

ESSENTIALS TO A SHARE IN THE KINGDOM.

– JOHN 3:1-16. – JANUARY 29. –

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

THE visit of Nicodemus, a Jewish ruler, to our Lord was evidently early in our Lord's ministry. We know little of the man, except that on various occasions he manifested sincerity and considerable faith in our Lord and sympathy with his cause. It was this same man who defended our Lord in a discussion amongst the Pharisees and priests respecting him. He said, "Does our Law judge any man before it hear him?" whereupon his fellow-rulers said, "Art thou also one of his disciples?" Nicodemus was not ready to affirm discipleship even then, but that his sympathy continued with the Lord is evidenced by the fact that he was one of the prominent men who requested the privilege of burying our Lord's body after the crucifixion. We know not what may have been the end of his course, but we fear that while he was too good to be an opponent of the Truth he had not enough stamina of character to be one of the Lord's disciples. Herein we have a lesson which each should apply to himself. The Lord is seeking disciples who are willing to take up their cross and follow him, after having counted the cost. Such as shrink from paying the cost of discipleship cannot be disciples, cannot share the Kingdom, whatever blessings the Lord may have in reservation for them in connection with or under the Kingdom.

We cannot reasonably find fault with Nicodemus for coming to Jesus by night. Throughout the day our Lord was busy teaching, and a visit then would have been more or less an interruption; besides, Nicodemus had no right to cast the influence of his presence and office on the side of our Lord until he had in some degree satisfied himself on the subject. Nevertheless, the entire character of Nicodemus seems

lacking in courage, for even at the time he presented himself to our Lord on this occasion he declared his conviction that he was a teacher sent from God and that he believed the miracles to be genuine. With that much evidence in hand he would have been fully justified in going to our Lord in a public way, acknowledging as much as he saw, and asking for further proofs.

BEGOTTEN AGAIN – BORN AGAIN.

Nicodemus had the Jewish hopes, and evidently was one of those in expectation of Messiah, and the Kingdom which Messiah was to establish for the blessing of Israel and the world. The entire conversation is evidently not given, but the Lord's answer implies that the inquiry of Nicodemus was along these lines – the Messianic Kingdom and the conditions of membership therein.

Our Lord promptly put the matter in a very plain light, assuring his visitor that no one could have the Kingdom unless born again. A little later in the conversation he added that no one could enter into the Kingdom except by being born again. (v. 5.) The word "born" is properly enough used in both these instances, and thus we learn that the Lord had reference to the future – reference to the resurrection birth described by the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 – born from the dead to the glory, honor and immortality, and a share in the Kingdom, assured to those who have **[R3486 : page 13]** part in the first resurrection. These all will be spirit beings, and with their Lord will constitute the spiritual Kingdom, which will be invisible to mankind in general – invisible to all its earthly subjects, as Satan the prince of this world is invisible to mankind.

Nicodemus discerned that there was something here far beyond anything he had contemplated. As a Jew he had been looking for and waiting for an earthly kingdom and an earthly King, but now he was informed that only by passing through a change, a begetting and a new birth to a new nature, could he hope ever to participate in or even to see the Kingdom of God. No wonder he was astonished and inquired

further respecting the new birth. Would it be like the first birth? Would those who would be heirs of the Kingdom be born again as they once had been born of a mother?

Our Lord's answer to the query is given. To be begotten of an earthly father and later to be born of an earthly mother would insure that the progeny would be earthly also – that which is begotten and born of the flesh is flesh. There is, however, a likeness between such an earthly birth and the new birth necessary to a share in the Kingdom. There must be a begetting, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:13.) There must also be a period of gestation for this spiritual new creature that will precede its resurrection birth. Thus all who will share in the spiritual Kingdom as spirit beings must first be begotten of the Spirit and subsequently be developed of the Spirit, growing in all of its fruits and graces, and ultimately be born of the Spirit, born from the dead a spiritual being like the Lord and a sharer in his glory, honor **[R3486 : page 14]** and immortality. That which is begotten and born of the Spirit is spirit, is not flesh – "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of heaven."

Nicodemus still marveled at such teaching. Could it be possible that himself and all the great teachers of the Jewish nation had such a misconception of the Kingdom! This was indeed true, and similarly we might say that a great many to-day have equally erroneous conceptions of the Kingdom, although not in every particular the same errors that beclouded the mind of Nicodemus and others of the prominent Jews. The difficulty to-day in this harvest of the Gospel age is that our Lord's words above quoted and which seem so plain are misunderstood, and supposed to refer not at all to the resurrection but entirely to the begetting of the present time.

This is in part at least the fault of the translators of our common version Bible, who, knowing that the same Greek word is translated both "begotten" and "born" in our English language, have not properly distinguished between these, nor given English readers the proper

knowledge that there are two thoughts behind this one word – the thought of begetting and, after gestation, ultimately birth. Few enough of Christian people have any clear conception of what begetting of the Spirit signifies, and their confusion is doubled when they are told that they are now born of the Spirit. No wonder that the majority of Christian people are in such perplexity on this subject, and would not know what to say if asked whether or not they were begotten of the Spirit, or what they mean when they express the hope that they have been born of the Spirit.

