

VII

THE KINGDOM AND EVERLASTING LIFE

Here it will be well to investigate another point. We have already seen, that the members of Christ are to be formed into a Kingdom, and to live and reign with Him. Accordingly, in writing to the Colossians, Paul, after mentioning Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus, says ;— "These only are my fellow-workers unto the Kingdom of God, men that have been a comfort unto me" (Col. 4:11). In another Epistle, he speaks of the hope that the Thessalonians would "be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God," for which, also, they were suffering (2 Thess. 1:5). The Kingdom, then, was the reward to which these early Christians aspired.

It is, however, important to see that we have a clear conception of the Kingdom. For Daniel, also, speaks of a Kingdom which the God of Heaven will set up upon the earth, and which will destroy all others, and will stand for ever (Dan. 2:44). This is, undoubtedly, the Millennial Kingdom of Israel. Is it, then, identical with that for which we are bidden to hope?

Apparently not: yet the two are parts of one great whole. The relations between them may be inferred from a passage of Isaiah, wherein the prophet declares, that the Lord will punish two governing bodies—

"the Host of the High Ones on high, and the Kings of the Earth upon the earth"
(Isa. 24:21).

Now, the former of these are, doubtless, Satan and his angels, the present spiritual rulers of the earth; while the latter are the kings of Christendom. Hence we may infer, that God's present arrangements for this world comprise two governing bodies, a spiritual or heavenly, and a human or earthly. And, since both of these bodies have failed to rule in righteousness, both will be deposed by the Lord Jesus, Who, together with His Church, will then take the place of the former, and will establish the Twelve Tribes of Israel in the room of the latter.

These governments will form the great Kingdom of God, which will thus consist of two spheres, the heavenly and the earthly, the last mentioned being the Millennial Kingdom of Israel, while the other is identical with the glorified Church. And hence it is that Paul cries out with exultant faith; —

"The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me unto His Heavenly Kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18).

The glorified Church, then, which is Christ's Body, and the Heavenly Kingdom of God, are merely different expressions for the same assembly. Since, therefore, the whole Church must be revealed in glory at the Lord's appearing, at which time also the Kingdom will be set up, it is clear that no one can become a member of the Heavenly Kingdom, unless he has part in the First Resurrection.

And since, again, as we have already proved from the words of Paul to the Philippians, the attainment of the First Resurrection does not follow as a necessary result from simple faith in Christ, but must be won, in the strength of the Lord, by self-denial and faithfulness after conversion—since this is so, it appears that membership in Christ's Body and a place in the Heavenly Kingdom are a reward for works done after conversion, being, indeed, "the things which God has prepared for them that love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9-10).

This conclusion will be found, not merely to be in accord with all other Scriptures, but also to throw much light upon certain obscure passages. And, if we run through the New Testament, we shall find, that, while simple faith and eternal life are linked together, the Kingdom is invariably connected, directly or indirectly, with the fruits of faith, with love, work, and conduct.

As an instance of the first of these cases, we may quote the following words of the Lord; —

"And this is the will of Him That sent Me, that, of all that which He hath given Me, I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the Last Day. For this is the will of My Father, that every one that contemplateth the Son, and believeth on Him, should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the Last Day" (John 6:39, 40).

Now, the first of these verses, as we have already seen, is explained by the second. Those who are given to the Lord come to Him, because His Father draws them; and so contemplate Him, and believe on Him. To all such, eternal life is assured by the very definite promise that follows: they can never be judged for their lives, because they have already passed from death unto life; and, consequently, the Lord will raise them up on the Last Day.

But which is the Last Day? It is, of course, the day of the General Resurrection, and of the Great White Throne. All doubt as to the correctness of this interpretation may be speedily removed by a reference to the solemn words of the Lord; —

"He that rejecteth Me, and receiveth not My sayings, hath one that judgeth him: the Word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the Last Day" (John 12:48).

Here it is certain that the reference is to the judgment of the Great White Throne; for no despiser of the Lord Jesus will have part in the First Resurrection.

Hence, to those who believe on Him, but go no further, the Lord does, indeed, give eternal life; but the fruition of it will not begin until the Last Day, until the thousand years of the Millennial reign are ended. Such persons will not, therefore, be permitted to enter the Kingdom of the Heavens.

