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The Kingdom of God

THE REV. CANON A. ST. JOHN THORPE, M.A.

DR. EDERSHEIM in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, writes, "Concerning this 'Kingdom of Heaven,' which was the great message of John, and the great work of Christ Himself, we may here say that it is the whole Old Testament sublimated, and the whole New Testament realized. The idea of it did not lie hidden in the Old, to be opened up in the New Testament—as did the mystery of its realization. But this rule of heaven and Kingship of Jehovah was the very substance of the Old Testament; the object of the calling and mission of Israel; the meaning of all its ordinances, whether civil or religious; the underlying idea of all its institutions. It explained alike the history of the people, the dealings of God with them, and the prospects opened up by the prophets. Without it the Old Testament could not be understood; it gave perpetuity to its teaching, and dignity to its representations. This constituted alike the real contrast between Israel and the nations of antiquity, and Israel's real title to distinction. Thus the whole Old Testament was the preparatory presentation of the rule of heaven, and of the Kingship of its Lord."

Going back, therefore, to the writers of the Old Testament, we find the generally accepted belief that the universe is God's dominion, and that all His creatures are under His power, even natural phenomena obeying His will. As for instance in Ps. xviii., we read: "Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations also of the hills moved and were shaken, because He was wroth" (verse 7). "The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave His voice; hail stones and coals of fire" (verse 13, and again in Ps. civ.). He is Lord too, of men and nations, for we read, "The Kingdom is Jehovah's, and He is ruler over the nations" (Ps. xxii. 28), and in Isa. xl. 22, "He sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers. . . . He bringeth princes to nothing."

But apart from this general aspect of the Kingdom of God, an outstanding revelation of the Old Testament is how God chose Abraham and his seed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth: how this family multiplied under Egyptian bondage, and how He led them into the promised land and adopted them as "a people for His own possession above all peoples upon the face of the earth" (Deut. vii. 6), giving them the promise, "Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." Together with this revelation of God's choice of Abraham, there grew up the monotheistic belief of the Hebrew people, which survived all the competition of surrounding polytheism. At first Jehovah was mentioned as the greatest of all gods, as when we read in Exodus xv. 11, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" or again in Chapter xviii. 11, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods: for in the thing wherein they dealt proudly He was above them." But when we come to the prophets, we find Jehovah proclaimed as the only God, the Holy One of Israel Whose glory fills the earth, as in Isa. vi. 3, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory." And again Daniel writes, "The Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will" (Dan. iv. 32). Together with such beliefs there grew up the strong hope of a Messianic Kingdom, and so deeply had this teaching entered into the religious life of the Jewish people that in spite of the silence of the voice of the prophet for three hundred years, there was a common expectation of the Messiah when Christ was born.

From this summary of Old Testament teaching concerning the Kingdom of God, let us turn to the New Testament. To quote Dr. Edersheim again, he says: "According to the Rabbinic views of the time, the terms 'Kingdom,' 'Kingdom of heaven,' and 'Kingdom of God' (in the Targum on Micah iv. 7, 'Kingdom of Jehovah'), were equivalent. In fact, the word 'heaven' was very often used instead of 'God,' so as to avoid unduly familiarizing the ear with the Sacred Name. This, probably, accounts for the exclusive use of the expression 'Kingdom of Heaven' in the Gospel by St. Matthew." And Dr. Hastings in his Dictionary of the Bible says, "It may be noticed that the phrase 'Kingdom

of heaven' (or 'of the heavens') is peculiar to the Gospel of Matthew, in which it occurs about thirty times. In 2 Timothy iv. 18, we read of 'His heavenly kingdom,' but elsewhere the term employed is 'Kingdom of God.' There is no good reason to doubt that Jesus Himself made use of all these expressions, and we should not look to find any recondite or peculiar significance in any one of them. The phrase, 'Kingdom of God' occurs also four times in Matthew, and often in the other Gospels and in the Acts and Epistles." And finally Dr. Klausner, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, writes: "The expression 'Kingdom of heaven' is typically Hebrew, and this Hebrew character is apparent in its Greek form which employs the plural to translate the Hebrew dual form. The Jews of the time habitually used 'heaven' to avoid having to pronounce the name of God; so 'the Kingdom of heaven' meant 'the Kingdom of God,' or 'the Kingdom of the Almighty,' i.e., the Messianic age." Thus, have we quoted the views of a Hebrew Christian, a Gentile Christian and a Jew, all men of scholarship, on the common meaning of the terms Kingdom of God and Kingdom of heaven.

But to understand the New Testament doctrine of the Kingdom of God we need to study what our Lord says on the subject. His early preaching and that of His disciples proclaimed the Kingdom of Heaven as at hand; and to His hearers such an announcement would mean little more than that the reign of the Messiah, foretold by the prophets, was about to begin. But to learn of the true nature of the Kingdom we must study our Lord's teaching. And the first thing we may observe is that He never gave His approval of the popular Jewish opinion that a temporal prince would come to world dominion in the generally accepted sense of the term. On the other hand He does not seem to have stirred up opposition by opposing such a belief, but rather sought to inculcate a more spiritual conception of the Kingdom; as for instance when He said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John xviii. 36); and "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation" (Luke xvii. 20). Yet, on the other hand, there is something more than the thought of spiritual power in the believer, when we say in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." Dr. Griffith Thomas writes on the Lord's Prayer in his book, *The Catholic Faith*, "God's Kingdom is

His rule over hearts and lives. The prayer implies that the Kingdom, though already in existence, has not yet come in its fulness. At present it is in the hearts of His people as an invisible power (Luke xvii. 20-21); (Rom. xiv. 17); but it is yet to come as an outward and visible rule for the world. When we pray to the Father that His Kingdom may come, we are praying for the hastening of that ultimate and final day when God shall be "all in all" (I Cor. xv. 28; Matt. xiii. 33; xxvi. 29).

