

SELF-DENIAL AND CROSS-BEARING CONDITIONS.

"Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me [be my follower], let him deny himself, and take up his cross." – Matt. 16:24.

GENERALLY the thought attached to this passage in the minds of Christian people is that the Lord is here laying down the terms and conditions upon which eternal torment may be escaped. This result of false teaching, received from earliest infancy, thus casts a false shadow upon very many of the utterances of our Lord and the apostles. To the Jew, however, who had no thought in his mind of eternal torment for anybody, the above utterance would have no such significance. The disciples, to whom it was addressed, received it exactly for what it says. To understand it as they did let us take their standpoint: As Jews they shared the nation's hopes, based upon the Abrahamic promise, viz., that in due time God proposed to bless all nations, and that Israel was to be his instrumentality through which the blessings would flow. We are to remember that based upon this hope all Israel was in expectation of a Messiah whose first work it would be to organize Israel in some sense of the word, and then, as its great Head and guide, bring to pass the blessed conditions.

The disciples knew that Jesus claimed to be this great Messiah, and they had left all to follow him, in order that they might have a share with him in his Kingdom, – according to his promise, a very honorable share in it, a seat in his throne. When, therefore, he addressed them on this subject in the above words nothing could have been further from their thoughts than that he should mean that only those who would conform to these strict rules would escape an eternity of torture: on the contrary, their understanding would be that all who would not conform to these rules, and be close followers of Jesus' example, would fail to share with him in the Kingdom glories and honors – fail to be associated with him as joint-heirs of the Kingdom. They certainly expected that his Kingdom, when organized, would

bless all nations, and if it would bless all other nations assuredly it would bless also the Jewish nation, out of which the Master was proposing to select his joint-heirs. From [R2615 : page 117] this standpoint our Lord's words are reasonable, and from no other standpoint.

It would be thoroughly unreasonable every way to suppose that the Lord laid down the hard and fast condition that everyone who would not become his follower and a cross-bearer to the full extent of self-denial, even of parents and children if need be, would be tormented on this account, or even destroyed. In fact, we know that the same great Teacher declared, "No man can come unto me except the Father which sent me draw him," and we see most evidently that but a small proportion of the nation was at that time drawn to Jesus by the Father through the word of grace. We see that the great majority were blinded. How evident, then, it is that our Lord had no reference to the blinded ones who did not become his disciples, but intended his remarks exclusively for the class addressed, whose eyes had been opened and whose ears had been unstopped, and who had become his followers by a consecration. Note the Master's words, "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear;" – here is the suggestion that the majority of the Jews did not see and did not hear, and hence had no call to be followers of Jesus in the same special sense; the majority being not even drawn of the Father, not being in a condition of heart to be drawn by the truth.

Note how our Lord refers to this matter, and speaks of the Jewish leaders, saying that they were blind guides, leading the blind people, and all about to "fall into the ditch." (Matt. 15:14.) This falling into the ditch seems to those who are deluded by the eternal torment theory, to be but another suggestion that all of the Jewish nation, both leaders and people, were fast hastening to "hell," to torment. But on the contrary, the Scriptures show clearly that the ditch to which they were hastening was the great time of trouble which came upon their nation after our Lord's crucifixion, and which culminated with the utter

destruction of their city by the army of Titus in the year 70 A.D. – since which time they have been nationally disintegrated and destroyed.

That the apostles did not understand that all who did not follow with them in the narrow way of self-sacrifice, self-denial, cross-bearing, were to be tormented, is testified by the Apostle Peter who, speaking under the inspiration of the holy spirit, declared to these same Jews that they had crucified Messiah, and then he adds, "But I wot that in ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers." – Acts 3:17.

This blind ignorance is referred to also by the Apostle Paul: in discussing the matter in his Epistle to the Romans he pointed out that Israel was blinded, and did stumble and fall into the ditch, and did not attain the great prize which it was seeking, and that the elect only obtained that prize. He points us to the elect "remnant" selected from the nation before its complete disintegration, and informs us that this remnant, being less than the number which God had predetermined, the elect Church, is to be completed during this Gospel age by the selection of the remainder from amongst the Gentiles to be fellow-heirs with the Israelites in the same promise made to Abraham. These are denominated "spiritual Israel," and the Apostle points out that this change in the divine operation was foreknown to the Lord, and was a part of his plan, as revealed through the prophets – that the Gentiles also should be fellow-heirs of the same promise. – Rom. 11:7-12.

The Apostle proceeds to show that the blindness will continue upon fleshly Israel until the Gospel Church is completed, and that then blindness will be turned from them, and they shall see; and God's favor shall come upon them, and they will be amongst the first to be blessed under the new order of things following the glorification of the elect Church.

With these thoughts in our minds, putting ourselves exactly in the place of the apostles, we are much better prepared to understand the meaning of the Master's words, "If any man will be my follower he

must deny himself and take up his cross." The Apostle points us to the same thought, saying that it is only if we suffer with him that we shall reign with him; if we be dead with him, that we shall live with him. The reference is exclusively to those on the "narrow way," and does not at all refer to the world of mankind. The verses following, a part of the same discourse, declare that whosoever would save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life for the Lord's sake shall find it; this also is exclusively applicable to those who had had their eyes opened, and had become his followers, and is not at all applicable to others.

