

HOW THE CHURCH BUILDS THE KINGDOM

Matthew 24:14—And these glad tidings of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole habitable earth, for a witness to all the nations, and then shall come the end.

Matthew 6:10—Let thy kingdom come, let thy will be done as in heaven so upon the earth.

Hebrews 12:28—Wherefore let us, receiving a kingdom not to be shaken, have grace, by which let us serve God acceptably with reverence and fear.

Revelation 12:11—And they have overcome him by reason of the blood of the Lamb, and by reason of the word of their testimony, and have not loved their life [soul-life] even unto death.

Let's have a word of prayer:

Dear Lord, as we continue in Thy presence we wait to hear what Thou hast to say to us. Lord, we are Thy bondservants, waiting to hear from Thee, our Master and our Lord. Speak, Thy servants heareth. May Thy word be living and operative in our lives, enabling us to be a vessel of Thy testimony to bring in Thy kingdom and righteousness. We commit this time into Your hand, trusting Thy Holy Spirit to reveal Thy mind to us. We ask in Thy precious name. Amen.

ECCLESIA—THE CALLED-OUT ONES

We have spent some time trying to define what we mean by the church and the kingdom. The church is not what is commonly understood by people. For instance, sometimes we say I left my umbrella in the church. By that, it shows that we think of the church more in terms of a building where God's people worship. But strictly speaking, the church is *ecclesia*, "those who are called out of the world and gathered together to the name of our Lord Jesus." The church is not where God's people gather under the name of a famous Christian or a truth or a name of an organization. The church is where God's people are gathered together unto only one name and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not just a question over a name but over who is the Sovereign that we gather under. And as we read the word of God, we will discover that this is really what the church is.

It is true that the church has two aspects. There is both the universal and local aspect. The universal aspect is where all the spiritual principles are being given, and the local aspect is where we, who are still on this earth limited by time and space, work out all these spiritual principles. Therefore, as we read the Bible, we find the way of building the church is by building these local churches.

In Revelation 2 and 3, we find the seven churches in Asia, and there in the midst of them is the Lord Jesus as the great High Priest ministering to them. And even today our Lord Jesus is in heaven ministering to His church and trying to find Himself in the church. If there is any lack, He is going to apply the oil so that we may shine brightly for the testimony of Jesus. It is through the building of these local assemblies that eventually we find in Revelation 21 and 22 the new Jerusalem which is the church universal. So it is very important to see that the building of the church is through the building of the church local, and this is where our responsibility lies.

THE KINGDOM IS THE KING

We have also considered this matter of the kingdom. The kingdom is the King. It is the sovereign rule of our God and of our Lord Jesus. From eternity to eternity, God rules, and this is the kingdom of God. There is nothing in heaven or on earth that is not under the sovereign rule of God. But unfortunately, there was rebellion, first among the angels and then later on in man. Because of these rebellions, people were no longer under the sovereign rule of God; but God never gives up. He has His wonderful plan which is to have someone who is a little lower than the angels to destroy the work of the enemy so that God's purpose may be fulfilled.

The Lord Jesus said, "You are Peter; I will build my church upon this rock, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." And immediately following that, the Lord said, "I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (see Matthew 16:a). It is the kingdom of heaven that opens the door to the building of the church. Now in what way does this happen? Who is going to build His church? God has not given this work to any one person or to many people; this building of the church belongs to our Lord Jesus. He said, "I will build My church."

How is the Lord going to build it? He will build it upon that one foundation which is the Lord Himself, and He will build it with the materials that come out of His life. Then He said, "You are Peter. You were formerly Simon—mere dust. Now you are Peter because there is a new element that has come into your life which makes you a living stone. Even though it is a small stone, yet it is a part of that Rock. I will build my church upon this Rock, using this material." We need to realize that the building of the church is not the building of you and me as natural man, for no two persons can really be one. But praise and thank God, in each one of us we have that same Life, and that is the building material.

