

The Reward of Service

*“The Son of man
came not to be
ministered unto,
but to minister,
and to give his life
a ransom for
many.”
—Mark 10:45*

It was nearing the close of Jesus’ ministry. For more than three years the Master had been calling his disciples and instructing them. They had come to recognize him as the Messiah, the heir of all God’s promises, the one

through whom the Messianic kingdom would be set up, which would bless all the families of mankind—the dead as well as the living.—Gen. 22:18; Gal. 3:8

The Master had particularly assured them that, if faithful, they should sit with him on his throne. (Matt. 19:28) However, he had not told them that his kingdom would be a spiritual one, and that they would need the “change” of the “first resurrection” before they could be sharers of it. (I Cor. 15:51,52; Rev. 20:6) He had not yet made clear to them the fact that a whole age would intervene before they would be sharers in the kingdom, and the kingdom itself be established among men. Yet he had hinted all this.

He had said, “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when that one, the spirit of truth, is come, ... it shall declare unto you the things that are to come.”—John 16:12,13, *Revised Version Improved and Corrected*

Jesus did, however, begin to break to the disciples a part of the news necessary for them to know and appreciate, lest they should be entirely overwhelmed and discouraged. He told them that he was going up to Jerusalem; he would suffer many things, and be killed. Peter, always courageous, this time brought upon himself a severe rebuke. He attempted to correct the Master, saying, “Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.” Peter believed that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and that he was about to set up his kingdom. It was inconceivable to him that the Lord would be killed. However, Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, “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. 16:21-23

In this same lesson, Jesus also included the statement that he would “be raised again the third day.” (vs. 21) However, because the disciples could not grasp the thought that Jesus would die, these added words must also have seemed to them like a “dark saying” of the Master which seemed so mysterious. They perhaps remembered also Jesus’ words on another occasion, “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” (John 6:53) This was another difficult statement that they could not understand.

There were many occasions when the disciples could not comprehend the meaning of the Master’s

words; they often seemed so different from what they had been expecting. To their credit, they had sufficient faith to continue to follow Jesus, but how could they understand the words which he spoke? Not until after Pentecost did they get the full grasp of the situation and of what Jesus had told them. (Acts 2:1-4) There the Holy Spirit began to make plain the divine arrangement—that the sufferings of Christ, including his body members, the church, must come first before the glories of the kingdom would be revealed and the blessings to the world begin.—I Pet. 1:11

On Right Hand and Left

Another of the Gospels tells us that the mother of James and John came with them and voiced their plea: “Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom.” (Matt. 20:20,21) They believed that the time for distributing the honors of the kingdom was very near at hand. We need not assume that these two dear disciples sought positions closest to the Master merely for ambition’s sake. Rather, we believe that they loved the Lord very dearly and therefore thought that they could appreciate a nearness to him more than perhaps some of the other disciples. Indeed, they were permitted to come nearer than the majority of the twelve. On several special occasions the Lord took with him the same James and John, as well as Peter. They were with him in the holy mount, at the awakening of Jairus’ daughter, and in Gethsemane’s garden. (Matt. 17:1-5; Luke 8:41,42,49-56; Mark 14:32-34) They were loyal disciples whom the Lord greatly loved.

Let us mark carefully the words of Jesus. He declared that while there would be places of prominence in his kingdom, they would not be distributed by himself, but by the Father. He said, “to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father.”—Matt. 20:23

The Father stands as the representative of absolute justice and righteousness. Positions in the heavenly phase of the Millennial kingdom, whatever form they may take, are not to be given on the score of mere favoritism, but on the basis of faithfulness and qualification, and all will be by grace. (Eph. 2:8) The Lord Jesus himself will have the highest place, because he is worthy. “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.” (Rev. 5:12) Indeed, the Father has given our Lord honor and great glory, exalting him to his own right hand. The climax of his kingdom glory will come when the church, the body of Christ, shall have been completed and all the “called, and chosen, and faithful” have received the promised “crown of life.”—Rev. 17:14; 2:10

What Kingdom Is Meant

For many centuries confusion has prevailed among Christian people respecting the kingdom of Messiah so frequently mentioned by Jesus and the apostles. There was, however, no confusion at first, nor for nearly two hundred years after Jesus' day. The Early Church understood very well the promise that Messiah would come a second time. He would receive the church to glory with himself and establish the

kingdom of divine power for the rule of the world and the subjugation of all things to the will of God; and they knew that this Messianic kingdom would require a thousand years to fulfill its mission.—John 14:2,3; Matt. 25:31; Rev. 20:6

However, by and by a theory sprang up to the effect that the church on earth was to be organized as Messiah's kingdom and was to conquer the world before Jesus' Second Coming. This unscriptural view changed the whole course of church history. No longer was the preaching of the Gospel with a view to calling out and perfecting a "little flock," who would have a hearing ear and an appreciative heart, to make these ready for kingdom honor and glory. (Luke 12:32) Rather, the course changed dramatically. Thereafter the endeavor was to grasp civil power. Intrigues began, false claims were asserted, and the endeavor was made to obtain control of kings and nations. Persecutions were used; and as much as possible civil rulers were induced and threatened, in order that worldwide dominion by the church might be established.

