

THE GREAT TRANSITION

“When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed ... He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:10,11).

“But it is not as though the word of God hath come to nought. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham’s seed, are they all children” (Romans 9:6,7).

“Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

As we come to this further stage in the matter of the divine seed, this fruit of Christ’s travail, this new spiritual Israel, I want to make one or two preliminary remarks of a general nature.

God’s dealings have one basis

In the first place, it is necessary that we should be quite clear that, in the Bible, there are not two distinct things, as represented by the two Testaments, the Old and the New, or even more, if the Old Testament is subdivided into eras. There may be two, or more, methods of expression, but throughout the Bible, from its beginning to its close, there is only one thing expressed. Our habit of handling the Bible by dispensations, and emphasizing the different characteristics of different times, may have had the effect of making us mechanically minded, just as can a preoccupation with typology and symbolism. I want therefore to underline this anew: that, in these several and varied forms of expression, God is actuated, from beginning to end, by one thought, and one thought alone: *that everything throughout, at all times, shall express and be subservient to His Son.*

He governs everything, in the realities of His Person and of His redemptive and perfecting work. It is one Person and one Work, from the first book of the Bible to the last. The change from the Old Testament to the New is simply and only the change from the indirect to the direct; from the symbolic to that which is symbolized; from the temporal representation to the spiritual reality. That is all. It is not a change of purpose or object, not a change of basis or foundation; it represents no change of principle in any way.

Perhaps you feel you know all that; but there is very much more in it than any of us have yet realised. For example, all God’s dealings with the patriarchs were,

in principle, as much upon the basis of His Son as are His dealings with you and me. That was true also of Israel. Israel in the Old Testament was dealt with as much upon the basis of God's Son as we are in this dispensation. God has never, at any time, by any means, worked on any other ground than that of His Son. His creative activities were on the ground of His Son. "In Him, through Him, by Him, unto Him, were all things created" (Col. 1:16); and from then everything has proceeded on that basis, and will be consummated in Christ. By whatever means, in whatever way God has worked, His ground has always been the same. And on into the ages to come, that ground will be unchanging. It is the ground of Christ. It is very important that we should remember this and be quite clear about it.

A transition

I want now to return to the point where I broke off in an earlier message in this series (see March issue, p.44), when we had begun to refer to the Gospel by John, especially chapter 3. I was saying that we think we know something about John 3. Is it not the great chapter of: "Ye must be born again ...", and of: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son ..."? Do we not know it? Have we not heard it a hundred times, a thousand times? And yet, and yet ... what do we know about it?

Now this part of the narrative, marked by chapters 3 and 4, embraces all that could be said about this matter of the transition from the indirect to the direct; the transition from God's old method to His new method. It brings right into view the nature and principles of the heavenly seed, and much more. Let us look, then, at John chapter 3.

The chapter opens with these words: "There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews ... Jesus ... said unto him, Art thou the teacher of Israel ...?" (John 3:1,10). "A man of the Pharisees", "of the Jews", "the teacher of Israel". Here you have in a person, an individual, the full embodiment, the full development, of Israel after the flesh: a Pharisee. I must push back the temptation to dwell upon details, for half an hour could easily be spent on the history of the Pharisees, and that to great profit. Let us simply note that the sect of the Pharisees represented the very essence, the intrinsic meaning, of "Israel after the flesh" (1 Cor. 10:18). They gathered into themselves all that Israel claimed to be or was supposed to be. If you met a Pharisee, you would meet the last word in Israelism and Judaism. This man Nicodemus was said to be "a ruler of the Jews", and then "the teacher of Israel". Note the form of the latter phrase, for the definite article is literally there in the text. Jesus did not say, "Art thou a teacher of Israel?"; He said: "Art thou *the* teacher ...?" This man evidently stood out; he was perhaps recognised above all others as the foremost teacher of that time in Israel.

I indicate these things in order to point out that here we have Israel present after the flesh in a very full way — *par excellence*. He is of the natural seed of Abraham, a full-grown son of Abraham after the flesh. Three things are main factors here: he was born after the flesh as a son of Abraham; he was circumcised in the flesh as the seal of the covenant made with Abraham; and his

all-absorbing and consuming interest, as a true Israelite, was with the kingdom that was covenanted to Abraham's seed. All the natural seed of Abraham, with all its marks and features, is gathered into this chapter. It is not just Nicodemus — the nation of Israel is present. With this man, there are present in representation all the children of Abraham, "according to the flesh", from the time of the patriarch himself right on to this very hour. He is really a most significant figure. Much more could, of course, be said about him. But that is where the matter is introduced.

Now the Lord Jesus, with a wave of the hand, repudiates the whole thing. He is not listening to it, not opening the door to it, not giving it a moment's consideration or attention. "Verily, verily, I say unto you: You must be born again." "Really to be the seed of Abraham, you must be born from above" — for the phrase can bear that meaning also. The true seed of Abraham, to whom are the covenant and the promises and the prospect and the kingdom, is that which is born from above; not this at all.

