

THE CHARACTER OF THE KINGDOM

CHANGED INTO HIS LIKENESS AND A LIVING SACRIFICE

John 3:1-7—Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came unto him by night, and said to him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew.

Matthew 20:24-28—And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren. But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

II Corinthians 3:17-18—Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit.

We are living in days of darkness, turmoil, confusion and revolution, and I believe that this darkness is going to grow. The economic problems, the financial problems, and the climatic problems we are facing are going to grow and grow. We are in the last days. We are near the time when the antichrist will appear. And blessed be the Lord, we are near the time when the Lord Jesus shall return. We need the character of the kingdom.

It is not enough to be born again. The Lord Jesus said, "Except a man be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." But then he added that we must be born anew if we are to enter into the kingdom of God. Once we are born of God, there is a sense in which we are born of the King; He has saved us. It is interesting in the Word of God that it speaks of entering the kingdom through much tribulation. In another place it speaks of a great entrance to the kingdom being ministered to us.

CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

I want to share with you two matters that are essential. The first is very simple. I think the simplest person can understand it. The character of the King is the character of the kingdom. The character of the kingdom is derived from the character of the King. It is very interesting that in the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that he speaks of us beholding as in the mirror the glory of the Lord and being changed into the same image from glory to glory. This Greek word *metamorphosis* is an interesting word. We have it in

English as: “transfigured, transformed, changed.” As we see the King, as we behold something of His glory—if only as in a mirror that is a reflection of His glory—we are changed into His likeness. If there is no change taking place in believers, there is no kingdom. The kingdom of God means that you and I who are born again, if we are to enter into that kingdom in reality, means that a change has to take place in us. We have to be transformed, changed, transfigured. In some way this marvelous work of the Holy Spirit has to be done in every one of us. Is it? When was the last time you took a step in the Lord? When was the last time the Lord challenged you?

COMFORTABLE CHRISTIANITY

It is so easy to have a comfortable Christianity. We go to meetings at least once a week. If we are good, we will go to the prayer meeting, and if we are not so good, we will go to the Bible study. We have a comfortable routine in Christianity. Nothing ever disturbs us. It is a kind of idea that we are being wafted into the glory of God, that somehow or another we are being carried on a bed of roses into the kingdom of God. What a fallacy this is! We have to be changed, transformed, and conformed into His image, His likeness, His character. Could you imagine what would happen in all the families represented here, in all the places of work represented here, the communities of unsaved people amongst whom we live, if every one of us was being changed into the image of the Lord Jesus, if there was movement and change taking place in our lives?

The apostle Paul puts it this way: “We are being changed into His likeness from glory to glory.” Brother Sparks used to say, “Dear child of God, it is from tribulation to tribulation.” It is from one affliction to another. Is that being too hard? You and I by nature are such comfort-loving creatures that we will never change unless the Lord disturbs us by relationships, circumstances or the enemy being allowed to play games on us. Oh, you say, Jesus will never allow the enemy to do that. I do not know what gospel you have, but if you are a child of God, you have been born into warfare. And what is the warfare over? It is over whether the enemy can keep you the kind of person you were when you were saved instead of the person that God wants you to be.

ENTER THE KINGDOM THROUGH TRIBULATION

It is interesting to see that the world takes notice of people who are being changed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus. So often they call us hypocrites because they look upon us as religious people. Of course, often it is true that we are religious Christians. But when we are being changed into His likeness, it is the purpose of God that is being fulfilled in our lives. The Lord takes all the circumstances, relationships, difficulties, tribulations, afflictions and uses them to disturb us till we take a step further in the Lord and another step and another step. We are told in the Word of God to walk by faith. And no one ever takes a step further into being changed and transformed into His likeness unless it is by living faith which is the gift of God to us. Then we are able to enter in and use those very things that should destroy us. They are being used to change us into the likeness and character of the Lord Jesus.

