

THE CHRISTIAN'S PLACE

IN RELATION TO

“The Kingdom of Heaven,”

AND


“The Powers that be.”

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THE conduct and deportment of the Christian as a subject of the kingdom of heaven, his relation to "the powers that be" that bear rule on earth (Rom. xiii. 1), and the practical maintenance of his heavenly calling, are matters of vital importance. In the first, we own Christ as Lord; as to the second, we are to be characterised by subjection; while the third is secured by our being sustained in the enjoyment of our "calling on high of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. iii. 14.)

When considering any subject of holy scripture it is necessary that Christ should be the centre of our thoughts, or we shall fail to apprehend the mind of the Spirit therein. Thus, though the idea of the kingdom of

heaven may be found in the Old Testament, yet the divine conception of it can only be gathered from the New Testament, where the position of Christ in glory, with its consequent result, is fully unfolded. The fact that Christ has come, and that He is now glorified, must of necessity greatly add to the thoughts previously expressed, for Christ shining forth in glory is the great central thought in the divine plan. In perfect wisdom God may allow Satan and evil apparently to triumph, yet the end will fully demonstrate the victory of God, who will be *fully* justified and vindicated in all His ways. The public solution of the question of good and evil, for the glory of God, necessitates the full development of man's will and ways.

Not until we come to the Gospel of Matthew do we read that "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Chap. iii. 2.) It had been prophesied of beforehand, and seen in figure and type, but now it was *near*—"at hand," for Christ had come, the One who could rule according to God. The power of this kingdom was seen in relieving man (chap. iv. 23), and its principles were plainly made known in the teaching of Christ. (Chapters v.-vii.) But having been rejected the Lord made known prophetically that this kingdom would be set up *in mystery*.

(Matt. xiii.) Then, from chapter xviii. to xx. 28, the Lord further unfolded that the light of *the kingdom* would so affect its subjects as to transform their character and lives. They would become like little children; they would be expressive of God's thoughts in regard to natural relationships and the disposal of their possessions, and in manifesting the grace which had been seen in Christ Himself in the midst of principles opposite in character, though perhaps extolled amongst men. At the close of the gospel the Lord said to the eleven, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (chap. xxviii. 18), and this would be so although the outward condition of things would not be changed.

The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles are based upon this grand fact that all power in heaven and upon earth is *given* to that Man. The words "all power" should be carefully weighed and their comprehensiveness noted. It should also be noticed that while the kingdom of heaven is in mystery, Christ, as Lord, only exercises this power in a spiritual way and in regard to His own (Col. i. 10-13); while all which has not yet come under His control, as *Lord*, is for the moment controlled by God providentially in view of the interests of the kingdom. When Christ appears He

will, by the power already given Him, subdue all things to Himself—"according to the working of the power which he has, even to subdue all things to himself." (Phil. iii. 21, New Trans.)

There is clearly a dispensational thought connected with the phrase, "the kingdom of heaven," or, as it should read, "the kingdom of the heavens," but it conveys also a moral thought. Dispensationally, the kingdom of heaven has not yet been manifested in public display, but it has been and is already established in power. We look for it dispensationally, but even now the power of it can be known and the blessings of it enjoyed, and we are to be marked by its moral characteristics. The divine idea is not simply that the heavens rule, but that God has set His Man (Christ) in heaven and that there are persons on earth under His influence and direction and enjoying the blessedness of His sway. Though in the place where He has been rejected, they are subjects of the kingdom, and they have the light (Rom. v. 1-11), the power (Col. i. 11) and the immense gain that flows from being under the guidance of that Man in heaven—our Lord Jesus Christ.

It must not be overlooked that the two phrases "the kingdom of heaven" and "the kingdom of God" both speak of the same kingdom.

The former has perhaps a little stronger dispensational aspect than the latter, but both set forth largely moral ideas. The thought of the kingdom of heaven gives prominence to the administration which is in the hands of the Man in heaven, while the expression, "the kingdom of God," throws into relief the fact that God's sway is established in the souls of the subjects of the kingdom by a moral work through the Spirit. Thus though the actual phrase, "the kingdom of heaven," only occurs in Matthew, yet the truth of it is certainly found in other books of the New Testament. The words of Ananias, "The Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee . . . hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Acts ix. 17), appear to us to cover both aspects. Romans i.-vii. connects more with the thought of the kingdom of heaven and chapter viii. with the kingdom of God, while Colossians i. 10-13 and other passages include both thoughts; for the objective and subjective aspects are needed to give a true conception of the kingdom.

