

SPECIAL STUDY NO. 1

The Kingdom of God

—by Seth Wilson

The New Testament says much about the kingdom, mentioning it 140 times by the term "kingdom," besides the other terms and phrases used. The whole message of the great prophet, John the Baptist, was the importance of the coming kingdom and of personal preparation for it. Jesus taught more about the kingdom than He did about any other subject. He taught men to pray for the kingdom to come (Mt. 6:10). He said it was the greatest treasure in the world, one for which any one should joyfully sell all other possessions that he might gain the kingdom (Mt. 13:44-46). He told us all to "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt. 6:33). He made it more important than the food and clothing which are necessary to physical life. Surely it matters much whether we believe in the kingdom and know it, not only in theory, but in vital experience.

What is the Kingdom of God?

It is not easy to give a definite and brief answer which would be satisfactory to all students or true to all the Scriptural uses of the phrase. *Its essential idea is the reign or government of God over the lives of men.* Sometimes it comprehends the characteristics and advantages of the complete submission of an individual life to the rule of God. Sometimes it refers to the whole community of men who obey God on earth. Sometimes it has reference to heaven itself as a place where God reigns in perfect peace, wisdom, and glory. But regardless of all other circumstances, it is always essentially the rule of God in the hearts of men.

Other terms and phrases are used for the same idea, and are freely interchanged with "the kingdom of God." Matthew uses the words "kingdom of heaven" about 29 times, although it is not used in any other New Testament book (cf. Mt. 13:11 with Mk. 4:11; and Mt. 13:31 with Mk. 4:30-31, etc.). It is also called "his kingdom (the son of Man's)" (Mt. 13:41; 15:28); "my kingdom" (Christ's) (Jn. 18:36; Lk. 22:29-30); "the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (II Pet.

1:11); "the kingdom of God's dear Son" (Col. 1:13); "the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Eph. 5:5); "my (Christ's) church" (Mt. 16:18); the "church of God" (I Tim. 3:5, 15); "the church" (Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32); "the church of the first born (ones)" (Heb. 12:23); or as congregations viewed distributively "churches of God" (I Cor. 11:16); (I Thess. 2:14), and "churches of the saints" (I Cor. 14:33), and "churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16).

These various expressions are not identical in their limits and points of emphasis, but they do overlap in that all of them have reference to the realm of God's rule through Jesus Christ. That reign will some day be complete and unchallenged, and will continue so eternally; but it also exists now and has for many centuries in the midst of those who resist it or deny its present reality.

The kingdom is not represented as coming all at once fully formed and in its ultimate glory, but this term is used for the rule of God in different stages, and for the growing control of Christ over men through the gospel — "first the blade, then the ear, and then the full grain in the ear" (Mk. 4:26-29). Study the other parables of the seed and of the leaven. Chiefly, of course, it looks forward to the glorious consummation, the complete subjection of all things to God, the eternal state of righteousness, peace, and blessedness that will result when God is given full control. Jesus came to establish the kingdom by revealing the righteousness, mercy, and goodness of God's will, and by winning the hearts of men to surrender themselves to Him — by redemption of sinners and reconciliation of their hearts to God, by putting the law of God into their minds and hearts through faith and love and regeneration of the Holy Spirit — (Heb. 8:10-11; Jn. 3:5). The government of God is truly desirable. Pray that it may prevail upon earth as it does in heaven (cf. Psalm 19:7-14).

John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles (before the cross) preached that the kingdom was just at hand, to be expected and prepared for immediately. It was certain to come before that generation died (Mt. 16:28; Mk. 9:1). In a sense it was already come (Mt. 12:28) in the person of the King, and it was suffering violence from the days of John the Baptist (Mt. 11:12; Lk. 16:16). The rule of God and the principles of His realm were being presented in the preaching of Jesus, and Jesus could say, "Lo, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk. 17:21).

This was said to the unbelieving Pharisees who did not have the kingdom in their hearts, but it was in the midst of them, in that its King was there proclaiming its laws and swaying His authority over them or at least some who were standing among them. Moreover, whenever it came to men, it was to come not with great demonstrations of force, "not with observation, but as in inward growth (Mk. 4:26-28). It was to spring from seed, which is the Word of God (Lk. 8:11), and to be brought about by preaching of the Word (Mt. 13:18-23). It was to begin small and grow to be very great (Mt. 13:31-33). During the growing stage it takes some "bad" as well as "good," who have to be separated by the angels at the end of the world (Mt. 13:47-50). The sons of the kingdom are the righteous (Mt. 5:20), who grow in the world side by side with the wicked (Mt. 13:38-41). Yet it is not a kingdom of this world (Jn. 18:36). It must be entered by a new birth of the Spirit (through faith in and submission to the word of the Spirit) and of water (baptism into Christ) (Jn. 3:5; Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5; I Pet. 1:23). And the least in the kingdom is greater than the greatest born of women (Mt. 11:11). Having part in it is equivalent to having "eternal life" and being "saved" (Lk. 8:18, 25, 26).