Two great contrasts

a) Two births

The Lord Jesus makes here, either by direct statement or by clear implication, some fundamental contrasts. Firstly, a contrast between two births: "that which is born of the flesh"; "that which is born of the Spirit": that which is born of the earth and that which is born out from heaven. These belong to two kingdoms, two worlds, two regimes, and there is nothing in common between them. The door of the Spirit is closed to the "flesh", and the Lord Jesus is not discussing this matter at all. He is simply saying that the Kingdom of God is so different, so other, it belongs to such a different realm, that there is no getting into it except by way of an utterly new beginning out from heaven. And the rest of the New Testament is built upon that fundamental truth. All Paul's ministry is built upon that. I said earlier that that was the cause of all the trouble where Paul was concerned. It was a most drastic, devastating thing to confront Israel with a statement like that — "You are not Israel after all! You have not begun to see the real meaning of the Israel of God!" "Except a man be born anew, he cannot see ..."

"Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Here is not only the natural birth contrasted with the spiritual birth: here is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, the Red Sea and the pillar of cloud and fire, as symbolic representations, and the spiritual reality on the other. "Born of water" — yes, symbolically in the Red Sea. "Born of the Spirit" — yes, symbolically in the cloud. They "were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor. 10:2). "But, Nicodemus, you know all about that, or you think you do. I tell you, you have not begun to see the meaning of it. There is a difference between the symbolic and the spiritual, the typical and the real. Being born of water and of the Spirit has a far, far, deeper meaning than you have ever seen, or can see, Nicodemus."

b) Two kingdoms

The second contrast related to the Kingdom. Of course Nicodemus had not mentioned the word. But let me remind you of the last words of the preceding chapter. “But Jesus did not trust himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that anyone should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:24,25). “Now there was a man ...”, and Jesus knew him and what was in him, “... a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus.” Jesus knew that this man’s one interest in life — no doubt an honest, sincere interest, indeed a passionate interest — was the Kingdom. That was, of course, the great hope of Israel. And the Lord Jesus, knowing the man’s absorption in that kingdom interest, made it perfectly clear that the kingdom about which Nicodemus was thinking was one thing, but that the Kingdom itself was quite another. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, is quite another thing from the kingdom of Israel on the earth.

What is the conclusion that we are to draw from all this? Just this: that the historic was not the real — it did not conform to what the Lord meant by the “truth”. We find the same thing in His conversation with the woman of Samaria, in chapter 4, where the Lord Jesus brought in a clear contrast. “The hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father.” Here is coming a change, a transition, a passing over. “The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:21,23). With that statement, the Lord rules out a whole order and system, and brings in something altogether different. All that which was historic was not the real thing: to use His word, it was not the “true”. “This mountain ... Jerusalem ...” — yes, but it is not the true. This birth after Abraham — yes, but it is not the true. This hope of the Kingdom — yes, but it is not the true! This is very searching.

The principle of death and resurrection

The fact is that everything had to be put on to the ground of Christ, and that could only be, and can only be at any time, through death and resurrection — in other words, new birth. “In Isaac shall thy seed be called” (Gen. 21:12). That is a symbolic statement. Why? Because Isaac is the embodiment, in type, of the principle of death and resurrection. Everything had to be put on to the basis of Christ in death and resurrection, and that was no less true in the Old Testament than in the New.

In connection with this, I was recently reading again the fascinating story of Joseph: the famine in the land, the coming of his brethren, and the subsequent removing of the whole family — Jacob and all his sons — seventy souls — from the land into Egypt. The whole story of Joseph is, I think, one of those things that holds you to the end once you start reading it. It is just full of overmastering interest. But I found myself brought up short with a question. The Lord had brought Abraham into the land and given it to him and to his seed, by covenant, as an everlasting possession. Then what is this? The whole seed, every soul of them, is vacating the land, leaving the land of covenant, and moving into Egypt! Now, we know that the Lord had told Abraham that his seed would be in a

foreign land

in bondage for four hundred years, and would be ill-treated, and so on (Gen. 15:13). The Lord said that it would be so, and here it is. But leave aside for the moment the fulfilment of the prophecy. Here is a strange thing: the whole family, to the last soul, is uprooted and evacuated from the very place of covenant and into *Egypt*. What is the meaning of this?

I think I see the answer. Look at the seed of Abraham in the land; just look at those sons of Jacob. What sort of people are these? Yes, they are the seed of Abraham after the flesh, the historic line — but look at them! The incident with Joseph alone is enough to betray what sort of people they are. And the whole story of those men, throughout, is not a very nice story, is it? Their behaviour, their disposition, is a poor showing up of the seed of Abraham. Do you think that God is going to allow that kind of person to follow through to His end? Not at all! He will bring them into Egypt and put them first of all upon the basis of the travail of Christ — the cross — and then, when they are there, let the principle of the cross deal with the self-life, the flesh, until they groan. But then, out of that travail, see the mighty energies of God bringing that seed out from Egypt.

The principle, you see, is this same great principle — that of travail unto a new birth through death and resurrection. God is putting them off the ground of nature onto the ground of Christ, and that can only be in death and resurrection. Unless they go through this ordeal, this terrible ordeal, they cannot inherit, they cannot come through to possess the land. God is true to His principles: God is true to His Son. God is not play-acting; He is not just making meaningless history. God is writing, in very purposeful history, the eternal laws of His Son in Person and redemption.

The principle of circumcision

Here I must put in a rather long parenthesis on the matter of circumcision, a matter fraught with the greatest significance. Let me turn you to a few passages.

“And he gave him” (that is, Abraham) *“the covenant of circumcision”* (Acts 7:8).

