

THE EXERCISE OF THE KINGDOM

THE ETERNAL LIFE OF GOD FULFILLING THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE KINGDOM

As we pointed out in a previous chapter, the first gospel preaching, preached both by John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus, was concerning the kingdom of the heavens. Because of our natural concepts, we are prone to consider that the first item of the New Testament gospel is the forgiveness of sins, and the second item is eternal life. Negatively, our sins have been forgiven, and positively, we have eternal life. But in fact the first word of the New Testament gospel was to **repent for the sake of the kingdom of the heavens** (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). **We need forgiveness of sins so that we can have eternal life, and we need eternal life so that we can be under the heavenly rule.** **The kingdom is the requirement of the gospel, and the life is the supply of the gospel.** What the gospel requires, it also supplies. The gospel requires us to be governed and ruled by the heavens. The gospel also supplies us with the divine life for us to fulfill the requirements of the kingdom.

As Christians who are born from above, we should not need any kind of earthly government to rule over us. We already have the heavenly government ruling over us. This is the real meaning of the kingdom of the heavens. The kingdom is simply the requirement of the gospel. **The gospel requires us not only to be sinless but also to be controlled and ruled by the heavenly government.**

If we are going to meet the requirements of such a high standard, we must have a life that is on an equally high plane. Otherwise, we cannot meet such a high standard. **Only the divine life can meet such a high standard. Only the divine life can meet the requirements of the heavenly government.** The kingdom is the requirement of the New Testament gospel, and the eternal life, which is Christ Himself, is the supply. The divine life can fulfill the requirements of the kingdom. Once we see the matter of the kingdom, we can see how high a standard is required by the gospel. After we are saved, we have a heavenly requirement within us demanding us **to live on a high level.** This level can be reached only **by the supply of the divine life.**

THE WISDOM AND JUSTICE OF GOD

The kingdom is also related to the wisdom and justice of God. The kingdom proves both the wisdom and the justice of God. **Without the kingdom God's wisdom and justice cannot be proved to the fullest extent.** Also, apart from the truth concerning the kingdom, it is very difficult to solve the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. The Calvinists stress eternal security, while the Arminians stress that one can lose his salvation. For many generations these two groups have been quarreling and debating. Both of these sides have their points. The Calvinists can point out many passages that prove eternal security. The Arminians, however, will bring up other passages, such as Hebrews 6 and 10, which seem to indicate that a person could be saved and then could fall and be lost again. **Without the kingdom truth these two extremes can never be reconciled.**

There is no doubt that once we have been saved, we are saved forever. Our salvation is eternally secure. But on the other hand, besides God's salvation, there is God's wisdom. There is the truth concerning the kingdom. In addition to salvation, there is the matter of the kingdom. Today the kingdom is an exercise for us. After we were saved, God set the kingdom before us as an exercise. In a sense we are born in God's home, but we are exercised in God's kingdom. The home is a place for birth and enjoyment, but the kingdom is a place for exercise and responsibility. After we have been regenerated, we must be **exercised.** **The home is the place to enjoy grace, but the kingdom is the place to exercise responsibility.** **We should not take one and neglect the other. We have to take the grace, and we also have to take the responsibility.** We have to take the home, and we also have to take the kingdom. We enjoy and share in the home **by partaking of the grace.** We share in the kingdom **by being exercised to take the responsibility.** Today, in the church age, the kingdom is **an exercise to us.** In the age to come, the millennium, the kingdom will be **a reward to us.** If we exercise well today, the Lord will reward us at that day. **If we do not exercise well today, we will lose the reward of the kingdom.** By this the wisdom of God is **proved**, and the justice of God is **maintained.**

THE EXERCISE OF THE KINGDOM

We need to read a number of passages which indicate that in addition to salvation there is the exercise of the kingdom. **First Corinthians 3:12-15** says, "If anyone builds upon the foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, stubble, the work of each will become manifest; for the day will declare it, because it is revealed by

fire, and the fire itself will prove each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward; if anyone's work is consumed, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." These few verses show clearly that **if we exercise properly, we will receive a reward, but if we do not exercise properly, we will suffer loss.** It does not mean that we will lose our salvation but that we will suffer loss. Both the reward and the loss are something in addition to salvation. Once we receive salvation, we have it eternally. But besides salvation there is the matter of the reward or the loss. **We must realize that after we are saved, we are put into the kingdom to exercise. Because we are born again, we must be under the control of the heavenly kingdom, under the heavenly rule and government.** For this exercise there will be a reward or a loss. **There is no problem concerning salvation, but there is a problem concerning the exercise.**