One thing is evident — that Jesus did not mean to set up a worldly, materialistic, or military kingdom. The devil offered Him the kingdoms of the whole world, but He refused them (Mt. 4:8-10). The Jews and even the apostles wanted that kind of kingdom, but Jesus disappointed them. After the feeding of the five thousand, they sought to take Him by force and make Him king, but Jesus refused. The very next day He preached a sermon on the spiritual and eternal purpose of His ministry which was so unacceptable to them that multitudes went away and followed Him no more (John 6). This same idea presents itself at the time of the Triumphal Entry, when the people in all the clamor and excitement of a mob, gathered together as a whole nation at Jerusalem for the Passover, and welcomed Jesus into the city as "the King that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Lk. 19:38), and as bringing in the kingdom of His father, David (Mk. 11:10). If he had wanted a kingdom of force, or of material wealth, or of political organizations, He could have had it (cf. Mt. 26:53; Jn. 18:36-37). Because of materialistic ambitions of the people regarding the Messiah, Jesus avoided telling plainly that He was the Christ, and He had to teach of His life's purpose and His kingdom by parables in order to hold their

attention and try to make plain the unwelcome message of a spiritual kingdom, instead of temporal.

One group of passages represents the kingdom under the figure of a place. This is the case in all expressions involving the act of entering into the kingdom (Mt. 5:20; 7:21; 18:3). It is better to enter into the kingdom of heaven with one eye than, having two, to be cast out (Mk. 9:27). Men are said to be near or far from it (Mk. 13:34). Those who enter are those who are reborn and who do the will of God, who have by relationship with the Saviour and by their characters a certain fitness for it (Lk. 9:62; Mt. 7:21; Jn. 3:5). But after entrance has been secured, it is a place of enjoyment, as in Mt. 25:34, and a place where even Jesus Himself eats and drinks, as in Mt. 26:29.

In a second class of passages the kingdom is represented as a possession. It is said to belong to the poor in spirit and to those persecuted for righteousness (Mt. 5:3, 10; Lk. 18:16). It will be taken from the Jews and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof (Mt. 21:43). It is the gift of God (Lk. 12:32). It is the most valuable of possessions, and it is the height of wisdom to seek and the summit of prosperity to secure it (Mt. 6:33; Lk. 12:31).

A third class of passages represents the kingdom as an organization, or body, composed of a certain class of men.

A fourth class designates it as an order of things, or a dispensation. The special new feature of the dispensation thus announced was its spirituality. Its members are in it by choice and by their perfect willingness to do God's will. Thus its law is written on their hearts and in their minds (Heb. 8:10-12; Rom. 12:1-2).

The kingdom did come in the generation of the apostles as Jesus said it would (Mk. 9:1). It did come with power on the day of Pentecost after His resurrection. Peter was given the keys (Mt. 16:19). Paul went everywhere preaching the kingdom of God (Acts 20:25), although he determined to know nothing save Jesus Christ and Him crucified (I Cor. 2:2). Philip preached the kingdom of God, and the faith of the Samaritans caused them to be baptized into Christ and become members of the church (Acts 8:12). Paul says God "translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Col. 1:13), and John says "he made us to be a kingdom" (Rev. 1:6). The church is a kingdom. Today, in our dispensation, it is THE kingdom. It is certainly not a

democracy as to its nature. Christ is the absolute monarch over all things pertaining to the church and to the kingdom (Eph. 1:22).

Quiz

1. Tell five things you know of Nicodemus.
2. Why do you think Nicodemus came to Jesus by night?
3. What was the main fault of the Pharisees?
4. Did Jesus say, "Ye must be born *anew*," or did He say, "*from above*"?
5. Give at least five Scripture references in the New Testament concerning new birth, or regeneration.
6. How is one born "*anew*" (cf. verse 5)?
7. In what way did Jesus illustrate the working of the Holy Spirit in the new birth process?
8. Essentially, what is the kingdom of God?
9. When did the kingdom of God come?

EARTHLY MYSTERIES COMPARED WITH HEAVENLY MYSTERIES

Text 3:9-15

9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?

10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things?

11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.

12 If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?

13 And no one hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, who is in heaven.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up;

15 that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life.

Queries

- a. Who is the "we" of verse 11?
- b. What are "earthly things" and "heavenly things"?
- c. Why is the comparison made with the "serpent in the wilderness"?

Paraphrase

Nicodemus said to Jesus, How is it possible for all these things to come to pass? Jesus replied to Nicodemus, Are you *the* teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? I tell you positively, that John the Baptist and I are speaking that which we fully know, and we are testifying to that which we have actually seen with our own eyes, and yet none of you are receiving our testimony. If I have told you the earthly things of the kingdom which happen within the realm of human experience and you continue to disbelieve, how shall you believe if I tell you of the heavenly counsels of an Omniscient God? No mortal has ever ascended into heaven to obtain first hand knowledge of God's eternal will except He that has come down from heaven, even the Son of Man. And in like manner as Moses lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so it is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up in order that everyone who looks unto Him in believing obedience may be cured of sin's deadly bite and may have eternal life.

Summary

Nicodemus is curious as to the exact manner of working of the Holy Spirit in the new birth. Jesus tells him that inability to comprehend the secret actions of the eternal God is no excuse for unbelief. What is necessary for man to know, God has revealed through His Son.

Comment

Nicodemus' continual "how"? (v. 4, 9) is like that of so many men and women today. He cannot understand the secret doings of an Infinite God and therefore he refuses to obey the mysteries of this God which have been revealed and which may be empirically known. There are those today who will admit the historical verity of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth but they will not give their souls over to God in trustful obedience to His Word because they cannot probe into and prove to their senses every unveiled mystery of an omnipotent God.