It is a great bulwark for the soul to know that the kingdom has been established in divine power, that God has wrought in delivering grace, establishing His sway through a moral work which in character corresponds to

the revelation of Himself in the Man in heaven, and that soon this kingdom will fill the whole earth. But it is also a great cheer to know that God providentially orders all "the powers that be" in view of the interests of the Man in heaven. The Old Testament clearly spoke of God in His omnipotence ordering all things, and this was fully recognised by our Lord (John xix. 11), but the New Testament states "There is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." (Rom. xiii.) It matters not to the Christian what form the power assumes, absolute monarchy or democratic government, he knows it is "of God" providentially. Neither does he raise the question whether it is Christian or infidel, beneficent or tyrannical, just or unjust in its demands, right or wrong in its actions, his course is clear, "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." (Rom. xiii. 1.)

What a comfort to know "There is no power but of God"! What a cheer that the powers are ordained in view of the interests of *God's* kingdom. We have received a kingdom which cannot be shaken, though all else will be shaken. (Heb. xii. 28.) A monster of cruelty, like Nero, may under God's providence come into power,

but he can only further the interests of God's kingdom. The seed sown by the martyrs yielded a fine harvest, and the persecution was calculated to arouse the saints to the fact that they belonged to a Person in heaven. The God of omnipotence necessarily orders all things providentially, using even wicked men as His sword. (Psa. xvii. 13.) In the days of old the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance according to the number of the children of Israel, but now He ordains all the powers in His infinite wisdom in view of His "kingdom which cannot be moved." The apostle speaks of this divine ordering when he says "Ye know what withholdeth." At that time the Roman Empire was used in the providence of God to hold in check developments connected with the one "who will be revealed in his time," "the man of sin." The mystery of iniquity was already working, but the Spirit of God indwelling the saints of God hinders the final manifestation of the evil, and this cannot take place while the Holy Ghost is here. (2 Thess. ii. 6, 7.) The Saviour God is also "preserver of all men, specially of those that believe." (1 Tim. iv. 10. N. T.) By the means of angels He holds in check things in relation to man. (Dan. x. 20; xii. 1). He hinders developments which throw men into anarchy

and misery (Rom. iii. 16; Rev. vi. 12-17), and protects His own, using angels for their providential salvation. (2 Kings vi. 17; Heb. i. 14.) Thus in God's kingdom all are under the sway and spiritual protection of the Lord (Heb. ii. 1-3, New Trans.), while all that lies outside is controlled by God providentially for the blessing of His own and the true advancement of the interests of the kingdom. Hence the Christian can happily commit himself to God, and "submits" at all times and under all circumstances, knowing that God controls all in view of the glory of Christ.

The body of the Christian, by which either the will of man or the will of God can be accomplished, is to be presented a living "sacrifice." (Rom. xii. 1.) This involves being subject for conscience sake, because insubjection to the authorities above us is lawlessness, and is clearly the movement of sinful will—being in direct opposition to the spirit and letter of scripture. The Christian is under the control of the Man in heaven—our Lord, and therefore submission to every ordinance of man, "for the Lord's sake," is his happy path, and no circumstances would justify insubjection.

In connection with this subjection it is necessary to consider the character of the power entrusted to the earthly rulers. The

one who weighs the unfoldings of scripture will easily perceive that it is power for secular rule, and that it is not religious in *character*. In Israel these two thoughts were united. At first the priest was the link with God, and the judge, prince or king received the light of God, through the priest, to guide his rule. Later, when God in His mercy called David, the king became the link with God, and on God's behalf he gave directions to the priest. But when on account of the sins of His people God gave them over into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the power committed to him by God was of a secular character merely, and did not include the priestly part of the rule which had belonged to Israel. Though captives to a Gentile king they had still to recognise Jehovah as the one true God; to walk likewise in the light of His commandments, though there were some that could only be actually carried out in their own land; and to submit to the power for rule which was committed to Nebuchadnezzar.