THE GREATEST OBSTACLE TO THE BUILDING OF THE CHURCH

However, there is something absolutely necessary that has to be done in us. If our self, our natural life, our flesh, our old Adam is still there, we will discover that it is the largest obstacle to the building of the church. Oftentimes, we think that Satan is our greatest enemy, but more and more we realize that the greatest enemy to building the church is we ourselves. I remember Martin Luther once said, "I am not afraid of the pope, or all of the cardinals, or all the dukes and counts, but I am afraid of the old Adam in me." How true that is! After we have believed in the Lord Jesus, the first awakening that comes into our lives in our Christian experience is that we begin to realize that even though the life of Christ is in our spirit and is telling us and urging us to move on heavenward, at the same time, we begin to sense there is still the old Adamic life in our soul. And these are at war.

The Bible says, "The spirit lusts against the flesh and the flesh against the spirit." This is a common experience to all believers. Do not be disappointed because when we are in that civil war, we will feel that most of the time we are defeated instead of victorious. Even though sometimes we do have a heart to follow the Lord, and to will is in us, but to do is not in us. The apostle Paul in Romans 7 cried out: "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of this body of death?" (v. 24.) If Paul cannot do that with such an iron will, how about you and me? Are we able to deliver ourselves from ourselves? We can do anything, but there is one thing we cannot do. We cannot even lift ourselves up. It is beyond us. We are the problem.

Brothers and sisters, the real problem is ourselves in the building of the church. Until we realize this and are willing to let go of ourselves and willing for the Lord Jesus to constrain us by His love to let go, there is no hope for the building of the church. Sometimes we hear people say, "Where can I find a perfect church?" And the answer is: "When you go there, it becomes imperfect." So you can see how hopeless we are. Have you given up hope in yourself? Do you still trust in yourself, relying on your iron will? If you are, you will go through more conflict.

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Thank God that He arranges so many kinds of circumstances, and we call it the discipline of the Holy Spirit. He will arrange our lives. Thank God that we have someone who is in charge of our lives. He is the all-wise God. He knows how to break us, how to deliver us, and how to bring us into the body of Christ. And by His wisdom, He will arrange our experiences every day. This may not be true with unbelievers, but so far as believers are concerned, be assured that we have someone who is taking full responsibility for us. Even the very hairs on our head have been numbered. Now we know that nobody knows how many hairs we have or how many hairs fall off in the morning when we comb it, but the Lord Jesus, not only knows how many, He even numbers every hair. Therefore, when you combed your hair this morning, number such and such fell and He noticed it. Think about that: if someone can take notice of you in such a way, do you think He will neglect you? Do you think He does not know what is going on in your life? Do you think that He is not trying to perfect you? We can be assured that we have the Holy Spirit in charge of our lives and He will so arrange our circumstances—who we will meet today, what is going to happen today. Everything is under His control. Therefore, if we do not fight against our circumstances or murmur against God, but we yield ourselves to Him, He will be able to work out His full salvation in our lives. This is the way that the church is to be built and it is by the principle of the kingdom of the heavens.

THE MESSENGER OF REPENTANCE—JOHN THE BAPTIST

Now we will go the other way and share together on this matter of how the church will bring in the kingdom. As we know, when our Lord Jesus first came into this world, His message was: "Repent for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn nigh." For four hundred years, God was silent to His people. Malachi was the last voice in the Old Testament; but it was not because God did not want to speak to His people. Even from the very beginning, as we find in Genesis, when God put man in the garden of Eden, He did not leave them there alone but He came to visit them. In other words, God is always looking after us. But His people did not hear; they *would not* hear. God sent His prophets again and again into their midst trying to remind them, but they were so stubborn in their hearts that they refused to listen; they wanted to go their own way. Eventually, they drove God to silence. What a terrible thing it is when we drive God to silence! If He could not speak to us again, where would we be? We are lost.

However, after four hundred years the Lord could not restrain Himself any longer, and He spoke again. He sent a messenger before the King, John the Baptist. His message was: "Repent for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn nigh." Now we usually think of repentance in connection with our sins, but here it seems as if repentance is to be based

upon the coming of the kingdom of the heavens. It is positive. So in light of this, why do we need to repent? It is because the kingdom of the heavens is coming. If the kingdom of heavens arrives, where will we be? Will we be able to be in the kingdom of the heavens or will we be outside of the kingdom? That is truly something for us to repent about. It is more than just repenting for our sins. It is to repent of our goodness, of our confidence, of our self-righteousness. Everything that is not of God in our lives must go because the kingdom of the heavens is nothing but the sovereign rule of our God.