In verse 10 Nicodemus is informed that he should have had some knowledge concerning the subject under discussion, i.e., regeneration. The use of the article *the* in the Greek language emphasizes identification. Since the article is used with both "teacher" and "Israel" in verse 10, the emphasis is that Nico-

demus was one of *the* esteemed teachers in all Israel. He may even have been *the* leading teacher of the day, as Gamaliel was a few years later. The Pharisees were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of the nation — they were supposed to be the experts in the Scriptures. Nicodemus' ignorance of the subject of regeneration was inexcusable and should have been embarrassing. The "law and the prophets" spoke again and again of Jehovah's demand for a renewal of heart and mind (cf. Deut. 30:6; Psa. 51:10-12, 17; Isa. 1:16-20; 57-15; Jer. 24:7).

There are various interpretations of the plural *we* in verse 11: (a) Jesus speaks of Himself and the twelve disciples; (b) Jesus refers to Himself and the Old Testament prophets and writers; (c) Jesus means Himself and His forerunner, John the Baptist. We prefer the latter of the three as the most likely meaning. Both Jesus and John the Baptist knew the Spirit for they were filled with the Holy Spirit; both had seen the Holy Spirit in a visible manifestation (Mt. 3:16; Mk. 1:11; Lk. 3:22; Jn. 1:33-34); both were sent to testify as to the work of the Holy Spirit and to preach repentance and regeneration. Both were eyewitnesses of the working of the Holy Spirit — Jesus' testimony being greater than John's, of course, for He had descended from Heaven and from intimate communion with the Father. Jesus and the Baptist went about testifying as eyewitnesses to the reality of the Holy Spirit, but the Pharisees rejected their testimony and their message of repentance and were, in essence, calling both Jesus and John liars! The cause for rejection by the Pharisees is made plain in Luke 7:29-30. When the outcasts of society heard John's message of repentance they "justified God" (put God in His rightful place of Divine authority) and were baptized of John. But when the Pharisees heard, they "rejected the counsels of God" (dethroned God) and refused John's baptism. The Pharisees rebelled because they did not want to "bring forth fruits worthy of repentance" (cf. Lk. 3:7-14).

The omniscient Teacher now shows the mortal teacher it is useless to discuss Heavenly mysteries. Nicodemus cannot even understand earthly things. There are two general interpretations of what is meant by "earthly things" in verse 12: (a) that Jesus means the wind, or (b) that He means the earthly things within the kingdom of God, e.g., things that may be experienced such as faith, repentance, baptism, and renewal of mind and heart. We prefer the second interpretation, for it fits the context better. If

Nicodemus could not understand that a "new heart and a new spirit" was necessary to be pleasing unto God (something he should have known from the Old Testament), how much more incredible would be God's eternal purposes to such a carnal mind! It was evident even then to Jesus that the cross would be a "stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles." How could Nicodemus understand it was necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up, like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness — he could not even understand the Prophets whom he had pledged to study all his life!

Even when mortal man asks, "How can these things be?" God's wisdom is so infinite and unsearchable that none can know except they ascend into heaven and sit in personal conference with him. None except the Son of man and the Holy Spirit have ever enjoyed this intimate bosom-acquaintance with the Father. Paul informed the Corinthians the wisdom he spoke was God's wisdom, infinitely greater than men's eloquence. Such wisdom God had "hidden since the foundations of the worlds," but it had been given unto the apostles by a special revelation of the Spirit "which searcheth the deep things of God," (cf. I Cor. 2:6-11). The last phrase of verse 13, "who is in heaven," is omitted in many ancient manuscripts. It is omitted in the most recent Codex — the Bodmer Papyrus (see Introduction). Most authorities believe it to be a scribal gloss and we have, upon textual evidence above, omitted it from our paraphrase.

The incident referred to by Jesus in verse 14 is found in Numbers 21:4-9. The Israelites were in the wilderness country south of Mt. Hor, near to the Red Sea and the land of Edom when they began to rebel against Moses and God. The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and many were bitten and died. The people repented of their murmuring and came begging Moses to intercede on their behalf for mercy. Jehovah God then revealed His plan of salvation to Moses who was to tell it to the people. Moses would fashion a serpent from bronze and raise it up on a pole or a standard. Every Israelite who obeyed God's plan and looked upon the brazen serpent would be cured and restored to life. Commentators have wrested Jesus' use of this incident as an illustration in order to carry out their own analogies. There seems to be at least two main points of analogy or illustration which are revelant to the context: (a) just as the brazen serpent was the *only* cure for the deadly bite of the fiery ser-

pents, so the "lifting up" of the Son of Man is necessary — a must — as the *only* remedy for the deadly bite of sin (cf. Jn. 8:28; 12:32); (b) God provides the remedy for sin through His Son and only that man who looks upon Him in trusting obedience will be saved. Although God provided the children of Israel with a cure for snake bite, not one would have lived had they stubbornly refused to look upon the brazen serpent. "Obvious!" a reader says. Yet how many today who have been bitten by "that old serpent, the devil" are refusing to do the obvious thing and obey the gospel? Did the Israelites hold back, like Nicodemus, harping on the "how can this be?" Did they demand an explanation of the scientific and medical relationship between a bronze serpent and cure of snake bite? Indeed they did not! These people were saved, not because they understood God's requirement, but because they trusted God and obeyed His demand to look upon this brazen serpent. Whom among mortals can explain fully the relationship between Christ's death on the cross and His commandment to "believe and be baptized" with salvation? How is this possible? — it is not possible for us to fully comprehend — but it is possible for us to trust and obey! This was the lesson Nicodemus needed to learn, this was the lesson the disciples had to learn and the lesson we must all learn. "Trust and obey, for there's no other way . . ."

