

God's Kingdom Nation

***“Therefore say I
unto you, The
kingdom of God
shall be taken from
you, and given to a
nation bringing
forth the fruits
thereof.”
—Matthew 21:43***

THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES, many nations have claimed to be specially favored by God, or by some higher spiritual power. Oftentimes, this has led rulers and leaders of the world to be autocratic and oppressive, citing divine authority to govern according to dictates which, it is asserted, are approved by God and, thus, must be followed without question by the masses of people.

For many centuries, the notion of the “divine right of kings” claimed that a monarch is subject to no earthly authority, nor to the will of the people, but had the right to rule directly from God. This concept fell from its high pedestal with the events surrounding World War I. However, today, more than a century later, many nations still claim a kind of religious authority by which they govern their citizens, and by which they attempt to gain influence and power among surrounding nations and the entire world.

The belief in a higher spiritual authority as the source of influence in governing earth's affairs is not, strictly speaking, without scriptural basis. The Bible, in fact, records various times and events during the course of man's history here on earth in which God's influence and guidance over certain nations and rulers was manifest. Furthermore, the Scriptures lay out for us God's plan to develop, as our title suggests, a "kingdom nation," which will bring blessings of life, peace, and security which no previous earthly government has ever come close to achieving. It is this grand purpose of God, to be executed in perfect righteousness, which our present subject addresses.

ISRAEL STUMBLER

The words of our opening text were addressed by Jesus to the religious leaders of Israel. The Master had just given the parable of the householder, who "planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country." Later, when it came time to gather fruit from the vineyard, the householder sent his servants to the husbandmen, "that they might receive the fruits of it." However, the husbandmen took the servants, "and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another." Then the householder sent other servants, but they were treated the same way. Wishing to give the husbandmen whom he had appointed a further opportunity to show good faith, the householder then sent his son, saying, "They will reverence my son," but when they saw him, the husbandmen said, "This is the heir;

come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.”—Matt. 21:33-38

After relating the parable, Jesus asked his hearers what they thought the householder would do to the husbandmen who were so unfaithful to the trust he had bestowed upon them. They replied that he would “miserably destroy those wicked men,” and then would entrust his vineyard to others who would “render him the fruits in their seasons.” Jesus then asked them if they had read the scripture, “The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner.”—vss. 40-42

Immediately following this is our opening text, beginning with the word “therefore,” by which Jesus hearkens back to the parable and gives its lesson. The nation of Israel, heeding the example of its religious rulers, was taking the same position as the unfaithful husbandmen of the parable, and was likewise rejecting the “stone” which was to become the “head,” or cornerstone, of God’s kingdom. Therefore, the opportunity to be part of that arrangement was to be taken away and “given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”

The foregoing parable and Jesus’ explanation indicate that for the nation of Israel much was at stake in God’s dealings with them. Our text reveals that it was nothing less than the opportunity of participating with Jesus in the rulership of the long-promised Messianic kingdom. Many centuries earlier God had declared that if the Israelites obeyed his words and were faithful to his covenant, they would be a “kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.” (Exod. 19:5,6) All of God’s dealings with them were designed to help them qualify for this exalted destiny.

Israel's final test came when Jesus presented himself to the nation as their Messiah and King. In order that they might be prepared to receive him, John the Baptist was sent as a forerunner, announcing, "The royal majesty of the heavens has approached." (Matt. 3:2, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*) Even with this help the nation failed in its final test, although a few individuals qualified. John explains this, saying of Jesus, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God."—John 1:11,12

The majority, however, stumbled over the "stone," just as the prophet had foretold. (Ps. 118:22; Isa. 8:14) It was this text which Jesus quoted and applied to himself, then explaining that whoever "shall fall on this stone shall be broken," adding that the stone would "grind him to powder." (Matt. 21:44) This is highly symbolic language, but it indicates that those who stumbled over Jesus, and in turn felt the weight of his rejection of them, being unworthy to be joint-heirs with him in the kingdom, would have their exalted hopes crushed. Verse 45 shows that the religious leaders knew that Jesus was speaking of them, that they were the ones who were to be replaced, the kingdom being taken from them, and given to others. Inasmuch as the people followed their leadership, the whole nation of Israel came under the decree, "Your house is left unto you desolate."—Matt. 23:38

While these historical facts concerning the nation of Israel are significant in relationship to God's plan, even more vital to us is a proper recognition of other important factors leading up to their rejection from

the chief place in the kingdom which was offered to them. Their final failure was but a continuance of those object lessons Paul had in mind, which, he says, were “written for our admonition.” —I Cor. 10:11