And so, whenever mere believing is in question, without any reference to what should follow it, we shall find it connected with eternal life, but not with the Kingdom. The Kingdom, on the other hand, as we remarked above, is always set before us, either directly or indirectly, as the reward of the conduct or works of the saved.

For the poor in spirit, and those who have endured persecution for righteousness' sake, will inherit it ((Matt. 5:3, 10). Unless our righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, we cannot enter into it (Matt. 5:20). A mere assertion that Jesus is our Lord will not procure admission for us (Matt. 7:21): the forceful take it by force (Matt. 11:12). No one who looks back is fit for it (Luke 9:62): and except a man be born again, he cannot even see it (John 3:3): and except he be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into it (John 3:5). We can reach it only by passing through much tribulation (Acts 14:22): the condition is, that, if we endure with Him, we shall also reign with Him (2 Tim. 2:12).

Very significant, too, is the reason which the Lord gives for His promise to the disciples on the eve of His death;

"Ye are they which have continued with Me in My temptations; and I appoint unto you a Kingdom, even as My Father appointed unto Me" (Luke 22:28, 29).

Because they had willingly shared in the trials of their Master, therefore the Kingdom was theirs. Similarly, Peter, after enumerating the qualities that must be and abound in believers, adds; —

"For if ye do these things, ye shall never stumble. For thus shall be richly supplied unto you the entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10, 11).

Since, then, the Kingdom is the reward of works done after conversion, we are not surprised to find that only the worthy can obtain it. So, as Paul tells the Thessalonians, God, by exposing them to persecution, had given them an opportunity of exercising faith and patience, in order that they might "be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God," for which they were suffering (2 Thess. 1:4, 5). Nor must we omit to notice, that the Lord Himself speaks of those "that have been accounted worthy to obtain that age and the resurrection from the dead" (Luke 20:35). For, since "that age" is coupled with the resurrection from the dead, or the First Resurrection, it is clear that the former must be the Millennial Age, during which those who have part in the First Resurrection will reign with Christ, while the rest of the dead will not be raised until the Last Day (Rev. 20:4, 5).

By this utterance, the Lord not only declares that the worthy alone will enter into the Kingdom, but also gives us the clue to another of His sayings, which will be more fully examined by-and-by. In explaining to Peter what those shall have who have left all to follow Himself, He says, that they "shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life." ~ Here, then, it is to be observed, that the reward is placed before eternal life. And this points again to the fact, that the reward will be given during the thousand years which precede the Last Day. The same lesson seems also to be taught in the parable of the "Labourers in the Vineyard," of which we shall have more to say elsewhere.

Seeing, then, that the saved are involved in some uncertainty in regard to their reward—though they are sure of their salvation—the Scriptures, as we might reasonably expect, do not fail to warn them of the danger to which they are exposed. We have already seen that transgressors of various kinds—that is, of course, transgressors after conversion—such as those whose righteousness does not exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, or those who have not been born of water and the Spirit, cannot enter into the Kingdom. So, again, when our Lord declares that the poor in spirit, and those who have passed through persecution for righteousness' sake, will be admitted, He manifestly implies that the high-minded, and the cowardly who avoid persecution at the cost of faith, will be rigorously excluded. And there are many other passages from which similar inferences may be drawn.

But there are also warnings of another type. For instance, Paul, after reminding the Colossians that the Lord had reconciled them by His death, in order that He might present them “holy, and without blemish, and unreprouable, before Him,” adds the very significant words, “if, at least, ye continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel which ye heard” (Col. 1:21-23). Are we, then, to regard the “if” as meaningless? Or does it furnish us with a fearful comment on the case of those who did run well, but do so no longer; or of those whose love grows gradually colder as their years increase? We cannot doubt that it does; and are not, therefore, surprised when the same Apostle exhorts us, in reference to obedience, to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). Nor is he singular in giving such advice ; for Peter also forcibly urges the same thing, when he says; —

“And if ye call on Him as Father, Who without respect of persons judgeth according to each man’s work, pass the time of your sojourning in fear” (1 Peter 1:17).

Have such searching passages as these received the attention which they certainly demand from all believers? Alas no: they are almost entirely disregarded. And so, we see the nominal churches filled with Laodicean complacency and self-satisfaction, while we know not where to find the man that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at God’s word.[†] But there are many similar notes of warning in the New Testament, and two of them, at least, are so striking and instructive that they may claim each a chapter for itself.

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