Quiz

1. Why should Nicodemus have known of the subject of regeneration?
2. Give three Old Testament Scripture references that speak of regeneration.
3. What is the best interpretation of *we* in verse 11? Why?
4. What are the "earthly things" that Nicodemus could not believe?
5. Give the two main points of comparison between the brazen serpent and the "lifting up of the Son of Man."

MORE HEAVENLY MYSTERIES

Text 3:16-21

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

17 For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him.

18 He that believeth on him is not judged: he that believeth not hath been judged already, because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God.

19 And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil.

20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, and cometh not to the light, lest his works should be reproved.

21 But he that doeth the truth cometh to the light, that his works may be made manifest, that they have been wrought in God.

Queries

- a. Why did God "so love the world?"
- b. How is the unbeliever judged already?
- c. What is the significance of the contrast between "doing evil" and "doing the truth?"

Paraphrase

For God so dearly loved mankind, that He gave His Son, His Only-unique son, in order that everyone continuing to trust in Him may not be eternally separated from the presence of God, but may have eternal life. For God's primary purpose in sending His Son into the world was not to sentence and condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through the agency of His Son. The man who continues to trust in Him is not condemned. The man who continues to disbelieve is condemned already because he has not trusted himself to the Only Son of God in whose name only is salvation possible. But this is the inevitable condemnation of the unbeliever, that the Light has come unto the world and men deliberately chose to love the darkness rather than the Light; for their works were evil. For everyone who practices worthless things hates and resists the Light and comes not unto the Light in order that his works may not be shown for what they really are. But the one who continually does the truth comes to the Light in order that his works may be made manifest because they have been wrought in God.

Summary

God, motivated by infinite love, sent His only Son unto fallen mankind, not to condemn but to save everyone who believes in His Son. The unbeliever brings condemnation upon himself by purposely rejecting the *only* life-giving light. The believer purposely manifests his works to glorify God.

Comment

Verse 16 has been called the Golden Text of the Bible, Everyman's Text, and other equally descriptive names. It is probably the most famous verse of the New Testament, and the most often quoted. In fact, verses 16-21 do contain the heart of God's new will. We see in this Golden Text that "God is love." Until we have experienced, in a measure, the same unselfish love, we cannot know God as we ought (cf. I Jn. 4:7-12). We see (v. 16) God's love wooing mankind back unto His glorious fellowship, for He made the initial advances — we love Him only because "He first loved us" (cf. I Jn. 4:19). This text shows God loving us, not for His sake alone, but for our sakes. True love "seeketh not its own" (cf. I Cor. 13:1-7). God's love is that of a Father who is happy only when His prodigal child has returned to His fellowship (cf. Lk. 15:11-24). Augustine said, "God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love . . . Love is the highest characteristic of God, the one attribute in which all others harmoniously blend. Although our finite minds cannot grasp the limitlessness of His love, we are informed of it in His revealed Word. God's love for men is declared in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (cf. Deut. 7:13; Isa. 63:9; Hos. 14:4; Rom. 5:8; I Jn. 4:10). Here are outlines of this famous verse by two famous men:

Wm. Hendriksen, author of *New Testament Commentary* "God's Love": 1. Its character (so loved, 2. Its Author (God), 3. Its object (the world), 4. Its Gift (his Son, the only-begotten), and 5. Its purpose (that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life).

R. C. Foster, author of *A Syllabus of the Life of Christ* "Doctrinal Elements of John 3:16": (1) Love of God (2) Jesus, the Son of God, deity of Jesus (3) Atonement (gave His Son) (4) Man lost in sin (5) Plan of salvation suggested (6) Eternal reward and punishment.

A few commentators have contended that Jesus' words cease at verse 15, and that from verse 16 through 21 we have the reflective words of the author, John. There are two reasons for believing to the contrary, that these words are further words of teaching by Jesus to Nicodemus: (a) the conjunction "for" establishes a causal relation between this and the preceding discourse (vs. 1-15); (b) the close connection of thought, i.e., "heavenly things" concerning the "scheme of redemption"; and, further, there is not the slightest notice indicating that the record has passed from direct conversation in v. 15, over to the writer's reflection in v. 16. Before passing on to the next verse, it will be well to note that "perish" does not mean "annihilate." That the wicked who die merely cease to exist, or are annihilated, is absolutely denied by the Scriptures. The New Testament is plain and positive in its teaching that those who refuse to believe and obey and who depart this world in such a state look forward to a "certain fearful expectation of judgment, and a fierceness of fire . . ." (Heb. 10:27). The unsaved dead will be condemned to eternal punishment (cf. Mt. 18:8; 25:41, 46; Jn. 5:29; II Thess. 1:7-9; Jude 6-7). We must also note that the promise of eternal life is to whosoever *continues* to believe in the Son. The word "believe" is in the Greek present tense, and indicates continued action.