If a government travels outside of its allotted sphere, and imposes that which interferes with approach to God, or with that which sets aside His commandments, I must humbly, in a lowly, subject spirit, state that I dare not do that one thing, for it would be to sin

against God. A Christian will then recall the word of our Lord that man can only kill the body (Luke xii. 4), and the individual will prove that the Lord will preserve and support him, even if he has to seal his testimony with his blood. This is illustrated by Daniel and his three companions. He purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself by partaking of that which the commandments of the Lord had forbidden (Dan. i. 8), and in a later day, when the king took the place of God, he "prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime." (Dan. vi. 10.) His three companions acted in the same way. Being obedient to their God, and in subjection of mind to their earthly rulers as such, they were supported by God. Again, when the religious leaders in Israel had rejected Christ; and in opposition to God sought to hinder the apostles whom God had commanded to preach, they rightly said, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." (Acts iv. 19.) Similarly the path of the Christian is one of subjection to "the powers that be;" but if these interfere with and seek to regulate that which lies outside their jurisdiction—that which in Israel was connected with the priest—thus setting aside the claims of God, the faithful soul has encouraging examples

in the parents of Moses, in Daniel and his companions, and in the apostles.

It may be well to recall to our minds that when the Gentile rulers are controlled by the religious power, then the people of God are persecuted. The civil power may do the *deeds*, but it is through the influence of the religious. (Rev. xvii. 6.) The civil power thus goes beyond the sphere entrusted to it, and the people of God suffer through the religious power, for they have to be faithful to God at all costs. The time will come when the civil power will be infidel; but even then the godly must not resist with sword, as did the Macabees, but accept the path of suffering which faithfulness to God involves. (Rev. xiii. 10.)

A very brief summary of government, as entrusted to man, will confirm what we have stated, and also clearly shew that which has been committed to earthly rulers. From Adam to Noah, though God providentially governed, government was not committed into the hands of man. After the flood, in mercy and goodness to men, God placed the sword of government in the hands of man; and man was responsible to wield it by taking the life of the murderer. When Israel was called out of Egypt plain directions were given for the maintenance of justice and judgment in their midst,

and also with regard to war with other nations. Using them as His sword, Jehovah, would fight for His people (Deut. xx.), and thus execute His governmental judgment in the earth. Thus the principal functions of the authority which has been entrusted to man in government are responsibility to protect the rights of God over His creatures (Gen. ix. 5), and to maintain what is right amongst men, both within their own borders and in their relation with other kingdoms; and for this purpose force has to be used when needed. Hence a pious man will render honour to all in authority, pay cheerfully all demands, and obey all regulations touching the rule of the kingdom; but he could not obey a religious body, or the civil State if under its power, in matters which interfere with approach to God, or are a violation of God's revealed will. If the distinction is seen between that which God committed to the priest, and that which He committed to the ruler (and if it is remembered that the former was never given into the hands of the Gentile rulers), the careful reader of scripture will easily perceive why subjection to "the powers that be" is not in any way limited, for it only applies to earthly rule in the affairs of their own kingdoms. (Rom. xiii. 1-4; 1 Pet. ii. 13, 14.) The scriptures contemplate the rulers as en-

gaged in matters of earthly government, and in no wise regulating a Christian's relations to God. We also see clearly in what connection implicit obedience is to be rendered to the authorities, and in what connection they could not be obeyed, though still subject in the spirit and attitude of our minds to authority as committed to them by God.

We must never lose sight of the fact that the Christian's peculiar portion lies outside of all this, for it is in the heavenlies. (Eph. i. 3-6.) If this is enjoyed, it could not lead him to set aside in word or deed the plain injunction which teaches him to be subject to "the powers that be;" but it would enable him to obey with heavenly wisdom and grace. The "ribbon of blue" (to speak in a figure), would be thus at the bottom of his garment. (Num. xv. 38.)

May the Lord enable each in His mercy so to walk for His name's sake.



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