“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Romans 2:28, 29).

“Is this blessing then pronounced upon the circumcision, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say, To Abraham his faith was reckoned for righteousness. How then was it reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision: and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision” (Romans 4:9-11).

You almost hold your breath as you read the next:
“Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing” (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Imagine a Jew saying that! We shall come to that in a minute.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

“For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Galatians 6:15).

Finally, that tremendous statement and exposition in the letter to the Colossians:

“In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:11,12).

The importance of circumcision to the Jews

Let us remind ourselves of the immense importance attached to circumcision by the Jews. It is something that could hold us for quite a time, and it would be well if the full force of it could come home to us. It was the very sign of their national oneness, of their national existence, of their belonging to the people of God. Anybody without that sign was altogether outside the pale of promise and covenant and hope. It was the door, for them, into everything of value: everything for them rested upon that. No one, for instance, would ever be allowed to partake of the feast of the Passover who did not bear that sign.

We can realise a little of what they placed upon it when we come into the New Testament and consider some of the events after the day of Pentecost. On the one side, think for a moment what it meant for the apostles themselves — Peter, James, John, and the others — to have to deal with this matter and weaken their position regarding it. It was a real battle, for it meant uprooting something from their very being, something that was a part of them; and it was cropping up all the time. On the other side, there were the Judaizers — those men who pursued Paul over the face of the earth, tracking him down into every town and city, on this one issue. They followed him up and said to those to whom he had ministered: “Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). That is a positive statement, and this was the cause of all the trouble.

There is very much, both in the Scriptures and outside of the Scriptures, that shows what a great thing this was. Even today, the celebration of this in a Jewish home is preceded by festivities and sacred rites. Yes, there is for them something about this ordinance that is big, tremendous. It was rooted deep in their very being as a most sacred thing, upon which everything of ultimate value hung. And here is this man who comes along and says, “Circumcision is nothing!” A Jew of the Jews, “of the stock of Israel”, “circumcised the eighth day” (Phil. 3:5), and he says it is nothing! What has Paul seen?

The significance of circumcision

Well, of course, he has seen the spiritual significance; and when you see that, the other is nothing. In his letter to the Colossians (among other places), he

lays down precisely and concisely what that significance is. Let us read the passage again.

“In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11, 12).

Now there are two things here. First of all, we have God’s full thought about circumcision and about baptism, and the relationship between the two. And then, secondly, we see what is the real significance of baptism in the life of the child of God.

Circumcision, like baptism, points to the cross

The relationship between circumcision and baptism is here stated by Paul. In both these words — “ye were ... circumcised”, “having been buried ... in baptism” — we are brought right to the cross of the Lord Jesus. In principle and meaning they are combined as one, and they point to the cross. “Buried with him ... raised with him”. The whole thing is put on the basis of Christ crucified and risen. Of course, we who are Christians know that to be the meaning of baptism. But what was the meaning of this other sign? Perhaps we may put it like this: that the cross is here brought in as — so to speak — the instrument of circumcision. It does that which must be done — it is the means of actually carrying it into effect — and it is drastic.

If Israel had only seen! If they had only seen, nothing would have been given away. They would not have had to lower their idea or lessen their estimate; they would not have made less of circumcision, if they had seen. For, after all, this *is* a big thing, it is a great thing. After all, national existence does rest upon it: but it is not this nation, it is the heavenly one. Entry into all the blessings of the covenant, the eternal covenant in His blood, rests upon the principle that is here. The whole Kingdom, as covenanted, is entered into and inherited by this door. Yes, it is a big thing. Nothing has been exaggerated as to its importance. If only they had seen Christ crucified and risen! It was only because they did not see the real meaning of this pre-eminent rite in their own life and history that they lost everything. They lost the Kingdom; they lost their place as a nation, in the purposes and counsels of God, for the time being at least; and all because they separated between a thing and its meaning. Now, in John 3 we see the Lord Jesus taking up the meaning of things for Nicodemus. By nature, of course, he is blind, like the rest. But Nicodemus is of the circumcision — that is the point. He is a Jew indeed; he is a representative, in a very full way, of Israel after the flesh. And the Lord Jesus makes it quite clear to him that — so far as acceptance with God is concerned — he, as such, is ruled out.

What is the meaning of all this? In the life of the true seed of Abraham — which is Christ’s seed — what does it mean? It means simply this: that circumcision is, as Paul says, not a matter of the flesh, but of the heart (Rom. 2:28,29). It is a severance that has to take place right down in the inner man, deep down in the innermost being of the person; a radical, fundamental putting of two things apart. You will be able to follow through the implications of this

more fully than it is possible for me to do here. There is an encircling of the blood which makes a separation, puts two things apart, and for ever after witnesses to the severance that has taken place, declaring that those two things are no longer together: God has put them asunder. And how much of the New Testament comes in when you say that! That is the spiritual meaning of baptism. You cannot say all this to everyone who is going to be baptized — they would be frightened and run away! — but God means all this. And God does not let us off. If we really mean business, He does not let us off any of His meaning, even though at the beginning we may not see it all — and thank God we do not! But even so, it might be well if we knew a little more than we often do.

