, connexion, and value. If we either overlook these or choose other centers, we cannot fail to perplex ourselves and misunderstand the scheme. They are *God's* centers; and none which man may fix upon or deem more important can supercede them. They may not be those that man would naturally choose; but still they are those on which God has hung everything; and man can gain nothing but confusion and darkness by rejecting either, or elevating other points to their level.

Such questions as the following naturally occur: To what extent was this manifestation made in creation? What was the exact design of man's fall in connexion with it? How much has been brought out and displayed from the Fall to the first coming of Christ? How much was manifested at that advent? What have been the extent and mode of manifestation from the first to the second advent? What is that second advent to bring to light? What are the events subsequent to it to reveal? These are not queries of vain curiosity. They are weighty and solemn, demanding the most strenuous and prayerful thought; the most patient and profound study of the Word of God. They are questions pointing totally in a different direction from that which the efforts of philosophy have ever taken, questions which philosophy has never thought of putting, questions which philosophy cannot solve.

Into the investigation of these points I do not mean to enter. They are wide and vast, needing treatises and volumes, not mere pages or chapters, for their elucidation. They may, however, suggest themes for the Bible student, which may lead to a fuller understanding of the mind and ways of God.

The object of the Scriptures is to tell us of God, His character and His doings; and, in declaring these, they introduce man the sinner, making known also his character, his doings, his connection with God. All the recorded actions of man the sinner bring out his own character in various aspects. All God's actions and words in dealing with man display His character in its manifold aspects. At each step, something new of God is seen.

And all the *evil* that has been brought to light in man has only been the means of bringing to light the *good* that is in God. At every point the evil has been met by the good, and overcome. The depths of the former are inconceivable; the resources of the latter, which have been drawn forth to meet these, are still more so, being truly infinite and divine. The history of these past six thousand years is rich in these deep lessons. It is our wisdom to study them thus.

But the Bible discoveries of God and of the creature do not merely keep pace with the present moment of our history. They go far beyond the present. To say that all the past is full of these displays; to say that each day's events are continuing to develop them more and more, is not to tell the whole truth. God has furnished us with hints as to the future developments which we are to expect, and into the meaning of which we may in some measure enter, though the wide compass of the visions, the glory, and the grace which they are intended to exhibit, can only be fully comprehended by those whose eyes shall look upon them.

We call them hints, for, in truth, they are no more. But they are not conjectures or dreams; they point to "scenes surpassing fable, and yet true." Man, in looking to the past, thinks he has uttered a profound maxim in saying that "truth is strange, stranger than fiction;" but the days to come will illustrate this in a way such as we have never yet imagined. God has arrows in His quiver, sharper and more destructive than those which for so many melancholy ages have been piercing the hearts of the King's enemies; the last still the sharpest and most destructive. He has "bright designs," deep-treasured up in His "unfathomable mines of never-failing skill;" the last still the brightest and most glorious! These prophetic hints are but glimpses of coming splendor; yet what a splendor! What a future do they disclose! What a universe!—bright all over with the effulgence of manifested Godhead! Perfection everywhere; perfection all the more perfect because coming forth from previous imperfection and ruin.

God has thus not only manifested Himself by telling us what He has done in this world of ours, but by making known what He yet *intends to do*. He has not hidden from us what He designs to accomplish, but, by admitting us into His counsels, He has made us more fully know Himself, and see, even now, somewhat of those features of His character which shall yet come into visible development in the ages to come. How much may we learn of God even here, standing afar off, and looking into the distant future, of which we can only have the dim outline presented to us! But how much more shall we learn hereafter, when we shall see these things as they are, and Him as He is!

The history of the past is not written with great minuteness of detail. It did not seem fit to the wisdom of God to do so; neither would this have been practicable or profitable. What is given us in Scripture is not a full narrative, neither is it an abridgment; it is what has been called *selective* history. It is entirely episodic; but then the episodes are of God's own selection. The events and characters singled out, and recorded as worthy of memorial, are such as God saw to be most expressive of His purpose; most fitted to carry out the original design He had in view. God is the selector of these, and He is at the same time the Being for the illustration of whose character these fragments have been chosen and preserved. Now what is true of the historical record, is equally so of the prophetic. It is even more strictly selective and episodic; and it is also for the same reasons and upon the same principles as in the former case. It is God himself, the self-manifesting, self-revealing Jehovah, that we also there behold.¹

As both history and prophecy are written upon this principle, we mean that of selection, there is peculiar care required for their right understanding. There are so many chasms everywhere, so many links not apparent, that the tracing of a complete and correct outline

¹ See, on some of the above points, the able *Lectures on Prophecy*, by the Rev. James Kelly.

becomes a matter of extreme difficulty, and calls for minute and patient scrutiny.