All who become Jesus' followers first take two steps, viz., justification and consecration, or sanctification. Justification is imputed to them as the result of faith in Christ as their Redeemer, and its object is to place fallen sinful human beings on such a reckonedly perfect plane or standing before God as would permit them to present their bodies living sacrifices, "holy and acceptable to God" through Christ. Consecration, self-surrender, sanctification, called in our text self-denial, consists in the giving up of our wills to the will of the Lord: and our wills controlling this implies our all.

This class, having received their share of the ransom, (justification) and having used it exchanging its hopes of restitution for the heavenly hopes, "heavenly calling," spiritual prosperity and prospective joint-heirship with Christ, have no longer any earthly rights or hopes: hence such must either gain the spiritual life they have started out for or must lose all life. And the terms or conditions upon which the heavenly life is to be attained are the sacrifice of the earthly life and its interests. Therefore, as here stated, in respect to this class, whoever of them saves his earthly life (refusing to sacrifice it, etc.) after having made the consecration, loses it entirely – loses all hope of a future life. And on the other hand, those of this class who are now faithful in laying down the present life for the Lord's sake shall find life eternal under the glorious conditions of the Kingdom. "If we be dead with him, we shall also live with him." – 2 Tim. 2:11,12.

The succeeding verse (26) is a part of the same discourse, not to people in general, but applicable to the disciples, the followers and cross-bearers only, the little flock. It reads: "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul (being, existence), or what shall a man give in exchange [R2615 : page 118] for his soul (his future existence)?" We are to remember that only one offer of life eternal has yet been made to mankind; and this was the offer that Jesus was making to his followers, and that has since been made throughout this Gospel age to whoever had ears to hear and a will to walk in the narrow way. There is no offer of eternal life to the world yet, altho the Scriptures clearly show us that there is to be an offer of eternal life under other conditions during the Millennial age; but none can either accept or reject those conditions yet, for they are not offered to any.

Those now invited to eternal life under its most glorious conditions of "glory, honor, immortality," and joint-heirship with the Redeemer in the Kingdom are exhorted by our Lord to appreciate highly the value of eternal life; and it is implied that anyone who will at all consider the matter will readily acknowledge that to give all that he has of earthly life and its vanities in exchange for life eternal would be to get that great boon at a very small price – at a great bargain! We see men who, as death draws near, are willing to give their all to retain their hold a little longer on the present life: how much more should we be willing to lay down our lives voluntary sacrifices, in daily self-denials, [R2616 : page 118] in sharing the sufferings of Christ in this present time, that we may thereby attain, according to God's good promise in Christ, the glorious and eternal life promised to the overcomers.

WHAT CONSTITUTES CROSS-BEARING?

But now we come back to the original proposition of our text, and inquire particularly respecting the declared terms of discipleship, What do they signify, and how do they apply to us individually in our daily lives? What is it for us to deny ourselves? It signifies that having

consecrated ourselves to the Lord we should have no wills of our own; self should be ignored, or, as the Apostle Paul expresses it, "Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God." "Reckon ye yourselves dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God." Self-denial, then, means to ignore self-will, self-gratification: and this includes all the earthly ambitions and desires, the sinful, and no less those that are laudable and proper. We pledge ourselves at the very beginning that we are not following our own inclinations and our own wills, but are to be wholly subject to the will of our Head, the Lord Jesus, if we may be in turn counted in as members in particular of his body, the elect Church.

Very graciously, the Lord veils from our sight at the beginning of the way some of the trials of the flesh and conflicts between the mind of the flesh and the new mind, which this full consecration must involve if we press along the line toward the mark which he has set for us, as the standard of character. Could we see all that is implied from the very beginning of the race we would be disheartened no doubt, but as we grow in grace, and become strong in the Lord and in the power of his might, we grow also in knowledge and in love toward the Lord and toward all who are in fellowship with him, and thus it becomes daily easier for us, as we sing,

"...the pathway smooths
Since first we learned to love it."

As a result, by and by the trials which came at first seem to be as nothing, but other trials come instead, as we discern more distinctly, more clearly, the good, the acceptable, the perfect will of God. Thus our trial condition progresses, and what is required of us is that step by step we shall be faithful to what we see to be the Lord's will, and shall seek to the best of our ability to submit ourselves thereto. This is self-denial, – forsaking all else to be Jesus' disciples.

Cross-bearing is closely related to self-denial, and yet a distinction between them may be noted. Self-denial relates more particularly to passive obedience and endurance for the Lord's sake;

cross-bearing relates more particularly to activities in the Lord's service, which we find to be contrary to our natural inclinations. Faithfulness in self-denial means courage and zeal; cross-bearing means victory, overcoming. Our self-denials may be victories gained in our own hearts, of which others may know nothing, and of which they should know nothing, if we desire to have the fulness of the Lord's blessing, for we are to make sure that we do not deny ourselves to be seen of men, but merely for the Lord's approval. Our cross-bearings, however, may be seen, to some extent at least, by those who are in close contact with us, and especially by those who are walking in the same "narrow way."