The flesh, or self-principle

What is it that is severed in and by the cross of the Lord Jesus? From what do you and I accept severance, when we come to the cross of the Lord Jesus and, in the symbolic act of baptism, take our position with Him there? There are various terms for it in the New Testament. It is sometimes called “the flesh”. Paul uses it here: “the body of the flesh” (Col. 2:11). He is not talking about our physical body, our body of flesh. He is using that word “flesh”, as he often does, in a symbolic way. A definition that he gives to it in the Corinthian letter is “the natural man”. Perhaps we think: Well, “flesh” is a difficult word, but “natural man” is still more difficult — it seems more technical. What do these terms really mean?

They mean, purely and simply: the *self*-principle in man. That is at the root of everything. That is where all the trouble began with Adam; that is where all the trouble has gone on; and that is where the trouble is with you and me. It is a protean monster that has awoken, stretched itself, risen up and taken hold of the heart of man. It will assert itself, make itself known and felt, in every conceivable and inconceivable way. We shall never be able to conceive of the unnumbered, unsuspected ways in which this monster will show itself. It is no use trying to track it down. Every hour, every minute, every second, almost, of our life, in some form or other, this many-headed, many-membered thing — the self-principle — will assert itself.

a) In the mind

It is found in the mind. It makes use of our intellect and our reason in order to overpower opposition and bring things our way, to argue and to substantiate our own position. And therefore, before you and I can ever get into the true realm of heavenly things, we have got to have a “circumcised” intellect, reason, mind. Is that not exactly what the Lord was saying to Nicodemus? Here is this teacher of Israel, coming to argue, to discuss, and the Lord says, “It is no use. You may have been circumcised in the flesh as a good Jew, but what you need is to have your intellect circumcised”. “Except a man be born anew, he cannot see ...” “You have got it all in the mind, all as an intellectual apprehension. If I have spoken of earthly things, and you do not understand them, where will you be if I begin to talk to you about heavenly things? Out of your depth altogether! Devout son of

Abraham though you may be, you need to experience a radical severance between your natural mind and the things of Heaven.”

That is the trouble with many people. It is their head that is in the way all the time — the one thing that is obstructing their progress is their own head! Their stubborn-mindedness, or their clever-mindedness; their intellectual superiority, or their argumentative disposition: you meet it all the time — there is no way through. If you try to take them on that line you are simply beating your own head against a wall. The Lord Jesus never attempted such an approach in trying to win souls. He simply said: “You must be born from above”.

b) In the feelings

In other cases the circumcision needs to take place in the realm of the feelings, the emotions, the desires. That is the part of the being that gets in the way of so many people. They are controlled entirely by the feeling-life, the affection-life — they are in bondage to that part of their being; and they are very difficult people to handle. But a true child of Heaven, the seed of His travail, is one in whom there has taken place, in that very realm of the feelings and desires, a deep work of circumcision.

c) In the will

And what is true of the intellect and the emotions is true in the realm of the will. With many people it is their will that is in the way. They have got a position, and they tenaciously hold to it and support it; they have got a grip, and they just cannot let go. They will support their position with Scripture, or even with a “revelation” superior to Scripture! Their will is the cause of all the trouble. The cause of the setting back of all God’s purposes in their lives is just there: in their choices, their decisions, their position, their way; in their natural self-strength, that has never been broken. And so it is just there that circumcision must take place.

It applies in so many other ways. The cross, as the instrument of spiritual circumcision, has to be applied to this self-life deeper and ever more deeply, because there seems to be no end to it. But that is the painful side, the dark side. What is happening on the other side? Is it not that room is being made for Christ? The real seed, the seed of Christ, is growing, becoming more and more manifest. The opposite of the characteristics which we have been considering — strength of intellect or emotion or will — is meekness. He said: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29). Pursue this right through, and you cannot fail to recognise that there was something radically different in the very depths of His being.

I have said that we cannot calculate the whole range of this self-principle, in its myriad forms of self-expression and self-occupation and self-attention and self-pity and self-consciousness and self-satisfaction. Even in our Christian life, in our devotion to the Lord, we are so happy that other people see how devoted we are, and how humble we are! And it is the self, the wretched — may I use the word? — the stinking self, coming up all the time. For a true child of God is oblivious of himself, has lost consciousness of himself in every way. If other people point out something good about them, they had not realised it, they were

not aware of it. They are surprised that anyone could say anything good about them; they are not conscious of that. And on the other side, should people be critical and point out failings, well, they only say, “Yes, I know: I had that out with the Lord”, or “I have got that before the Lord right now. I am not deceiving myself about that.” This is the true child of Heaven.

So we could go on. That is the meaning of circumcision. In the light of that, the true meaning, the true principle, think of a Pharisee — a child of Abraham — saying: “I am better than anyone else”, or making long prayers for everybody to see and to hear! A child of *Abraham*! You remember all that the Lord said about them. Oh, they have missed the point! Ah, but do not let us criticize and blame. It is a very searching thing for ourselves, is it not? Paul says that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but a new creation. True circumcision is not of the flesh, but of the heart. The Lord give us circumcised hearts, and give us grace to have this severance pursued to finality.

APPRENTICESHIP FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD

“And he goeth up into the mountain, and calleth unto him whom he himself would: and they went unto him. And he appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach” (Mark 3:13,14).