Every Christian should know of the Lord's promise to accept him to a new nature through begetting of the holy Spirit; – should know that his justified heart has been fully consecrated to the Lord, should know that he has been begotten of the holy Spirit, which is the earnest or begetting to the new nature, which, if maintained, will ultimately be born of the Spirit in the resurrection.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF A SPIRIT-BORN BEING.

Our Lord admonishes Nicodemus that he must not be too much surprised at the great mistake he and others had made in regard to the terms and conditions which would qualify them for a place in the Kingdom; they should marvel not, but realize the necessity of being born again – of attaining to the first resurrection if they would be members of the Kingdom class.

Our Lord's illustration respecting such Spirit-begotten ones is very clear and explicit. Nicodemus could understand about the blowing wind, which had power but was invisible. Our Lord explained to him that this illustrated the character of the beings born of the Spirit; they will be like the wind, which can go and come, can be heard and to some extent felt, but which cannot be seen – "Thus is every one that is born of the Spirit." Likewise Nicodemus, or whoever else would be an heir of the Kingdom, must experience such a great change or transformation, such a birth of the Spirit, which would make them like the angels, invisible, able to go and come without being seen of men.

Nicodemus, marveling still more at this explanation of the first resurrection and the character of those who would have part in it, exclaimed, "How can these things be!" Is it possible! Our Lord's answer was that a ruler in Israel should have comprehended these things. Evidently, therefore, a proper study of the matter from the scriptural standpoint might have led true Israelites indeed to more or less of an appreciation of the character of the Kingdom in advance of its coming. While they would not have been able to appreciate any of its details, they might have understood better than they did. They were content to live on too low a plane; they did not enjoy all the knowledge available because probably too self-satisfied, because they did not sufficiently hunger and thirst after the Truth.

This our Lord declares is the reason why Nicodemus and his fellow officials, the Doctors of the Jewish Church, were not ready for his message, not ready to receive the Truth – "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen, and ye receive not our witness" – our message.

Our Lord continues: You would like to have me explain about this spiritual Kingdom, its operations, etc., but this I cannot do; you are not in condition to receive my word. "If I told you earthly things and you believed not, how shall you believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" The person who cannot grasp with clearness and distinctness the features of God's plan which relate to the world in general, certainly need not expect that he would be in any condition to understand or appreciate the things which pertain to the spiritual conditions, which are higher and therefore more difficult of comprehension.

NATURAL VS. SPIRITUAL THINGS.

Evidently Nicodemus was inquiring particularly respecting the heavenly Kingdom to which the Lord had referred. He was desirous of measuring with his judgment the probabilities of such a Kingdom as our Lord had announced. Many of our day look at the matter

similarly, and refuse to believe the things beyond the range of their natural senses – they lack the sixth sense of faith, or spiritual apprehension. As our Lord explained, the difficulty lies in the fact that they have not thoroughly believed the Lord's testimony in respect to earthly things – they have not thoroughly subjected their minds to him. Only after faith and obedience respecting earthly things, and a full consecration of our hearts to the Lord, need we expect the begetting of the Spirit, which would enable us to grasp mentally by faith some of the exceeding great and precious things which God hath in reservation for them that specially love him – for the Church as the Bride, the Lamb's Wife.

Neither need those who have the spiritual sense expect to understand spiritual things with the full comprehensiveness with which they grasp earthly matters. The things not seen as yet – which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man" – are "revealed unto us by his Spirit," as the Lord declares. He does not go into particulars with us, but in general terms tells us of glory, honor, immortality and joint-heirship with his Son as Kings and Priests and Judges of the world. In a general way we may grasp this matter after we have come into proper relationship to the Lord; we grasp it as a whole and not in its details, which are not revealed. What we do see, however, is almost overwhelming in its grandeur, and with the Apostle we assure ourselves that these are indeed exceeding great and precious promises, by which we may attain to the divine nature. – 2 Peter 1:4.

NO MAN HATH ASCENDED UP.

Continuing his argument, that Nicodemus must receive by faith whatever he would know about heavenly things and that he would be entirely dependant upon Jesus' word, our Lord remarked that no man ever ascended [R3486 : page 15] up to heaven, and that himself, the Son of man, who alone had come down from heaven, was alone able to speak with knowledge and authority respecting heavenly matters.

This is still the case. There is but one testimony respecting these heavenly things – our Lord's own words while in the flesh and his subsequent revelations through the holy Spirit by the apostles. We must accept this testimony, for there is no other.