From the sublime contemplations of the love of God, we are abruptly faced with judgment — condemnation. Verse 17, according to one commentator, "is an attempt by Jesus to correct a Jewish misinterpretation of the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah." A long standing Jewish interpretation of Messianic prophecies held that the purpose for the coming of the Messiah was to "condemn the world," i.e., to judge the Gentile nations which had oppressed Israel. Amos, the herdsman-prophet from Tekoa, seems to be crying out against such a gross misinterpretation (Amos 5:18-20). The verse before us (v. 17) clearly teaches Christ's primary purpose in the first coming into the world was to provide a way of salvation for mankind. Skeptics are quick to seize upon this verse and compare it with John 5:22, 27; 9:39; 12:47, 48 and declare the Bible contradicts itself. A moment of unbiased contemplation of all the passages dealing with the purpose of Christ's coming will show there is no contradiction. Jesus came to save, not to judge the world. He came to judge the world (at the Incarnation) only insofar as it would not allow

itself to be saved. He still judges (condemns or sentences) the world when His good news of salvation is rejected by men. This same principle is applied in our everyday living. It is possible for us to offer to share something with a fellow-man, and, when he deliberately rejects our offer, his rejection turns out as a judgment upon him. A favorite illustration of this same principle goes: "A visitor was being shown around a famous art gallery by one of the attendants. In the gallery were masterpieces beyond all price, works of genius and fame. At the end of the tour the visitor said: 'Well, I don't think much of your pictures.' The attendant answered, 'Sir, I would remind you that these pictures are no longer on trial, for they are masterpieces, but those who look at them are.'" When the Jews rejected Paul's message they "judged themselves unworthy of eternal life" (cf. Acts 13:46). The gospel is *never* on trial, but those to whom the gospel is preached are *always* on trial. Jesus Christ was not on trial as He faced Annas, Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate in succession — but these judges were being judged!

In verse 18 comes the wonderful news of pardon for the believer, and the awful sentence of doom for the unbeliever. This verse shows why God did not need to send His son to condemn the world. Since the Son was sent with the message of salvation, the man who disbelieves and disobeys brings about his own condemnation. On the other hand, the man who accepts the testimony of Christ and obeys His Word "has passed out of death into life." The word *kekritai* is the Greek word for judged — condemned and the word from whence comes the English critic, crisis, critique, etc. That this word means condemned here is evident from verse 17 where it is placed in apposition to saved. The tense of the Greek in verse 18b shows that the unbeliever is condemned just as long as he continues to disbelieve and disobey. The men or women who even now refuse to surrender in loving obedience to the demands of the gospel walk the face of this earth with the sentence of eternal condemnation ever present upon them! God does not need a special day to determine a man's destiny — that is determined by the man's own will and sealed at death. Notice that Jesus places all of mankind in only two categories: the believer and the unbeliever — the saved and the condemned. We cannot here enter into a lengthy discussion of the possibility of the unevangelized heathen being saved through ignorance of the gospel. Suffice it to say the New Testament

indicates even the heathen has had sufficient law of conscience given to him so that "he may be without excuse" (cf. Rom. 1:18-32; Ept. 2:11-12). The point Jesus seems to emphasize for Nicodemus is that salvation is possible *only* through trust in God's Son. Unless Nicodemus accepts the *only* way, he stands condemned, regardless of his Jewish blood and ancestry from Abraham. This point needs emphasis in every generation. Family ties, traditions and family religion will not avail unless they be conformable to revealed truth!

The next verse (v. 19) is very revealing! Jesus shows that the condemnation which abides upon the unbeliever is just,—it is what the unbeliever deserves — and He further reveals the inner moral wrong which makes this condemnation deserved. The Greek word for loved in verse 19 is *agapae* which means a love of intelligence and purpose . . . a deliberate love. Thus a man who deliberately loves the darkness is morally rebellious and makes his own choice! When the light comes and convicts this man of his sins he will purposely reject the light and deliberately love the darkness. Such a man inevitably condemns himself and receives a just punishment (cf. II Thess. 2:9-12). Unbelief stems from a moral wickedness and not from ignorance! Paul recognizes as the basic cause of rejecting of the truth "having pleasure in unrighteousness."

The Lord further shows that the one who has deliberately chosen the darkness cannot remain at peace with the light. This principle is expressed by Jesus — "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth" (Mt. 12:30). The lover of darkness *must* hate the light. There are two different Greek words used for evil works in verses 19 and 20. In v. 19 the word *ponera* which denotes an active wickedness, and in v. 20 the word is *phaula*, which denotes worthlessness — the one positive the other negative. Even the one who is useless and inactive in the cause of righteousness is evil in the Lord's sight! The remaining words of Jesus in this 20th verse focus like a gigantic searchlight upon the very deepest recesses of the heart of the one who loves darkness. Such a man hates and wars against the light because the light reveals his works for what they really are — evil, dishonest and worthless. The verb convicted (*elencho*) means more than reprov'd. It means expose, show up, bring to light, show what is actually the case (cf. Eph. 5:13). As Lenski says, "We see here the inner, self-contradiction and self-

condemnation of all such doers of evil who in unbelief act contrary to Christ and the gospel. They choose the worthless but they do not want its worthlessness revealed. They want to be undisturbed in thinking the worthless valuable." The evil-doer does not want others to see him, nor does he want to face himself. Jesus recognized this in the Pharisees who deliberately rejected His word when He said, "*Because I say the truth, ye believe me not*" (Jn, 8:45).

Now what of the man who does the truth? He gladly comes to the light. The man who abides in the truth purposely comes to the light that he may manifest his works to show that they have been wrought in God. He is not afraid to have the penetrating searchlight of truth play upon his works for they have God as their source and they are good works. The disciple of Jesus is to purposely show his good works before men that they may glorify the Father who is in heaven (cf. Mt. 5:16).

Thus ends Jesus' conversation, as far as we know, with this teacher of Israel. We would like to know more of Nicodemus than what is briefly told in two later passages (Jn. 7:50-51; 19:39). The important Personage for us to know, however, is not Nicodemus but the One who is now teaching Nicodemus, even Jesus.