The thought of “apprenticeship” is, of course, something included and implied in the words “disciple” and “discipleship”. “He appointed twelve, that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth ...” You will notice the very precise terms in which this statement was made. This choosing of the twelve was a quite deliberate, calculated, considered, far-reaching and significant act. At another time the Lord Jesus said: “I know whom I have chosen” (John 13:18). And again: “Did not I choose you the twelve?” (John 6:70). From Luke’s account (Luke 6:12,13) we know that His choice followed a night spent alone with His Father in prayer. Yes, it was a very deliberate act, prayed over and considered, with a very large background in His own mind; it was far from casual. These are not just independent comments upon it or statements about it; they are supported by, and are indeed the very teaching of, the Scriptures. We shall see that as we go on.

“And he chose ... twelve” (Luke 6:13). What a dangerous thing for Him to do! But what a significant thing for Him to do! That number was a well-understood number in Israel. Were there not twelve Patriarchs? Were there not twelve tribes? Twelve is one of the great, dominant numbers of the Bible, particularly in relation to Israel. Now that is deliberately laid hold of by the Lord Jesus, and brought over as the very beginning of the movement into the new dispensation; and so we have the twelve apostles. And in many other ways that number comes into view, both in itself and in its multiples, in relation first of all to Israel. In the new Jerusalem, at the end of the Revelation (Rev. 21:10 - 22:5), we have twelve foundations to the walls. The city itself is 12,000 furlongs in each direction. It has twelve gates of twelve pearls. There are twelve angels. In the seventh chapter of the same book the number of the sealed is a multiple of twelve: 144,000—twelve times twelve thousand. And so we could go on.

Are you beginning to see something more in this deliberate act of the Lord Jesus? I say, it was not casual. He knew what He was doing. When He did this, He was doing, in one sense, the most dangerous thing that He could do. For of course all the nation of Israel, and especially their rulers, would jump to but one conclusion from this that He was doing. In their minds there would at once arise the thought: “Oh, he is setting up another Israel, is he? I see!” *And so He was!* That is just the point. With Him, the Israel that has been is set aside and

repudiated. With Him another is brought in. To the twelve He said: “You shall sit upon twelve thrones” (Matt. 19:28). Now this number, twelve, in Bible symbolism, as you probably know, is the number of government, of administration. Israel knew that, and so, of course, immediately grasped the implication of choosing twelve. “He is setting up a new government, a new administration!” Yes, He was! — but a very different one, as we shall see.

Twelve is the number of government. Consider its factors — three and four. Three is always the number of heavenly government, divine fulness of government, the very Godhead over all. Four is clearly the number of earthly government: earthly conditions are characterized by the number four. North, south, east and west comprehend the earth; spring, summer, autumn, winter comprehend the seasons; and so we could go on. Heavenly and earthly government are embodied in this number twelve. And that is very significant as to this act of the Lord Jesus. We recall that, when the covenant was made to Abraham, he was told that his seed should be as the sand on the seashore, as the stars of the heaven (Gen. 22:17). But now we call back the words of Paul: “To Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Gal. 3:16). Heavenly and earthly government meet in Christ.

The choice of twelve, then, brought into view, first of all the new Israel, and then the new government by that Israel of heaven and earth; and that new Israel is the church, as represented by the twelve. But this Israel, we repeat once more, is something very different from the old. It is a spiritual posterity, the fruit of His travail, the seed that He should see because of it (Isaiah 53:10,11). It is spiritual, as being a people who inherit, take over, the real spiritual meaning of that nation that was called “Israel” — “prince with God” (Gen. 32:28). There, inherent already in the very name, is the governmental element.

Now, of the “Israel after the flesh” many things were said, as to their pre-eminence, being the head of the nations, “the head, and not the tail” (Deut. 28:13), and so on. As we know, they failed in this. But God’s principles do not go when His instruments fail. When anything which God chooses, in order to express His principles, fails to do so, He does not abandon the principles. He may have to abandon the vessel or the instrument, but He will go on with His principles. And so it is in this case: the principle is taken over, and the fulfilment of this conception — a prince with God, the head and not the tail, the head of the nations — is found in the new Israel.

That, then, is the setting. Let us get closer to it. It has two major aspects: firstly, the essential nature of this Israel, and then the essential apprenticeship unto the Kingdom.

The essential nature of the Israel of God

We have said that this seed of Christ is spiritual in constitution. We spent some time on that, as seen in John 3, in our last meditation, but let us just touch on it again. In the Israel after the flesh, you have an actual people on this earth whom you can recognise. You can see that they are — physically and in other

ways — a nation, a people. Now, however physical features may manifest themselves in us, the constitution of the new Israel is not a physical constitution, a constitution of physical features: it is essentially a spiritual constitution. That is, it has in the first place nothing to do with anything outward at all. It has to do with *character*. This Israel is constituted on the basis of another character, and that character is Christ. Its very constitution is Christ.

A new knowledge

It is a nature constituted, in the first place, with a faculty for *knowledge* which is altogether outside of the reach and range of any other kind of person. Here again we come back to John 3. “Except a man be born anew, he cannot see... Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom...” This thing is beyond him in sight, in knowledge, in understanding, to say nothing of inheritance. This Israel is an Israel that has a seeing capacity which the old had not and no other has. It is constituted this way.