For a time, these endeavors flourished; but since the beginning of the nineteenth century the thought of ecclesiastical dominion of the earth has mostly disappeared. In the resulting confusion, many have lost all faith in the Messianic kingdom, and few are looking for it at Christ's Second Coming. In perplexity, some discuss a spiritual kingdom as merely dwelling in the hearts of believers. Others believe that Christ's kingdom is now represented in the great governments of the world. Yet, these are further confused when considering why certain portions of Messiah's kingdom have built great

armies to potentially war against or destroy other portions of the same kingdom.

The result of all this confusion has been that to many professed Christian people, the teachings of the Bible simply do not seem consistent or logical. Otherwise, they would see that James, John, and the other apostles could not sit upon “twelve thrones” without there being a ruling kingdom. (Matt. 19:28) They would also see that the kingdom must yet be future, in harmony with the Lord’s prayer: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:10) As we seek to know and understand more of God’s plan of salvation, we must study the Bible reverently and “search the scriptures” daily. (John 5:39; Acts 17:11) In doing so, we will receive great blessings and perceive that Messiah’s glorious kingdom, though not yet established in the earth, is “near, even at the doors.”—Matt. 24:33

“Are Ye Able?”

To the two dear disciples and their mother, who requested for them places of special nearness to the Master in the kingdom, Jesus made known the fact that any position in the heavenly kingdom would require the fulfillment of certain conditions. It was not enough that they had been called to discipleship. It was not enough that they had surrendered all to follow the Lord; that they had been with him, had learned his teachings and had assented to them. There must be something more; else they might not enter into the spiritual phase of the kingdom.

These conditions the Master declared, saying, “Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and

to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Matt. 20:22) What did he mean? What was the import of "the cup" and "the baptism" Jesus referred to, which he said not only applied to himself but also to those who would be his faithful followers?

We reply that Jesus' "cup" was the one to which he elsewhere referred, saying, "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (John 18:11) In the divine arrangement God had already marked out that whoever would be entrusted with the Messianic kingdom glory, honor, and power for the blessing of the world, must first demonstrate faithfulness worthy of that honor and glory. In the case of Jesus himself the cup meant all those experiences of service, ignominy, shame, sacrifice, and suffering, all of which he faithfully endured during the three and one-half years of his earthly ministry, and which he fully accomplished at Calvary when he cried, "It is finished."—John 19:30

As disciples of Christ, we must follow the example he laid out for us as we go through similar experiences as he did. We will only be successful in attaining to joint-heirship with the Master in his kingdom glory, honor and power, if we first of all demonstrate loyalty and faithfulness with respect to suffering, sacrifice, and service, as we walk in his footsteps.—Rom. 8:17; II Tim. 2:11,12

When Jesus spoke of the "baptism that I am baptized with," he was referring to his baptism unto sacrificial death. He spoke again of this a short time later, saying, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened [pressed] till it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:50) The Master's water baptism at the beginning of his ministry was merely a symbol

of his true baptism. His going down into the water, his burial in it, and his rising up from it represented his going down into sacrificial death and his resurrection therefrom. His real baptism into death progressed for three and a half years, from Jordan to Calvary. When he cried on the cross, "It is finished," he meant that his baptism unto death was completed. He was raised up out of that death-baptism condition on the third day by the Father's mighty power, to his right hand, which position he will always occupy.—Eph. 1:19-22; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:1-3

"We Are Able"

In the account of this incident the disciples answered Jesus, "we are able"—that is, they were willing to undertake to drink of the Master's cup and partake of his baptism. (Matt. 20:22) They did not know clearly what all this meant; but they were able and willing to do anything that Jesus would command. Thus it must be with all who, like those faithful disciples, shall be "more than conquerors" and share with the Redeemer in the glory, honor and immortality promised to his "body" members, the church.—Rom. 8:37; 2:7; I Cor. 12:27

In the account under consideration, Jesus replied to the disciples, "Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with." (Matt. 20:23) That is to say, willingness on their part is all that the Lord could reasonably require of his disciples. None of us has the power and ability that Jesus possessed. We are sinners by nature. He was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." (Heb. 7:26) We can merely, therefore, commit our will to do right. The Lord must take us under his

care and into his school of affliction and experience. He will then give us the lessons necessary to prove our loyalty and faithfulness, even unto death. How gracious it is that because of our weakness as members of the fallen race, God has provided for us in the Savior a “merciful and faithful high priest.” (Heb. 2:17) Thus only through Jesus may we hope to attain to the heavenly kingdom.

Chief Servant—Most Honored

The other apostles were indignant that James and John, together with their mother, should have made such a request. (Matt. 20:24) However, the incident afforded Jesus opportunity for laying down the guidelines which must govern what will constitute greatness in the Messianic kingdom. Whoever will serve others most, with humility and love, will thereby be demonstrating to God a greater fitness for a higher place. (Gal. 5:13) This is different, as Jesus says, from the ordinary course of affairs, where lordship typically does not include serving others, but being served.—Luke 22:25,26

The rule of the kingdom will be that the one who serves most will have the highest honor. Jesus himself is preeminently a servant above all others. Thus his position is the highest in the kingdom by divine appointment, and others will range next to him in proportion as they have his spirit of love, service, obedience, and loyalty. To his followers, the Master said, “If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.”—John 12:26 ■