JESUS ANOINTED AS LORD AND KING

When our Lord Jesus was sent to this world, He began His ministry with the same preaching. He said, "Repent for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn nigh." Even after He was resurrected from the dead, during those days when He was with His disciples, He was still talking to them about the kingdom of the heavens. Then the apostles took up that gospel because when you read the words spoken by Peter and the eleven on Pentecost, it is the gospel of the kingdom of the heavens. He said, "The One whom you have rejected is now anointed as Lord and Christ." That is the message of the kingdom of the heavens. Even when Paul was in that hired place in Rome waiting to be judged, he was still preaching the kingdom message and teaching about the Lord Jesus (see Acts 28:31).

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM ENTRUSTED TO THE CHURCH

Dear brothers and sisters, this is the gospel that has been committed to the church. It is the responsibility of the church to continue to preach the kingdom of the heavens. Why is it so? As we have already read in Matthew 24, it says the message of the kingdom of the heavens shall be preached throughout the whole earth to all the nations, and then the end shall come. This message of the kingdom of the heavens has been entrusted to the church and when that message is not only preached, but believed in and experienced, then the end shall come.

When our Lord Jesus left His disciples and ascended to heaven, He promised He would return. So during the first century God's people were looking forward to His return, and throughout these twenty centuries, those who love the Lord are waiting to see the coming of the Lord in their lifetime. They were not mistaken because the Lord can come at any time *if* His bride is ready. Oftentimes, I think we are anxious for the Lord to come and wonder why He does not come. But on the Lord's side, He is anxious to return to receive us to Himself, but we are not ready.

So far as I can recall, there is only one occasion of a marriage when the bride was waiting for the bridegroom. Usually, in a marriage the bridegroom is already there. He is very anxious, waiting for the bride to come and wondering why she delays. But there is only one occasion that I know of when the bride was waiting for the bridegroom, and that was Hudson Taylor's great-grandfather. He was a young man—free and careless, and not religious. On the day he was to be married, that morning he suddenly realized: "I am going to be married. That is a great responsibility." So he went to the field to pray, and he prayed, and prayed, and prayed, and he forgot the time. When he stopped praying, suddenly he realized that it was time for his marriage because the bride was already there waiting for him, and everybody was wondering where he was. So he rushed to the church building and was married; but something happened. That very evening he asked his wife to kneel down

and pray. It was a surprise to his wife because they used to be a happy couple in the sense that they liked different kinds of amusement and dancing. Suddenly she found that she had married a man who was a Methodist, and she had to kneel down and pray. But from that beginning, for generations the Taylor family has been serving God. They went to China, and we are ever grateful for what happened.

So we find that usually it is the husband who is waiting for his bride. In our case it is just the opposite. The Lord Jesus has been waiting and waiting and waiting. Why? It is because the bride is not ready. He cannot marry a baby, a teenager, one who is not fully grown. He has to marry a counterpart, one like Himself. It is just like Eve who was taken out of Adam; she was part of Adam. Therefore, they could be united into one, and that is what our Lord Jesus is waiting for. So it is more than a personal matter; it affects the eternal purpose of God. How we need the kingdom and the kingdom truth to build us up that we may really grow to the full stature of Christ! And when that happens, He is able to come back and receive us to Himself.

We find that when our Lord Jesus first came into this world, He began to preach the gospel of the kingdom of the heavens. He said that it was drawing nigh because the King was already here to establish His kingdom upon this earth. This earth is rebellious and under the control of Satan and the evil spirits of the air. And the Lord Jesus came down to the earth to build His kingdom in such an environment, but He was alone. In other words, the King was here, but where were His people? As He began to preach, thank God that there were some who responded to Him, became His disciples and followed Him. Those disciples who were around Him were ones who were willing to leave everything to learn of Him, to be transformed by Him, and be conformed to His image. It is a long process, but that was the beginning.