In Acts 14 it says that we enter into the kingdom of God through many tribulations (see v. 22). I think of the apostle Peter's first letter in which he says, “The proving of your faith.” But actually in the Greek it is not the proving or testing of our faith, it is the proof of our faith. God is proving that we have living faith. Something is being done in us. We sometimes

think of it as our being tested or tried. But, in fact, the Lord is so loving that He will never put us into a test which destroys us. He will only put us into a test which proves that we have living faith.

PAUL—THE CHIEF OF ALL SINNERS

What is the character of the kingdom of God? It is the character of the Lord Jesus. You and I are being changed into that character of the King. How are you doing? Is there any movement in your life? Is there any progress in your life? Is something happening in you?

Let us take the apostle Paul as an example. In one of his very first letters, he speaks of himself as being a sinner, but in his last letter he speaks of himself as the chief of sinners. Is that not extraordinary? This apostle began by seeing the King of glory and was knocked out by the risen glorified Messiah Jesus. This was tremendous. He went through many troubles, and we have the records of the scourgings, the imprisonments and the different things that happened to him. Therefore, we would have thought that at the end he would have said, "Dear friends, I am so glad that I was changed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus." Instead, he calls himself the chief of all sinners. This means that the Lord knows there is pride in every one of us. As soon as we have won a few battles and we feel that we might be an overcomer, we immediately begin to preen our feathers: "You know, I am something; I got through." But the Lord keeps us extremely humble when He is changing us into the image of the Lord Jesus. Then we are learning of the Lord and being changed into His likeness. His character is being developed in us. However, we are only aware of how hopeless we are, how poor we are, how little we are, and how far short we fall of what we feel we should be.

WE TAKE WITH US INTO ETERNITY ONLY WHAT THE LORD HAS DONE IN US

The character of the kingdom is the character of the Lord Jesus, and that character has to be formed in us. There is not a person who has not come into this world naked. We had no clothes on when we were born; we were naked. When we go to be with the Lord, or to put it more boldly, when we die, we will be naked again. All the degrees and titles, all the jewelry, all the things we have possessed—businesses and homes—we will leave it all. We came into this world naked and we will go out from it naked. The only thing we will take with us is what the Lord has done in us. When the Lord produces character in us, it is forever. It is something to do with the kingdom of God. It is something to do with the throne of God. It is something to do with eternal service.

I used to wonder why God wipes away tears (see Revelation 21:4). Why will He be wiping away tears? I think it is because we never allowed the Lord to do in us what He wanted to do. We spent our whole life circling around ourselves. Even our Christian life is centered in ourselves. We are glad that we are saved because it is ourselves that are saved. We are glad that we are a child of God. We are glad we know the Lord because He will clean up all the messes that we make. It is no wonder that we will weep when the Lord says, "I sought to change you into the likeness of My Son, and you would not." God needs candidates for His kingdom. He is looking for people who can reign with Him through the ages to come, people who can reign with the Lord Jesus, people who have the same character as the Lord Jesus. That is the character of the kingdom and the character of the Lord Jesus.

ONLY A PIN-PRICK OF TIME TO BE MADE READY

If you and I are not being conformed to the image or the likeness of the Lord Jesus, what point is it in studying the Bible, in praying or witnessing? What value is there in our human life if we are not being changed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus? It seems to me a waste of a human life if we have not been changed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus. We have only one life. We may live to 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, or even older, but this little life of ours is a pin-prick compared with eternity. It is like dust. It is so small that even if you live to 103, it is a pin-prick compared to eternity. It is nothing. Why do you and I throw away the opportunity that we have in this short life that God has given us to be changed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus?

Catholics believe in purgatory—that place when you are put into an oven and cooked and you are changed—because they felt that so many people needed a little more time than this little life. I do not think there is a purgatory. As I see it, you have one single life and you do not know God's appointed time for that life.

