

The Conversion of Peter

***“The Lord said,
Simon, Simon,
behold, Satan hath
desired to have
you, that he may
sift you as wheat:
But I have prayed
for thee, that thy
faith fail not: and
when thou art
converted,
strengthen thy
brethren. And he
said unto him,
Lord, I am ready to
go with thee, both
into prison, and to
death.”***

—Luke 22:31-33

THE WORKING OF DIVINE

providence in the life of the Apostle Peter, from the time he was called by Jesus to be a fisher of men, is both enlightening and encouraging. Peter was the surname given to Simon, spoken of in our theme text, at the time that he stated with conviction that Jesus was the foretold Messiah. (Matt. 16:16-18) Peter fully believed that the Lord had come to break the Roman yoke of bondage over Israel and to set up his kingdom of promise which would begin its work of blessing at

Jerusalem, and finally extend its sphere of influence throughout the whole earth. Notwithstanding this, neither Peter nor the other apostles, prior to Pentecost, understood that there were to be two

phases to the kingdom of God. They knew only of the earthly phase of that kingdom.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus had indicated to his disciples in one way or another that if they were faithful to him they would be given a share in the rulership phase of this kingdom. Even this was, in the beginning, merely an earthly hope, because they believed that the Messianic kingdom was to be earthly. They doubtless knew of the manner in which the miracle-working power of God had frequently operated in Old Testament times. However, they seemed bound by their limited vision of truth to the idea that the Messiah would establish his powerful government by a kingly display of power. In their minds, such a display would result in the Roman soldiers capitulating before him as he marched to glory, leading his little band of faithful followers who would share his kingdom glory with him.

While Jesus had indicated to his disciples that he expected to die—that he would give his flesh for the life of the world—this was among the things which they did not understand until they were reminded of them by Jesus after his resurrection, and by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Indeed, he gave them a parable concerning “a certain nobleman” who went into a far country to receive a kingdom and to return. He gave this parable because his disciples believed that his kingdom was to “immediately appear.”—Luke 19:11

The full meaning of this parable, however, seemed also to escape the disciples. To them, the kingdom was at hand, and they did not want to believe anything else. Thus, as the ministry of

Jesus drew near to a close, he announced to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem where he expected to be arrested and put to death. (Matt. 16:21) This was beyond Peter's ability to understand and accept. If Jesus was truly the Messiah, and had come to establish the powerful and world-wide kingdom of promise, why would he surrender himself to his enemies in Jerusalem and allow them to put him to death?

Peter said to Jesus, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee." Then Jesus said to Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." (Matt. 16:22,23) Jesus' covenant of sacrifice with his Heavenly Father required his death, and any influence—even the earnest advice of his good friend Peter—which was contrary to this was not of the Lord, but the expression of a human point of view, suggested, as Jesus indicated, by the great adversary, Satan.

GOD'S WAY

Jesus continued, and said to his disciples, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." (vss. 24,25) This was a great truth, but was quite beyond the ability of the disciples at that time to understand, and seemingly Peter resisted it.

It was only a short time after this that Jesus passed through his ordeal in the Garden of Gethsemane. When the mob from Jerusalem appeared to

arrest him, Peter drew his sword in an effort to protect his Master. He had advised him against going to Jerusalem in the first place. Now he was determined to prevent his arrest and death if he possibly could. Jesus commanded Peter to put away his sword, for, if he wished, he could ask his Heavenly Father to send twelve legions of angels to protect him. Jesus did not need Peter's help, nor did he ask his Father to send the guardian angels to protect him, for he knew that it was the Father's will for him to die. "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?"—John 18:11

All the while Peter continued to believe that Jesus was making a mistake. Certainly a dead Messiah could not establish a kingdom at Jerusalem and assure the whole world of peace, health, security, and life. He went to the judgment hall where the Master was hailed before the high priest, possibly hoping he might still have an opportunity to help him. However, this also ended in near disaster for Peter, and he fled from the trial chamber weeping because he had denied the Master.

THE THIRD DAY

Early in the morning on the third day after his crucifixion, Jesus was raised from the dead. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome had gone to the tomb of the Master to anoint his body with spices. Suddenly, an angel appeared to them, explaining that Jesus was no longer in the tomb, but had been raised from the dead. Then the angel directed these devout women to go their way, and "tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth

before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.”—Mark 16:1-7

It would seem that there is real meaning attached to the fact that in addition to directing the women to tell the disciples about the resurrection, Peter should be singled out specially to receive this message. It was Peter who had advised Jesus not to surrender himself to his enemies and allow them to put him to death. It was Peter who, with his sword, attempted to prevent the Master's arrest. It was to Peter that Jesus had said, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” Peter had also heard the explanation that those who lose their lives in sacrifice, as Jesus did, would save their lives.