THE KINGDOM IS SEIZED BY VIOLENCE

Then in Matthew 11 He began to say, "The kingdom of the heavens is to be seized by violence and the violent seize upon it." In other words, the kingdom of the heavens is here now; the Lord is here; His disciples are here. And the way to enter into the kingdom of the heavens is to seize it by violence—not doing violence to other people but to ourselves. We are to put our body under, put our flesh away, and allow the life of Christ to grow and mature in us.

The kingdom of the heavens is already on earth, but it is hidden, so far as the world is concerned. You will recall in Matthew 13 that the Lord used seven parables about the kingdom of the heavens. So far as the appearance of the kingdom today, it is still hidden. He used two parables—one is the parable of the treasure. There was a man looking for a great treasure, and he discovered it in a field. Then he hid it and sold everything he had to buy the field in order to get that treasure. What is that treasure?

Then He followed with another parable—the pearl. A man was looking for a great pearl, and when he found it, he sold everything he had to get that pearl. Outwardly, the kingdom of the heavens today is like a mustard seed that has grown abnormally into a big tree and the birds of prey have settled upon it. That shows the outward form of the kingdom of the heavens in the eyes of the world which they see as Christendom. Wherever the influence of Christianity is, there is the kingdom of the heavens. The kingdom of the heavens is suppose to be very small like a mustard seed. It belongs to the plant, not to the tree which is another

species. However, it grows into a tree and the birds of prey, that is, Satanic powers, come into it. Or it is like a woman who puts yeast into the meal and everything is leavened. That is what Christianity is today. Outwardly, it has become abnormally big; inwardly, it is not only morally corrupt but spiritually as well.

Thank God that in spite of all these outward things, there is something hidden there that is a reality, and the reality is in two aspects. The treasure speaks to us of the truth of the kingdom of the heavens, and the pearl speaks of the experience of the kingdom of the heavens. So we can see that there is a reality there.

There are some Christians—true believers—throughout the twenty centuries up to our time who really do violence to themselves, who are willing to take up the cross and follow the Lord, who deny themselves and allow the Lord to build His life within them. They are literally living in the kingdom of the heavens and under the dominion of our Lord Jesus. They are hidden. They are just a little flock, so far as the world is concerned. But this is the kingdom of the heavens today on earth. However, the world does not see it, and unfortunately, sometimes even God's people do not see it.

THE POSITION OF THE BELIEVER IS IN THE KINGDOM

Are we living today in the kingdom of the heavens? Positionally we are because He has delivered us out of the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love. Therefore, every believer is supposed to be daily living in the kingdom of the heavens even before it is publically manifested. But how very few are truly living in the kingdom of the heavens! How very few people really let the truth of the kingdom of the heavens sink deep into their hearts and transform them so that they experience the kingdom under the sovereign rule of our Lord Jesus.

THE FEW WHO LIVE IN THE REALITY OF THE KINGDOM

God's purpose is for the whole church—everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus and is saved—to be in the kingdom of the heavens, to inherit that heavenly kingdom. That is the will of God. And throughout the centuries, thank God that we have seen those who really exhibit in their lives that they are literally living in the kingdom of heavens.

For instance, when John was exiled to the island of Patmos, he was there for the kingdom. Throughout the centuries, we thank God for those people who are willing to follow the Lord to the very end. They are the hidden ones. Even though the world may not know them, God knows them. They are literally living in the kingdom of the heavens now.

The church has the responsibility to spread the news of the kingdom of the heavens. Unfortunately, even the truth of the kingdom of the heavens has been hidden for many centuries. We often speak of the Dark Age. There were several centuries in which Christianity had entered into the Dark Age. Even the very simple truth, the basic truth of salvation by grace was forgotten. During that period, the Bible was chained and people were not allowed to read it. People thought they could go to heaven only by accumulating merits. If you had enough merits, you could go to heaven. If you did not have enough merits, then you had to go to purgatory to be purged until one day you were totally purged; then you could go to heaven. They even tried to speed it up and say you could buy indulgences. If you paid a certain amount of money, then you could get out of purgatory quickly. All the truths that are found in the Bible were lost and not experienced.