There are various plans for connecting these links which God has seen fit to leave thus separate. It is plain that man's reason can help us but little, for it cannot enter into the mind of God: "the world by wisdom knew not God" [I Cor. 1:21]. Nor will the completest theological system carry us over the difficulty; for systems are, at the best, imperfect, and at so many points leave us helpless, running us up at once to the purpose of a sovereign God. Besides, we are too apt to stretch systems beyond their legitimate end, and, instead of bringing them into contact with the Word, to be molded into more accurate and perfect form, we bring the Word into contact with them, that it may be interpreted according to their laws; instead of fashioning the human according to the form of the divine, we too often cast the divine into the mold of the human, making texts to bend to systems, instead of systems to texts.²

The true way of getting at the connected view of God's purposes, as spread out before us in these prophetic selections, is to keep our eye upon His design, to get hold of His idea. What is it that makes the vast and intricate machinery of the manufacturing process intelligible? It is being acquainted with its principle and object. The knowledge of God's leading purpose is the real key to all the apparent discordances of His Word. Keeping that purpose before us, we shall be able to see the unity and connection of events which otherwise seem hopelessly perplexed and corrupt. Man's systems are confined, awkward, angular, sure, in many cases, not exactly to *fit* many texts, if too rigidly applied. But THE IDEA which they contain, in so far as it is really God's will, will admit of a much more perfect application, without violence done to any portion of His Word. Even with reference to the past, schemes and

² This is a most significant and appropriate comment, especially as it comes from such a solid Calvinist of deeply rooted Reformed convictions. B.E.H.

systems will often be found at fault; much more in reference to the future. They are often insufficient measuring-rods for Genesis, and much more for Ezekiel or the Apocalypse.

We do not dislike system. Far from it. We count it right and useful. And could we get hold of Jehovah's system, all would be well. In so far as our system's approach to this, they are good and helpful. But then, in so far as they fall aside from it, in so far as they are dissimilar to it, to that extent they not only obscure our views of it, but prevent our understanding of Scripture, nay, pervert our interpretations. A perfect system would harmonize with every jot and tittle of the Word of God, but an imperfect one will necessarily be found at variance with many portions of it. In proportion as our system approximates towards God's, in that proportion will such dissonances cease, and the whole system be in unison with the whole Word. But unless we are prepared to maintain that our system is complete in every joint and ligature, as well as entirely accurate in the symmetry of its structure, we shall find how perilous it is to set it up as our infallible standard, by which we are to weigh or measure the meaning of each passage, pronouncing interpretations sound or unsound according to their agreement with or opposition to our scheme.

Begin at the lowest in the scale of systems, the Socinian. It fits in to so few passages of Scripture, and is at variance with so many, that its meagerness and unscriptural nature soon become apparent. Whatever man's reason may think of it as a system, still it is at war with such a mass of Scripture that either it or the Bible must give way. The only idea in it that is worth, is that God is ONE. This is what it *professes* to maintain. And the unity of God is a scriptural truth. But there Socinianism halts. That idea will carry us a certain way; but what light does it cast upon those passages which speak of the Son being God, and the Holy Spirit being God? None. There it gives way. At the moment we begin to apply the system to such passages as those alluded to, its lameness is felt. It is plainly and grossly defective.

Ascend a higher level. Take Arminianism. It will fit into a far wider range of passages than Socinianism, but then it is still at war with many. It has purged itself of the grosser blasphemies of the other, but still it has retained so many imperfections that, when brought into contact with a numerous class of texts, either *it* must be greatly modified, or *they* must be explained away. Its range is too narrow for the infinite compass of Scripture. It has not a little of truth in it; some of its ideas are scriptural: but it is so sadly imperfect in many points, that it gives way when brought to expound Scripture. It is not the mere shape and mold of the system that is defective. That would be of less importance. But some of the ideas which it embodies are inconsistent, not only with special texts, but with God's great pervading idea and purpose, self-manifestation. It fails to express this mighty idea. It stammers grievously and incurably in attempting to utter this grand, original, external purpose of the Triune Jehovah.

But rise to a loftier level still. Look at Calvinism. It is, in its connected shape, man's system; yet we believe it to be a system containing and giving utterance to more of the great ideas of the Bible than any other that has ever been chiseled out by the hand of man. In its leading ideas it is divine; in its formulae for expressing them, it is human. In the former respect we may call it complete; in the latter we may safely admit its imperfection, an imperfection necessarily arising from man's efforts to express in his own words and develop in his intellectual forms the thoughts and purposes of the eternal Jehovah. With the former, we believe no text will ever really be found at variance; with the latter, not a few, peradventure, may be so found. The former we would carry with us everywhere in our researches into Scripture, assured that thus there will be light shed upon our path; the latter we require to apply more cautiously. For we may, with little confidence say, that while no passage of the Bible will be found at strife with Calvinism, some passages may be discovered not perfectly harmonizing with Calvinistic formulae.

There is no system that gives so free and rich an utterance to that grand purpose, that mighty idea of God, self-manifestation, as what is called Calvinism. Every part of it is built upon this, and brings forth this into conspicuous view. And it is just because this system never loses sight of God's original idea, that it is so useful and so invaluable as our guide to the exposition of the Word of God. Whatever part of Scripture you are seeking to expound; historical, preceptive, doctrinal, or prophetic; take it with you, and you will find the steady, accurate light which it casts even upon hard passages, as well as

the satisfactory way in which it furnishes us with links for connecting together what appears sometimes isolated and disordered.

Prophecy no less than doctrine receives light from this system. The future as well as the past bears its impress in every part. From the beginning to the end of God's workings in His universe, the same principles are acted on, the same idea is developed, the same purpose is unfolding itself—self-manifestation. In the ages to come, God is the same ALL AND IN ALL, and man the same nothing, that they have been in the generations that are past.

I call the world's Redeemer mine;
 He lives, who died for me, I know,
 Who bought my soul with blood divine;—
 Jesus shall reappear below,
 Stand in that dreadful day unknown,
 And fix in earth his heavenly throne.

Charles Wesley
on Job 19:25