Quiz

1. What is the nature of God's love (cf. I Cor. 13:5)?
2. Give three Old Testament references to the love of God.
3. What reasons may be given for contending that verses 15-21 are a continuation of Jesus' teaching?
4. What is meant by the word perish?
5. What was the primary purpose for Jesus' coming into the world?
6. How does the unbeliever bring about his own condemnation?
7. Into what two categories does Jesus place all mankind?
8. What kind of choice is made by the man who loves darkness?
9. Name two types of evil as mentioned in these verses.
10. How does the unbeliever contradict himself?
11. Why does the doer of the truth come to the light?

JOHN'S WITNESS CONCERNING HIMSELF

Text 3:22-30

22 After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized.

23 And John also was baptizing in Enon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.

24 For John was not yet cast into prison.

25 There arose therefore a questioning on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purifying.

26 And they came unto John, and said to him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond the Jordan, to whom thou hast borne witness, behold the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.

27 John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it have been given him from heaven.

28 Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but, that I am sent before him.

29 He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, that standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is made full.

30 He must increase, but I must decrease.

Queries

- a. Why is Jesus' growing popularity mentioned?
- b. Why does he ask the question about purifying?
- c. How does John's analogy of the bridegroom and the friend of the bridegroom apply?

Paraphrase

After His ministry in the vicinity of Jerusalem, Jesus and His disciples went out into the countryside of Judea and He spent some time there with His disciples and immersed. But John the Baptist was also immersing in Aenon near Salim, because there was an abundance of water there; and people were continuing to come and be immersed — for John had not yet been cast into prison. John's disciples, therefore, began a disputation with a Jew concerning the subject of ceremonial cleansing. They came to John and said to him, Teacher He that was with you beyond the Jordan, the One to whom you have borne witness, look, He is immersing and everyone is flocking to Him! John

answered and said to them, A man is not able to claim any authority if it has not been given unto him from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said positively, I am not the Christ but I was sent in advance of the Anointed One. The One having the bride, He is the Bridegroom. But the friend of the Bridegroom, the one who stands and listens for the Bridegroom's coming, rejoices greatly on account of the approaching voice of the Bridegroom. This, therefore, is the fulfillment of my work and thus my joy is fulfilled when all the people flock to Him. He must continue to grow in esteem and following while I continue to decrease in following.

Summary

Jesus' ministry and popularity grows. John the Baptist's disciples exhibit jealousy. The Baptist exhibits humility and devotion to Jesus, refusing to be jealous of Him.

Comment

After attending the Passover week and performing many signs and after a considerable ministry in the vicinity of Jerusalem (including the conversation with Nicodemus), Jesus goes out into the countryside. The most likely place to go with his disciples in order to baptize would be near Jericho where the Jordan was forded. It is evident from John 4:2 that Jesus baptized no one personally, but He is said to have baptized when actually His disciples performed the rite. There was Divine wisdom in this. The apostle Paul was forced to contend with division in the Corinthian church a few years later which had resulted from certain Christians taking pride in having been baptized by certain preachers and apostles (cf. I Cor. 1:14ff). It is asked, "What baptism would Christ and His disciples administer?" The only reasonable answer is that they were administering John's baptism of repentance and preparation. The baptism into His death (Rom. 6:3) could not have been instituted until after His death. The baptism instituted and commanded by Jesus at His ascension (Mt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15-16) was not a carry-over of John's baptism. John's baptism was not valid after Pentecost (Acts 2) and this is evident from Paul's instruction to some untaught disciples of the Baptist (Acts 19:1-7) and from the instruction given to Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). The list of parallels below which show the differences in the two baptisms is taken from *Studies in the Life of Christ*, Vol. 1, by R. C. Foster :

CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

JOHN'S BAPTISM

1. Demands explicit faith in Jesus as Son of God, as well as repentance	Was preceded by repentance
2. In the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit	On the general authority of God, no known formula
3. Permanent, remaining in force to the end of time	Temporary, preparing for the appearance of Christ
4. Universal — "all nations," "every creature"	For the Jews only
5. Inducts one into the kingdom and into Christ	Only in preparation for the coming kingdom
6. "For the remission of your sins."	Unto repentance and remission of sins (in promise?)
7. Followed by the "gift of the Holy Spirit"	Not connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit

In verse 23 we are informed that John changed his place of baptizing. Before this time he was "beyond the Jordan" (v. 26) which means the eastern side of the Jordan. There is much discussion as to where Aenon is located. No definite location can be established. The most acceptable location is about eight miles south of Scythopolis on the western banks of the Jordan. The primary discussion of this verse centers around the phrase, "because there was much water there." The pedo-baptists claim the phrase means "many waters, or an abundance of springs." They do this, of course, to discredit the "much water" as an inference for immersion. They say John chose a location with an abundance of water that the multitudes might have sufficient drinking water. But the whole emphasis of this context is upon baptizing. The demand of the New Testament for immersion as the only Scriptural mode of baptism cannot be denied by such egregious reasoning as the pedo-baptists have used with this verse (cf. also comment on 1:23-28).

As John writes his gospel, he is aware of Matthew's sequence of events in the ministry of Jesus and John the Baptist. John would know that Matthew has John the Baptist cast into prison just after the temptation of Jesus (Mt. 4:11-12). Here, in

John's gospel, Jesus and the Baptist are represented as preaching and baptizing simultaneously at least six months after the Lord's temptation. John, the author, is aware that those who later compare his gospel and Matthew's account may stumble and so he interjects the phrase anachronistically, "for John was not yet cast into prison." The interjection of verse 24 shows there was a considerable lapse of time between Matthew 4:11 and 12, and during this time Jesus and John were both preaching and baptizing.