Thank God that since the sixteenth century, God raised up Martin Luther, John Calvin, the reformers, and people like that, who tried to bring back an open Bible. They tried to insist upon salvation by grace and not by merit. Since then, throughout the centuries God has been recovering all the truths that have been lost, and this kingdom truth was recovered in the nineteenth century

Brothers and sisters, we have a responsibility because the Bible tells us that when the message of the kingdom of the heavens is preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to the nations, then the end will come. When I first came into this country in the fifties, I was warned by people not to talk about that because I would be considered as a heretic. Thank God, today we can talk about it. And people have begun to realize that the gospel is more than just grace because grace brings us to the kingdom; therefore, it has to be preached. How can we experience it if we do not even know about it? But we are thankful that today it seems as if it is spreading with the knowledge that unless we allow the kingdom of the heavens to work in our lives, when the kingdom of the heavens shall appear upon this earth publically, we will have no part in it. That does not mean we are not saved; we are still saved but we have not grown up. We have not been disciplined enough to grow. Most likely, during the kingdom age of one thousand years, instead of reigning with Christ in glory, we may be thrown into darkness to repent and go through discipline because God's will cannot be defeated. Once He sets His eye upon us, He will never let us go, no matter what. So there is a blessed hope there. It is the church's responsibility to preach the kingdom of the heavens, and then the end will come.

PRAYER FOR THE KINGDOM TO COME

We are not only to preach about it, but we are instructed to pray about it in the Lord's Prayer where we are taught to say: "May Thy kingdom come; may Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This is a prayer that God has committed to His people. Sometimes we do not realize how important that prayer is. We may repeat the so-called Lord's Prayer without knowing what it really means. But it is a commitment because the Lord is asking us to pray in this way because it is His will. How He wants His kingdom to come! It is delayed, delayed, and delayed because His people are not praying.

I remember in 1904-05 there was a great revival in Wales, and the instrument that God used was a young man, Evan Roberts, who was a miner. How he prayed, and said: "Lord, bend the church and save the world." He was greatly used by God during the Welsh revival, and then he was hidden for a number of years. When he came out again, they asked him what he had been doing during those years, and he replied: "I am praying the kingdom prayer."

Brothers and sisters, do we have the burden to pray for the kingdom to come? Or are we afraid to pray that way? Suppose the kingdom should arrive publically today; will we be there? Are we ready for it? Can we go in and rule and reign with Christ for a thousand years? Many of God's people are afraid that the Lord will come today because they are not ready. Do we really mean business when we pray: "May Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? I hope this prayer will become much more real to us from now on, for we have a responsibility to pray about it.

SERVING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

However, we not only need to pray for it, we also need to work for it. Having this everlasting kingdom, how we need to serve with reverence and fear! Our service today is a preparation for our service in the future. All our services today are probational. God uses this time to train us. Whether we are serving the Lord out of our self or serving Him according to His will, it will be shown at the judgment seat of Christ. We need to serve Him with reverence, that is, serve Him according to His will. I can recall in my youth when I first got saved, how I tried to serve Him, but I served Him according to my will. I thought that was what He wanted. I told Him where I would go to serve, and I made all my decisions with zeal, until one day the Lord took all these away. It is according as the Bible says, "Many will say, I preach in Your name, I perform miracles in Your name, and I cast out demons in Your name, but the Lord says, I do not know you, you wicked man." Are we serving according to His will? Are we serving in the power of His Spirit instead of our own intellect and influence? We need to serve Him with reverence and fear.

It is true, perfect love casts out fear (see I John 4:18), but the fear that is mentioned here is the fear of a slave; nevertheless, there is a holy fear that should always be with us. In other words, we are afraid that we may not please Him, and that is a fear that we need to have all the time. If we have that kind of fear we are safe.

THE OVERCOMERS WILL REIGN IN THE MILLENNIUM KINGDOM

The Lord wants everyone whom He has saved to be in that kingdom. But unfortunately, we find only a few as it was in the Old Testament where we find the remnant principle. When the twelve tribes of Israel departed from the Lord, thank God that there was always a few, a remnant that were faithful to the Lord. And when those who feared the Lord were talking one to another (see Malachi 3:16), the Lord recorded their conversation. Those who feared His name the Sun of righteousness would arise with healing in His wings (see Malachi 4:2).