SATAN'S PROPAGANDA

Satan has a tremendous propaganda machine that he uses. He will tell us: "You do not need to start getting serious about the Lord now. Wait; you are young; just wait a little while." Then you get married, and the enemy comes to you and says, "You have too many worries now that you are married. You have a young family. So put it off a while longer; it will be all right. When you are middle-aged you will have plenty of time." Then when you are middle-aged you find that you have spread, and life has become comfortable. The enemy says, "You do not have to get all disturbed about things—silly people like that preacher talking to you about being changed into the likeness of the Lord Jesus. Just wait awhile till you are older." So you wait till you can hardly see, you cannot hear, and you totter around. Then you think that you are now too old to change. How clever is the enemy to do this to us, stringing us along right through the whole of life. What a wonderful thing it is when the Lord uses our circumstances, relationships, business life, home life, and even the national life of the nation from which we come to change us into His likeness.

THE KING IS A SERVANT

The second thing I want to mention here is that the supreme calling of the King and the kingdom is to service. Just recently Britain had the Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. She has reigned for sixty years and has been an example to the whole of the British people of service. She gets up early in the morning, reads all the cabinet things that are going on, all the things that different members of Parliament have said. Then she goes out to open new hospitals, or children homes, or other big things, and does much entertaining. No person has worked so hard. No people in the Republic fully understand what a real king or queen is all about. They think it is something glorious where the queen sits on a golden throne, lifts her little hand and some flunky rushes off to get something and bring it back on a cushion. They sit there and are admired by everybody. They do not realize how much real work a good king or queen does. Queen Victoria reigned for 63 years, and she was a remarkable woman who gave to the British people a spiritual tone to their life.

What is God's idea of a king? Oh, you may say, it is someone powerful and authoritative, someone who can rule, lift his hand and it is done, someone who is the center of everything. God's idea of a king is that he is a servant. Matthew said, "For the Son of Man came to serve."

In that passage from Matthew 20:24, the mother of James and John who was a cousin to Mary said, "Jesus, you should keep this whole thing in the family." You who are Chinese will understand this. Keep it in the family! Don't let it go outside of the family. Of course, when the rest heard it, they were indignant. Then the Lord Jesus said this: "If you want to be something in the kingdom, you must be as a servant. If you want to be first, you must be a bonds slave; for the Son of Man came to be such a servant and to give His life a ransom for many."

HIRED SERVANT OR BONDS LAVE

There are two words in Greek that are translated in English as servant. One is a hired servant and the other is a bonds slave. There is a world of difference between a hired servant and bonds slave. A hired servant has rights, hours of work, hours off, and wages. A bonds slave belongs to his master. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks of the years through all the years of his life to the year of Jubilee, he is at the beck and call of his master. Sometimes I get these letters from people who want to be servants of the Lord. By this they mean they want to have authority over other believers. We train people for this task and have made it a whole system. Jesus said, "Yes, if you want to be something, you can be like a hired servant—have your rights, your hours, and wages. But if you want to be first of all, you have to be a bonds slave." Isn't it interesting that in Philippians 2 it says that Jesus being on an equality with God did not see it as something to be grasped, but humbled Himself and became a bonds slave. So to be changed to the likeness of Jesus is to be ready to be a bonds slave. Does that come to you as a shock?

It is very interesting that a number of the apostles, when they wrote their letters, called themselves bonds slaves. A bonds slave of God and of the Lord Jesus the Messiah is at His beck and call, totally His, ready to do anything He says whether small or large. What is the character of the kingdom? Supremely, it is service. It is not service where you have hours and time off, service from which you can retire at a certain age. It is service which takes your whole being for all time.

Fancy the Lord Jesus being described as a bonds slave. No wonder it says, "Wherefore also God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name which is above every name that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Him as Lord." Your Savior was a bonds slave. Your Lord was a bonds slave. He did it for you. He speaks again and again of Himself as serving God the Father.