There are some special uses of the term Kingdom of Heaven which deserve our attention, e.g., when it is used to cover a group of people, as for instance, in the parables of the Tares and the Drag-net (Matt. xiii. 24, *et seq.*, and 47 *et seq.*), which teach that both good and evil people dwell within the kingdom, but that finally they must be separated. The conclusion is that the real children of the kingdom out of which the evil is to be taken, is the group of those whose hearts are right with God.

Another special use of the term is found in the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matt. xxi. 33, *et seq.*). At the conclusion of which our Lord says to the Jews (43), "Therefore say I unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." The thought here can only be that of the transfer of privilege and blessing which the Jews had enjoyed as God's chosen people. And again there are passages which suggest the term is synonymous with heaven, and that the Kingdom of God is the place where the righteous go after death, e.g., "It is better to enter into the Kingdom of God with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into Gehenna" (Mark ix. 47). Here the contrast suggested is that of Heaven or Hell.

However, after considering some of the special uses of the term Kingdom of God or Heaven, we return to the general view of it, as the rule of God in men's hearts and lives, one day to become the outward and visible rule for the world. In considering the Kingdom of God as such, there are several considerations to be borne in mind.

First of all our Lord's teaching concerning entrance into it. And for this our thoughts turn naturally to Christ's discourse with Nicodemus, when He said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John iii. 3).

The thought of a new birth would not be strange to Nicodemus, for he would be familiar with the Jewish thought of proselytes as "new-born." Had our Lord referred to the new birth only as applied to proselytes, Nicodemus would have understood what he meant, and there would not have been any perplexity on his part. The new birth as applied by the Jews to a proselyte was in consequence of his having entered the kingdom, but the way Christ put it revealed an entirely new aspect, viz., that the new birth was the condition of seeing the kingdom.

Again, our Lord spoke of a birth from above. Judaism could understand a new relationship between God and man, and man and man, but knew nothing of the new birth from above, as the initial step in that relationship. Thus our Lord taught that Grace is the lock which opens the door into the Kingdom of God. On the other hand some time afterwards, when in Capernaum, in response to His disciples' question, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" (Matt. xviii. 1), He replied, "Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." Thus showing that man's will is the key which fits the lock of Divine Grace, and opens the door of the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, let us pass from the condition of entry into the Kingdom of God, to a consideration of the principles and characteristics of this kingdom. Two verses which seem to sum up this part of our subject are in Heb. i. 8, 9. "But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy Kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity." Here we have three grand characteristics of the Kingdom of God: Firstly, Stability—"Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever." Secondly, Righteous government—"Righteousness is the sceptre of Thy Kingdom." Thirdly, Holy living—"Thou hast loved righteousness and hated iniquity."

I. *Stability*. When we consider the stability of the Kingdom of God, we cannot but contrast it with the transitory Kingdoms of the earth—such as the Egyptian, Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Grecian and Roman; for the territories held in the past by the rulers of these Empires are to-day being colonized by the emissaries of the Kingdom of God. In spite of the efforts of Judaism and paganism in the early Christian

centuries to prevent the setting up of the Kingdom in the hearts of men ; and in spite of the determined efforts made to-day by Communism on the one hand and nationalism on the other, to do the same thing, the stability of the Kingdom is unshaken, and we still say with confidence, " Thy Kingdom, O God, is for ever and ever."

II. *Righteous Government.* Secondly, a righteous government characterizes the Kingdom of God. In the Old Testament we read such passages as " Justice and judgment are the habitation of Thy throne," and again, referring to Israel, " What nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgements so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day." In the New Testament the righteousness of God is manifested in the infliction of the penalty of sin to the uttermost (in the willing sacrifice of Christ, Who made Himself a curse for us) because He (God) would " in no wise clear the guilty." And so we look on to that day when guilt shall be cleared away, not only from the hearts of men, but from the nations of the world, and " A king shall reign in righteousness."

III. *Holiness.* Thirdly, holiness is a characteristic of the Kingdom of God. As Hannah sang, " There is none holy as the Lord," and what she meant was—there is none holy but the Lord. Since " He is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look upon iniquity " ; those who belong to Him must be holy too. " Be ye holy, for I am holy." Thus, as citizens of that Kingdom, holiness is to characterize our lives now, and perfection at the coming of the King. " Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be : but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him ; for we shall see Him as He is " (1 John iii. 2).

In closing let it be stated that the Kingdom of God is in the heart of the believer, and because of this the Kingdom is in the world. At the same time the greater glory of the Kingdom is in the future, when the King returns in person. And it is the privilege and duty of all on earth whose " citizenship is in heaven," to witness by life and lip to the truths of the Kingdom, until that day when, " The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ ; and He shall reign for ever and ever." " Even so, come, Lord Jesus."