GOD’S NATION

In our text the Greek word translated “nation” means a race, or tribe. The Jewish race comes from the family of Abraham, and in the Old Testament many other families are spoken of as nations. The Hittites, Amorites, Jebusites, and many other groups likewise had family origins. Jesus’ reference to a nation might well be narrowed in meaning to the thought of a family, specifically a family of God, or as the Apostle Paul states, a “household of faith.” —Gal. 6:10

This family is made up of the children, or sons of God. That the hope of the kingdom has been given to these is clearly shown by Paul. He wrote that God’s Holy Spirit “beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.” —Rom. 8:16,17

The Apostle Peter also identifies the nation to whom the kingdom was given when taken away from those to whom it was first offered. He, in fact, quotes the same prophecy that Jesus had referred to concerning the rejected stone. Peter then adds, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous

light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God.”—I Pet. 2:7-10

The reference here is to Gentile believers—not all Gentiles, but those who accept Christ and dedicate their lives to following in his footsteps. However, the opportunity is not limited to Gentiles, for individual Israelites may also qualify. Indeed, the first thus to receive this privilege were those Jews who accepted Christ, and to whom he gave the “power to become the sons of God.”

This nation is new in the sense that it is a faith seed, or family, made up of “new creatures” in Christ Jesus. (II Cor. 5:17) It matters not what their nationality may have been. Paul stresses, “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Gal. 3:27-29

The natural descendants of Abraham took for granted that they were the promised seed of Abraham, solely through whom all nations would be blessed. Such would have been the case had they qualified under the terms which God laid down. However, due to their lack of faith and obedience, this great privilege was taken from them, and given to a new “family.” These are all begotten by God’s Spirit and bound together in one family by the cords of faith and love. These, irrespective of nationality, position or gender, are now the real seed of promise, the nation to whom the kingdom has been given.

GOD'S MERCY

We thank the Heavenly Father for his assurance that the rejection of Israel as the heirs of the heavenly kingdom promises does not imply their loss of opportunity for salvation through Christ Jesus. Paul speaks of the future time when the “fulness of the Gentiles be come in”—that is, when the full number designed by God to be associated with Jesus as joint-heirs in his kingdom have been called and fully prepared to reign with Christ. Then, he says, “all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.” (Rom. 11:25-27) Likewise, all Gentiles will be given the opportunity for salvation, as spoken of by the Apostle James, “That the residue [remainder] of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles.”—Acts 15:17

Israel sought to be the kingdom nation, the seed of promise, hence the avenue of blessing to all the families of the earth. The promises of God justified the nation's hopes along this line. However, in addition to these promises being conditional upon faith and obedience, they contained implications with respect to God's plan of salvation which the Israelites did not perceive—namely, that the seed of promise was to be of a spiritual kind rather than earthly.

A “MYSTERY”

It is this feature of God's plan that is referred to by Paul as a “mystery,” which he further describes as “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Col. 1:27) Another way of expressing this is found in the apostle's words that “through our Lord Jesus Christ” we have “access

by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” (Rom. 5:1,2) The Apostle Peter words the same thought a little differently, saying that to us are given “exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature.” (II Pet. 1:4) These promises belong to the sons of God, the spiritual family, or nation, to which the kingdom is given.

The Apostle John also testified, saying, “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (I John 3:2) This Gospel Age family of God is to be like Christ, who, when he was raised from the dead, was highly exalted above “all principality, and power,” and was made the “express image” of the Heavenly Father.—Eph. 1:20,21; Heb. 1:1-3

As God resurrected Jesus from the dead and “gave him glory,” so those to whom he gives power, or authority, to become sons of God, will likewise be exalted, if faithful unto death. Those of the Jewish nation who accepted Jesus and espoused the Messianic cause were the first to be identified with this new and “holy nation.” Throughout the entire age, the call of the Gospel has continued to go out to Jews and Gentiles alike. The invitation is to accept Christ as one’s personal Redeemer and Savior, deny self, and follow him into sacrificial death.—I Pet. 1:21; Matt. 16:24; Rom. 6:3-5; 10:9

This invitation is described by Paul as the “high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:14) It is a “high” calling because those who are faithful to its terms, even unto death, will receive the reward of joint-heirship with Jesus in his kingdom, to live

and reign with him a thousand years. (Rev. 20:4,6) Throughout past ages this aspect of God's plan remained a mystery, and little did the posterity of Abraham realize that Gentiles would become fellow heirs of these glorious promises. This also remained a mystery until God's due time came for revealing it.