Brothers and sisters, on the one hand, we do realize it is God's will for all of us to be in that kingdom when it publicly appears and reign and rule with Him for a thousand years. That is our heritage He has promised to give to us. Unfortunately, because of our own weaknesses, we have to accept the fact not only in the Old Testament time was there the remnant principle, in the New Testament time there is the overcomer principle. The call to the seven churches in Asia was to overcome. So far as the church as a whole is concerned, it has lost its testimony. In other words, Christ cannot find Himself in the church.

I remember the dream that A. J. Gordon had. Even though he was a young man, he was a famous pastor in Boston. He had a big church with pipe organs, choirs and everything; in other words, he was very successful. In the dream he saw a man come into the building before he began to deliver his sermon. He did not know him, but the usher brought him to the front. Somehow his attention began to focus on that man, and as Mr. Gordon spoke, he was wondering what the man would say about his sermon, and whether he would approve of the big pipe organ and choir. What would this man think about? He decided he would like to meet the man after the sermon as everyone was coming out through the front door. He tried to catch him, but when he arrived at the door, he was gone. So he asked the usher: "Who was that man?" And he said, "Don't you know Him? He is Jesus." And A. J. Gordon

realized that the pipe organ and the choir had to go. Everything had to change. From that time onward, the Lord greatly used him.

Brothers and sisters, the Lord is looking for overcomers today. Who are these overcomers? They are not people who are special. They are just like one of us. They are not perfect. They have their failures; but thank God that they have overcome. How do they overcome the accuser? Satan is the accuser, and he is always trying to accuse us. Right or wrong, true or false, he is accusing us.

They Overcome by the Blood of Jesus

Martin Luther, who was greatly used by the Lord, had a dream one day. He saw Satan coming towards him, showing him a scroll, and the sins of Martin Luther were written on it, both inside and out. It was full of sins. Satan accused him and said, "How dare you do the work of reformation! Such a sinner! Martin Luther took a pen and wrote over it, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from every sin." And Satan disappeared. These overcomers are just normal Christians. They trust in the blood of the Lord Jesus. Dear brothers and sisters, the more you grow in the Lord, the more you feel how precious is that blood. Even the very tears of our repentance need to be washed. Thank God for the efficacy and the power of that precious blood of the Lamb!

They Overcome by the Word of Their Testimony

And it is because of the word of their testimony that they overcome. They have a testimony to bear, and because they live out that testimony, when they say it, there is power behind it. You remember in Acts 17, the seven sons of the Jewish high priest Sceva tried to exorcize the devil by using the name of Jesus. Two of the sons told the demons: "I cast you out in the name of Jesus whom Paul preached." And the demons said, "Jesus I know, Paul I am acquainted with, but who are you?" And these demons overcame two of them and they left naked. To say "Jesus is Lord" is not easy unless you are ruled by the Spirit of God, and then when you say "Jesus is Lord," His Lordship will be manifested. So this is the word of their testimony.

They Loved Not Their Lives Unto Death

And they loved not their lives—their self-life—even unto death. That is how they overcame by the grace of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is our prayer that in God's sovereign mercy, He has gathered us to hear about the King and the kingdom to prepare us to meet Him face to face. Are you looking forward to seeing Him? Or are you afraid to see Him? May the Lord really apprehend every one of us and make us ready! I always feel whenever people ask me if I am ready, I can say: "Ever ready—never ready." This is our attitude. Hopefully by the grace of God, He considers us as ready.

Shall we pray:

Dear Lord, we praise and thank Thee because Thou art the only one who can prepare us to be ready to meet Thee face to face. So Lord, here we are. We give ourselves totally over to You. May Thy Spirit touch each one of us. Do not let us go but work in each one of us constantly,

persistently. Lord, if we resist wait until we turn back. We pray, Lord, that Thou wilt apprehend each one of us here and make us ready to meet Thee face to face. We worship Thee. In Thy precious name. Amen.