As in the case when most great spiritual leaders gain a following, there arises, unsanctioned by the leaders, jealousy between the followers. Verse 25 informs us of John the Baptist's disciples beginning a disputation or argument with a Jew (probably one who favored Jesus and His ministry) over the question of cleansing. From verse 26 it seems the whole disputation was over the authority and cleansing efficacy of the two baptisms. The disciples of John began the controversy and probably challenged the Jew because he had been baptized by Jesus' disciples. That Jesus could baptize without consulting John they could not understand, and undoubtedly argued that the Jew had not been purified or cleansed because he had not been baptized by John. John's disciples probably brought the Jew with them when they came to their Teacher, expecting John to set this man right about the correct administrator of the rite of baptism.

The real trouble of these particular disciples of John was jealousy, not theological problems. Jesus was gaining popularity, and He and His disciples were preaching and baptizing and were not companying with John and his disciples. Jesus' disciples had the same trouble with the "unknown miracle-worker" (Mk. 9:38-39.). They could not understand how one could do good and practice religion and not company with them. Anyone who is doing the revealed will of God, whether he belongs to our immediate circle of fellowship or not, is for us and for Christ, and he is a child of God!

The Baptist's answer, verse 27, was probably unexpected by the disputing disciples. They were saying John should have the pre-eminence and that Jesus was a usurper. But John replies that authority and pre-eminence is divinely bestowed. In God's eternal scheme of things everyone has a place. John knew he had a definite place — his place was to be a preparer, a forerunner. Even John's own disciples testified publicly of John's previous denial that he was the Christ.

John now uses a familiar Old Testament figure to illustrate his secondary position to Christ. The bride is expressive in the Old Testament of the people of Israel in their close relation to God (cf. Isa. 54:5; Hos. 2:18; Ps. 45). The bride belongs to the bridegroom. Christ is the Bridegroom, and His people are the Bride (cf. Eph. 5:32; II Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17). In the Jewish marriage ceremonies, the friend of the bridegroom often had certain tasks to perform in advance of the final union. The friend would then stand and wait for the approach of the groom. Upon hearing the groom's voice the best man could rejoice in a task completed and rejoice again when the groom voices his joy upon receiving the bride. John then tells his disciples, "Since you have come to me and told me that all people are flocking to Him, the Bridegroom, my joy is made full." The Bridegroom is receiving His Bride with joy and the friend of the Bridegroom also rejoices!

Verse 30 will stand forever as a monument to this great man, John the Baptist. It exemplifies his whole life of service in behalf of the Christ. As Barclay says, "we would do well to remember that it is not to ourselves that we must try to attach people; it is to Jesus Christ. It is not for ourselves we seek the loyalty of men; it is for Him." (Wm. Barclay in *The Daily Study Bible*, "The Gospel of John," Vol. 1). Note the word *must* in this verse. The word is a translation of the Greek word *dei* which, in turn, is from the Greek verb *deo* meaning "I am bound." John says, then, "I am bound, I must decrease while He is bound to increase." John is merely submitting to the eternal plan of God by giving Jesus the pre-eminence.

Quiz

1. Where did Jesus go with his disciples to baptize?
2. Did Jesus baptize anyone? Explain.
3. Name at least 4 differences between John's baptism and Christian baptism.
4. Where is Aenon?
5. How are Matthew 4:11-12 and John 3:24 reconciled?
6. What probably caused the disputation concerning purifying?
7. How is v. 27 to be interpreted?
8. What was the joy of John the Baptist v. 29?

JOHN'S WITNESS CONCERNING CHRIST

Text 3:31-36

31 He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is of the earth, and of the earth he speaketh: he that cometh from heaven is above all.

32 What he hath seen and heard, of that he beareth witness; and no man receiveth his witness.

33 He that hath received his witness hath set his seal to this, that God is true.

34 For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for he giveth not the Spirit by measure.

35 The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand.

36 He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.

Queries

- a. Who is "he that cometh from above" and "he that is of the earth"?
- b. What is the meaning of "He giveth not the Spirit by measure"?
- c. What is the significance of the word obey?

Paraphrase

The One coming from above is far above all men: but he that comes from the earth remains on an earthly level and is above no one and he speaks from an earthly standpoint. The One coming from heaven is above all men: He is bearing witness to that which He has seen and heard in the very presence of God and no one is receiving His witness! The person who has received the Son's witness has acknowledged that God is true. For the One Whom God sent is speaking the words of God, for the Father does not give the Spirit to the Son in part. The Father loves the Son and the Father has given all things into His hand. The person continuing to believe in the Son with a trustful obedience is continually possessing eternal life, but, conversely, the one continuing to disobey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him in his disobedient state.

Summary

The Baptist points out that Jesus comes with the full revelation of God's will. The person who accepts Jesus' words acknowledges that Jesus is God's true Representative.

Comment

Although it is not certain whether verses 31-36 are the words of John the Baptist or John the Apostle, contextually they seem to be the words of the Baptist. John the Baptist is certainly capable of uttering such high and lofty phrases when speaking of the Son of God (cf. Mt. 3:11-12; Mk. 3:7-8; Lk. 3:16-17; Jn. 1:26, 27, 29-36; 3:27-30).