This is, mark you, not merely a statement of truth. This is something very searching for *us*, as to our being children of God, being the spiritual children of the travail of Christ. This is not something that is extra to the Christian life, or for those who advance to certain heights and degrees. Right from our new birth, you and I, every one of us, ought to have a faculty of spiritual understanding and perception and knowledge that is possessed by no other person outside this Kingdom! We could spend much time in pointing out the tragedies that have come into Christianity because of failure to recognise or live up to this. I would go so far as to say that the largest proportion of all the trouble between Christians is due to either a lack of, or a failure to live on, the basis of spiritual understanding, spiritual discernment, spiritual perception, spiritual knowledge. There is any amount of natural knowledge in the Christian world: Bible knowledge, prophetic knowledge, and what not. But spiritual knowledge is a rare commodity; and yet it is supposed to be a constituent of our new birth from above, a faculty that we ought to have.

Now, if you are thinking: “Then woe is me — I don’t know much about that!”, the Lord is simply saying to you: “Look here, this is yours by rights. It is not some extra thing to which you attain by struggle and effort, or by years of laborious Christian living, or by some specific act, some terrific upheaval in your spiritual life. It is a *birth* thing, it is a *birth* right: you have a *right* to this!” But it may be that, after all, you *do* know in this way, although you do not know that you know! You have a new sense, a new faculty, a new “something” in you, that causes you to know — in some measure at least — what is of the Lord and what is not, what is spiritual and what is not. But oh for the increase of that! It is the development of *that*, the increase of *that*, which is the apprenticeship in the school of Christ. We learn by mistakes, we learn by blunders, but the thing that we are learning is not something objective. We are learning inwardly that such and such is not the way of life and we should do well to avoid it; and that such and such *is* the way of life, and that is the way for us to go. We learn it inwardly. It is a new kind of knowledge.

A new power

This spiritual Israel is constituted also with a new kind of *power*. This particular kind of seed, or divine progeny, has a power, an ability, a strength, which is quite different. One of the things that we learn in this apprenticeship, in this school, if we are apt pupils, if we are really abandoned to know the Lord, is that the Lord will deliberately undercut and undermine our natural strength. He will bring us to positions where the very best natural strength of any kind cannot cope with the situation; where, if we are to go through, we shall require a strength that is not in us by nature at all, even though we might be the very best specimens of humanity. We come back to Nicodemus. “You just cannot”, said the Lord to Nicodemus, “you just *cannot*. You may be as willing as anybody could be, you may be as anxious and as interested, but what stands over you is CANNOT.”

The great question, arising again and again from Nicodemus’ lips, is:

“How ...?”, “How ...?” He cannot. But this seed has something of a strength which is different, quite different from all that. Peter speaks of it as: “the strength which God supplieth” (1 Pet. 4:11). It is an ability of another order.

And so we could go on with the constitution. But it will all amount to this — that it is of another generation. It is of the generation of Christ. There are here capacities and possibilities and resources which are from Heaven, which cannot be accounted for on earth at all.

In point of fact, the old Israel was put onto that basis, though in a symbolic or typical way. We pointed out in our last study that they were put onto the basis of Christ, and we saw just what it meant for them to be put onto that basis. When everything went wrong with them spiritually and morally, and they were unworthy of the name of Israel, they were just rooted up from the land. Those twelve sons of Jacob, behaving as they did — putting Joseph in the pit, deceiving their father, and even counselling murder, and then the exposure of them before their brother whom they did not recognise in Egypt — it is a sorry tale. What breakdown! What failure! And so Israel must be put on to the ground of Christ, through death and resurrection; they must come into the meaning of His travail, be born out of it. Then their life afterwards must be constituted on the same basis, the basis of Christ, so that, for those ensuing forty years in the wilderness, there is no accounting for their bread or their water, or for anything else, on any other ground than that of heaven. “It was not Moses that gave ... the bread ...; but my Father ...” (John 6:32). It was heavenly. You see the point: they were constituted according to Christ, with resources that are not explicable on any other ground than that they are from heaven.

Thank God for that! It is the most wonderful thing to live on Christ — to live on heavenly ground! Perhaps you are thinking that this spiritual life must be a very difficult one. Well, for the flesh, of course it is! For the natural man, of course it is! To the self-life, it certainly is. But the spiritual life is a romance. What the Lord does — oh, it is just wonderful. How my heart went with a brother whom I recently heard speaking about ministry! Would not our flesh always like to have everything well worked out and mapped and planned in advance — have it all there, so that to give the word is really no trouble at all! But the Lord shuts us up

and holds us up, and gets us into a perfect travail over a message, waiting so often until the very last minute — and then it comes! That is a personal testimony of over thirty years. It is something wonderful. This is no theoretical matter. It is marvellously real, and really marvellous.

That is the nature and constitution of this new Israel. This seed is a mystery, this Israel is a mystery; everything to do with it is a mystery. It cannot be understood by natural means at all. But do not take that the wrong way, interpreting it to mean that we have got to be very “mysterious” people! There are many people trying to be mysterious, under the mistaken idea that that is spirituality. But this mystery is the mystery of a *life*.

The mystery of spiritual life

Of course, even life in the natural is a mystery. We cannot explain life; we do not know what life is. It is the greatest reality, and yet it is the thing which is most impossible of explanation. But in the real realm of the spiritual there is another life, and this life is an even greater mystery. It is a life that persists in spite of everything that can be set against it. The mystery about the church, about the people of God, is the mystery of this life — how it survives, how it goes on, how it increases. There is nothing in all this universe which is so assaulted, so set against, as this life of the people of God. All the dark, sinister forces of Satan seem to have but one ultimate object — namely, in some way to quench this life. All the experiences through which the Lord allows His people to go (and sometimes takes them), which, looked at naturally, could be said to be death, are only

allowed in order to bring out this wonderful reality — that there is a life which, when put to the test, subjected to every kind of trial, survives, overcomes.