When Peter had this message specially delivered to him that his Master had been raised from the dead, what a flood of reflections must have swept over him! Now he would know one thing for a surety—namely, that Jesus had not lost his life, even though he allowed himself to be put to death. No doubt Peter was still firm in his belief that one should not be punished for doing good, and that only evildoers should be punished. To him any other viewpoint would be contrary to sound reasoning.

ON THE SHORE OF GALILEE

Jesus appeared to his disciples a number of times before he returned to the heavenly courts. One of these appearances was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, or Tiberias. Here Jesus took occasion to question Peter concerning his love: “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?” (John 21:15) On the eve of the Master's crucifixion, Peter

had avowed that even though all men, or the disciples, might forsake Jesus, he would not. Peter even said that he would die for him. Now Jesus was asking him, in view of his denial, if he still loved him more than did the other disciples, or more than he loved his fishing business.

Peter replied, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." Jesus replied, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asked the same question again, and Peter's answer was affirmative. Then Jesus asked the third time, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee."—John 21:15-17

This was a remarkable reply! Peter had been rebuked and thwarted by Jesus, and it seems likely that the Master was eliciting from him this confession before the others so they might know that Peter was holding nothing in his heart against his Lord. Peter's expression, "Thou knowest all things," might well be predicated on the fact that Jesus predicted that he would deny him, even though Peter had said that he would die for his Master. In any case, the atmosphere was now cleared, and Peter received the commission to feed the Lord's sheep, which would help to establish in his mind the fact that Jesus still held him in high esteem and confidence.

"TARRY AT JERUSALEM"

For a period of forty days after his resurrection, Jesus made intermittent appearances to his disciples. The record states that "he shewed himself

alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”—Acts 1:3

His last appearance was a notable one. At this time, the apostles asked Jesus, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (vs. 6) They still clung to the hope of the kingdom, the earthly kingdom which would first restore Israel to her freedom and then extend its blessings to all nations. They had learned much through the death and the resurrection of Jesus, but they had not yet discerned that there were two phases to the kingdom of God—the heavenly and the earthly—and that the gathering of those who would qualify for the heavenly phase was just beginning.

Jesus’ reply to the disciples’ question was straightforward. He said, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.” (vs. 7) He had just instructed them to tarry at Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit, and now told them that, beginning at Jerusalem, they were to be his witnesses to all nations. Thus a further long wait for the kingdom was indicated.

PENTECOST

Shortly Pentecost came, and with it the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Spirit, many things which Jesus had said to them were brought to their memory, and they were enlightened with respect to the deeper meaning of the death of Jesus. Peter preached a sermon that day, and in it he quoted Psalm 16:10, to show that

Jesus' death and resurrection had been foretold in the Old Testament. Here was the man who only a short time before had tried to prevent the death of Jesus, believing it would thwart the plan of God concerning his Messiahship!

Now, as a result of the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, Peter had experienced the "conversion" which Jesus referred to when, on the night before the crucifixion he said to him, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." (Luke 22:32) This was not a conversion from sin to righteousness, but a conversion from one viewpoint to another. Peter held to the common human viewpoint that only evildoers should suffer, and he knew that Jesus was not an evildoer, so he tried to save his life. Now he knew that the plan of human redemption called for the suffering and death of those counted as righteous in God's sight, and that it was the divine will that the holy and perfect Jesus should voluntarily submit to being put to death by his enemies. What a conversion of understanding this was!

TO A LIVELY HOPE

How disconsolate all the disciples must have been when their Messiah was taken from them and crucified. Not realizing that they were talking to the risen Lord, two of them later said, "We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed [restored] Israel," the implication being that now they were no longer so sure, that their hopes in him as the Messiah had been dimmed.—Luke 24:21

How wonderful was their hope which centered in Jesus. They saw Israel restored to freedom and

the descendant of David enthroned in Jerusalem. They saw themselves sharing in his glory, for he had promised that those who left all to follow him would, when he sat upon the throne of his glory, also sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matt. 19:28) True, the hope they entertained was an earthly one, but it was glorious. Temporarily that hope was lost when Jesus was crucified.