A FAITHFUL AND PRUDENT STEWARD

Now let us read **Luke 12:42-47**: "The Lord said, Who then is the faithful and prudent steward, whom the master will set over his service to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Truly I tell you that he will set him over all his possessions. But if that slave says in his heart, My master is delaying his coming, and begins to beat the male servants and the female servants and to eat and to drink and become drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and will cut him asunder, and will appoint his portion with the unbelievers. And that slave who knew his master's will and did not prepare or do according to his will, will receive many lashes." **If the steward is faithful, the master, at his coming back, will set him over all his possessions.** But **if he is not faithful, that steward will be cut asunder and will have his portion with the unbelievers.** Please notice that there are two possibilities for the same steward. Both possibilities refer to the same person. This is a matter of the reward of the kingdom. **Today we are in the kingdom to be ruled, but in the next age we will be in the kingdom to rule.** Today the kingdom is an exercise, but in the next age the manifestation of the kingdom will be a reward. First, **we must be ruled, and then we can rule over something.** If we have never been ruled, we can never rule over something. **We must be exercised in this age** so that we will be qualified to rule in the next age. The present age is the age for the Lord to discipline His children and to prepare His kings. We all must be prepared. As a steward, you must learn how to take care of the household of the Lord. **You must learn how to be exercised to be a king and to rule.** Then when the Lord comes back, you will be appointed to rule in the kingdom. At that time the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens will be a reward to you.

There are **two possibilities for the same slave.** The first possibility is that he would be **faithful** and be set over all his master's possessions. The second possibility is that he would be a **slothful** slave and be punished by his master. Some Christians have the **wrong concept** that these are two different slaves. They think that one is the real slave, and the other is the false slave. But by careful reading, **we can see that these are not two different slaves. It is the same slave with two different possibilities.** Instead of being faithful, the slave may quarrel with the brothers and sisters and may beat them. When his master comes, he will surely cut him asunder and appoint his portion with the unbelievers. **He is a believer, but he will suffer in that time as an unbeliever. This does not mean that he will lose his salvation. This means that he will suffer some loss.** When the Lord comes back, he will be beaten. Some Christians would argue that when the Lord comes back, we all will simply be resurrected and taken up to be with Him. They cannot imagine that the Lord would punish any believers. It is not my word which says that the master will beat the slave. The Bible says that he will beat the slave.

We must see several points very clearly. Surely this steward is saved, because once we are saved, we can never be lost. Yet because of his unfaithfulness, the steward will suffer a beating from his master. **The master will reward the faithful one and will punish the unfaithful one.**

FOUR DISPENSATIONS OF THE LORD'S DEALINGS

We must realize that there are **four dispensations, or ages,** in which the Lord will accomplish His work. There was the age of Adam to Moses (Rom. 5:14), the age of Moses to Christ (John 1:17), the age of the church, and the age of the millennium. The last of these four ages, **the millennium,** will be an **age of restoration** but not an age of perfection. This means that **it will still be an age of dealing, an age for the Lord to accomplish something.** During the time of the millennium, there will still be some curse left upon the earth. Some will die, and even at the end of the millennium, the nations will rebel. **This proves that the millennium is not the age of perfection but the age of**

restoration. The Lord's dealing with the believers is mainly in two ages: the church age and the millennium. If we are **willing to be dealt** with by the Lord to the fullest extent in this age, we will enjoy the reward in the next age. But if we are not willing to be dealt with by the Lord to the fullest extent in this age, He will still deal with us when He comes back. **At one time or another we must be dealt with—either in this age or the next.** But there is a big difference. If we are willing to be dealt with by the Lord in this age, **we will be rewarded.** If not, **we will be punished** during the next age. **Either way we will be dealt with by the Lord.**

Why would the Lord still deal with us during the next age? It is because **we are His harvest, His crop.** As a crop, we must be ripe; otherwise, the husbandman cannot receive us into the barn. If we would not be ripened in this age, the Lord will make us ripe in the next age. If we are not matured in this age by the time the Lord comes back, He will cause us to be matured in the next age. For a crop to be matured is a fixed principle. **We must be matured.** **As the Lord's crop we must be mature and ripe.** If we are **willing** to be ripened and matured in this age, the Lord will reward us for this willingness. If we are **not willing** to be matured and ripened in this age, the Lord will cause us to be matured and ripened in the next age, but we will suffer.

Many Christians today mistakenly think that once they die, everything will be all right. That can never be! **Even after we die, whatever problems we have with the Lord will still remain.** If we are not ready and mature before we die, we remain in the same condition after we die. Then, when the Lord Jesus comes back and we are resurrected, He will tell us that we are not ready and that we need to pay the price to become ripe and mature. This principle is quite logical. On the one hand, it corresponds with Calvinism, which says that we are saved eternally, and on the other hand, it corrects Arminianism, by the fact that we will not be lost again but that we may suffer some punishment. **At the Lord's coming back, immature believers will not be lost, yet they will suffer some kind of punishment.** If we are **not living** in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today, under the control of the heavenly rule, **we will not be able to go into the manifestation of the kingdom in the next age as a reward.** If we want to enter into the manifestation of the kingdom in the next age, **we must live** in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today. In other words, if we would rule in the next age, **we must be ruled in this age.** We must be exercised in the matter of the kingdom in order to enter into the kingdom to rule.