The power, persistence, and progress of this life are a mystery. The more the children of Israel were oppressed, the more they grew. Carry that over into the spiritual Israel. It looks today very much as though the evil forces — hell and men — are reducing the church, by putting to death, or by driving out of triumphant faith, many of the Lord’s people. Ah, but that is not the end of the story. These blind instruments of evil are fools — they cannot read history. If they could, they would see that what they are doing is the very thing that is going to accomplish what they are trying to frustrate. Oh, no — make no mistake about it: long centuries of terrible ordeal have proved this, that there is a persistence and an increase here that is a mystery; you cannot explain or account for it naturally at all.

That should be true of every child of God. So take hope, take heart, dear tried one. If you are feeling that your way is more death than life, that the ordeal is tending to be one of total reduction, remember that that is not the end of the story.

The essential apprenticeship for the Kingdom

I come now to this matter of the “essential apprenticeship”, as I am calling it, for the Kingdom of God. That is, the Lord Jesus chose twelve — and we have seen the significance of His act — “that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth”. Here are two halves of one thing, essential halves. “Be with him” — why? That He might teach, that He might instruct, that He might equip, *in order that* He might send forth. All going forth must issue from the closest association with Christ in His school. And all association with Christ in His school must issue in going forth! The Lord does not want people shut up in monasteries and cloisters, and places like that, always studying and learning, accumulating knowledge of things, even though they might be heavenly things. Every bit of God-imparted knowledge is to be for practical purposes. And no practical activity which does not come out of God-imparted knowledge will affect the Kingdom of God. So these are the two things.

Note that all Christ’s teaching, instructing, training of the twelve came out of His own spiritual life. It did not come out of books; it did not come out of the schools. This was a thing that baffled the scholars of His day. “Whence ... hath this man all these things?” (Matt. 13:56). “How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” (John 7:15). He was not a man of the schools; He was not a man of the library, of the study. It all came out of His own spiritual life. He had a spiritual knowledge which was unique. It differed entirely from every other kind of knowledge.

The Fatherhood of God

For one thing — and this was the basis of everything else — His knowledge of the Father was unique. Consider this statement: “No one knoweth who the Son is, save the Father; and who the Father is, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him” (Luke 10:22). “No one knoweth who the Father is, save the Son”. That is a sweeping statement, a tremendous claim! But His unique knowledge of the Father sprang, not out of studying, not out of contemplating, but out of the inward spiritual oneness between the Father and Himself.

Now note this: the Fatherhood of God was not a *doctrine*, preached by Jesus to the general public. You can confirm that from the record in the Gospels. It was a *mystery*, disclosed to His disciples in private. The Fatherhood of God was no doctrine with Jesus, no theory: it was a reality in His own spiritual life and in His own spiritual being. To the twelve He made the Fatherhood of God real — not by argument, nor by much speaking, but because the Father was to Him the supreme reality in His life. All His training of the twelve came out of that; His teaching came out of that. And you note how much there was in His teaching of them and training of them which centred in the Father. How often did He refer to or address the Father! If you are not impressed, look it up again. This was the heart of everything in His training of these men. His teaching on prayer was all based upon that. “After this manner ... pray ye: Our Father...” (Matt. 6:9). I repeat: this was not for the general public. It was something on the inside of the

school; it was a mystery disclosed alone to those on the inside. But it was made real.

This new Israel has to be constituted on that basis. Just as the Lord Jesus trained the twelve on the basis of His union with the Father, so all our training will be through our union with Christ — a union as vital as was His with the Father: so that we, in union with the Son, may ourselves come into the mystery and wonder of the Fatherhood. It is a secret within this spiritual seed, within the Israel of God: the wonderful secret of the Fatherhood, not as a title, but as a great reality. How much we should be saved from if that became as real in our beings as it was in His! From beginning to end His reference is to the Father, His deference is to the Father; His appeal is always to the Father. The controlling reality in all His movements is the Father; everything for Him comes from the Father. The last words that He uttered were addressed to the Father: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). It was this that kept Him strong, it was this that kept Him right. It was the great motive force in His refusing everything that the Devil offered Him; it was His motive power in enduring suffering. The Father was everything to Him, in every way — “all in all”; a deep inward reality.

I suggest that we lack something vital in constitution if we lack an adequate sense of our spiritual union with God as our Father in Christ Jesus. When we get as near to Him as that, or get Him as near as that, we begin to see something. Because, you see, the Lord Jesus sought to inculcate into the disciples, the new Israel, the meaning of this relationship between Himself, as Son, and the Father. It was something of practical account in their relationship with one another. For He was not constituting a kind of *clientèle* or following, a new movement of people of common interests: He was constituting a family

That is made so clear by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews: “He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare thy name unto my *brethren* ... I and the children which God hath given me” (Heb. 2:11-13). In effect, and in definite statement, the Lord is saying: “Now, I want you to realise that you are all brethren, you are all of one family, because you are children of one Father in the deepest reality of your constitution. That is the basis on which you should regard one another and behave toward one another. You are to cherish and care for one another, even as I have loved you.” You see, this is the same thing: “Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end” — to the uttermost (John 13:1). That was only making practical in their corporate life the relationship between Himself and His Father, the Father and Himself. It was a training.