Assuming these to be the words of John the Baptist, they are his final testimony to the Sonship of Jesus. These words of witness to Jesus' deity are but a continuation of the witness John is giving his disputing disciples. These disciples must recognize, as did Andrew, Peter, Philip and the other early disciples of John, that the Lamb of God has come and He is the pre-eminent One. Thus, the Baptist points out, since Jesus came from the "bosom of the Father" He is superior to every mortal. He is above even a great mortal like John the Baptist, for this prophet was earthly in origin like all other mortals (cf. Mt. 11:11). These loyal (but jealous) disciples of John must see that the "one to whom all men are flocking" is the One Who has come down out of heaven with the complete and final counsel of God (cf. Jn. 1:9-15; 3:11-13). The Baptist states an axiom which not only applies to ordinary fallible men, but also in some instances to Spirit-inspired mortals when he says, "he that is of the earth . . . and of the earth he speaketh." John the Baptist and some of the apostles, when left to their own fallible reasoning, reverted occasionally to carnal thinking and speaking (cf. Mt. 11:2-3; Gal. 2:11-14).

The Baptist continues, in verse 32, to explain to his disciples that Jesus has come from the very presence of the supreme God and Father with the message of absolute truth. The message of Jesus does not vary; it contains no conjectures and is not frustrating. His message is the exact will of God for men which the Son heard directly from the Father (cf. Jn. 5:19; 7:16, 29; 8:26, 38, 40; 15:15). What a blessed knowledge! He Who speaks to us through the gospels speaks the words which He heard in the council-halls of heaven. He has interpreted for us (Jn. 1:18)

the divine plan of redemption, and He became God's oath, sworn in blood, to show that the promises of God are immutable (Heb. 6:17). Then the Baptist, in the last phrase of this verse, shows the superlative guilt of one who rejects Christ's testimony. John does not mean every man, without exception, when he says "no man receiveth his witness." This is plain from the following verse (v. 33). It is so monstrous to the Baptist that even one man should reject the message of Christ that he is moved to say, "no man receiveth his witness."

John says there were some who did receive the witness of Jesus, and thereby acknowledged that "God is faithful and will fulfill all that he has promised." Those few of Israel who did accept Jesus as the Son of God realized God was fulfilling His promises through Jesus and they "set their seal" that God was true to His word. Up to this time, John the Baptist, Peter, Andrew, Philip, Nathanael, and undoubtedly John and James had all received the witness concerning Jesus as the promised Messiah. Another principle is implied in this verse (v. 33). The person who will not receive the witness of Jesus is actually calling God a liar. Jesus told the Pharisees that although they claimed God as their Father, in reality Satan was their father because they rejected the Son's witness (cf. Jn. 8:38-47). To reject the witness of Jesus is to call God a liar (I Jn. 5:10). To dishonor the Son is to dishonor the Father (Jn. 5:23b).

Verses 34-35 are John's climactic conclusions to convince his untaught disciples that Jesus is the One to be followed and adhered to. John is convinced that Jesus is the One whom God sent. Except for one or two instances, the phrase *hon apesteilen ho theos* ("The one whom God sent") is always applied to Jesus (cf. Jn. 3:17; 5:36; 6:29; 7:29; 8:42; 9:7; 10:36; 11:42, etc.) Upon others who spoke on behalf of God the Spirit came only in measure. God spoke by others "in divers portions and in divers manners," but the Son was the "effulgence of his glory and the very image of his substance," and the Spirit was given to the Son without measure. The Baptist was an eyewitness to this and he "saw the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him" (Jn. 1:33-34). Not only does the Son receive the Spirit without measure, but the Father gave all things into His hand (cf. Jn. 5:19-20; 12:49; 13:3; 17:2; Mt. 11:27; 28:18).

Verse 36 certainly fits the character of John the Baptist's preaching as it is recorded in the Synoptic gospels. There his

message was, "the axe lieth at the root of the tree . . . hewn down and cast into the fire . . . shall baptize . . . in fire . . . flee from the wrath to come . . . whose fan is in his hand," etc. Here, in verse 36, he intends to warn these quibbling disciples in no uncertain terms that to reject Jesus inevitably brings down the wrath of God upon the disbeliever. The sharp contrasts of the Baptist here between the destinies of the believer and the unbeliever are very similar to the contrast Jesus presented to Nicodemus (3:16-18). John uses the present tense to denote that the one receiving eternal life is one who continually trusts and obeys. One who has an abiding faith has also an ever-present assurance of eternal life.

The only other alternative to accepting Jesus is rejecting Him. With Christ there is no middle-of-the-road policy — men either obey Him or disobey Him. Evidently, there is a plan or a norm which the Son came to manifest, which every man must act in accordance with, or rebelliously reject Him. Believing in Christ, then, entails more than admitting His historicity, and even more than giving intellectual assent to His message and claims. A faith that does not express itself in obedience is a dead and useless faith (cf. Jn. 14:21, 23; 15:10; Jas. 2:26). The gospel of Christ is a gospel demanding obedience, and its commandments are plain enough that "they who run may read." The law of the kingdom of Christ is love. But it is a love which leads to trust, repentance, confession and baptism. These are but the entrance requirements — once received as a citizen by the Lord, the new member must participate and share in the edifying of the whole society of believers to his fullest capacities.

The dreadful sentence upon the disobedient is that even now the wrath of God is potentially abiding upon him. The disobedient does not experience the wrath of God while he yet lives, but when Jesus comes again He will "render vengeance unto all them that know not God and obey not the gospel" (II Thess. 1:8). Then those who have chosen to disobey Christ's terms of entrance into the kingdom will go into eternity to reckon with an all-righteous and perfectly just God. There the unredeemed must bear the eternal and perfect wrath of God all alone. The one who chooses to disobey can blame only himself . . . he has been given the message and the opportunity to accept or reject . . . he brings the wrath of God upon himself.