What a privilege it is now to be "partakers of the heavenly calling." (Heb. 3:1) The conditions attached to this calling are exacting, however, and only through faithfulness even unto death may we hope to attain that for which we have been invited. Paul sounds a timely warning of this by reminding us, using metaphorical language, that since many of the natural Jewish "branches" in the olive tree of the Abrahamic promises were "broken off" because of unbelief, those Gentiles who have been "grafted in" can also be broken off, and for the same reason. He says, therefore, "Be not highminded, but fear."—Rom. 11:17-20

BRINGING FORTH FRUIT

In our text Jesus said the kingdom would be given to a nation "bringing forth the fruits thereof." These are the "fruits of righteousness," which provide the outward evidences of faith in the promises of God, and of humble and loyal obedience to all the terms associated with them. As we have seen, God's new nation, or race, is made up of those who, during the Gospel Age, become his "sons," his children, and Paul emphasizes that one of the conditions of sonship is that "we suffer with him."—Rom. 8:14,16,17

Suffering with Christ implies faithfulness in representing him as his ambassadors. Simply to believe in Jesus is not enough. To rejoice in all that he means to us is not sufficient. He has commissioned

his followers to be the “light of the world.” If we let our light shine we will find, as Jesus did, that people often prefer “darkness rather than light,” and thus will oppose the Word of truth and those who proclaim it.—Matt. 5:14-16; John 3:19-21

When the Apostle John wrote, “Now are we the sons of God,” he added, “And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” (1 John 3:2,3) The purity here mentioned by John is God’s own standard of righteousness, his will for his consecrated people. It means unqualified devotion to every aspect of God’s principles of righteousness set before us in the perfect example of his dear Son.

Christ’s example is summed up in the quality of unselfish and self-sacrificing love, which he demonstrated perfectly. If we root out selfishness from our hearts, and seek to be filled and controlled by the principle of divine love, we will find ourselves in full harmony with what Jesus referred to as “these sayings of mine” contained in his sermon on the mount. (Matt. 7:24) We will love our brethren, neighbors and even enemies. We will bless those who curse us, and pray for those who persecute us. As the Heavenly Father bestows his favors upon the just and the unjust, causing the sun to shine and the rain to fall upon all alike, so we will be impartial in our treatment of all, and thus be “perfect,” or complete, just as our Father in heaven is perfect.—Matt. 5:44-48

“IF YE DO THESE THINGS”

In Peter’s second epistle he again reminds us of the conditions attached to the heavenly promises of God. He says, in the third chapter, that we look for

a “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (vs. 13) Indeed, the promises of God give us authority to hope that, if faithful, we will be a part of that “new heavens,” the spiritual phase of the Messianic kingdom nation which will rule for the blessing of all mankind. In view of this exalted hope, Peter asks, “What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation [conduct] and godliness?”—vs. 11

The “manner of persons” we ought to be is outlined in chapter one of the same epistle. After reminding us of the precious promises of the divine nature, Peter says that we should give “all diligence,” to add to our faith: virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity, which is love. (vss. 5-7) These are the fruits for which the Lord is looking in the lives of all who are seeking to be part of the kingdom of God’s dear Son. Peter confirms this, saying, “If these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.”—vss. 8,9

Let us be sure that we are not one who “lacketh these things,” but that in humility and in full surrender to the divine will, we allow the Spirit of God to work in us to bring forth these fruits of righteousness, the fruits of the kingdom. We have been called and chosen for the high position of joint heirship with Christ. Peter speaks of it as our “calling and election.” (II Pet. 1:10) However, those who will actually be partakers of the divine nature and the glory of God, who will sit on the throne with Christ,

and who will be with him to reign a thousand years, must not only be “called, and chosen,” but they must also be “faithful.”—Rev. 17:14

This being “faithful unto death” is what Peter describes as making our “calling and election” sure and steadfast. (Rev. 2:10) He admonishes us to give diligence in order to do this. No halfhearted followers of the Master will be successful in making their calling and election sure.

Rather, we must be like Paul, and say with enthusiasm, “This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”—Phil. 3:13,14

Peter says that if we give all diligence in doing “these things” we “shall never fall.” What a glorious assurance! God wants us to make our calling and election sure. It is his good pleasure to promise that “an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (II Pet. 1:10,11) With this in view, our Heavenly Father will supply guidance in our struggle against the devil and his wiles, give us encouragement when we might become discouraged, grant us wisdom to know his will, and provide the needed help to do it.

Surely the prospect for those to whom the Lord has given the kingdom is a glorious one. The “holy nation” to which it is given will soon be completed. Let us be diligent to carry out the terms of our discipleship, so that we might serve in that nation as kings and priests to reign with Christ for the blessing of “all the kindreds of the earth.”—Gen. 22:18; 26:4; Acts 3:25 ■