Here we note the peculiar and unsatisfactory condition of the world in general – not only of the heathen but also of the learned professors of Christendom, who deny our Lord's prehuman existence and deny the revelations he has since made through his apostles. (John 16:13,14; Rev. 1:1.) The heathen believe things pertaining to an invisible realm, a spiritual or heavenly state, but without evidence except such as comes to them through the fallen spirits. In civilized lands those who reject our Lord's revelation on the subject have nothing whatever to base their faith upon, except such unsatisfactory evidences as they obtain through Spiritualists [R3487 : page 15] – whose knowledge and manifestations we hold, according to the Scriptures, are from the same evil origin as those of the heathen – the fallen angels who personate the human dead. Respecting the latter our Lord in this verse distinctly tells us that they have not ascended to heaven: elsewhere (John 5:29) he tells us that they are in their graves – that they are dead, and will so remain until his power and authority shall call them forth again to being. The Apostle Peter's testimony respecting the Prophet, David, one of the ancient worthies, is along the same line. He declares, "David is not ascended into the heavens." – Acts 2:34.

The last three words of the 13th verse are spurious. They were not in the original manuscript, and are not found in the oldest Greek manuscript discovered about half a century ago, the Sinaitic. These words were doubtless added by some well-meaning person who wished to express his faith that the Lord had risen and ascended on high; he did not notice that the addition of these words makes nonsense as they are placed – they would make Jesus say that he was in heaven at the time he was talking to Nicodemus. How important it is that we have a knowledge of the unadulterated Word of God. We must neither

add to nor take from it; and when we find, as in this case, that some one either intentionally or unintentionally added these words to the original text, we should cancel them and thus free ourselves from the confusion they would otherwise create. A similar instance of an improper addition to the Lord's Word is found in the last verse of John's Gospel, which is a most palpable untruth, and is omitted from the oldest Greek manuscript, the Sinaitic. Another similar case is the first sentence of Revelation 20:5. Concerning this latter see MILLENNIAL DAWN, Vol. I., page 288, foot note.

UPLIFTED LIKE MOSES' SERPENT.

Our Lord did not stop with a mere answer to his visitor's questions about the Kingdom being heavenly, but proceeded to give him in brief form an outline of the entire plan of salvation. He reminded him of the Israelites bitten by the fiery serpents in the wilderness, and that God had directed Moses to lift on a pole a copper serpent, to which the Israelites who would exercise faith might look and receive healing. Our Lord announced that he was to be the antitype of this; that he would be lifted up on the cross and thus made to appear as the sinner – to take the place of the sinner – so that the whole world of mankind, bitten by sin and dying as a result, might look unto him by faith and be healed.

What a wonderful condensation of a great truth the Lord here expressed! It was the typical lesson of his own substitution as man's Redeemer and sin bearer, and clearly taught that faith in him as such is essential to a recovery from the fall and its results. This blessed privilege of looking to the Lord and being healed is already accorded to such as hear the message and accept it – "Look and live!" Believers who now by faith can realize their sins forgiven are thrice blessed. But we thank God that his provision is not merely for those who now have the hearing ear and the eye of faith, but that eventually all the blind eyes shall be opened and all the deaf ears unstopped, and the message, "Look and live!" and again, "Partake of the water of life freely," will

be heard by every member of Adam's race, that each may have a full and fair opportunity of acquiring his share of the blessings secured for Adam and all his race by Christ's death.

Thus eventually it will be not only whosoever believeth, but all who will have the necessary conditions to permit them to believe, to permit them to enjoy their share of the gift of God, eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

THE GOLDEN TEXT.

Our Golden Text is a wonderful verse, and all the more wonderful the more we understand of the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the divine plan of salvation. Luther, who grasped the Gospel message more fully than many of his day, and yet less fully than we see the reality to be, called this verse the "little Bible." We would express the same in the words, "the Gospel in a nut shell." The whole message of God is contained in a condensed form in these words:

(1) Man's need is shown – his perishing condition, his need of divine help.

(2) God's love is declared, and the proof of it is pointed out to be the gift of his Son.

(3) Our Lord's willing cooperation in the Father's plan is evidenced.

(4) The lengths and breadths of this love and redemption are declared to embrace the whole world, and not merely a section, a family or class.

(5) The limitations of divine grace are plainly stated: only through a true acceptance of Christ can any obtain this great blessing – release

from the perishing conditions of the curse and full reinstatement in the divine favor and its blessed reward of life everlasting. Thus this Gospel statement assures us that there is no hope for the heathen in their ignorance, and points us, as do other Scriptures, for all hope respecting them to the future, when the voice of the Son of man who redeemed them shall call all from the grave, to the intent that all may attain to resurrection perfection under the judgments of the Millennial age. "When the judgments of the Lord are abroad in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness;" and many who have gone down into the tomb under the curse, and in ignorance of the only name given under heaven and amongst men, shall ultimately be blessed as they shall hear of the great salvation God has provided, and if they shall accept it upon God's terms.