And how appropriate it is that all cross-bearers should recognize each other, and be able to sympathize with one another, and give an encouraging word, a sympathizing look or a helping hand, as opportunity may offer. As for others, we cannot expect sympathy from them, for from their standpoint we are counted fools (Acts 26:24; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14; 3:18), unwise, following an unwise course, bringing our difficulties upon ourselves, because we insist on following an ideal Pattern, the pattern of our dear Redeemer, instead of following the pattern of churchianity and the world. Such, of course, have only sneers for the faithful, and often no doubt think of them as they speak of them, as being hypocrites. This indeed is a part of the cross-bearing, especially when those who deride and who sneer are those whom we love and whose esteem we would enjoy, if we could have it in conjunction with the Master's "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Look, for instance, at our Lord Jesus, and the cross which he bore – not the literal cross of wood which he bore to Calvary, amid shame and jeers, but the cross-bearing which he practiced continually throughout the three and a half years of his ministry from the time of his consecration at Jordan. Note how faithfulness to the truth, in testifying respecting his mission, the Kingdom that he was establishing, and the terms and conditions of membership in it, being misunderstood by the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees, led to

opposition continually, so that they not only maligned his name, but in their hatred sought his life and finally obtained it. Note that these were not worldly people, as that word is generally understood, but members of the leading denominations of his day: and that the so-called holiness people of that day were his most bitter assailants. He could indeed have fallen into line with the Pharisees or with the Sadducees, and have been considered "respectable," and have had a large following, but fidelity to the truth would not permit him to do this, but forced him to take a stand independent of all sects and parties, and this brought [R2616 : page 119] against him the wrath of all of them, and was his continual and daily cross-bearing, that had to be borne, if he would "overcome" and be granted association with the Father in the Kingdom. And may not all of his faithful followers expect similar experiences, under similar conditions now? We think so; we know so; they have such experiences.

The Apostle mentions some of these crosses, and declares that the endurance of them are marks of his faithfulness as a servant of the Lord: "In much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings," by dishonor, by evil report, as deceivers and yet true, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, yet possessing all things. (2 Cor. 6:4-10.) How much our Master knew of being counted a deceiver, while yet he was the true one, of being called Beelzebub, while really the Prince of light! What a cross it must have been to endure such slanderous misrepresentations, and contradictions of sinners against himself; and how faithfully he bore the cross. And shall not all of his followers expect to similarly share this cross with him, and be misunderstood, misrepresented, misjudged, by those who are more or less blinded by the Adversary! Such dishonor, such evil reports, are amongst the things which our Lord specifically declared would be a part of our cross-bearing when he said, "Blessed are ye when men shall revile and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my

sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad (in all such cross-bearings), for great is your reward in heaven."

In a word, our Lord calls upon his disciples to follow him, in direct opposition to the world-current. He declares that the disciple must not expect to be above his Lord in being spared such experiences, but promises great rewards at the end of the journey – life eternal, with exceeding glory.

The awfulness of the teaching of the creeds of Christendom respecting the fate of the world in general is only grasped when we begin to seriously consider the narrowness of the way in which all of the Lord's true followers are called to walk in his footsteps. Surely, if all except such faithful saints, an extremely "little flock," are to be eternally tormented, it would mean that there are to be many members of every family on earth consigned to that awful and unending agony. How absurd is the proposition, how unreasonable, how unscriptural, when the Scriptures are rightly understood!

But how reasonable is the proper interpretation of our text, how reasonable its application to those who have been drawn of the Father to the Son, and who then have accepted of the Son and his great sacrifice for sin, and who have considered it a reasonable service to present their bodies living sacrifices, and have consecrated their all to him, that they might have fellowship in his sufferings, and ultimate fellowship also in his glory. These can see readily that the Kingdom honor and glory to which they are called, are blessings so great, honors so profound, and their works as kings and priests and judges in the Millennial age so particular, that all of these testings of faith, patience, love and obedience are wholly reasonable to them.

All such we exhort, especially at this particular season of the commemoration of our dear Redeemer's death, that they catch not merely at the outward form of self-denial, practiced by nominal Christendom during the Lenten season, but that whatever of outward self-denial they may practice they may learn the full meaning of self-

consecration and immolation which our Lord's words signify: and that they be not content with the wearing of a cross as an ornament, but grasp fully and clearly the purport of the Master's words respecting the true cross-bearing, that in due time they may also attain to the crown-bearing promised as a reward to the faithful. Let us at this season of the year renew our covenant of sacrifice with the Lord, determined, in the words of the Apostle, that we will more zealously than ever – Lay aside every weight, and every besetting sin, and run with patience the race set before us in the Gospel, looking unto Jesus, in whose footsteps we seek to tread. – Heb. 12:1.