Discipline

Mark you, it was a discipline, too, a real discipline: for if ever there were twelve diverse kinds of people on this earth, it was these twelve. Yes, there was something there of every kind. Temperamentally, constitutionally, naturally, they would fly into fragments at any moment. There is nothing here naturally of cohesion, integration. But under His hand, in His school, something is going to happen. At any rate, if the symbolism of the book of the Revelation means

anything at all, there is something fairly solid in its last chapters! For we read that “the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. 21: 14). Here they are making one solid basis for the everlasting Kingdom. Something has happened.

Now that is what the Lord is trying to do with us. If you feel that you cannot get on with another child of God, just ask Him to move them away, or move you away, and see what happens! You will find that you have got into the realm where the Lord takes no notice of your prayer — at least until something has happened in you. The Lord lets us go through all the “sand-papering” and difficulty of these contradictory dispositions and temperaments amongst His children. We think: “Oh, wouldn’t it be good if only He would take that very difficult person away!” But it seems that the Lord does nothing about it, on the outside. No, He is going to do something on the inside. He may eventually take them away, but not until that something inside has been done. That is a part of the apprenticeship to the Kingdom. How can we rule or reign together in the Kingdom, if we are all in a state of mutual contradiction and conflict? No, the Lord is not going to have a kingdom like that, nor a government like that.

So, their being “with Him” was for the purpose of deep practical instruction and teaching in all this meaning of the Fatherhood of God, that this deep secret and mystery might find its expression in a corporate life.

This matter of training covers a vast amount of ground, and many other aspects than the one that I have mentioned. Let me just point out this. While it is true that the Kingdom came on the day of Pentecost, the New Testament speaks of the Kingdom in three tenses — past, present and future: it has come, it is coming, and it has yet to come. It is with a view to that coming now and yet to come that you and I are being trained. We are in school now for the present coming of the Kingdom. It will not come, except through the discipline of those who are called into fellowship with Christ. And the final manifestation and appearing of the Kingdom is something for which a great preparation is going on, a preparation of us all. Whatever may be involved in this apprenticeship, this training, in relation to the Kingdom, in every one of its aspects, it is of the greatest importance that we recognise this. We are in school with a view to the Kingdom.

No realisation without the cross

Whatever may have been the aspect of the training in the case of the disciples, notice how Jesus held everything to the cross. He leaves the multitude, He leaves the world, and takes these men apart with Himself:

He speaks to them of deep things, wonderful things — and then He heads it all up to His going to Jerusalem, being delivered into the hands of the rulers and crucified. (See Matt. 16:21; 17:22,23; 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-33.) That was something they could not accept, they could not understand; that was the thing that stumbled them. But He held everything to that, as though He would say: “All this that I have been saying to you, all this that I have been holding up to view, all this for which I have chosen you, all this for which you have been in the school with Me, is based upon the cross. Not one bit of it can

be realised apart from the cross. You can come into not a fragment of it, except by way of the cross. The cross is essential to your being this Israel. You will be born out of that travail, and before that you will be scattered, every man of you.”

How true it was! But out of His travail, out of His tomb, out of His resurrection, they were born as an organic entity. How they stood up together on the day of Pentecost! I do not think they had ever been together quite like that before. This is a new togetherness. They are born on the day of Pentecost. The new Israel is here. It has been spoken about and prepared for; it has had much instruction, much teaching, and much handling; but it required the cross to produce it.

So for the Israel of God the cross is essential. The cross is essential to the Kingdom, the reign; the cross is essential to the service, the administration. I am deeply impressed by something in that part of the prophecies of Isaiah from which we have taken our basic passage — Isaiah 53:10,11. The real beginning of that chapter is, of course, not as marked in our arrangement, but at verse 13 of chapter 52: “Behold, my servant...” And then we read on about the suffering Servant. But what is said of Him immediately? “He shall be ... very high.” How? The next verse says: “His visage was so marred more than any man ...” A few verses later we read: “He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: we hid as it were our faces from him ...” “We did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” But we were wrong: “He was wounded for our transgressions ...” And then on to our passage: “When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.”

Who is this? The Servant of the Lord. “Behold, my *servant*”. And He chose twelve who were to be “with Him” in the service of the Kingdom. They were to be the servants of the Kingdom — His fellow-servants. You notice from the margin that some authorities add (as in Luke 6:13): “whom also he named apostles”. Here, then, is the whole service of the Kingdom fully in view: but it is only, as in Isaiah 53:10,11, by the travail. It all comes out of the travail — there is no other way. The natural disposition has to be undone by the cross, disintegrated, broken up and scattered. It is a false thing that cannot stand and will not go through; it is proved to be unsubstantial. Another thing must be brought in which is spiritual — that is, of the Spirit — and which can go through. The cross is the instrument of God to bring about the new Israel, the new Kingdom, and the new servants of the Kingdom.

May the Lord say something to all our hearts: show us what kind of people He is after, and why He is taking the way with us that He is. He has in view a service — here, and more so hereafter — which requires a people after this kind. The Lord make us like that!

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