Their loss of hope was not for long. Later, Peter wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively [living] hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”—I Pet. 1:3-5

They now understood the fact that they had been “begotten again” to a living hope, and not only that, but to a hope of life which was far grander than they had known anything about when they walked with Jesus in the flesh. They were now begotten to the hope of a heavenly inheritance, which God had foreordained for those who would fully consecrate themselves to him, to be “kept” by his power “through faith unto [the great] salvation.”

Prior to the death of Jesus, when his disciples had labored so faithfully with him throughout Israel, they knew nothing about a heavenly inheritance, but now they did. Initially, they had thought that their reward was at hand, and that they would soon be reigning with Christ. Now they knew that their reward would not be realized until “revealed

in the last time,” even though they doubtless felt that the last time was close at hand.

STRENGTHENING THE BRETHREN

Jesus told Peter that when he was converted he was to strengthen the brethren, and in his first epistle we find him so doing. He begins by pointing out the fact that the sufferings of Christ had been foretold by the prophets through the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter says, “It [the Holy Spirit] testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”—I Pet. 1:11

Later in the epistle, Peter explains that the foot-step followers of Jesus share in these foretold sufferings. He writes, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.” (chap. 4:12,13) When one suffers it is a great source of strength to know the reason for it, and here Peter is reminding us that there is the best possible reason for our suffering as Christians. The reason is that it is the divine will, having been foretold by God’s holy prophets.

Again, Peter writes, “What glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps.” (chap. 2:20,21) Peter was grieved when he saw Jesus suffer for well doing, but

through his conversion he came to understand that this was the divine will for his Master, and that it is now God's will for Jesus' disciples.

We quote Peter again on the subject of Christian suffering: "Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled." (chap. 3:13,14) We have a good example in Jesus of the principle involved in this exhortation, "Who . . . will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?" It is true that cruel suffering was brought upon Jesus. A crown of thorns was placed on his head, and he was hung on a cross until he died. Yet, in reality, he was not harmed. These sufferings merely completed the sacrifice of his humanity—the sacrifice which he had covenanted with his Father to make.

It was as a New Creature that Jesus was not harmed. All that happened to him was that through death and the resurrection he exchanged his cross for a crown. It will be the same way with us if we continue faithfully to lay down our lives following in the Master's footsteps. This is what was meant by Jesus' words to Peter prior to his crucifixion—that one saves his life by voluntarily losing it through sacrifice.

GOD'S CARE

We should truly welcome Peter's admonition, "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you." (chap. 5:7) God's care of his people is exercised in many ways—through the Holy Spirit, by the guardian angels, through his Word of truth,

and by our association with the brethren. We need all these helps, especially when we are suffering with Christ. When everything is going well, we might be inclined to overlook the need of God's care. We need him all the time, however, in fair weather and in storms. May we never fail to seek the throne of heavenly grace in our every time of need, and also in times of relative calm.

Peter adds that we are to "be sober," and to "be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world." (I Pet. 5:8,9) Satan attacks the Lord's people along many lines. Here the apostle seems to be reminding us that his attacks will often come through efforts to discourage us because of our afflictions, and indeed, this is one of Satan's methods.

However, we are to resist these attacks through steadfastness in the faith—the "most holy faith," revealed to us through the Scriptures. It is through the most holy faith that we understand the reason for Christian suffering. If we do not know why we are suffering we are very vulnerable indeed to Satan's endeavors to discourage us. How different it is when we know that we have been called to suffer with Christ—to enter into a covenant with the Lord by sacrifice, and to take up our cross and follow him.

The enlightened Christian who is faithfully laying down his life will not ask why he is suffering. He will rejoice in the fact that he is a partaker of the sufferings of Christ, and will in God's due time

partake of his glory. The enlightened Christian, rejoicing in the most holy faith, will realize that Christ suffered and died as man's Redeemer, and that he has been invited to die with him, to be planted together in the likeness of his death that he might also be in the likeness of his resurrection.

He will know that in the "first resurrection" he will enter into his heavenly inheritance, and have the privilege and honor to be associated with Jesus in the promised blessing of all the families of the earth. He knows that eventually all suffering and death will be destroyed, and the whole earth will be filled with the Lord's glory. For these reasons, he will not allow Satan's roars to frighten him, and will continue to cast all his cares upon the Lord. Let us be continually thankful that Peter, the other disciples, and the Lord's consecrated of this present time have been "converted" to understand these wonderful truths. ■