A LIVING SACRIFICE

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your body a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (one version), your worship (another version)." Years ago, I was confused by this Scripture. We had a Cambridge don in the fellowship, and I told him that I did not understand it. He said that it was extremely difficult to understand but this is what he said. Being a living sacrifice is your spiritually intelligent worship and service (this is the

Greek meaning). Before he said this I had asked him if it could mean your spiritually intelligent worship. He said no, not unless you add “and service”—“your spiritually intelligent worship and service.” In other words, if my worship and your worship, my service and your service are emotional, if it is just from our flesh, it means nothing. It is when in cold blood you become a living sacrifice—that is your spiritually intelligent worship and service. And nothing less! Oh, you say, that is far too high a standard for us! I cannot do anything about it. That is the character of the kingdom.

What is this living sacrifice Paul speaks of? What do you think a living sacrifice was under the Old Covenant? That poor animal that was being sacrificed was alive. Its blood was being shed; its life was over. Actually, it would be a burnt offering and go up in smoke. So much for the idea that we should consecrate our talents and everything else to the help of the Lord, that we will throw ourselves behind the Lord and bless Him with our talents and everything else that we have. The church has suffered so much from the talents of its people. Oh, to have the kind of service that means you and I are living sacrifices! Half of the squabbles that we have in the church, the confrontations and difficulties we have with one another would disappear, if we were all living sacrifices. That is precisely what the apostle says, “That you might be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” You can never be transformed except by being a living sacrifice. You will never, never be anything in the kingdom of God if you are not a living sacrifice.

The apostle Paul wrote the greatest exposition of the gospel in the Bible including Old and New Testament and is accepted by everyone as such. He takes eight chapters to describe sin right from the beginning and its awfulness all the way through to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, and ends with those wonderful words: “There is therefore no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” Then he goes into chapters 9, 10, 11. Why did he do that? What does it have to do with the gospel? They are three whole chapters dealing with election. Oh you say, don’t bring up that subject, but here it is. The whole problem that the apostle was facing in this question of the gospel was: can the Lord elect and unelect? Can He save and unsave? And he takes Israel, the Jewish people, as the incredible example of the election of God. Then he speaks of all the elect Gentiles coming into the salvation of God. In the last part he speaks of the gifts and callings of God which are irrevocable. And he speaks in those immortal words: “I would not, brethren, have you ignorant of this mystery (the mystery of Israel), lest ye be wise in your own conceits, that a hardening in part (partial petrification) hath taken place in Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles be come in; and so all Israel shall be saved” (Romans 11:25-26a). What mercy!

THE MERCIES OF GOD

Now he sums the whole of these eleven chapters into one single marvelous phrase: “I beseech you therefore ...” Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said: “Always take notice of the small words—wherefore, therefore, but, and so on, because on them hinges a whole lot.” Why did he say “therefore”? I beseech you therefore by the mercies of God, by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus who became sin for us that we may become the righteousness of God. What mercies God has expressed to us! Can you believe that God can be so faithful to unfaithful people? How could He do it? Mercy—this wonderful word in Greek is *charis*, *grace*; in Hebrew it is *heses*. This marvelous word is used hundreds of times in the Old and New Testament. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your

bodies a living sacrifice.” Out of this comes the proving of what is the good, perfect, and acceptable will of God, and out of this comes the church (see Romans 12). This is the character of the kingdom. Does it find you out? Does it find me out?

COUNT ZINZENDORF

There was a man whose name was Nicolas Count von Zinzendorf. He was a nobleman and an aristocrat, but he was unsaved. He was a Moravian from the Czech Republic, which is Slovakia. He went into a museum one day and while walking around looking at the various things, he saw a painting. It was the painting of the crucified Christ. He stood in front of that painting for two solid hours and did not move. Underneath, written in German were the words: “I did all this for you; what have you done for Me?” Count von Zinzendorf was converted. From that moment, he became a living sacrifice. It was no half-hearted Christianity for him, no comfortable or self-centered Christianity for him; he became a bondsman of God, of the Lord Jesus. He turned his estate in Moravia into a place of refuge for all the persecuted believers fleeing from Catholic persecution. What happened amongst those people is one of the most glorious chapters in the history of the church. When the Holy Spirit fell upon them after a big argument they all had (which is normal amongst Christians), something happened. It began the hundred years’ prayer meeting. Those people who were filled with the Spirit that day became missionaries to the most unlikely parts of the earth. They went to the Eskimos and to Tibet. They actually contracted leprosy—not willingly—but from looking after the lepers and they rejoiced in the Lord that now they were lepers. They were able to speak to lepers with understanding. They even sold themselves as slaves into slave ships with captive Africans who were being taken across to the new world and to Britain. They actually became slaves in order to reach slaves. It is one of the most glorious chapters of the history of the church.