The kingdom is the requirement of the gospel, and the life we receive at regeneration is the supply of this requirement. It is not a loose and light matter to become a Christian. **It is a very serious matter.** We have been saved, and we have been born into a royal, heavenly family. Therefore, we have to be exercised in a heavenly way and to be ruled and governed by a heavenly rule in order to be qualified to be heavenly kings in the next age.

EXERCISE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Many verses in the New Testament show the need of exercise for the kingdom. Acts 14:22 says, **"Establishing the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God."** By comparing this verse with John 3:5, we can see a great difference. John 3:5 simply says that by being born of water and of the Spirit we can enter into the kingdom of God. According to John, entering the kingdom is a matter of another birth. But Acts 14 says that **we must suffer many tribulations to enter into the kingdom of God.** These two verses show two aspects. To enter into the kingdom of God is one thing, and to enter into it in the way of inheritance is another. If we would inherit the kingdom of God, **we must suffer the tribulation.** **We must be tested and exercised.**

We can see the same principle in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6. Chapter 5 indicates that a brother who committed a terrible fornication will still be saved. Even such a sinful, defeated believer will still be saved. But in chapter 6 we are told that **fornicators will not inherit the kingdom of God.** This means that such a fornicator **cannot enjoy or inherit the kingdom of the heavens as a reward.**

Now let us read Ephesians 5:3-5: **"But fornication and all uncleanness or greediness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints, and obscenity and foolish talking or sly, filthy jesting, which are not becoming, but rather the giving of thanks. For this you realize, knowing that every fornicator or unclean person or greedy person (who is an idolater) has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."** The kingdom of Christ and of God is the part of the kingdom of God which is the kingdom of the heavens. As a whole, it is the kingdom of God, but particularly, it is the kingdom of the heavens. **In the kingdom of God and of Christ there is no**

inheritance for the sinful one. If you are still in filthiness and sinfulness, although you are a saint, a saved one, you will have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Galatians 5:19-21 says, “The works of the flesh are manifest, which are such things as fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, divisions, sects, envyings, bouts of drunkenness, carousings, and things like these, of which I tell you beforehand, even as I have said before, **that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**” Thus, three portions of the Bible—1 Corinthians 6, Ephesians 5, and Galatians 5—tell us basically the same thing: **You may be a saved person, but if you are still living in sin and filthiness, you will not inherit the kingdom of God. You will have no share in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens, because you are not qualified.**

Second Thessalonians 1:5 says, “A plain indication of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be accounted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which also you suffer.” This verse indicates that **to suffer persecution causes one to be worthy of the kingdom of God.** This can enable one to inherit the kingdom of God.

Let us also read **2 Timothy 4:18, 7-8, 1:** “The Lord will deliver me from every evil work and will save me into His heavenly kingdom, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen...**I have fought the good fight; I have finished the course; I have kept the faith.** Henceforth there is **laid up for me the crown of righteousness, with which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will recompense me in that day,** and not only me but also all those who have loved His appearing...I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom.” These verses, written near the end of Paul’s life, indicate that **he was sure of being in the heavenly kingdom because he had fought the good fight, he had run the course well, and he had kept the faith.**

THE EXAMPLE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

Surely we have been saved eternally, but whether or not we will be able to share in the manifestation of the kingdom is the problem. As a concluding word we need to consider the history of the apostle Paul. First, let us read **1 Corinthians 9:24-27:** “Do you not know that those who **run** on a racecourse all run, but one receives the prize? Run in this way, that you may lay hold. And everyone who contends exercises self-control in all things; they then, that they may receive a corruptible crown, but we, an incorruptible. I therefore run in this way, not as though without a clear aim; I box in this way, not as though beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest perhaps having preached to others, I myself may become disapproved.” Surely Paul had the assurance that he was saved. Yet he emphatically told us that **he was running the race.** During the time that Paul was living, there were the Greek Olympic games, where people ran the races in order to receive a prize. Paul used this as his example, saying that he too was running a race **to receive a prize.**

Philippians 3:13-15 says, “Brothers, I do not account of myself to have laid hold; but one thing I do: Forgetting the things which are behind and stretching forward to the things which are before, I pursue toward the goal for the prize to which God in Christ Jesus has called me upward. Let us therefore, as many as are full-grown, have this mind; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, this also God will reveal to you.” At the time Paul wrote Philippians, he was old and had been with the Lord many years, but he was not yet certain that he had attained to the goal. Only at the time of the writing of 2 Timothy, which was close to the time of his martyrdom, did he have the assurance that he had reached the goal. This did not mean that he was not sure whether he was saved but that he was not sure whether he had gained the reward of the manifestation of the kingdom. **When he wrote 2 Timothy, he was sure that the crown of righteousness was waiting for him. That is the crown to be a king.** This means that when the Lord comes back, Paul will be rewarded with the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens. **We must be very clear: to be saved is one thing, and to be exercised in the kingdom is another. Today we need to be exercised so that tomorrow we can be rewarded.**