JOHN WESLEY

There was an old legalist called John Wesley who did everything by method; thus they called his followers Methodists. He felt unsaved, as he was, but he thought that he should preach the gospel. So he decided he would preach to the red Indians. He went to Holland and found a boat that was traveling to the colonies. He preached the gospel to the red Indians everywhere and wore himself out preaching. In the end he decided that he was hopeless, let alone the red Indians. And he wrote in his journal, “Oh God, I came to save the red Indians but who can save me?”

On his journey to the colonies, a terrible storm hit the ship. The captain and the seamen were convinced that the ship was going to capsize and go down. They threw all the cargo overboard, but it did nothing. They saw the end was coming, and so did John Wesley. Then he heard singing coming from somewhere, and he thought: “Oh, I have drowned, and I am now in heaven.” But then he saw a light shining through a partly closed door, and he went over to it and gently opened the door. To his amazement there were forty Moravians in the bowels of the ship sitting around that room with babies in their arms, toddlers on their laps, and singing hymns. He thought to himself: who are these people that they have such faith? That was the seed that took root in John Wesley’s life.

Nevertheless, he went back to London as a failed missionary. One day he heard of a Moravian preacher who was going to preach in Fleet Street in London, so he decided he

would go hear him. By then he was a vicar. So off he went to hear the Moravian preacher who was reading a commentary of Martin Luther's on one of Paul's epistles. As the Moravian preacher read it, John Wesley said: "I felt the strangest warming in my heart." John Wesley had finally been saved. It was the beginning of the first great evangelical awakening.

John Wesley lived to be ninety-four and travelled all over Britain on horseback. He was a well-known figure, and even in the night, people would hear the horse as it sped by. He preached four times a day in all kinds of weather which is saying something about British weather. Your American weather is nothing like it. It is dreadful at times. But at ninety-four he often traveled thirty or forty miles on horseback between each place he preached.

King George, who was partly responsible for the colonies rising up in fury, was a doddering old fool who did not believe in God. And some mistress of his said to him: "Can't you do something about these dreadful preachers?" "Which preachers," he said. She said, "John Wesley and George Whitfield are all over the place preaching, and thousands are coming to the open air to hear them, and not in churches. It is disgusting, sire." So he thought for a moment and said, "Well, I could make them bishops; that should take the fire out of them."

When Wesley finally went to be with the Lord, the Lord had changed the face of Britain and saved it from the French Revolution. Incredible! He was a living sacrifice, a bondsman of God the Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah. When he died, that old king who did not believe in God decreed that there should be three days of mourning in the whole of Britain and that Wesley should be buried in Westminster Abbey.

Dear child of God, this is the character of the kingdom. It is people like these who have given up everything to become a living sacrifice to serve the Lord, to be under His command, and to be totally obedient to Him. They sacrificed career, their own will, and in so doing they became overcomers. This is the character of the kingdom. This is the character of the Lord Jesus.

Shall we pray:

Lord, we realize that we really do not often have this kind of character in us, but we ask You to do something. Do something in our lives. Challenge us. May it be that we shall surrender to You, Lord, everything that we are. He may choose the path that we shall go. He will choose our career. He will choose everything for us and we will serve Him from the heart. If that is the case, He will take full responsibility for everything. He will bless you; He will protect you; He will provide for you; He will be everything you ever needed. Do it, Lord, for every one of us. We ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen.